1stContent DIGITAL

WHITE PAPER · EDITION 1

Search visibility in the age of AI assistants

A practical framework for South African businesses, built on public research and 12 months of our own Search Console data.

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Why we wrote this

Ask ten South African marketing managers where their enquiries come from and most will say Google. Ask them what happens when an AI assistant answers the question before anyone reaches Google, and the room goes quiet.

This paper separates what is known from what is guessed. It draws on three kinds of evidence: published research with the method stated, public figures on usage, and our own data. That last source is deliberately uncomfortable: the Search Console record of our own legacy website over the last twelve months.

We do not offer an AI visibility score. Nobody can measure one reliably today, and we would rather say so than invent a number. What we offer is a framework, a measurement approach and a 90-day plan that stand up without one.

What is inside

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Five findings, one page

1

Clicks are getting scarcer

When Google showed an AI summary, US users clicked a normal result link on 8% of visits, against 15% without one (Pew Research Center, March 2025 data).

2

Being first no longer protects you

Ahrefs estimates AI Overviews cut the click-through rate of the top result by about 58% (December 2025 data). It is a modelled estimate, not a proven cause.

3

Most of our visibility sat too low to matter

85.2% of our site's search impressions came at an average position of 20 or lower. Only 64 of the top 1,000 queries averaged the top ten.

4

Four gates decide whether you are found

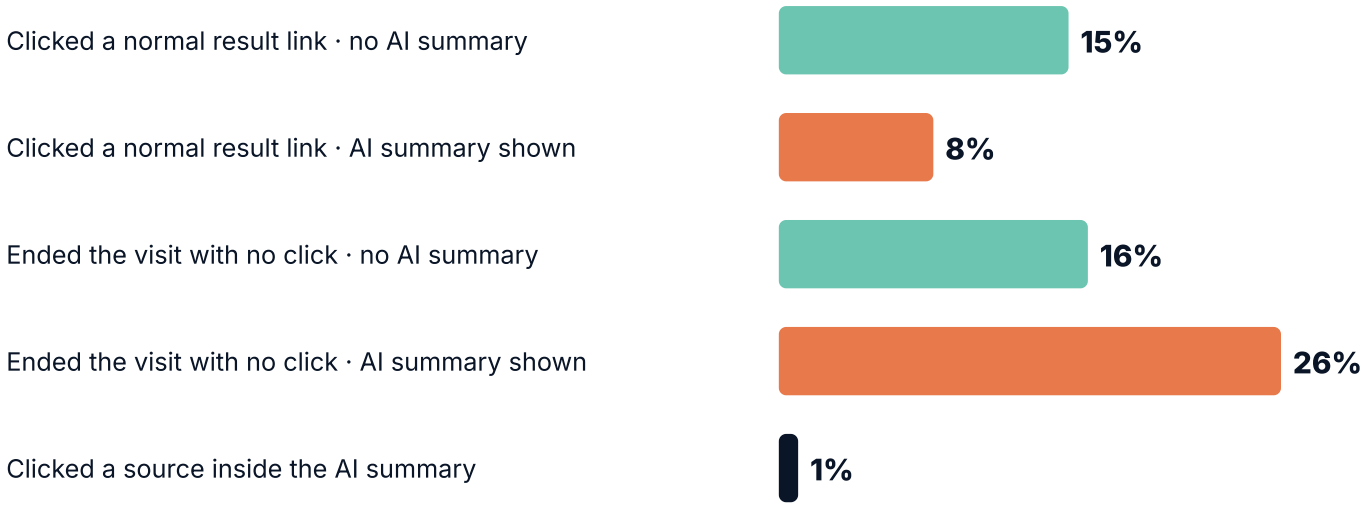
Reach, Read, Trust and Convert. Each one can be checked and fixed without any guesswork about how AI systems rank.

5

Measure what exists

Search Console, analytics referrals and a "how did you hear about us?" field are measurable. A single AI visibility score is not.

