

The **y**oast Perspective

Industry-led SEO survey insights,
analyzed and interpreted by Yoast.

Jump to

Introduction	2
The state of SEO in 2026	3
Data, insights, and commentary	6
The state of SEO	6
LLMs and SEO	10
Metrics and mindset	16
Challenges and tactics	24
Key takeaways	26
Yoast's action plan for 2026	27
Conclusion	31
Full survey results	32

Introduction

SEO is evolving faster than ever. AI-powered search is expanding where and how SEO works, but the core principles, like clarity, structure, authority, and relevance, remain the same. What does this shift mean for the professionals doing the work?

To answer that, we surveyed 59 SEO experts, from newcomers to industry veterans, and combined their firsthand experiences with Yoast's perspective on the future of search.

In this report, you'll find real-world data combined with actionable insights. Reading this, you'll get a clear view of what SEO stands for today and where it's heading tomorrow.

Here's what we found:

- The expanding definition of SEO in 2026
- How AI is evolving SEO strategies
- The new metrics to focus on
- The biggest challenges in SEO and how to overcome them

This serves as more than an industry overview. It's a practical guide for navigating upcoming changes, supported by data and expert insights.

Here's a high-level overview of the report

- **Part 1:** A little background and context
- **Part 2:** Data and insights; showing key findings from the research, grouped by theme, includes expert analysis from Carolyn Shelby and Alex Moss
- **Part 3:** An action plan, with recommendations and practical advice from Yoast
- **Appendices:** Here, you'll find the full research results

Part 1:

The state of SEO in 2026

Since the beginning of SEO, there have been reports of its death. After this research, we can assure you that SEO isn't dying, but evolving. Our field is becoming increasingly critical by the day, while the job description of an SEO is expanding.

The big picture

SEO today looks very different from even a couple of years ago. The main drivers of traffic are still traditional search engines, but AI, chatbots, and social media platforms are changing how we discover information. The rules have changed:

- **Traffic is down, but its value is up.** We get fewer clicks, but the ones we do get are more likely to convert. Now that search interfaces change, traffic volume alone is a weaker signal for measuring success. Today, visibility, brand recognition, citations, and conversions matter more than ever before, much more than just clicks.
- **AI is upending search.** LLMs (Large Language Models) like Google Gemini, ChatGPT, and Microsoft Copilot are becoming important sources of answers for users.
- **Searching happens everywhere.** People are no longer just Googling. Search happens on platforms like TikTok and YouTube, but also on smart devices and chatbots.

We set out to explore how SEOs are adapting (or not) to these significant changes. For this, we asked 59 SEOs, from newcomers to veterans with over a decade of experience, to understand the following:

- What are they prioritizing in 2026?
- What are they struggling with?
- How are they measuring success in the age of AI?

Part 1: The state of SEO in 2026

Key takeaway: The most important takeaway? SEO isn't dead. What's more, it's not even declining. We do see that it's split into three:

- Traditional search in search engines like Google and Bing
- Discovery driven by AI, with LLMs, chatbots, and smart assistants
- Search first social media, like TikTok, YouTube, and Reddit

We found that the best SEOs aren't choosing one or the other but mastering these multichannel platforms. LLM optimization is SEO, but with stricter standards. AI systems prioritize the same principles, like clarity, relevance, and authority, but with less tolerance for mediocre content.

Why this report?

At Yoast, we wanted to find out where SEO experts stand at this point, not in the future. For this report, we asked a group of SEOs to answer a questionnaire. 59 of them responded. In addition, we analyzed six months of conversations in the Women in Tech SEO community to gain insights. To bring it all together, Yoast's Principal SEOs, Carolyn Shelby and Alex Moss, added their vast expertise.

Who responded to our call for input?

Role	Experience	% of respondents
All-rounders	5+ years	33%
Content-focused	5+ years	28%
Technical SEO	5+ years	7%
Mixed	<3 years	32%



[Read more: 7 things Yoast learned from the SEO industry in 2026](#)

Part 1: The state of SEO in 2026

Take action

Five things you can do now

1. Audit your content for EEAT and improve where necessary.
2. Optimize for AI visibility to get cited in AI overviews and LLMs.
3. Reuse your content for other platforms like TikTok and YouTube.
4. Don't just track traffic, but also influence and visibility.
5. Work with your marketing team to build a better brand.



Part 2: Data, insights, and commentary

As we've established, significant changes are happening in SEO. There's a lot of new technology emerging, changing how people find and consume information. We still have traditional search engines, but also LLMs and chatbots. For our research, we wanted to know how SEOs are adapting and what they're struggling with. Of course, we're also curious to learn how they see the industry developing.

But what does all of this actually mean? We've discussed the findings in this research project with Carolyn Shelby and Alex Moss, Yoast's Principal SEOs. Their takes reveal the more profound truths behind the insights.

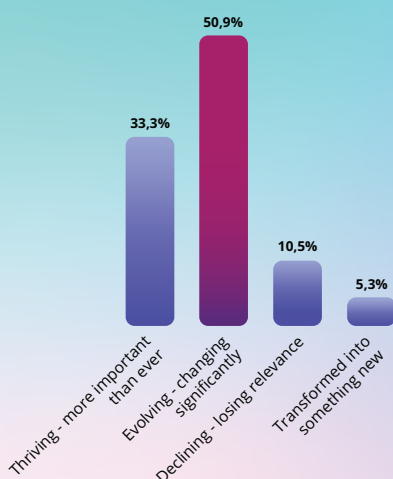
Theme 1: The state of SEO – Evolving, thriving, or declining?

