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NEWSLETTER

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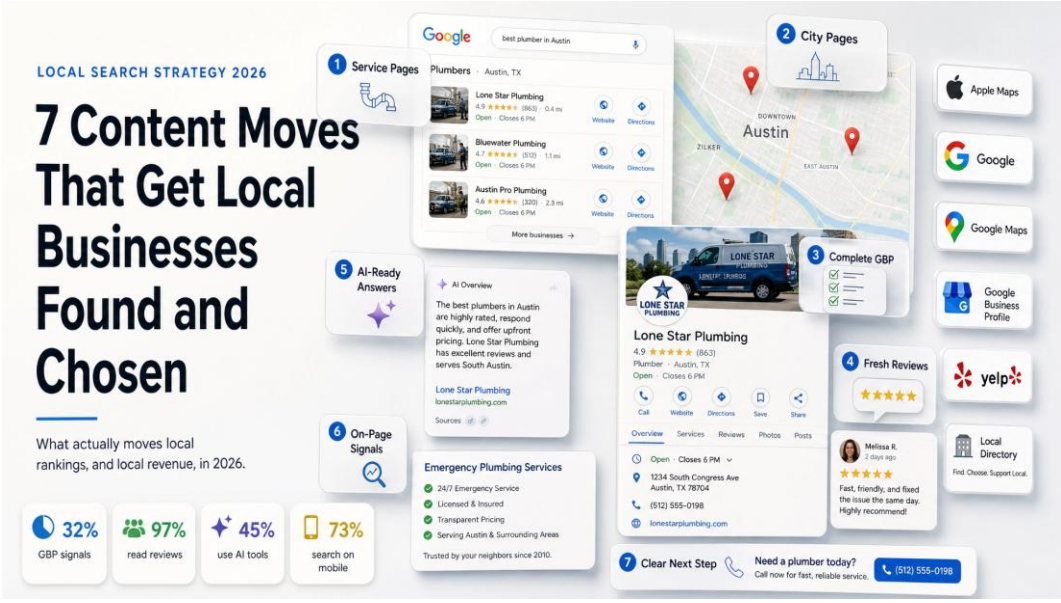
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1 7 Content Moves That Get Local Businesses Found and Chosen

What actually moves local rankings, and local revenue, in 2026.



Local search stopped being a ranking contest. **Between January and April 2026, 68% of US Google searches ended without a single click**, up from 60% in 2024. Over the same stretch, **45% of consumers used AI tools to find a local business, up from 6% a year earlier**. Seventy-three percent of local searches now happen on a phone, and 28% of people pick a business in under five minutes.

Showing up is no longer the win. Being the one they choose is. Here are seven moves that do both.

1. One page per service. No exceptions.

The 2026 ranking data puts a dedicated page for each service at the top of the local organic list. Not a bulleted services list. A page.

A plumber with a single "Services" page competes for nothing in particular. Separate pages for water heater replacement, drain cleaning, and burst pipe repair compete for three intents, each with its own urgency and price point. Predefined services inside your Google Business Profile climbed from position 81 to 22 year over year, so mirror your page titles in that service list word for word.

> **Do this:** list every service you actually sell, then count your pages. The gap is your content calendar.

2. One page per city too, but only where you can prove it

Service pages tell Google what you do. Location pages tell it where. Geographic relevance is the second strongest local organic factor and an address in the searched city is the fourth strongest local pack factor, so your best pages are usually both at once: service plus city.

Service area businesses need one caveat. Proximity drives roughly 55% of local pack ranking decisions and you have one verified address, so you cannot publish your way into the 3-pack in a town forty miles out. Location pages win the organic results below the map, not the map itself. That is still most of the traffic, and it is the half you actually control.

The failure mode is the doorway page: one template with the city name swapped. Build a location page only when you can put at least three things on it that are true of that city alone. Completed jobs with photos. Reviews from residents there. County permit rules. Named neighborhoods. Your real response time to that postcode.

