

ADSWIZARDS / RESEARCH / 2026

# Search Is Moving Beyond Keywords

A working hypothesis on what happens when interpretation, intent and evidence become part of discovery.

This is our conclusion, not Google's. Below, we show the documented mechanisms it's built on — and where we're extrapolating beyond them.

Evidence model: this paper marks every claim as Google Documented, Observed, or Adswizards Lab Hypothesis. See page 9 for the full framework. Accessed 21 August 2026 — verify time-sensitive product claims before reuse.

## RESEARCH

# Search Is Moving Beyond Keywords

A working hypothesis on what happens when interpretation, intent and evidence become part of discovery.

STATUS Working hypothesis, v1.1 / August 2026 · CLAIM This is AdsWizards Lab's conclusion about where Search is heading. It is not attributed to Google. Every claim below is tagged by evidence tier — see page 9.

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## Executive Summary

We think Search is moving from a system organized around the literal query to one organized around interpreted intent, matched against entities, filtered by context and ranked by evidence. Google has not described a unified roadmap that says this. We're stating it ourselves, based on how two of its systems now behave — and we're showing our work.

Two systems are moving in a related direction, in parallel, without merging into one. On the organic side, AI Overviews and AI Mode add an interpretation layer between a question and the pages that answer it. On the paid side, AI Max adds an optimization layer inside Search campaigns. Both reduce how literally a query has to map to a result. Neither replaces the keyword. Neither is the other system wearing a different label.

**The single clearest piece of evidence we found is Final URL Expansion: a marketer sets a destination, and the system can send the click somewhere else instead.**

Evidence: **GOOGLE DOCUMENTED** [1][2][3][4]

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## The Old Search Model

For two decades this was the whole picture:

**Organic:** Query → Search results → Page → Answer

**Paid:** Query → Keyword match → Ad → Landing page → Conversion

SEO optimized pages around queries. PPC built keyword structures around expected demand. The query was the central object the entire system organized around. That model still exists — it's just no longer sufficient to describe everything happening in Search.

## Search Now Has an Interpretation Layer

### GOOGLE DOCUMENTED

On the organic side, users can describe a problem, add constraints, ask follow-ups and compare alternatives without reformulating every step as a keyword query. Google's own documentation says AI Overviews and AI Mode may use a "query fan-out" technique — issuing multiple related searches across subtopics and data sources — to develop a response, and that its systems identify more supporting pages while generating it than a classic search would surface. <sup>[1]</sup>

Question → Interpretation → Sources / Entities → Synthesized answer → Action

This is a change in when retrieval happens, not just in how the answer looks. Interpretation now runs before and during retrieval, not only after it.

## Two Systems, One Direction

### OBSERVED

It's tempting to read AI Max as "the paid version of AI Overviews." We don't think that's accurate, and we want to be precise about why — this is exactly the kind of claim that's easy to overstate.

#### AI OVERVIEWS / AI MODE

Organic Search features. Change what a user sees on the results page. Not something an advertiser configures. Live on the informational surface of Search.

#### AI MAX

A Google Ads campaign setting. Changes how a Search campaign is matched, written and routed. Has no relationship to whether AI Overviews appear for that query.

What connects them isn't a shared system — it's a shared direction. Both let Google's models exercise more judgment over the literal query, on the premise that this produces better outcomes. We're calling that direction observable, not documenting a merger: Google's own materials describe these as separate products with separate mechanisms, and we have found nothing suggesting otherwise. <sup>[1][2]</sup>

## AI Max: An Optimization Layer for Search Campaigns

GOOGLE DOCUMENTED

AI Max is not a separate campaign type, and we want to state that plainly because it's a common misreading. Google's own description is explicit: AI Max "serves as a continuous optimization layer for your Search campaigns," processing real-time signals to refine targeting and creative delivery. [2]

It sits on top of a standard Search campaign and bundles three settings that can be toggled individually: search term matching, text customization, and Final URL expansion. [2][3] Turning AI Max on enables all three by default; each can be switched off without disabling the others.