The first thing we want to understand is whether SEO is doing better than ever or if it's losing ground. We asked them to describe our industry in their own words. Their answers show that there's a really big difference between how people think and how they do. Some are still holding on to the past, while others are well ahead of the curve. Here are some of their answers and what they all mean.

Q3: How would you describe the state of SEO in 2026?

We start with question three, as the first questions were introductory questions. Not many SEOs think SEO is dying. It's actually the other way around. Most agree it's changing and changing fast.

How would you describe the state of SEO in 2026?



50,9%

Evolving - changing significantly, but still essential



Part 2: Data, insights, and commentary

What the data shows:

- **51% say SEO is evolving.** They still see it as an essential strategy, but the tactics and focus areas are changing.
- **33% of respondents say SEO is thriving.** They feel it's more important than ever, leading to new opportunities for all.
- **10% say SEO is declining.** These experts feel it's losing relevance compared to other options like social media or paid ads.
- **6% feel it's transformed into something totally new.** They no longer recognize SEO as the strategy we once knew.

Experience seems to matter in how people think about SEO:

- **42% of SEO experts with over ten years of experience say SEO is thriving.** It looks like veterans are more optimistic. That might be because they've seen these massive shifts happen often in their career.
- **25% of SEOs with less than three years of experience agree.** Newcomers might feel overwhelmed by the size and speed of changes happening, or might not know how to adapt to them.

What does this mean? We can undoubtedly say SEO isn't going anywhere, but it's not business as usual. There's a widening gap between those who adapt and those who don't. We see that veterans are more confident, and newcomers need to work hard to catch up.

What do Yoast's in-house SEO experts think?



Alex's take: "Evolving is the best way to describe this. SEO has adapted as the SERP has changed over the years and will continue to do so now that the traditional SERP has been replaced. SEO will continue to evolve as our interaction with the web will."

Carolyn's take: "SEO is evolving, but not because its fundamentals are breaking, but because the interfaces between users and information are changing. Search is no longer confined to ten blue links, but the need for structured, relevant, trustworthy content has not diminished. For experienced practitioners, SEO still feels "thriving" because the underlying principles remain effective; for others, the shift toward AI-mediated answers can feel destabilizing. SEO isn't declining -- it's being redistributed across more surfaces."



Yoast's perspective

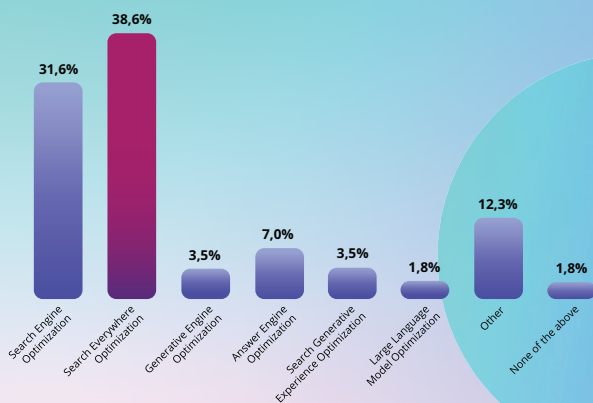
The data shows SEO is far from dead, but its scope has outgrown the old playbook. The SEO fundamentals still apply, but they're now tested across search engines, AI chatbots, social platforms, and voice assistants. The 10% who see SEO as "declining" are measuring it by yesterday's rules (e.g., "Are my Google rankings stable?"). The 51% who say it's "evolving" understand the real question is: Are you visible where your audience is searching?

Part 2: Data, insights, and commentary

Q4: What should SEO be called in 2026?

The term SEO has been around for a very long time. In 2026, though, with so many searches happening on other platforms like YouTube, chatbots, and LLMs, does that term still describe it adequately?

In 2026, how do you believe SEO should be labeled?



38.6%

Search Everywhere Optimization



What the data shows:

- **39%** of respondents say it should be called *Search Everywhere Optimization*. This shows that search has moved beyond the classic search engines.
- **32%** want to keep the name *Search Engine Optimization*. The name says it all, and the basic principles haven't changed much.
- **7%** want to call it *Answer Engine Optimization (AEO)*. This is a term that focuses on AI-driven search, which provides direct answers for users.
- **4%** chose *Generative Engine Optimization (GEO)*. This term focuses on optimizing for AI-generated content.
- **12%** chose the *Other* option. Suggestions from respondents include *Findability*, *Marketing*, and *Continuous Improvement of Websites*.

Experience split:

- **41% of veterans** prefer *Search Everywhere Optimization*. The veterans understand that searches are no longer only happening in Google.
- **31% of newcomers** are split between *Search Everywhere* and the existing SEO name. There might be some hesitation to dump a term they are comfortable with.