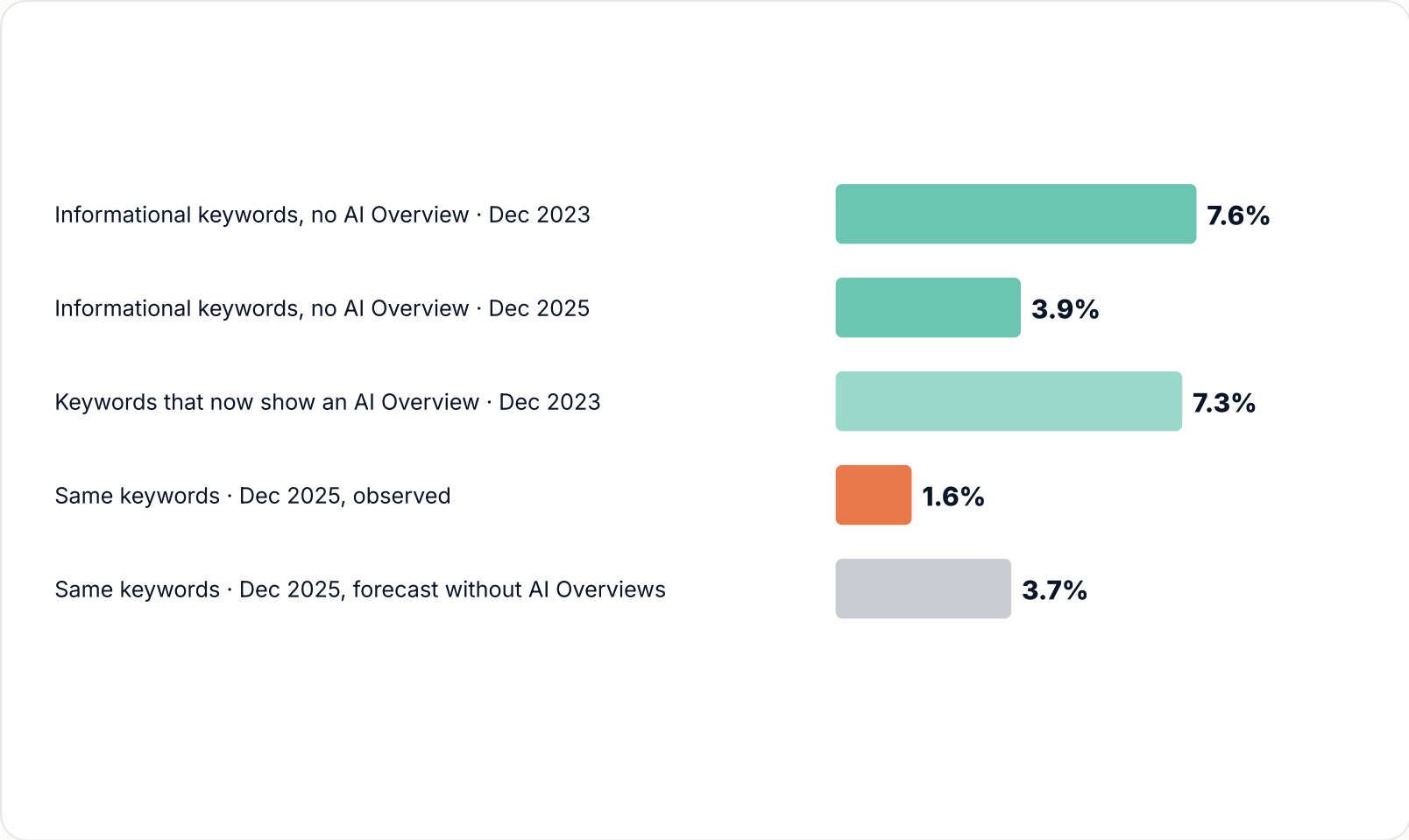
When an AI summary appears, people click less



Source: Pew Research Center analysis of browsing by 900 US adults, March 2025, covering 68,879 unique Google searches, about 18% of which showed an AI summary. Browsing behaviour in South Africa may differ. We found no comparable South African study.

Takeaway. Visits with an AI summary were roughly half as likely to include a click on a normal result, and only 1% of visits clicked a source inside the summary itself. Visibility inside the answer matters, but it does not replace the click.

The top result is worth less than it was



Source: Ahrefs, "AI Overviews reduce clicks" update, December 2025 data. 300,000 keywords, desktop click-through rate from Search Console data, position one. The forecast line is modelled, and the authors describe the result as a correlation. Other studies report different magnitudes.

Takeaway. The direction is consistent across studies. The size is not. Plan for fewer clicks per impression, and judge pages by enquiries rather than rankings.