Do this: multiply your services by your priority cities, then build only the cells you can prove. Depth beats a forty-page matrix of thin copy every time.

3. Your Google Business Profile carries a third of the weight

Google Business Profile signals account for roughly 32% of the local pack factors you can control, up about 15 points since 2023. Review signals sit near 20%, on-page around 19%, links 15%, behavioral signals 8%, citations 7%.

The top local pack factors are blunt: primary category, proximity, keywords in the business name, an address in the search city, and, new to the top five, whether you are open at the time of the search. Hours and your service list are ranking assets. Profiles with photos pull 30% to 50% more views, and for service businesses 10% to 15% of profile views become a click to call.

> **Do this:** audit your primary category, fill every predefined service, and add ten current photos.

4. Reviews are content, and they expire

97% of consumers read reviews. 41% always read them, up from 29% a year earlier. 68% will not use a business rated below four stars, and 31% now hold out for 4.5 or higher.

The part most owners miss: 74% only consider reviews written in the last three months, so a 200-review profile that stopped collecting last year reads as stale. 47% skip businesses with fewer than 20 reviews entirely. 89% expect the owner to reply and 81% expect it within a week, but 50% are put off by obviously generic replies. Businesses that respond to everything are 80% more likely to be chosen.

> **Do this:** target two to five new reviews a month and write real replies, not templates.

5. Write so an AI can quote you

45% of consumers now use AI tools for local recommendations, ChatGPT at 31% and Google AI Mode at 23%. 82% read AI-generated review summaries and 23% decide from those summaries alone.

The good news: AI does not close the deal. Only 18% of AI users felt ready to contact a business an AI recommended, and 43% of those who started with AI went back to Google to check. AI shortlists, Google confirms, your site converts. To get quoted, put the direct answer in the first two sentences under a question-shaped heading, and keep pricing and service area in plain text rather than images. 73% of sites carry technical barriers that block AI crawlers, usually robots.txt rules, CDN restrictions, or JavaScript rendering.

> **Do this:** add a short FAQ block with pricing ranges, service area, and response time to every service page.

6. On-page details still decide the close races

On-page signals carry about 19% of the local pack weight you control and sit in the top five for local organic. Four fundamentals do most of the work.

Page titles. Lead with the service, then the city, then the brand: "Emergency Drain Cleaning in Fresno | Rapid Plumb". Title length is not a ranking factor. Clarity and the city name are.

Schema. LocalBusiness markup with name, address, phone, hours, and service area on every location page, plus Service and FAQPage markup on service pages. It is how machines confirm what your copy claims.

Internal linking. Link every service page to its matching city page and back, using anchor text that names the service. Orphaned service pages do not rank, no matter how well written.

NAP consistency. Identical business name, address, and phone across your site, your profile, and every directory. Mismatches are a silent ranking tax.

Do this: pick your five most valuable pages and fix titles, schema, and internal links on all five this month.

7. Make the next step impossible to miss

Average conversion rate across tracked industries is 5.13%. Organic search does better in local service categories: 8.1% for professional services, 7.3% for legal, 4.8% for construction and engineering.

Note how those conversions arrive. 56% of legal conversions and 53% of professional services conversions come through a phone call, not a form. Put a tappable number in the header of every page, visible without scrolling. Keep forms to name, phone, service, and postcode, because every extra field costs you leads, and state your response time next to the button. Speed decides the rest: average mobile load on 4G is 8.6 seconds against 2.5 on desktop, only 42% of mobile sites pass all three Core Web Vitals, and roughly 1% of conversion rate disappears per additional 100 milliseconds.

> **Do this:** open your top service page on your own phone, on cellular data, and count the taps it takes to reach a human.