Part 2: Data, insights, and commentary

What does this mean? SEO isn't going away anytime soon. It's still the most recognizable term, but we do understand that the scope has expanded significantly. For SEO, there's no need to rebrand. We do need to educate stakeholders about how SEO now also applies to AI-driven search, chatbots, and social media platforms.

What do Yoast's in-house SEO experts think?



Alex's take: "The term SEO will stay, and think it will/should remain as "Search Engine Optimization". But the ambit of an SEO's role will simply widen to include other disciplines that will include AI-focused SEO as well as others that are yet to cement themselves."

Carolyn's take: "The term "SEO" still holds shared meaning, credibility, and market recognition, and there is no strong evidence that rebranding the discipline itself is necessary or beneficial.

Responses favoring terms like "Search Everywhere Optimization" appear to reflect where SEO outcomes now surface, rather than a fundamentally different practice. While content visibility now spans AI systems, assistants, and non-traditional interfaces, the underlying work (technical foundations, content relevance, authority, and trust) remains the same.

Introducing new labels risks fragmenting understanding, especially outside the SEO community, where "SEO" is already well-established. A more effective approach is to retain SEO as the umbrella term while clearly explaining how modern SEO now influences discovery across multiple surfaces, including AI-driven experiences.

It's also worth noting that terminology preferences tend to vary significantly by experience level, with more senior practitioners generally favoring continuity over rebranding."



Yoast's perspective

SEO is not evolving but expanding. We don't need to change the name, but we do need to find better ways of explaining it. SEO now comprises more tactics than ever, but the fundamentals remain intact. We should optimize both traditional search and AI-powered discovery without treating them as separate disciplines.

Part 2: Data, insights, and commentary

Theme 2: LLMs and SEO – Is it really just traditional SEO in disguise?

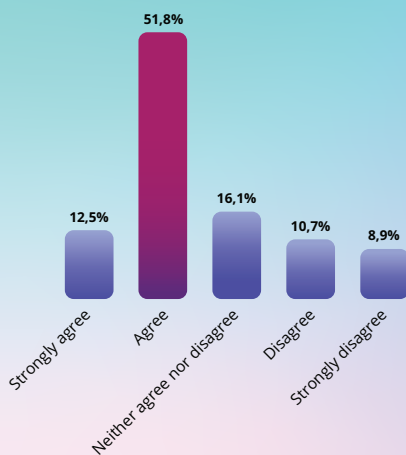
AI is shaking up search, with Large Language Models (LLMs) and chatbots like ChatGPT and Google Gemini now being a large part of how people search for and find information. But does this also mean we need to shake up optimization? Or are we good with an expansion of good ol' SEO?

In our research, we asked SEOs how they are adapting to this. People take a different approach. Some see it as an extension of what they already do, while others treat it as something new. Here's what they answered.

Q5: Is LLM optimization the same as traditional SEO?

LLMs and chatbots change how people get answers, but is optimizing for them any different from traditional SEO?

LLM optimization is essentially the same as traditional SEO



51,8%

Agree



What the data shows:

- **13% strongly agree** that optimizing for LLMs is basically the same as traditional SEO.
- **52% agree**, and they see it as an extension of what they already do.
- **16% neither agree nor disagree**, so these respondents are unsure, or they do see some differences.
- **11% disagree**. They think optimizing for LLMs needs new tactics.
- **9% strongly disagree**, meaning they believe it's a totally separate discipline.

Part 2: Data, insights, and commentary

Experience split:

- **21% of veterans strongly agree.** These people are more likely to see optimizing for LLMs as a natural expansion of their existing skills.
- **Only 5% of newcomers strongly agree,** which means some newer SEOs may see LLMs as a separate challenge that requires new knowledge.

What does this mean? Most SEOs think LLM optimization is built upon the foundation of traditional SEO. The tactics don't really change, but it's just a different endpoint. If you are serious about SEO and practicing it well, you are already optimizing for LLMs. Of course, there is a difference in how forgiving LLMs are of mediocre content. LLMs prioritize clarity, authority, and relevance even more than regular search engines.

What do Yoast's in-house SEO experts think?



Alex's take: "I do agree with this, but more so that LLM optimization overlaps a lot with SEO when it comes to skillset and execution."

Carolyn's take: "At the foundational level, this is largely true. The same practices that make content discoverable, interpretable, and trustworthy for search engines also make it usable for LLMs. The confusion arises when people treat LLMs as a completely separate system requiring entirely new tactics. In reality, LLM visibility rewards clarity, relevance, and authority (all long-standing SEO principles) rather than novel "optimization tricks."



Yoast's perspective

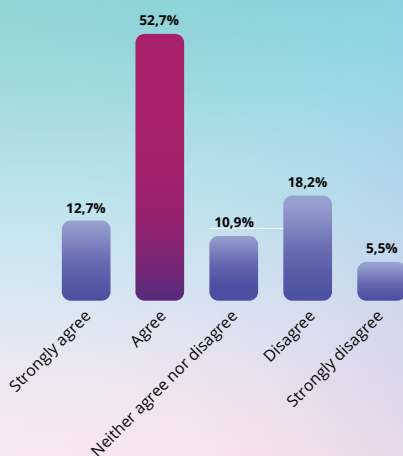
Modern SEO includes everything you do to perform well in LLMs. The 65% who say it's an extension of SEO are correct. In the end, we still want to achieve the same things, such as improved clarity, authority, and structure. The difference is that AI systems don't like average content very much. But if your SEO work is good, you are automatically optimizing for LLMs. While the tactics don't change much, the metrics do. Stop focusing just on rankings and start focusing on AI visibility metrics.