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The audience is large and moving to assistants

51.7m

South Africans online at the end of 2025, 79.6% of the population

DataReportal, Digital 2026: South Africa

~900m

weekly active users of ChatGPT, as announced by OpenAI in February 2026

OpenAI, reported by eWeek, 27 Feb 2026

29.1m

social media user identities in South Africa, October 2025

DataReportal, Digital 2026: South Africa

What we could not find

We looked for reliable figures on how many South African searches now show an AI answer, and how many South African users rely on AI assistants for business research. We found none we would put our name to. This paper does not estimate them.

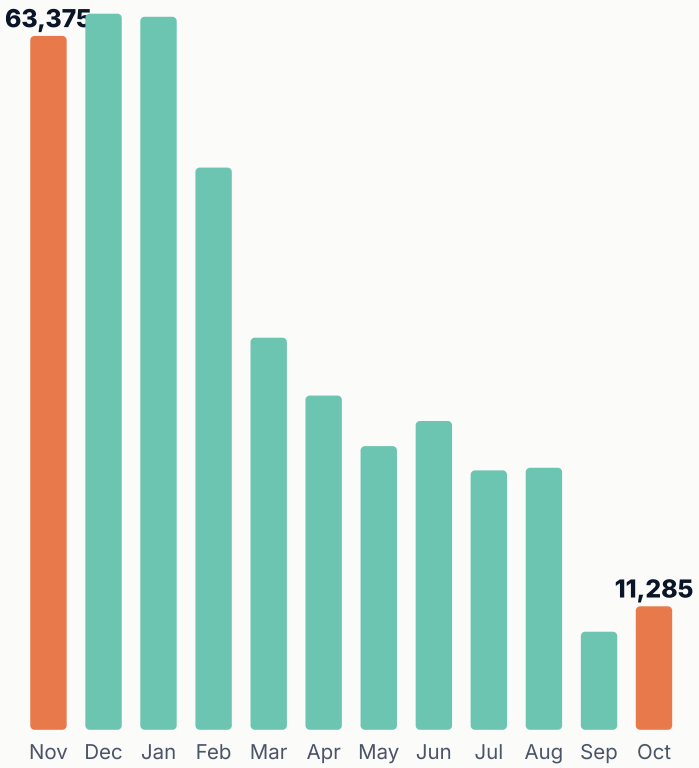
Why that matters

Anyone quoting a precise local share of "AI search traffic" is extrapolating from other markets. Treat it as an assumption, and test it against your own analytics.

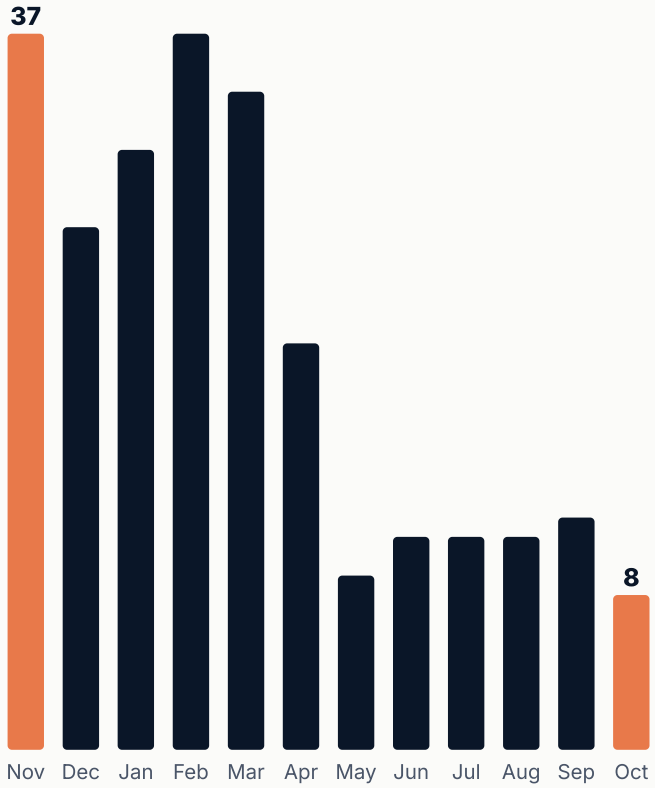
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We audited ourselves. Impressions fell 82% in 12 months

Monthly search impressions, Nov 2025 to Oct 2026



Monthly clicks, Nov 2025 to Oct 2026



Source: Google Search Console, property 1stcontent.co, web search, 3 Nov 2025 to 3 Nov 2026. One site, one market. The pattern is a legacy WordPress site with dated 2021 to 2022 content and no new publishing. It shows what drift looks like, not an industry average.