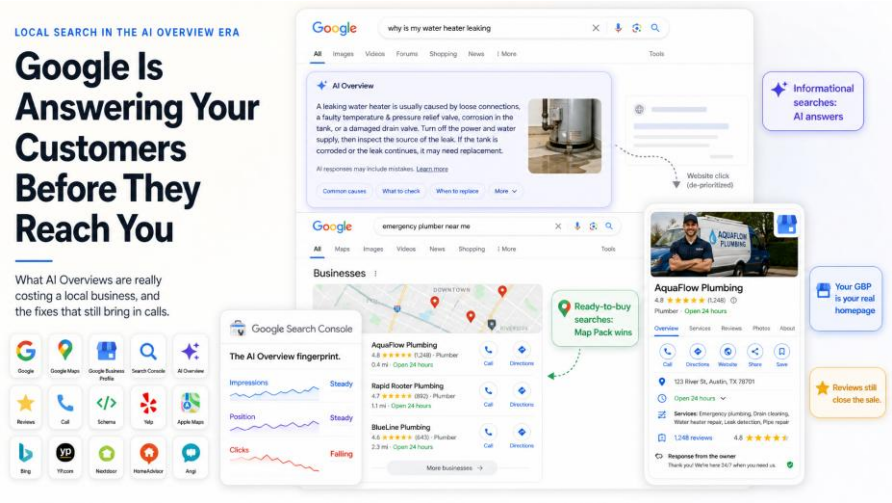
START HERE NOW

1. Count your services against your service pages. Build the biggest gap first.
2. Map services against priority cities. Build only the combinations you can prove.
3. Fill every predefined service in your Google Business Profile, using your page titles.
4. Fix titles, LocalBusiness schema, and internal links on your five best pages.
5. Ask your last ten happy customers for a review. Reply to every review you already have.
6. Add a question-shaped FAQ block with real pricing ranges to your top page.
7. Time that page on a phone, on cellular, and make the number tappable in the header.

Rankings follow relevance. Revenue follows the next step being obvious.

2 Google Is Answering Your Customers Before They Reach You - What Can You Do

What AI Overviews are really costing a local business, how to check your own site in twenty minutes, and the five fixes that still bring in calls.



The drop is real

You are not imagining it. **Roughly two out of every three Google searches now end without a click** to any website at all. That number has been climbing for years, and AI Overviews, the answer box at the top of the page, pushed it higher.

When that box appears, **the top-ranking result loses about a third of its clicks**. Pew Research watched real people search and found the same thing from the other side: with an AI answer on screen, people clicked through to a website **half as often**.

> ***The traffic did not go to a competitor. It stopped happening.***

But local search is a different animal

Almost everything written about AI Overviews is written about publishers and blogs. Your customers search differently, and the pattern there is far kinder.

A study of hundreds of local searches across US cities and trades found a clean split:

- **When someone is ready to buy** ("emergency plumber near me"), the **map pack shows up almost every time** and the AI answer box rarely does.
- **When someone is just researching** ("why is my water heater leaking"), it flips. **The AI box answers over 90% of those** and the map pack barely appears.

Read that twice. **The searches that turn into phone calls are still largely intact.** What is disappearing is article traffic, the "how much does it cost" visits that rarely booked anything anyway.

That should change what you worry about, and what you spend money on.

Check your own site in twenty minutes

Google gives you no report that says "AI Overviews took these clicks." You have to read the fingerprint instead.

1. Open **Google Search Console**, go to Performance, and switch on Clicks, Impressions, CTR and Average Position. Compare the last three months against the same period last year.
2. Look for one pattern: **impressions steady, position steady, clicks falling.** That is the AI box. If your position dropped too, you have an ordinary ranking problem and a different fix.
3. Split the pages into two piles: **service and location pages** in one, **blog posts** in the other. If the losses sit almost entirely in the blog pile, your money pages are fine and you can stop panicking.

Twenty minutes here saves you from rebuilding a website that was never the problem.

Five fixes, in the order that pays

1. Your Google Business Profile is your real homepage

The map pack wins the ready-to-buy searches, and your profile is what wins the map pack. **Fill in every single field**: categories, exact hours including holidays, your full services list, service areas, and price ranges. **Add fresh photos every month.** Answer the Q&A section yourself before a stranger does.