Part 2: Data, insights, and commentary

Q6: Is LLM optimization just traditional SEO applied to new channels?

When we say optimizing for LLMs is an extension of SEO, does that mean you can apply the same principles to the new platforms?

LLM optimization is just traditional SEO applied to new channels



52,7%

Agree



What the data shows:

- 13% strongly agree
- 53% agree
- 11% neither agree nor disagree
- 18% disagree
- 6% strongly disagree

What does this mean? A majority of SEOs see LLM optimization as classic SEO with a twist. The core principles we all know, technical health, content quality, and authority, still apply. The difference is that AI systems are new outlets, so our metrics must evolve as well. Instead of just focusing on rank tracking, SEOs should focus on presence and visibility. Are you cited in AI answers? Do AI systems recognize your authority, or do you need to build it out?

Part 2: Data, insights, and commentary

What do Yoast's in-house SEO experts think?

Carolyn's take: "This framing is useful, with an important caveat: LLMs change how content is consumed, not what qualifies as good content. The same technical foundations, content quality standards, and trust signals apply, but success increasingly depends on how information is structured and summarized rather than how it ranks. SEO skills translate directly — but expectations and metrics must adapt."



Yoast's perspective

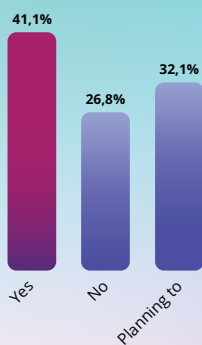
LLM optimization is traditional SEO applied to new outlets. 66% of SEOs agree the rules haven't changed, as we are still working on quality content, technical health, and authority. But the end goal has changed, because, instead of aiming for rankings, success for many now means being selected by AI Overviews and chatbots. Now, we should track citations and measure visibility, not just position. Don't forget that AI interprets your content; it doesn't find it.

Part 2: Data, insights, and commentary

Q7: Are you actively optimizing for Large Language Models?

We wanted to hear from SEOs whether they are already optimizing for LLMs.

Are you actively optimizing Large Language Models?



41.1%

Yes



What the data shows:

- **41% say yes**, they've already started optimizing for LLMs.
- **27% say no**, they're not working on it yet.
- **32% say they plan to**. These respondents see the importance, but haven't started on it yet.

Experience split:

- **74% of the veteran SEOs are already optimizing for LLMS**. These experts are ahead of the pack, possibly because they have the resources to experiment.
- **Just 13% of newcomers are doing the same**. It looks like newer SEOs might be more careful or lack the time and money to focus on upcoming trends.

What does this mean? There's a divide between SEO veterans and newcomers. Veterans embrace LLM optimization, but newer SEOs hold back. This could point to a lack of resources, knowledge, or confidence, but it could also suggest that LLM optimization is still seen as a nice-to-have rather than a must-have for many people.

Part 2: Data, insights, and commentary

What do Yoast's in-house SEO experts think?



Alex's take: "If you're undertaking good SEO, you're already optimizing well for LLMs."

Carolyn's take: "The data reflects reality: most experienced SEOs aren't "optimizing for LLMs" as a separate activity because strong SEO already covers the necessary groundwork. Where intentional effort is warranted is in content structure, clarity, and brand authority — not in chasing speculative or experimental tactics. Organizations with strong brands, complex products, or high-risk misinformation concerns benefit the most from being deliberate here."



Yoast's perspective

LLM optimization isn't a separate discipline, but SEO with a new audience. The same best practices apply, but the metrics need to evolve to reflect AI-driven discovery. Instead of just tracking rankings, focus on presence and visibility. Are you being cited in AI answers?

The **SEO Update** by **yoast**



Watch Carolyn Shelby and Alex Moss as they unpack the most important SEO news, algorithm shifts, and industry developments.



Part 2: Data, insights, and commentary

Theme 3: Metrics and mindset – What’s actually moving the needle?

While many sites still maintain good visibility in the search results, traffic is way down. We see AI-powered search features take up more space by the day. With all these changes, most SEOs are still measuring success in the old way.

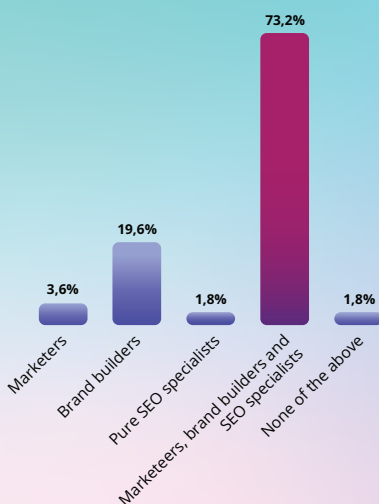
But now, in 2026, what should you be tracking? Rankings? Conversions? Something totally new?

In our questionnaire, we asked SEOs which metrics matter most this year. The answers show a real divide, again, in how people look at metrics. Some double down on existing KPIs, while others focus on things like visibility.