Takeaway. Impressions went from 63,375 to 11,285 a month and clicks from 37 to 8. Average position slipped from 32.7 to 49.4. A site that stops improving drifts down.

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85.2% of our visibility sat at position 20 or lower



Share of 380,013 impressions across the 1,000 top queries, by average position

434,086
impressions in 12 months for 253 clicks, a click-through rate of 0.06%

64 of 1,000
top queries averaged a position in the top ten

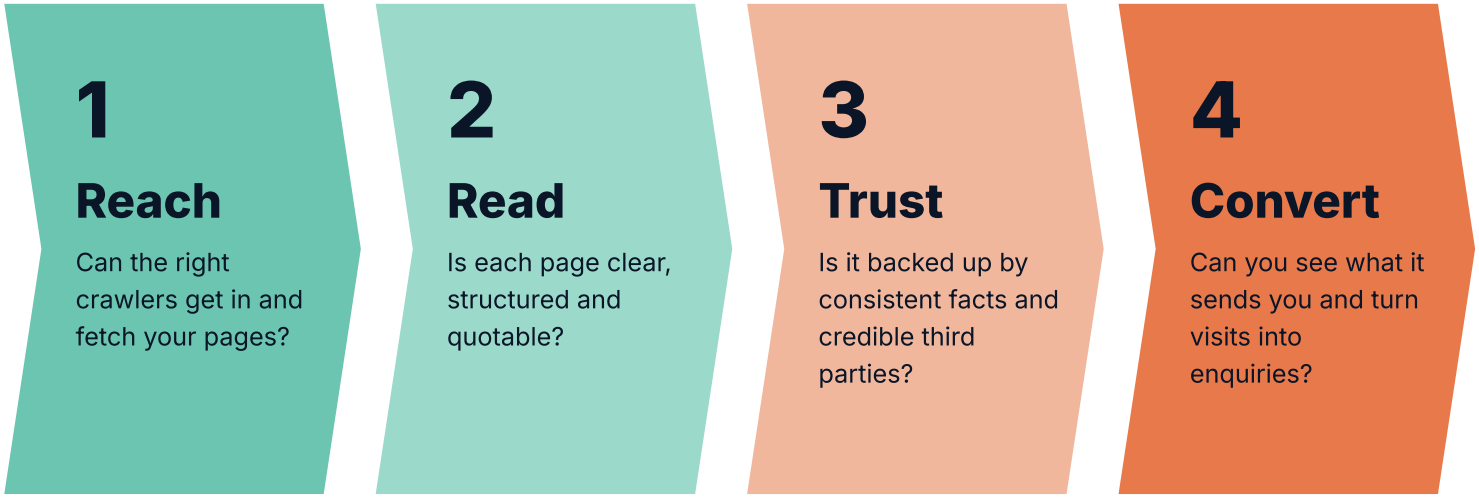
68%
of all clicks came to the home page, 173 of 253

Source: Google Search Console, queries and pages exports, same period. Position is an average, and the queries export covers the top 1,000 queries only.

Takeaway. Our largest term group, SEO services and companies in South Africa, drew about 163,000 impressions at positions 20 to 60. Impressions without position are not visibility. The first job is to move the pages already closest to page one.

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Four gates decide whether you are found



The same four gates apply whether the answer is delivered by a search results page, an AI summary or an assistant. They are checkable, and each has an owner.

> **How to use it.** Check the gates in order. A business that is blocked at Reach gains nothing from better content at Read. A business that cannot track enquiries at Convert cannot tell whether anything else worked.

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What to check at each gate

1 Reach

- robots.txt allows the crawlers you want, including AI assistants
- Pages return a normal 200 response over HTTPS
- XML sitemap exists and lists only indexable pages
- Important pages are linked from other pages

2 Read

- One H1 and a title that names the topic
- The answer sits in the first paragraph
- Question-shaped headings, answers underneath
- Structured data that matches the visible page

3 Trust

- Same name, description and contact details everywhere
- Named authors, real clients, dated pages
- Independent mentions from relevant sources
- No claims you cannot support

4 Convert

- Enquiry forms record where visitors came from
- AI assistant referrals are tagged in analytics
- A "how did you hear about us?" field
- Monthly review of enquiries, not only rankings

Our free Search and AI Visibility Check tests the Reach and Read items on a single page. It does not predict mentions.