2. Reviews decide who gets picked

The bar has risen sharply in the last year:

- Nearly a third of people now refuse to use a business rated under **4.5 stars**.
- Most ignore anything older than **three months**. Old reviews stop counting.
- Four in five expect **a reply to every review**, good or bad.

The practical version: **ask three to five customers a week, every week**. A steady trickle beats forty reviews in one month. Reply to all of them within a week.

3. Answer the questions, do not just list the services

If you want to appear in the AI box, be the page that answers the question cleanly. **Give the direct answer in the first two sentences**, then the detail. **Publish real price ranges** instead of "contact us for pricing." Use short tables for costs and timelines. AI tends to cite recent pages, so **revisit your key pages every few months** and show the date.

4. Get mentioned where the AI is already reading

When AI answers a local question, **most of what it cites is other people's websites**, not yours. You cannot win that by editing your own site alone. Keep your **name, address and phone identical** on Google, Bing, Apple Maps and Yelp. Then add the local layer: chamber of commerce, supplier and dealer listings, local news, sponsorships, and the community groups where your town actually talks.

5. Label your pages so machines can read them

Add **LocalBusiness schema** to your homepage and every location page: address, phone, hours, service area. Add **FAQ schema** to your question pages. This is a one-off job for whoever maintains your site, and it is the difference between a machine *guessing* your details and *knowing* them.

Where this is heading

A year ago, almost nobody asked AI for a local recommendation. Today **close to half of consumers do**, and among people in their thirties and forties it is far higher.

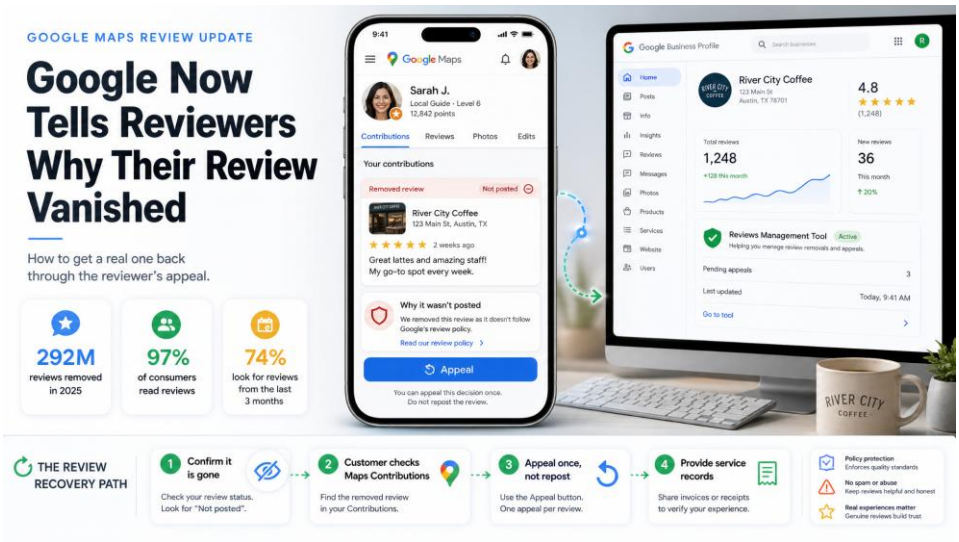
The reassuring part: **almost all of them fact-check what the AI told them**, usually on review sites. **The AI mention starts the journey. Your reviews and your profile still close it.**

DO THIS NOW

- Run the **Search Console** comparison and find out whether your money pages actually lost anything.
- Complete every empty field on your **Google Business Profile** and upload five current photos.
- Reply to **every unanswered review**, oldest first, then set a weekly reminder to ask three customers for one.
- Take your **three best service pages** and add a direct answer, a price range and a last-updated date.
- Check your **name, address and phone** on Google, Bing, Apple Maps and Yelp. Fix anything that disagrees.