Q8: Should SEOs think more like marketers, brand builders, or specialists?

At Yoast, we’ve always said that branding is a huge part of SEO. Plus, SEO is not a separate task because it intersects with marketing, branding, and technical expertise in a business. But how should SEOs see their role in 2026?

In 2026, should SEOs think more like...



73,2%

A mix of all three

AGREE

What the data shows:

- **73% say SEOs should think like a mix of all three**, so marketers, brand builders, and SEO specialists.
- **20% say brand builders**. These respondents believe authority and trust are key to success online.
- **4% say just SEO specialists**, as they think technical expertise is still essential.
- **2% say marketers**. These people see SEO as just a part of a broader marketing strategy.

Part 2: Data, insights, and commentary

Experience split:

- **26% of SEO veterans say brand builder.** They understand that trust and authority are essential in an AI-powered world.
- **Only 10% of newcomers agree with this.** Newer SEOs might still need to master the current technical aspects of SEO.

What does this mean? SEOs can't operate alone anymore, as the best ones blend technical expertise with brand storytelling. Besides optimizing for search engines, they are also building authority and trust. Veterans understand this better than newcomers. Those just starting might still be too focused on traffic and rankings.

What do Yoast's in-house SEO experts think?



Alex's take: "100% all three. As the years have passed, brand and marketing in general have become more intertwined with SEO as a discipline. This will continue to merge as our remit grows in our role."

Carolyn's take: "A blended mindset is essential. SEO can no longer operate in isolation from brand, product, or communications. Brand builders rise to the top among senior practitioners because authority increasingly determines eligibility for AI inclusion. Technical skill remains critical, but without brand trust and narrative consistency, visibility becomes fragile."



Yoast's perspective

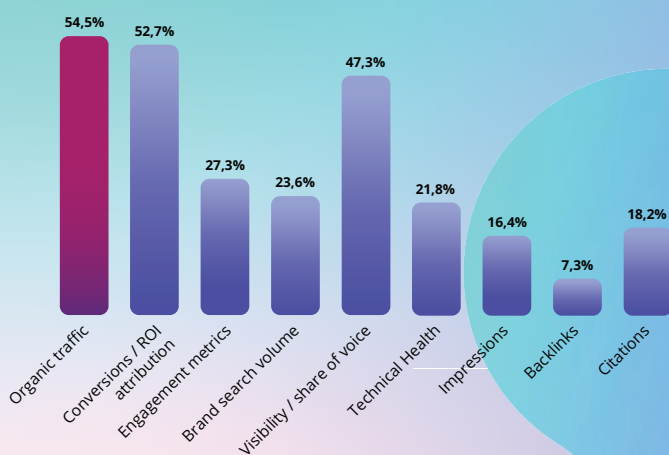
SEO in 2026 is built on technical, marketing, and branding skills. In that case, the 73% of respondents who embrace all three are right. Users and AI systems reward authority and not just algorithms. Veterans know this, but those new to SEO often don't, as they still count clicks instead of building influence. Start using SEO as a brand-building tool. Measure citations, and trust, not just ranking and traffic. This year, we'll see that the best SEOs own the conversation for their brands.

Part 2: Data, insights, and commentary

Q9: What are the most important SEO metrics in 2026?

Many sites are seeing organic traffic dropping this year, so which metrics should SEOs focus on in 2026?

What do you believe are the most important SEO metrics for you in 2026?



54.5%

Organic traffic



What the data shows: (Respondents could select multiple answers)

Traditional metrics:

- **Traffic: 55%** say *organic traffic*. It's still the most common metric, even as its value declines.
- **Impressions: 16%** say *impressions*. Being seen is the first step to being chosen.
- **Engagement: 27%** say *engagement metrics*. Time on page, engagement rates, and scroll depth are still relevant.
- **Backlinks: 7%** say *backlinks*. They're still a factor, but their importance is declining.
- **Technical health: 22%** say *technical health*. Site speed, crawlability, and structured data are non-negotiable.

Part 2: Data, insights, and commentary

Visibility metrics:

- **AI citations: 18%** say *citations*. Mentions from trusted sources are becoming more important than backlinks.
- **Brand mentions: 24%** say *branded search volume*. If people are searching for your brand by name, you've built recognition.
- **Other visibility metrics: 47%** say *visibility/share of voice*. Being seen matters, even if it doesn't drive clicks.

Business metrics:

- **Conversions: 53%** say *conversions/ROI attribution*. SEOs are under pressure to prove their impact on the bottom line.

Experience split:

- **63% of veterans say organic traffic**, as they are more likely to rely on traditional metrics.
- **43% of those newer to SEO say conversions/ROI attribution**, as they might be more focused on business outcomes.

What does this mean? Not surprisingly, SEOs are still tracking traffic, but they are also looking at influence-based metrics. Branded search volume, conversions, and citations might become more important than rankings or backlinks. Veterans are slower to adapt to this change, while newcomers are busy proving the ROI of SEO.

What do Yoast's in-house SEO experts think?



Alex's take: "This was so close! The top three of organic views, conversions and visibility/SOV will always stay within our responsibilities, but perhaps 2026 will redefine what an "organic visit" is. As we move from being seen to being selected, visits don't hold the same value they used to. In the end, the business goal should be the most important."

