

Artificial Intelligence

Why GEO could matter more than SEO in the AI era



Representational image

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Published May 14, 2026



I've sat in enough brand AOP's this past year to know the script. The pursuit of organic traffic and the SEO dashboard is green. Rankings stable. Backlinks growing. And yet the pipeline is thinning. Qualified leads and influence from organic search, quietly dropping quarter after quarter. The CMO looks at the agency. The agency looks at the dashboard. Nobody has an answer.

I do. And it's uncomfortable. The leads didn't vanish; the behavior of your consumer changed. They moved to ChatGPT, Perplexity, Google's AI Overviews. People are chatting away to glory, asking questions and getting full answers that don't mention your brand (mostly). Not because you're irrelevant. Because no one made sure you exist inside the model's reasoning layer. That's structural invisibility, and most of corporate India hasn't even named it yet.

Here's the data that makes this urgent: India is already Perplexity's largest market by traffic, ahead of the US, with usage up 640% year-over-year after the Airtel partnership. It's the 2nd largest AI market, AI search adoption here is running at 190-210% ++ annually. Indian consumers graduated. Indian marketing budgets didn't.

The quick test

Open ChatGPT on your non work friends phone. Ask AI to recommend a product eg: term insurance. Try Claude for a SMB CRM recommendation. Calculate what the inclusion is for your brand in AI answers. That gap is the problem between Seo and GEO, in 2026 that problem is impacting revenue.

What your board needs to hear (but probably hasn't)

Gartner predicted traditional search volume would drop 25% by 2026. We're inside that prediction. Organic CTR has crashed 61% on queries where AI Overviews show up. Less than 1% click the tiny almost invisible citation links. Traffic is bottoming out.

And here's what nobody in Indian marketing is saying out loud: Google is cannibalizing its own advertisers. When a query runs through AI Mode, Google decomposes it into sub-queries (engineers call this Query Fan-Out). Your paid ad is competing in an auction, but the answer's

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already assembled before the auction runs. If your brand isn't in that sub-query layer, you didn't lose the bid. You were never in the room. This has repercussions on your organic traffic and your paid traffic, it's a tough situation to manage especially if wars, and pandemics took a big bite out of your plans already.

The logged-in trap that's fooling your team

This one really bothers me. You test a query on ChatGPT / Gemini while logged in. The model's seen your history, your previous conversations about your brand, your category. So when you ask a question, your brand shows up. You cannot diagnose the problem.

That's logged-in bias. The model is reflecting session history, and memory not what a new customer sees with zero context. I've seen brands go from "we're in every response" to "we don't appear" just by using a fresh unbiased token search. Entire teams get blindsided because they're mistaking a personalized echo chamber for real brand authority. It's a learning curve.

Why GEO will replace SEO

Traditional SEO assumed Google would always return ranked URLs and a human would click. Both broke in the same year. When someone asks an LLM a question, no index gets consulted. The model synthesizes from its internalized weights. It doesn't rank pages. It picks winners.

In our audits for 700+ brands (India's largest GEO benchmark index study, 408,000 prompts across four models), the failure modes are painfully consistent. Brands omitted despite being category leaders. Competitors surfaced without factual basis. Features and pricing hallucinated out of thin air. Indian brands at a disadvantage always. Or a mention so weak it generates zero commercial outcome.

LLM models, pick trust signals, one consumer venting in the corner of a sub reddit carries more weight than most articles on your website, analysts and credible news mean more than 12 months of SEO. The landscape has changed drastically.

What brands actually need is a clear AI visibility index. Six questions, answered with live information: What are consumers asking AI about your category? What's your brand's rate of inclusion? Are you being cited as a source? Are you being recommended, or just mentioned? What Should you do? Is it Fixed? What is the inclusion growth? Until you can answer all Six from fresh, uncontaminated sessions across multiple models, you're flying blind.

The cost of waiting is compounding

Every quarter you sit this out, competitors are conditioning the models you're absent from. Unlike a Google ranking drop (recoverable with a content sprint), model perception is cumulative. The first brand to establish itself in the training signal builds a compounding advantage. The second doesn't start later. It starts behind.

This holds globally. But India's specific combination, the world's fastest AI search adoption running alongside a marketing industry still budgeting like it's 2019, creates the widest gap I've seen in any major market. Our Audits with Neurorank that span 65+ categories of brands show leading brands losing category dominance in AI, while some smaller brands completely steal the show. This technology-created disruption will impact P&L's and the shift by brands to GEO will be drastic and fast.

So where does this leave us?

SEO isn't dead. But it's no longer the main event. AI models now decide which brands get recommended, cited, and trusted before a single search result loads. That's the new reality.

The CMOs who build Generative Experience Optimization capability now will own the categories. Everyone else? They'll spend three years staring at perfect rankings and an empty pipeline, wondering what went wrong.

(The article has been authored by Ambika Sharma, who is Founder and Chief Strategist of Pulp Strategy Communications and Founder of Neurorank – an AI visibility intelligence platform)

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