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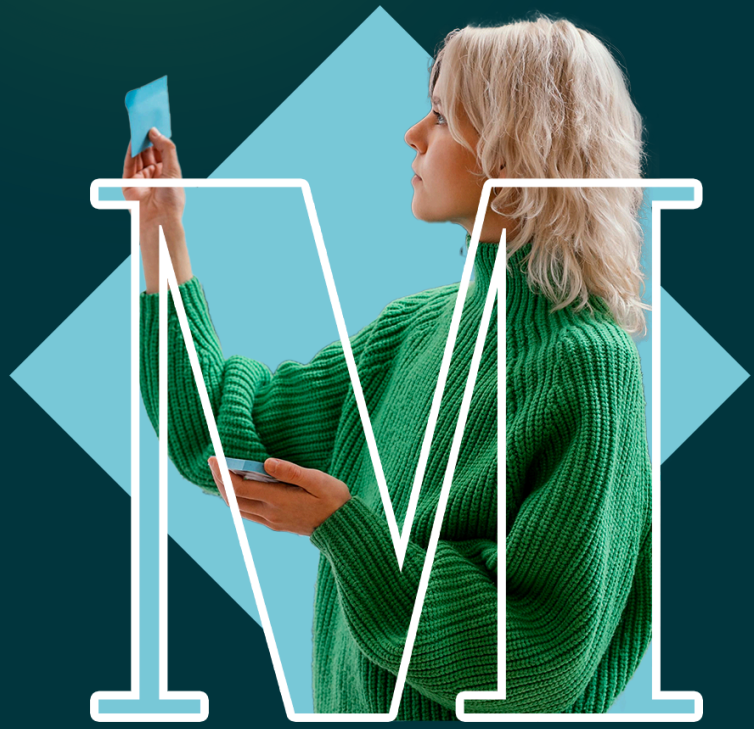
CLIENT BRIEFING

Zero-click reality.

How B2B buyers research now, and what that does to attribution.



For marketing and demand generation leads 2026

— THE CENTRAL MESSAGE

Marketing is becoming more influential and less observable at the same time.

01

Buyers now learn about you, judge your credibility and form a preference without visiting your site or filling in anything.

02

When they finally become a lead, your systems record the last detectable action, not the marketing that made them consider you.

03

So measurement is not pointless. It is just far less certain than the reporting interface makes it look.

The claim “this advert produced this customer” is a reporting convention. It is not a finding.

PART ONE

What buyers actually do now.

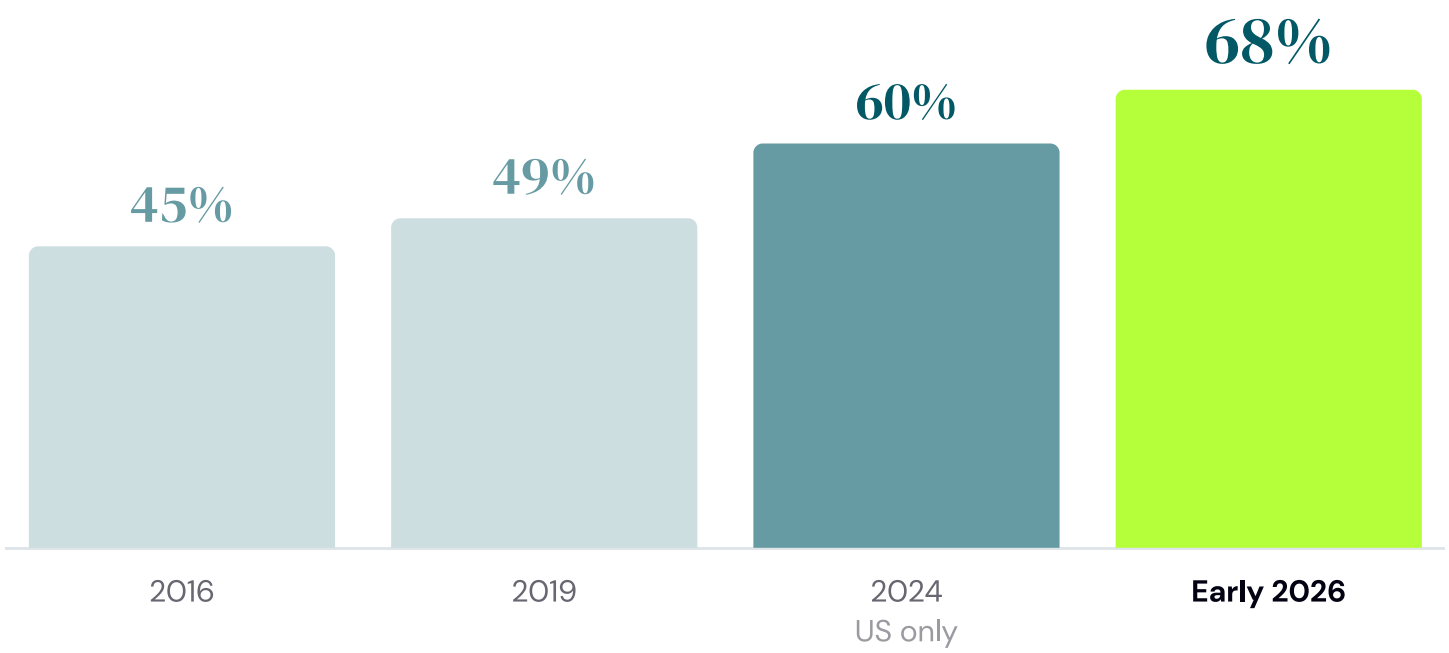
Five slides of evidence on where discovery has moved.