Carolyn's take: "Organic traffic remains important, but on its own it's no longer sufficient. Visibility, influence, and contribution to business outcomes matter more than raw clicks. As AI reduces the need for some visits, success increasingly looks like being represented correctly rather than merely visited. Metrics must evolve to reflect impact, not just volume."



Yoast's perspective

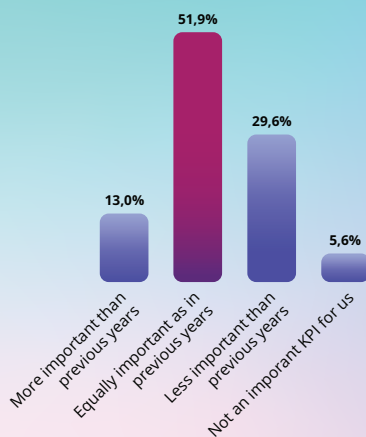
Traffic alone won't be enough in 2026, so SEO professionals need to measure what comes after the click. The most important metrics to track are visibility, conversions, and AI citations. Thanks to AI and zero-click searches, being seen is just as much as being visited. Veterans hold on to traffic because that's familiar territory, but newcomers are right to focus on ROI. We need to keep an eye on the bottom line. Stop counting visits and start measuring influence. The future of SEO isn't about rankings, but about owning the answer.

Part 2: Data, insights, and commentary

Q11: How important are rankings as a KPI in 2026?

We've always used rankings as one of the main ways of tracking success. But now, with AI-driven search growing by the day, how relevant are they?

How important are rankings as a KPI for you in 2026?



51,9%

Equally important



What the data shows:

- **13%** say rankings are *more important than in previous years*
- **52%** say they're *equally important*
- **30%** say they're *less important*
- **6%** say they're *not an important KPI*

What does this mean? Unsurprisingly, rankings still matter, but they are not the end goal. Rankings are a proxy for visibility, but not a guarantee for success. We see search shifting from ranking pages to selecting resources, so SEOs must find ways to interpret rankings alongside visibility, citations, and accuracy metrics.

Part 2: Data, insights, and commentary

What do Yoast's in-house SEO experts think?



Alex's take: "Traditional rankings are still important as agents still search the web in order to ingest that information. If you aren't visible there, it's less likely an agent will identify and select you into their responses."

Carolyn's take: "Rankings still matter, but they are no longer the end goal. They are a proxy for visibility, not a guarantee of impact. As search shifts from ranking pages to selecting sources, rankings should be interpreted alongside presence, citation, and narrative accuracy."



Yoast's perspective

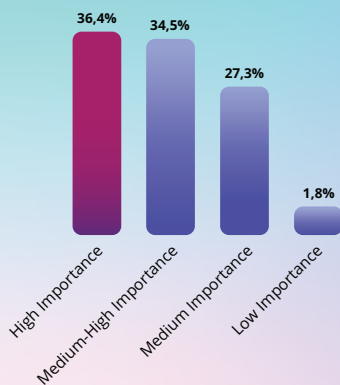
Rankings still matter, but they are not the only measure of success. In 2026, 65% of SEOs still rely on them because they give you an idea of how visible you are. But remember, AI doesn't rank content, but merely selects it. While rankings show how visible you are, they don't show that you are chosen in the AI answers. So stop treating rankings as the end goal and track them alongside conversations, AI citations, and branded searches. If you aren't part of the conversation, you are just noise, so try to become the go-to answer.

Part 2: Data, insights, and commentary

Q12: How important is being visible in AI overviews in 2026?

AI search features like Google's AI Mode change how people find answers, but how important is it to be visible in these overviews?

How important is being visible in AI overview to you in 2026?



36.4%

High Importance



What the data shows:

- **36%** say it's of *high importance*
- **35%** say *medium-high importance*
- **27%** say *medium importance*
- **2%** say *low importance*

Experience split:

- **57% of newcomers say it is of high importance**, as they are more likely to prioritize upcoming trends and opportunities.
- **But only 26% of SEO veterans agree.** They might be more cautious about over-investing in unproven tactics.

What does this mean? Visibility in AI surfaces is essential, even if it doesn't drive traffic. See your content and brand cited in AI overviews builds legitimacy and trust. Newcomers likely see this opportunity, while veterans might be more skeptical.

Part 2: Data, insights, and commentary

What do Yoast's in-house SEO experts think?



Alex's take: "It depends. Does the AI Overview detract from your goals or brand authority? This will depend on the brand, the query and what the answer produces. If this helps with attracting a human to take an action towards your product or service then this is a positive thing to have."

Carolyn's take: "AI Overviews are less about clicks and more about legitimacy. Being included signals that a brand is considered a credible source. Even when users don't click, the impression and framing influence trust and downstream decisions. That makes visibility here strategically important, even if traditional attribution models struggle to capture the value."



Yoast's perspective

Don't focus so much on getting clicks, but focus on influence. Your metrics should show more than just traffic, like authority, trust, and selection. That means you should monitor AI visibility (Yoast AI Brand Insights can do this for you), citations, and branded search volume.