## Text Customization: What Google Actually Draws On

GOOGLE DOCUMENTED

Text customization writes ad copy the advertiser didn't write, generated per auction rather than fixed at campaign creation. Google documents exactly what it draws on to do this: existing ads, landing-page copy, the keywords in the ad group, and the account's other assets. [3] All four inputs are named explicitly in Google's own setup documentation — this isn't a black box drawing on unstated signals.

## Final URL Expansion: The Clearest Evidence We Have

GOOGLE DOCUMENTED

This is the single feature that best supports our thesis, so we want to be exact about what it does — not what it implies.

A marketer sets a Final URL for an ad. That used to be the end of the decision: click the ad, land on that URL. With Final URL Expansion on, it isn't. Google's documentation says the feature "will only send traffic to URLs that are query relevant and themed to your ad group" [4] — but within that constraint, it can replace the advertiser's chosen URL with a different page from the same domain if it predicts that page performs better for the specific query.

The advertiser keeps real controls, and they're worth naming precisely rather than gesturing at: **URL exclusions** stop specific pages from ever being served; **URL inclusions** restrict expansion to a defined set of URLs; and **tracking templates continue to apply** — the serving logic substitutes the expanded final URL into the existing template's {lpurl} parameter rather than bypassing tracking altogether. <sup>[4]</sup><sup>[5]</sup>

#### ONE CONTROL DOES GET OVERRIDDEN

Pinned Responsive Search Ad assets aren't respected once Final URL expansion or URL inclusions are active — because a pinned asset may not match the page Google ultimately chooses to serve. To guarantee pinned assets always run, both settings have to be turned off. <sup>[4]</sup><sup>[6]</sup>

**Marketer says Final URL = A. System says: for this query, B converts better. That's not evidence the keyword is dying — it's a documented, observable instance of the query → keyword → ad → URL chain becoming negotiable rather than fixed.**

**OBSERVED** — synthesis of the mechanisms above, not a single Google claim

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## A Different Unit of Discovery

### ADSWIZARDS LAB HYPOTHESIS

Our working hypothesis is that a more useful unit for thinking about AI-mediated discovery is:

**Intent × Entity × Context × Evidence**

**Intent** — what is the person actually trying to accomplish?

**Entity** — which company, product, expert or source is relevant, and does the system understand what that entity is?

**Context** — which constraints change the answer: geography, regulation, price, risk, stage of consideration?

**Evidence** — why should the system retrieve or trust this source: unique information, explicit claims, consistent structure, corroborating signals?

This is not Google's terminology, and we're not presenting it as such. It's the model we're testing against the mechanisms documented above — the reason this is a hypothesis paper and not a report on Google's stated plans.

## SEO and AI Visibility Are Not the Same Job

### GOOGLE DOCUMENTED

Google explicitly says foundational SEO remains relevant to AI Overviews and AI Mode, and that there are no special technical requirements beyond being indexed and eligible to appear in Search with a snippet. <sup>[1][7]</sup> We don't treat AI visibility as a replacement for technical SEO — we treat it as an additional question.

**Search visibility:** can this page be discovered, indexed and ranked?

**AI visibility:** can a system understand what this source knows, when it's relevant, and whether it's useful enough to support an answer?

## The Website Is No Longer Just a Destination

### OBSERVED

In the conventional model, the website sits near the end of the journey: search, click, land, convert. Google Ads makes a concrete case for something broader: AI Max can draw on landing-page content for text customization and can select alternative URLs from the domain before a user ever experiences the page as a destination. <sup>[3][4]</sup> Information architecture starts to affect acquisition earlier than the click.

## We Are Testing This on Ourselves

AdsWizards Lab is part business, part experiment. We deliberately separate conventional search optimization from AI visibility, building a connected knowledge structure — Research, Playbooks, Decision Frameworks, Knowledge Base — instead of manufacturing keyword-targeted pages, and attempting initial visibility without paid acquisition.

We don't yet know if the hypothesis holds. That's why it's an experiment and not a claim of proof.

## What We Will Measure

We'll track where AdsWizards Lab appears, which materials get retrieved or cited, how different AI systems interpret the business, which structures seem to move visibility, and which interventions produce nothing. The aim isn't a GEO checklist — it's separating repeatable signal from folklore. Results get published as evidence accumulates, including the parts that fail.