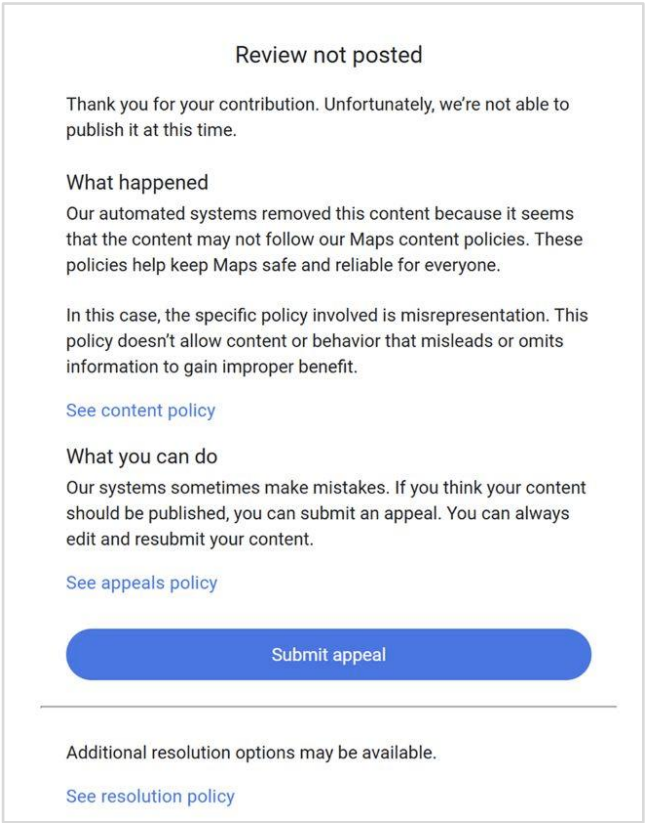
3 Google Now Tells Reviewers Why Their Review Vanished: How to Get a Real One Back

Google pulled 292 million reviews last year. Some of them were legitimate. The customer who wrote yours can now see the reason it disappeared, and that gives you one clean shot at getting it restored.



If your review count dropped overnight and nobody told you why, you are not imagining it. Google blocked or removed 292 million policy-violating reviews across Maps and Business Profiles in 2025, up 21% on 2024, while publishing around a billion legitimate ones. At that scale, honest reviews get caught in the net.

Here is the shift worth knowing about: the person who wrote the review can find out why it went missing. Google's Maps content policy documentation now spells out that when a contribution is removed or rejected, the contributor is typically shown three things: which contribution was affected, the reason it was pulled, and what they can do next. The review does not vanish from their account. It sits in their Maps profile flagged with a status such as "Not posted" or "Not accepted."



What the reviewer sees now: the named policy, plus an appeal button. Screenshot: Google Maps.

That matters because your customer, not you, holds the strongest lever for getting a genuine review reinstated.

Why real reviews get pulled

None of these require you to have done anything wrong:

- The reviewer's account got restricted for unrelated activity, which can take their entire review history with it.
- A cluster of reviews landed in a short window (a tablet at your counter, an event, a review push), which reads as coordinated to spam filters.
- The text names a staff member or reads like it was scripted. Google's April 2026 policy update explicitly banned staff review quotas and telling reviewers what to include.
- Someone reported it and an automated pass agreed.

Before you panic: not every disappearance is a removal. Google's Business Profile API has had display and count discrepancies through 2026, so check your live profile in a private browsing window first.

The recovery playbook

1. **Confirm it is actually gone.** View the profile logged out and compare against your last export or screenshot.
2. **Ask the customer to look.** In Google Maps: tap their profile photo, then Contributions, then Reviews. A removed review shows the stated reason and, where eligible, an appeal option.
3. **Have them appeal, not repost.** Each removal can only be appealed once, and editing or deleting the review after filing cancels the appeal outright. Reposting the same wording usually trips the same filter.
4. **Work your own channel in parallel.** The Reviews Management Tool shows the status of reports on your profile and allows one escalation if a decision went the wrong way. Evaluations typically take several days.
5. **Have the paperwork ready.** Service dates, invoice numbers and appointment records are what turn "this was a real customer" into something a human reviewer can act on.