Read more: [Monitor your visibility in AI tools with Yoast AI Brand Insights](#)

Part 2: Data, insights, and commentary

Theme 4: Challenges – What’s holding SEOs back?

SEO is not getting easier. We get fewer clicks, and there’s more competition. Not to mention the AI-generated content that’s spreading rapidly on the web, don’t even start trying to prove the ROI of SEO. It’s hard. Here’s more on the current challenges of SEO.

Q19: What’s your biggest challenge in 2026?

In 2026, achieving good SEO results is increasingly complex. The challenges are real, but what exactly are the most significant issues?



What the data shows:

- **49%** say *reducing organic clicks*. AI overviews, zero-click results, and chatbots are eating into traditional traffic.
- **47%** say *proving ROI*. SEO’s impact is harder to measure in a multi-touch, multi-platform world.
- **39%** say *content saturation*. AI can generate “good enough” content at scale, making it harder to stand out.
- **33%** say *keeping up with algorithm changes*. AI-driven search evolves faster than traditional ranking systems.
- **26%** say *EEAT demands*. Building genuine authority, trust, and credibility is more complicated than ever.

Part 2: Data, insights, and commentary

What does this mean? SEOs are fighting declining traffic, AI competition, and the challenge of proving value to upper management. The biggest challenge is moving from traffic-based to influence-based SEO. SEO can no longer rely on output volume to survive.

What do Yoast's in-house SEO experts think?



Alex's take: "This I can't disagree with. An SEO has always had a hard time being truly accurate when it comes to ROI of organic channels. Even when data is there, there can still be scrutiny. Because of the "appropriation of visits" from AIO and LLMs, visits decline, which in turn skews other metrics. Those success metrics have to adapt to fit in with the business's own goals."

Carolyn's take: "The decline in measurable clicks is a symptom, not the core problem. The real challenge is proving value in an environment where influence often precedes attribution. SEO must increasingly demonstrate how it shapes understanding, trust, and preference -- not just traffic."



Yoast's perspective

All of these challenges are real, but you can overcome them. Here's how:

1. Organic clicks reducing? Optimize your content for selection and LLM visibility, not just ranking. Be sure to add structured data, which helps AI platforms to understand your content.
2. Difficulty proving the ROI of SEO? Focus on conversions, not just rankings. Make sure the business goals align with the SEO goals.

Part 2: Data, insights, and commentary

Key takeaways

- **SEO is expanding, but not dying.** We'll keep the name, but the scope grows, also including AI, social media platforms, and chatbots.
- **LLM optimization is a form of traditional SEO, but stricter.** AI systems want clarity, relevance, and authority. But, unlike search engines, it has less tolerance for average work.
- **Metrics are moving from traffic to influence.** Be sure to track AI visibility, branded searches, and citations, instead of just monitoring rankings and clicks.
- **There are many challenges, but these are manageable.** Focus on selection (not just ranking), outcomes (not just traffic), and depth (not just volume).
- **The future of SEO is interdisciplinary.** Use your technical expertise and combine it with brand building and marketing.

What to do with these results

In part three, we'll give you the tools you need to adapt your SEO strategy for 2026.

- Audit your current SEO approach
- Understand how LLMs work
- Optimize for AI-driven discovery
- Expand beyond traditional search
- Shift from traffic-based to influence-based metrics
- Build authority through EEAT

Action plan

Part 3: Action plan – How to adapt your SEO strategy

The data is clear: SEO in 2026 is expanding across platforms, metrics, and expectations. The following actions translate these insights into a practical strategy.

1

Step 1: Audit your current strategy

Start by evaluating whether your content strategy reflects how SEO actually works in 2026.

Audit your performance across both traditional search and AI-driven discovery. If you are only optimizing for rankings and traffic, you are missing a growing share of visibility.

Expand your measurement framework to include influence-based metrics such as AI visibility, branded search volume, and citations.

Review the structure of your content and the technical foundations for your site. Make your content easy to interpret, with clear hierarchy, logical headings, and structured data.

Finally, assess your EEAT signals. Identify gaps in credibility, depth, and authorship, and prioritize improvements that strengthen trust and authority.

2

Step 2: Optimize for AI and traditional search

AI systems don't just rank content, they synthesize answers, but the principles of SEO still apply. To get cited, your content must be clear, authoritative, and structured for both AI and traditional search. Success is no longer just about ranking, but about being selected as a trusted source.

Structure your content for AI with direct answers, sufficient context, and anticipated follow-up questions. Format your content hierarchically, with clear headings, and use bullet points and tables to improve scannability. Comparison tables like "X vs. Y" also work well for AI inclusion.

Action plan

Set up simple experiments to quickly test how AI-friendly your content is. Regularly test how your content performs in AI-generated responses. For instance, ask the AI to explain your topic as simply as possible. If the result is clear and straightforward, your content is on the right track. Also, use ChatGPT or Gemini to see if your content is cited in responses. Don't forget to set up an AI visibility tool, such as Yoast SEO AI Brand Insights, to track performance.

Strengthen EEAT signals through original insights, expert input, and real-world examples. Write excellent bios for your authors, add credentials, and cite trusted sources to build their expertise. You can also create authority by getting mentioned in industry publications and earning backlinks from high-authority sites. Make sure you are trustworthy, disclose your affiliations, and avoid making misleading claims.