## What This Means for Acquisition

We're not declaring SEO dead, keywords dead, or Search dead. The more interesting possibility is that all three remain while becoming components of a larger system — one where marketers increasingly supply information, constraints, creative and evidence, and machines make more of the individual matches.

**The question changes from "which keywords should we rank or bid for" to "what does the system need to understand about us to choose us for the right intent." That's the question we're testing.**

## EVIDENCE MODEL & LIMITATIONS

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Every claim in this paper is tagged with one of three tiers. This is stricter than a simple citation list — it tells you how much weight the claim can bear.

### GOOGLE DOCUMENTED

Stated directly in Google's own product or policy documentation, cited by source number. The strongest tier — closest to a direct quote.

### OBSERVED

A pattern we see by connecting two or more documented mechanisms. Not a single Google citation, but not speculation — reasoning shown, sources named.

### ADSWIZARDS LAB HYPOTHESIS

Our own model or forward-looking claim. Not Google's framework, not yet validated by longitudinal evidence. Treat as a hypothesis until it is.

Evidence status for this paper as a whole: **Directional**. The product mechanisms are documented; the Intent × Entity × Context × Evidence model and the framing of "Search is moving beyond keywords" are AdsWizards Lab's own conclusions, built on that documentation but not asserted by Google.

## REFERENCES

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[1]

### Google Search Central — AI Features and Your Website

Google explains how AI Overviews and AI Mode surface supporting links, use query fan-out, and retain foundational SEO requirements.

<https://developers.google.com/search/docs/appearance/ai-features>

Page last updated: 2025-12-10 UTC · Accessed: 21 August 2026

[2]

### Google Ads Help — How AI Max for Search campaigns works

States that AI Max serves as a continuous optimization layer for Search campaigns, and documents its three component settings.

<https://support.google.com/google-ads/answer/15910187?hl=en>

Accessed: 21 August 2026

[3]

### Google Ads Help — Set up AI Max for Search campaigns

Documents that text customization draws on domain content, landing pages, existing ads, keywords and assets; documents URL exclusions and inclusions.

<https://support.google.com/google-ads/answer/15909989?hl=en>

Accessed: 21 August 2026



**[4]****Google Ads Help — About Final URL expansion in Search**

Documents the relevance constraint on Final URL expansion, URL exclusions, and that pinned RSA assets aren't respected when expansion or inclusions are active.

<https://support.google.com/google-ads/answer/16230205?hl=en>

Accessed: 21 August 2026

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**[5]****Google Ads API — Serving URL Expansion Rules**

Documents that the tracking URL template is expanded and the {lpurl} parameter is substituted with the expanded final URL — tracking continues to apply rather than being bypassed.

<https://developers.google.com/google-ads/api/docs/ads/upgraded-urls/serving-url-rules>

Accessed: 21 August 2026

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**[6]****Google Ads Help — Frequently asked questions about AI Max for Search campaigns**

Confirms pinned Responsive Search Ad assets are not respected when Final URL expansion or URL inclusions are enabled.

<https://support.google.com/google-ads/answer/15913066?hl=en>

Accessed: 21 August 2026

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**[7]****Google Search Central Blog — A New Resource for Optimizing for Generative AI in Google Search**

Google's May 2026 guidance emphasizes unique, non-commodity content and states that established SEO best practices remain foundational.

<https://developers.google.com/search/blog/2026/05/a-new-resource-for-optimizing>

Accessed: 21 August 2026

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**METHOD NOTE**

Statements tagged Google Documented are sourced directly above. Statements tagged Observed are AdsWizards Lab's synthesis of two or more documented mechanisms. Statements tagged AdsWizards Lab Hypothesis — including the Intent × Entity × Context × Evidence model and the central claim that Search is moving beyond keywords — are our own conclusions, not Google's. Platform documentation and product behavior can change; re-verify time-sensitive claims before reuse.

ADSWIZARDS LAB

# Interpretation is becoming part of discovery. We're testing what that means.

**Search Is Moving Beyond Keywords — our  
hypothesis, our evidence, shown in full.**

Growth architecture for complex and policy-sensitive markets.

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