Do not make it worse

Pressuring a customer to repost, offering anything in exchange, or leaning on a reviewer is now federal exposure, not just a Google problem. The FTC's Consumer Reviews and Testimonials Rule, in force since October 2024, covers review suppression, including intimidation and unfounded legal threats, with knowing violations carrying civil penalties of roughly $53,000 apiece. The Commission sent warning letters to nearly a dozen companies in December 2025.

Drop review gating too. Asking only your happy customers is prohibited, and the pattern it produces (a flawless wall of five stars with no variation) is exactly what triggers the filters costing you reviews in the first place.

The steadier fix

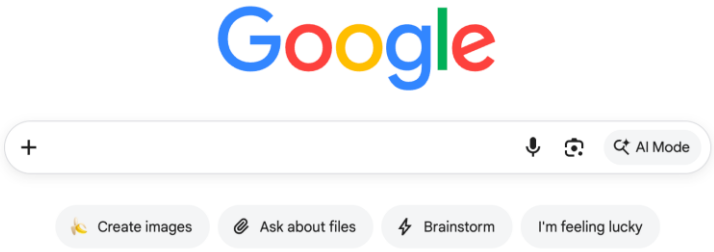
Recency is doing more work than volume right now. In BrightLocal's February 2026 survey of 1,002 US consumers, 97% said they read reviews for local businesses and 74% look specifically for ones written in the last three months. A profile earning a few reviews every week absorbs a removal wave without anyone noticing. A profile that collected 80 reviews in a single campaign two years ago does not.

So ask every customer, not just the delighted ones. Ask after they have left rather than at the counter. Let them use their own words. And keep a monthly export of your reviews, so the next time the number moves you know exactly which one went missing and whose inbox to reach for.

4 Google confirms it is testing new buttons on the home page to drive users to AI-powered search features

The classic Search button vanished for some people this week. Here is what replaced it, what the new buttons actually do, and why your normal search still works exactly the same.

If Google's home page looked unfamiliar this week, you were not imagining it. The blue "Google Search" button that has sat under the search box for two decades has quietly disappeared for some people, replaced by three shortcuts into Google's AI tools.



The tested home page: Create images, Ask about files and Brainstorm sit where the Search button used to be.

What actually changed

Three new buttons now sit under the search box: Create images, Ask about files, and Brainstorm. "I'm Feeling Lucky" survived the cut. The box itself picked up a plus sign on the left for uploading images and files, alongside the microphone, Google Lens, and an AI Mode button.

Barry Schwartz spotted the change on August 10. Google confirmed it a day later. Robby Stein, Google's VP of Product for Search, wrote on X: "This is a small test on desktop to help people find new things they can do with Search. No impact to how the core search box works, just add your question and hit enter as usual (which is how most people search anyways!)"

The test is small: desktop only, a limited number of users, and mostly people who are not signed into a Google account.

What the three buttons do

Create images opens AI Mode with prompts for generating pictures, powered by Google's Nano Banana image model. You will need to be signed in for this one.

Ask about files lets you upload a document, PDF or spreadsheet and ask questions about it in plain language. Think of it as handing Google your insurance policy and asking what your deductible is, instead of reading forty pages yourself.

Brainstorm drops you into a back-and-forth conversation on any topic, closer to talking with a chatbot than running a search.

All three lead into AI Mode, Google's conversational search experience.

Your normal search is untouched

This is the part worth repeating: type a question, press Enter, and you get the same results page you have always got. The buttons are optional signposts, not a new front door. Nothing about how you search has to change.

Why Google is doing this

Reach is not Google's problem. At I/O in May, Sundar Pichai said AI Mode had passed 1 billion monthly active users within a year of launch, with AI Overviews above 2.5 billion. Discovery is the problem. Most people still open Google, type, and hit Enter, exactly as Stein described. Very few know they can upload a tax form and ask questions about it. Buttons on the home page are the bluntest available fix, and they may not work: Schwartz's own reaction was that after twenty years of ignoring "I'm Feeling Lucky", he expects to ignore these too.

