



How Customers Find Businesses in an AI-Driven Search World

A Clear Look at How AI Search Decides Which Businesses Get Mentioned — and Which Don't

Merge Point
Marketing

AI Doesn't Recommend the Best Business — It Recommends the One It Understands Best

AI-driven search is built on interpretation, not rankings.

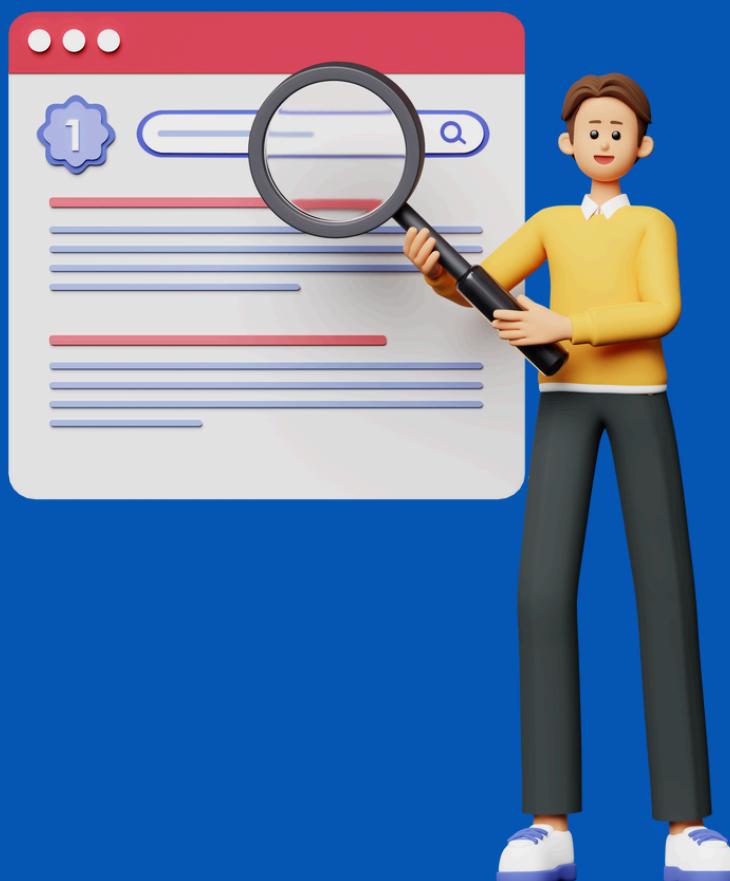
From your website and Google Business Profile to reviews, mentions, and real-world engagement, AI forms an understanding of your business across the web.

This talk helps you see how AI builds that understanding — and where clarity or confusion may be limiting your visibility.

AI-generated summaries now appear in over 20% of search queries, with use higher for complex, question-style searches. | [Source: Search Engine Journal](#)

Search Has Changed

(Even If You Haven't Noticed Yet)



Customers are still searching — just differently than before.

- AI-powered search is already here
- Google increasingly answers questions instead of listing links
- Customers now ask AI tools:
 - “Who should I hire?”
 - “Best company near me”
 - “What’s the difference between X and Y?”



**SEARCH BEHAVIOR HASN'T STOPPED,
CLICK BEHAVIOR HAS CHANGED**

Old Google

10 Blue Links Era

- Page title links
- Short meta descriptions
- Minimal instant answers
- User must click to learn anything

Google search results for "italian restaurant" in Omaha, Nebraska:

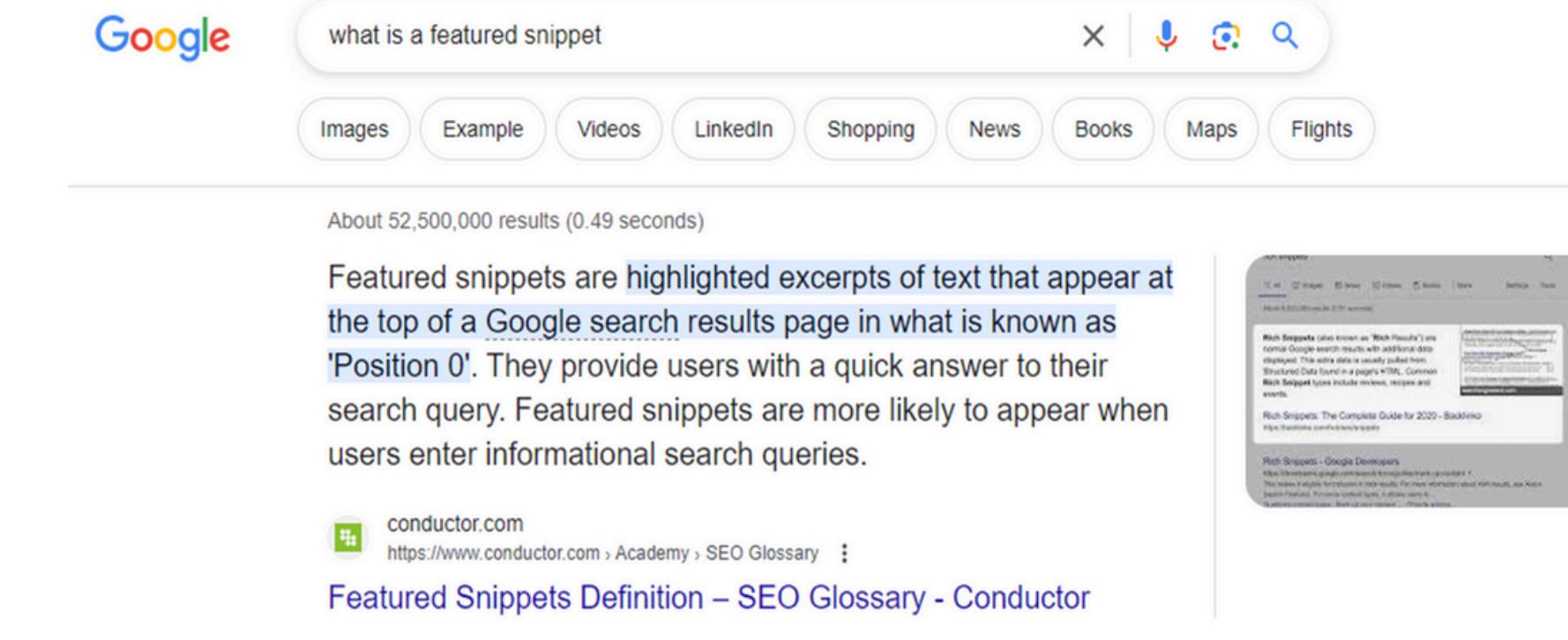
- The 10 Best Italian Restaurants in Omaha - TripAdvisor**
<https://www.tripadvisor.com> > United States > Nebraska (NE) > Omaha
- The Best 10 Italian Restaurants in Omaha, NE - Last Updated October ...**
<https://www.yelp.com> > Omaha, NE > Restaurants > Italian
- The 15 Best Italian Restaurants in Omaha - Foursquare**
<https://foursquare.com/top-places/omaha/best-italian-restaurants>
- 25 Best Italian Restaurants in Omaha - VacationIdea.com**
<https://vacationidea.com/ideas/best-italian-restaurants-in-omaha.html>
- Italian Restaurants in Omaha - Urbanspoon/Zomato**
<https://www.zomato.com> > United States > Omaha

Malara's Italian Restaurant: Homemade Italian Food | Omaha, NE
<https://www.malarasitalianrestaurant.com/>

New Google

Answer-First Era

If Google can answer the question itself, it will. Your job is to become the source of that answer.



Google search results for "what is a featured snippet". The search bar shows the query. Below it are various filter buttons: Images, Example, Videos, LinkedIn, Shopping, News, Books, Maps, and Flights. The results section starts with a snippet: "Featured snippets are highlighted excerpts of text that appear at the top of a Google search results page in what is known as 'Position 0'. They provide users with a quick answer to their search query. Featured snippets are more likely to appear when users enter informational search queries." Below this snippet is a result from conductor.com, which includes the URL and a snippet of the page content: "Featured Snippets Definition – SEO Glossary - Conductor". To the right of the search results, there are two small screenshots of a mobile browser showing rich snippets.

what is a featured snippet

Images Example Videos LinkedIn Shopping News Books Maps Flights

About 52,500,000 results (0.49 seconds)

Featured snippets are highlighted excerpts of text that appear at the top of a Google search results page in what is known as 'Position 0'. They provide users with a quick answer to their search query. Featured snippets are more likely to appear when users enter informational search queries.

conductor.com
https://www.conductor.com › Academy › SEO Glossary

Featured Snippets Definition – SEO Glossary - Conductor

How AI Decides Which Businesses to Mention



AI tools look for signals they can trust.

- Clear understanding of what a business does
- Consistent information across the web
- Credibility and authority
- Content that is easy to summarize
- Real-world signals (reviews, mentions, engagement)

TRADITIONAL SEARCH → **RANKS PAGES**

AI → **SELECTS SOURCES**

The Practical Requirements AI Looks For



If AI can't confidently summarize & trust you, it won't confidently recommend you.

What DOESN'T work anymore

- ✗ Keyword stuffing
- ✗ Thin location pages with swapped city names
- ✗ Generic blog posts
- ✗ "SEO tricks" without authority
- ✗ Relying on ads alone



THESE AREN'T TASKS — THEY'RE SIGNALS AI EVALUATES OVER TIME.

E-E-A-T

E-E-A-T is not a ranking factor, but is a framework to help assess quality, credibility, and reliability.

It's about proving you know what you're talking about, you've actually done it, and you can be trusted.