01

— CLICKSTREAM ANALYSIS

Two thirds of searches now end without a click.

A decade-long drift that has turned into a step change in the last two years.



Share of Google searches ending without a click to an external website. SparkToro analysis of Similarweb clickstream data.

68.01%
of Google searches in the first four months of 2026 ended without a click.

+7.5pt
in two years, from 60.45% in the US in 2024. The fastest acceleration recorded in a decade.

Exact figures vary by geography, device and panel method. The direction does not.

— CONTEXT

This did not start with AI.

Google has been answering searches inside its own environment for the best part of a decade.

Featured snippets	Knowledge panels
Maps and local results	Product listings
Video carousels	People Also Ask
Calculators and direct answers	AI Overviews and AI Mode

THE STRUCTURAL SHIFT

From a directory of information to the place the information is consumed.

AI accelerated a change that was already ten years old. Treating it as a sudden emergency leads to the wrong response.

AHREFS, 300,000 INFORMATIONAL SEARCHES

Ranking first no longer buys what it did.

Estimated fall in click-through rate when an AI Overview appears, by organic position.



100 → 42

clicks a first-ranked page would once have received, when an AI Overview is present.

34.5% → 58%

The same study's estimate for position one, April 2025 against February 2026. Behaviour is still moving.

Not a controlled experiment. Treat as directional, not as a forecast for any one site.

— INDEPENDENT RESEARCH

The effect shows up outside the industry panels.

Including a study designed to isolate cause, not just correlation.

−15%

Daily visits to affected English-language Wikipedia articles after exposure to AI Overviews.

A 2026 causal study across more than 161,000 matched article and language combinations. The drop was largest where a short synthesised answer settled the question.

13.7% 64.7%

of all queries returned an AI Overview, against nearly two thirds of question-based queries.

From more than 55,000 test searches, 2026. Exposure is concentrated exactly where B2B research lives.

30%

of sources cited in AI answers did not appear in the conventional first page of results.

Being chosen as an AI source is becoming a separate visibility contest from ranking. Winning one does not win the other.

— WHY B2B IS MOST EXPOSED

Your buyers ask exactly the questions AI answers best.

INFORMATIONAL, COMPARATIVE, QUESTION-BASED

- “What is account based marketing?”
- “Best employee mentoring platforms”
- “How much does intranet software cost?”
- “Alternatives to Salesforce”
- “Questions to ask a PPC agency”

WHAT THE PROSPECT RECEIVES, WITHOUT A VISIT

A summary of the market	A shortlist of vendors
A comparison of capabilities	A description of the problem
An answer built partly on your content	**Your name, cited or uncited**

THE ZERO-CLICK PARADOX

Your content can do its commercial job without producing the traffic you used to measure that job by. The report shows no visit, no source, no conversion.