What this means for you

Try Ask about files on something genuinely tedious: a lease, a medical bill, a warranty, a bank statement. This is where AI search earns its keep, and it is the feature most people do not know exists.

Use Brainstorm when you do not have a specific question yet, like planning a trip or narrowing down a big purchase.

Keep pressing Enter for facts: prices, opening hours, and anything where you want to see the source. AI answers still get things wrong, and a results page shows you who is telling you what.

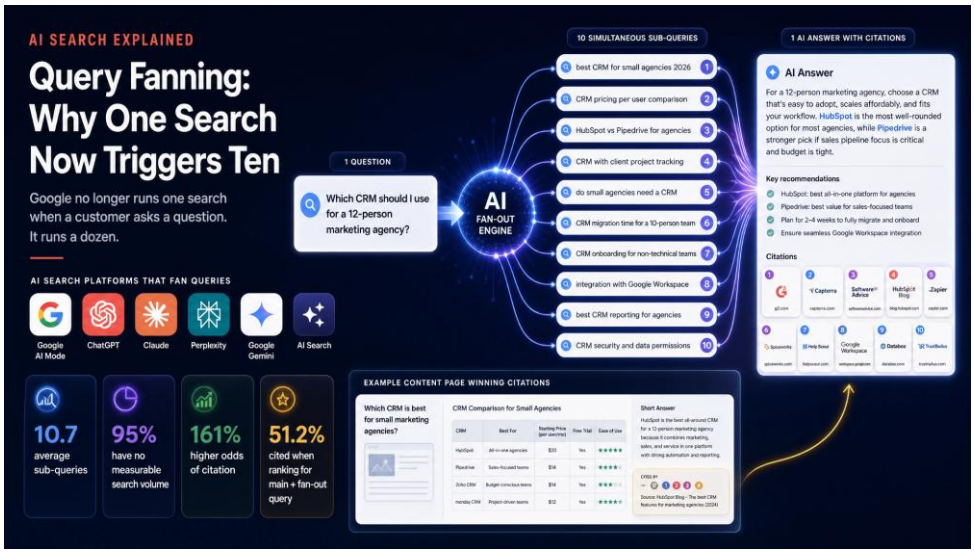
Do not panic about the missing button. It is a test, and Google runs hundreds of these every year. Plenty never ship.

The bigger picture

Google spent 25 years training the world to type and press Enter. It is now spending real estate on its most valuable page to teach people something new. Whether these buttons survive matters less than the direction they point in: Google wants search to be a conversation, and it is willing to redesign its own front door to get you there.

5 Query Fanning: Why One Search Now Triggers Ten

Google no longer runs one search when a customer asks a question. It runs a dozen. Here is what that means for your website, and the five things worth doing about it.



The short version

When someone asks a question in Google's AI Mode, or triggers one of those AI summaries at the top of the results, Google does not run a single search. It quietly breaks the question into smaller sub-questions, runs a batch of searches at the same time, and writes an answer from whatever comes back.

Google calls this **query fan-out**. In its own words, published 20 May 2025: "AI Mode uses our query fan-out technique, breaking down your question into subtopics and issuing a multitude of queries simultaneously on your behalf." For its Deep Search feature, Google says the system "can issue hundreds of searches."

Query fanning is the industry's shorthand for the same thing. It is arguably the single biggest change to how search works since Google started ranking links.

What it looks like in practice

Say a prospect searches: *"which CRM should I use for a 12-person marketing agency"*

Google does not simply hunt for pages matching that phrase. Behind the scenes it may run searches like:

- *best CRM for small agencies 2026*
- *CRM pricing per user comparison*
- *HubSpot vs Pipedrive for agencies*
- *CRM with client project tracking*
- *do small agencies actually need a CRM*
- *CRM migration time for a 10-person team*

You never see these. But the pages that answer them are the pages that get quoted in the final answer.