Experience

Has the creator actually done or lived what they're writing about? Experience looks for first-hand involvement, not just research or theory and helps distinguish practical insight from generic advice.

Expertise

Does the creator have the knowledge or skill to speak accurately on this topic? Expertise reflects a depth of understanding and ensures the information is technically sound. technically sound.

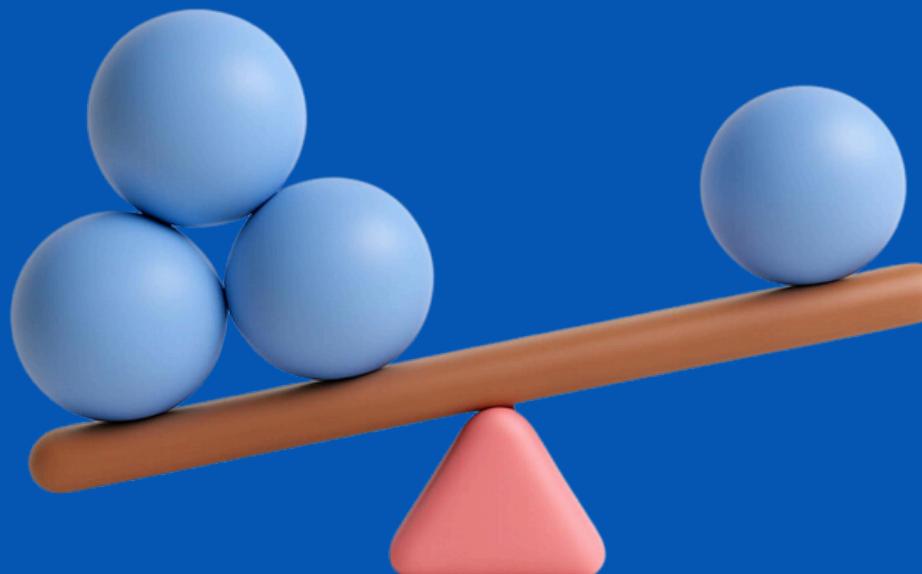
Authoritativeness

Is this source recognized as a reliable reference in its space? Authoritativeness is about reputation and consistency, not popularity and grows over time as a body of work becomes cohesive and reliable.

Trustworthiness

Can users rely on this content and this source? Trustworthiness focuses on honesty, transparency, and safety and is especially critical for content that influences decisions, finances, or wellbeing.

How AI Search Is Different from Traditional SEO



Traditional SEO

- Helps people find your website
- Ranks pages
- Focuses on keywords
- Competes for clicks

AI Search

- Helps AI decide who to recommend
- Builds understanding
- Focuses on entities and answers
- Competes for trust and confidence

Area	Traditional	AI SEO
Primary Goal	Rank webpages in Google search results	Be selected as a trusted source in AI answers
What Gets Optimized	Pages, URLs, site structure	Answers, entities, facts
How Visibility Is Earned	Keywords, backlinks, authority	Clarity, trust, consistency
Content Style	Long-form, comprehensive	Short, direct, quotable
Success Metric	Rankings, clicks, traffic	Mentions, citations, summaries
Competitive Unit	Webpages	Sources (brands / businesses)
User Action	Clicks through to site	May not click at all
Local Impact	Extremely important	Growing rapidly
Longevity	Foundational & long-term	Accelerating
Status	Still critical	Required going forward
	Ranks pages	Selects sources
	Rewards keywords	Rewards answers
	Measures clicks	Measures usefulness
	Traffic-focused	Visibility-focused

EXAMPLE

**How much
does it cost
to paint a
house?**

Traditional Google Search

A list of ranked pages from different painting companies and blogs..

AI Search

AI might say:

“According to ABC Painting in Raleigh, interior house painting typically costs between \$3,000 and \$8,000...”

The company becomes the answer — not just the page.

Can You Pay to Show Up in AI Like Google Ads?



- There is no direct “AI ad placement” (yet)
- Ads don’t buy AI visibility
- Ads do influence behavior

Why that matters:

- Google Ads drive real customer actions
- AI observes real-world behavior
- AI trusts businesses with visible engagement



**ADS DON’T REPLACE AI VISIBILITY —
THEY ACCELERATE THE SIGNALS
BEHIND IT.**

Why This Matters for Local & Service Businesses



- AI often presents only one or two recommendations
- Being “almost clear” isn’t enough
- If AI doesn’t understand your business:
 - ✗ You aren’t compared
 - ✗ You aren’t considered
 - ✗ You aren’t mentioned



AI VISIBILITY ISN’T ABOUT BEING EVERYWHERE — IT’S ABOUT BEING UNMISTAKABLE.

Need Help Improving Your Visibility?

If you're unsure how clearly AI understands your business — or where confusion may be limiting recommendations — we can help.

We evaluate how your business is interpreted across the web, identify gaps in clarity and consistency, and build a focused plan to strengthen the signals that influence both search and AI-driven recommendations.

Contact

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