PART TWO

Why neat attribution stopped working.

Zero click is landing on a buying process that was never very trackable to begin with.

02

— 6SENSE BUYER EXPERIENCE REPORT, C.4,000 BUYERS

Most of the decision is made before you are contacted.



94%

of buying groups had already ranked their preferred vendors before making contact.

77%

of purchases were won by the vendor already preferred before that first conversation.

10.1

months, on average, from first research to decision. Dreamdata puts the journey at around 211 days.

The form submission does not tell you which of ten months of marketing created the preference.

— THE BUYING GROUP

One person enters the CRM. Six others decided.

Attribution tracks an individual. The purchase is made by an organisation.

IN THE CRM The person who filled in the form	Procurement	Finance	Legal
Operations	IT and security	Senior leadership	The peer who recommended you

~50%

of shortlisted suppliers are rejected by these hidden stakeholders, on LinkedIn's research. Brand credibility weighs heavily with them.

THE PERSON WHO CONVERTS IS RARELY THE PERSON WHO

First encountered you	Read the thought leadership
Recommended you internally	Compared the vendors
Approved the budget	Rejected the competitors

— WHAT ATTRIBUTION ACTUALLY IS

Change the model and the answer changes.

Same customer. Same revenue. Seven defensible answers to “which channel won it?”

ATTRIBUTION MODEL	WHICH CHANNEL RECEIVES THE CREDIT
First touch	The earliest recorded visit
Last touch	The final recorded visit
Last non-direct touch	The latest detectable marketing source
Linear	Every recorded touch, split equally
Position based	Weighted to the first and last touches
Data driven	A platform model’s estimate of contribution
Self reported	Whatever the buyer remembers and tells you

Google draws the same line: attribution reports *attributed* sales, over short windows, inside the observable digital environment. Useful for optimisation. Not sufficient alone for budget decisions.

A WORKED EXAMPLE

One real journey. Seven possible reports.

A ten-month, multi-stakeholder purchase, compressed into one field.

WHAT HAPPENED

01 The CMO sees a LinkedIn video from your founder

02 A colleague forwards your report in Teams

03 She asks ChatGPT which agencies specialise in B2B demand generation

04 Your company appears in the answer

05 A marketing manager searches your brand name

06 The manager reads three case studies

07 A director hears a recommendation from a peer

08 Procurement opens the pricing page from a direct link

09 The CMO clicks a branded advert and submits a form

10 The deal closes four months later

HOW IT MAY BE REPORTED

- **Paid search revenue**
- Organic search revenue
- Direct traffic
- LinkedIn influenced
- ChatGPT referral
- Partner or referral
- Unknown or offline

The advert captured demand that already existed. Remove it and the buyer very likely clicks the organic result instead.

The reporting system rewards the channel nearest the conversion.

— WHY THE JOINS FAIL

Six things no amount of tagging will fix.

The journey still happens. The recording of it does not.

Identity is fragmented

Personal phone, work laptop, a webinar, an AI assistant, then a form from another browser. Those cannot always be joined into one person.

Consent removes the data

Cookie rejection, browser controls, privacy regulation and corporate security policy all delete identifiers before you see them.

Platforms are walled

Each platform sees a fragment and may claim the same conversion. There is no neutral identity layer to deduplicate the claims.

Buyers share privately

Slack, Teams, WhatsApp, email, DMs, internal documents. These arrive as direct or untagged traffic, often from a different person.

AI sits in the middle

Your content can shape the answer without generating a click. Search Console does not cleanly separate AI Overview performance from blue links.

CRM records are thin

Website. Inbound. Google. Referral. Unknown. Ten months of activity compressed into whatever someone happened to remember.

PART THREE

What to measure instead.

Not less measurement. A body of evidence rather than one fictional source of truth.

03

— THE DISTINCTION LEADERSHIP NEEDS

Three different questions, routinely treated as one.

ATTRIBUTION

Which observable interaction should receive credit?

"The CRM assigns this opportunity to organic search."

EASIEST TO REPORT

Weakest evidence of effect

CONTRIBUTION

Which activities probably helped move the buying process?