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What you can measure, and what you cannot

Measurable today

- **Impressions, clicks and positions** by page and query in Search Console
- **Referrals from known AI assistants** in analytics, where a referrer is passed
- **Enquiries by source**, if your forms capture it
- **Crawler access**, from robots.txt and server logs
- **Self-reported discovery**, asked at enquiry

Not reliably measurable

- **"AI visibility scores"** and share-of-voice indexes from third-party tools
- **How often an assistant names you**, which varies between runs, users and products
- **Which ranking factors an assistant uses**, as none publish them
- **Zero-click influence**, where someone remembers your name and searches for it later

Rule of thumb. If a vendor shows you a number, ask how it is calculated, whether it can be reproduced and whether it connects to enquiries. If the answers are vague, so is the number.

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A 90-day plan, in order

DAYS 1 TO 14

Diagnose

Pull 12 months of Search Console data. Run a technical audit. Check robots.txt and sitemaps. Map which page owns which search.

YOU WILL HAVE
Audit, query map, baseline numbers

DAYS 15 TO 45

Fix the gates

Repair indexing, redirects and speed. Rewrite the pages closest to page one with answer-first openings. Add honest structured data.

YOU WILL HAVE
A site that is reachable and readable

DAYS 46 TO 75

Build trust and depth

Make facts consistent everywhere. Add named authors and dates. Publish the missing cluster pages. Link related pages in body text.

YOU WILL HAVE
Consistent facts, new cluster pages, internal links

DAYS 76 TO 90

Measure and decide

Review enquiries by source. Tag AI referrals. Compare positions on the priority pages. Decide what to extend.

YOU WILL HAVE
A one-page report and the next-quarter plan

Checkpoint. At day 90 you should be able to say which pages moved, what each one delivered in enquiries and what you will do next. You should not be able to say that you are "number one in AI". Nobody can.

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Ten-question readiness check

Score 2 for yes, 1 for partly, 0 for no. This measures readiness, not visibility.

1	Our robots.txt allows the crawlers we want, including AI assistants	2 1 0
2	Our sitemap lists only indexable pages and is submitted to Search Console	2 1 0
3	Every key page has one H1 and a title that names the topic	2 1 0
4	Key pages answer the main question in the first paragraph	2 1 0
5	Our structured data matches what the page shows	2 1 0
6	Our name, services and contact details are the same everywhere	2 1 0
7	Related pages are linked together in body text	2 1 0
8	We reviewed 12 months of Search Console data in the last quarter	2 1 0
9	Our forms record where each enquiry came from	2 1 0
10	We can state, with figures, how many enquiries search sent last month	2 1 0

Reading your score. 0 to 8: fix the gates before spending on content. 9 to 15: you have foundations; focus on depth and trust. 16 to 20: you are well placed; the work is measurement and steady improvement.

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Sources and method notes

Pew Research Center. "Google users are less likely to click on links when an AI summary appears in the results", 22 July 2025. 900 US adults, March 2025, 68,879 unique searches.

Ahrefs. "AI Overviews reduce clicks" update, December 2025 data. 300,000 keywords; position one desktop click-through rate; forecast modelled by the authors.

DataReportal. "Digital 2026: South Africa". Figures reflect the latest available data in October 2025, with internet users at the end of 2025.

OpenAI / eWeek. ChatGPT "around 900 million weekly active users", reported 27 February 2026.

1st Content Digital Search Console data. Property 1stcontent.co, web search only, 3 Nov 2025 to 3 Nov 2026. Monthly figures exclude the partial month of November 2026. Query bands use the top 1,000 queries; the export omits anonymised queries, so query clicks (76) are lower than total clicks (253).

Limits. External studies cover other markets and different time periods. Our data is a single site. No figure in this paper is a forecast or a promise of results.

Talk to us

Want your own numbers read this way? Book a 30-minute review of your Search Console data and your Reach, Read, Trust and Convert gates.

1stcontent.co/contact-us/