How many sub-questions? Seer Interactive ran 501 prompts through Gemini 3 in November 2025 and found an average of **10.7** sub-queries per prompt, ranging from 3 to 28. The same test on the older Gemini 2.5 averaged 6.01, a 78% jump in one model generation. Ahrefs reports Google AI Mode typically fires 5 to 11.

Here is the part most people miss: **95% of those sub-queries had no measurable search volume**. They are not keywords sitting in a keyword tool waiting to be found. They are questions the machine invents on the spot.

WHY THIS IS NOT A NICHE TECHNICAL TOPIC

1 billion monthly active users on Google AI Mode, reached within a year of launch. *Sundar Pichai, Google I/O keynote, 19 May 2026*

7.22 vs 4.0 average words in an AI Mode query versus a traditional Google search, across 69 million US desktop sessions. *Semrush, May–July 2025*

53% vs 8% share of searches producing an AI summary for queries of 10+ words versus 1–2 words. *Pew Research, 68,879 searches, March 2025*

8% vs 15% of visits where users clicked a normal search result, with an AI summary present versus absent. Just 1% clicked a link inside the summary. *Pew Research, July 2025*

40% of small businesses report traffic disrupted by algorithm changes and AI, rising to 46% at 11–100 employees. *LocaliQ survey of 300+ SMBs, March 2026*

Put those together and the picture is clear. Search is becoming more conversational. Conversational searches pull in more AI answers. AI answers send fewer people to websites. Query fanning is the machinery sitting in the middle of all three.

The number that should change your content plan

Surfer SEO published the most useful study on this in December 2025. They took 10,000 keywords, analysed 173,902 URLs, and used Gemini to extract 33,000 fan-out queries. Three-quarters of those keywords (76%) triggered an AI summary.

The headline finding:

- Pages ranking for the main query only accounted for **19.6%** of AI citations.
- Pages ranking for the main query *and* at least one fan-out query accounted for **51.2%**.

That is a **161% lift** in the odds of being cited. The correlation between how many fan-out queries a page ranked for and how often it got cited was 0.77, which is strong.

The second finding is the encouraging one if you are not the biggest name in your market: **67.8% of cited pages did not rank in the top 10** for either the main query or its fan-outs. You do not have to be number one to be quoted. You have to be the page that genuinely answers the sub-question.

And being quoted pays. Seer Interactive found brands cited in AI answers earn roughly **120% more organic clicks per impression** than brands that are not.

Five things to do about it

1. **Answer the whole question, not the keyword.** Before publishing anything, write down the 10 to 15 follow-up questions a real buyer would ask: cost, timeline, alternatives, who it suits, who it does not, what typically goes wrong. Cover them on the page, or across pages you link together.
2. **Write so a machine can lift a passage.** Use the question as your heading, then answer it in the first two or three sentences underneath before you expand. Tables, short lists and clear headings get extracted. Long unbroken prose does not.
3. **Be specific and current.** In the Seer test, 21.3% of fan-out queries included a year and 26.4% included a brand name. Vague evergreen copy matches neither. Name products, name competitors, cite figures, date your content.
4. **Build clusters, not one-off posts.** Do not chase individual fan-out queries. Surfer found only 27% of them stay the same when the identical question is asked again, so they are moving targets. What stays stable is depth of coverage on a topic.
5. **Publish the boring facts.** Prices, service areas, opening hours, specifications, warranty terms, comparison tables. Fan-out queries constantly ask for these attributes, and most business websites bury them or leave them out entirely.

What to measure instead

Keyword rankings alone will stop telling you much. Add three things: how often you get cited in AI answers for your core topics, your branded search volume (a rising line means the answers are working even when the clicks are not), and the conversion rate of AI referral traffic, which is small in volume but tends to arrive much further down the funnel.

Bottom line

Query fanning turns one customer question into a dozen. The winners are not the sites with the best single keyword match. They are the sites that credibly answer the most of those dozen, in a format a machine can quote. That is a content depth problem rather than a technical one, and it is solvable by any business willing to write down what it already knows.