"Search, LinkedIn, case studies, events and peer recommendations all appear to have contributed."

REALISTIC TO BUILD

Where reporting should sit

INCREMENTALITY

What would have happened without the activity?

"Would the same organisations have enquired if we had paused LinkedIn for a quarter?"

HARDEST TO ANSWER

Strongest evidence of effect

Incrementality needs holdouts, geographic splits, time-based tests or media mix modelling. Google's own guidance is to combine all three, never to rely on attribution alone.

— THE REPORTING LAYERS

Five layers, not one number.

Keep the lead and revenue reporting. Stop asking one field to describe the whole journey.

Commercial outcomes

- Qualified pipeline
- Sales-accepted opportunities
- Win rate
- Average contract value
- Sales cycle length
- Acquisition cost
- Retention and expansion

Demand capture

- Demo requests
- Enquiries
- High-intent organic traffic
- Branded paid search
- Pricing page activity
- Conversion rates
- Cost per qualified opportunity

Demand creation

- Branded search volume
- Direct and returning traffic
- Target account engagement
- Content consumption
- Newsletter growth
- Share of search
- Sales-reported recognition

Search and AI visibility

- Rankings and impressions
- CTR by query type
- Presence in AI Overviews
- Citations in ChatGPT, Gemini, Perplexity
- Accuracy of AI descriptions
- Competitor share of mentions
- Unlinked brand mentions

Qualitative evidence

- Sales call transcripts
- Form responses
- Customer interviews
- Win and loss reviews
- Procurement questions
- Content prospects mention
- Why you made the shortlist

Two form questions do a lot of work here: *how did you first hear about us* as free text, and separately, *what prompted you to contact us now*. Discovery and activation are different questions.

— PROPORTION

What zero click does not mean.

The wrong conclusion here is as expensive as ignoring it entirely.

- × SEO is dead
- × Website traffic no longer matters
- × Google is no longer important
- × Every informational page will lose all its traffic
- × AI engines have replaced traditional search
- × Conversion reporting should be discarded

190× more referral traffic still comes from Google than from ChatGPT, on Ahrefs' estimate, despite rapid growth in AI search use.

THE ACTUAL OPPORTUNITY

Rank in conventional search, and be cited in generated answers

Be discussed by credible third parties

Become familiar before the buyer is active

Give buyers a reason to search for you by name

Convert the smaller number of visits that do happen

Traffic may fall while influence rises. That is uncomfortable, because influence is harder to put in a monthly spreadsheet.

HOW TO PUT IT TO YOUR BOARD

Change the question, not the ambition.

The buyer journey has not become less measurable because the marketing got worse. It has become less measurable because discovery and evaluation now happen inside search results, AI systems, social platforms, private conversations and buying groups. Analytics records the visible fragments. It does not record the decision.

STOP ASKING ONLY

Which channel produced this lead?

Leads can still be associated with channels. What should be avoided is presenting that association as proof of cause.

START ASKING

Are we creating demand among the right organisations, are we visible during independent research, and is that producing qualified pipeline over time?

— SOURCES

Where the numbers come from.

SparkToro, Similarweb clickstream

68.01% of Google searches ended without a click, January to April 2026; 60.45% in the US in 2024.

Ahrefs, February 2026 update

300,000 informational searches; CTR reduction by position; Google against ChatGPT referral volume.

Wikipedia AI Overviews study, 2026

161,000+ matched article and language combinations; c.15% reduction in daily visits.

AI Overview prevalence study, 2026

55,000+ searches; 13.7% of all queries, 64.7% of question-based; c.30% of citations off page one.

6sense Buyer Experience Report, 2025

c.4,000 B2B buyers: 61% first contact point, 94% pre-ranked, 77% win rate, 10.1-month cycle.

LinkedIn B2B Institute research

Hidden buyers reject around half of shortlisted suppliers; Dreamdata 211-day average journey.

Google measurement guidance

Attribution reports attributed rather than incremental sales; combine with incrementality tests and MMM.

A note on method

Panel and clickstream studies are directional, not controlled experiments. Treat them as evidence of direction, not as forecasts for any single site.

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