As mentioned before, structured data is invaluable in helping AI understand your content. Use Yoast SEO to add schema markup for FAQs, how-to digest, articles, and product pages. Test your implementation to ensure it works without issues.

Last but not least, if you want to get cited, publish original research, data studies, or other types of experts' insights. Get your brand featured in industry publications, news sites, or podcasts and build relationships with influencers willing to amplify your content.

3

Step 3: Expand beyond traditional search

Search has expanded to many more platforms than just classic search engines like Google. People now use platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Amazon, LLMs, and chatbots to search. This means you need apply SEO fundamentals to optimize for these different platforms if you want to stay ahead.

Key platforms to optimize for:

Platform	Why it matters	Action steps
TikTok	Younger audiences search here first	Repurpose blog posts into short videos. Use keywords in captions
YouTube	The second-largest search engine after Google	Turn how-to guides into videos. Optimize titles, descriptions, and tags
Amazon	50% of product searches start here	Optimize product listings with keywords and high-quality images
LLMs	LLMs like ChatGPT cite sources in responses	Create concise, authoritative content that AI systems can easily reference

Action plan

4

Step 4: Shift your metrics from traffic to influence

With fewer clicks available, SEO success must be measured differently. In 2026, track influence, not just clicks. In LLMs, strong brands are more likely to be cited and selected. People will more frequently search directly for well-regarded brands.

Old metrics vs. new metrics:

Old metric	New metric	Why it matters
Organic traffic	SEO visibility in AI answers	Being cited in AI answers builds legitimacy , even if it doesn't drive clicks.
Rankings	Branded search volume	If people search for <i>your brand</i> by name, you've built recognition .
Backlinks	Citations	Mentions from trusted sources boost authority more than low-quality links.
Impressions	Conversions/ROI	Traffic is meaningless if it doesn't drive business outcomes .

Start by tracking your performance in AI search using AI visibility trackers. This reveals how your brand is represented within AI-generated responses, which, in turn, allows you to improve your strategy. Also, monitor branded searches in Google Search Console and set up a Google Alert for tracking citations for your brand.

5

Step 5: How to strengthen EEAT for AI-driven search

In AI-driven search, EEAT is a key differentiator. AI systems prioritize content they can trust, verify, and cite. Strong brands are more likely to be cited, selected, and searched for directly.

For Experience: Don't just publish case studies, but show how much impact your work had. Add before-and-after metrics, testimonials from real people, and detailed breakdowns of how you solved the customers' problems. For example, if you write about SEO tools, add a detailed case study of how a client increased its traffic by 30% following your recommended strategy. Be sure to validate it with real screenshots from their analytics program.

For Expertise: Don't bother with vague author bios, but highlight specific qualifications that matter to your audience. For instance, if you write about AI in healthcare, an author bio like "Dr. Sarah Nakamoto, MD, AI Ethics Researcher at Johns Hopkins" is far more powerful than a generic one. Be sure to cite recent industry-specific sources, such as peer-

Action plan

reviewed studies, government reports, or data from respected research companies like Forrester or Gartner.

For Authoritativeness: Getting a mention in Forbes is nice, but niche authority matters much more. Try to get articles in industry-specific outlets, like Search Engine Land for SEO and The Verge for tech. For links, aim for contextual links from the most critical sites in your field. This might be a guest post on Search Engine Journal for SEO topics, or on the Harvard Business Review for business-related topics.

For Trustworthiness: Transparency is essential, but it's not just about disclosing affiliations but about showing your work. For instance, if you are reviewing a product, be sure to explain your testing process. If you're citing data, make sure to link directly to the source and highlight any issues. Avoid vague claims without providing evidence. AI systems and readers reward specificity.

SEO in 2026

The future of SEO is already here, but are you ready?

For SEO in 2026, you don't have to choose between traditional search and AI. You are applying the same principles to both. The fundamentals of SEO, like technical health, content quality, and authority, haven't changed. The main factors that have changed are where search happens and how we measure success.

While the fundamentals haven't changed, the rules have changed. It's not enough to focus on getting traffic. Influence is what it's all about: are you the source that the AI cites? Are you the brand users search for by name? Are you the most trusted voice in your industry?

We're not talking about some far-off future; this is happening today. To thrive in this environment, you need to:

- **Master SEO across all platforms:** Traditional search, AI-driven discovery, and social media. The principles are the same, but the metrics and tactics must adapt.
- **Measure things that matter:** It's no longer about rankings or clicks, so monitor AI visibility, branded searches, and citations
- **Build real authority and trust:** EEAT is a good way to prove you are trustworthy, which keeps AI and your competitors in line
- **Test and experiment:** Be flexible. Test, adapt, and improve

The tools and tactics are all available, but the question is, will you use them?

The future of SEO is already here. The only question is whether you will lead or struggle to keep up. It's up to you!

Publication details

Title: The Yoast Perspective: SEO in 2026

Editor-in-chief and research: Chris Scott

Writer and editor: Edwin Toonen

Editor: Camille Cunningham

SEO insights and validation: Carolyn Shelby, Alex Moss

Design and typesetting: Maarten Jansen

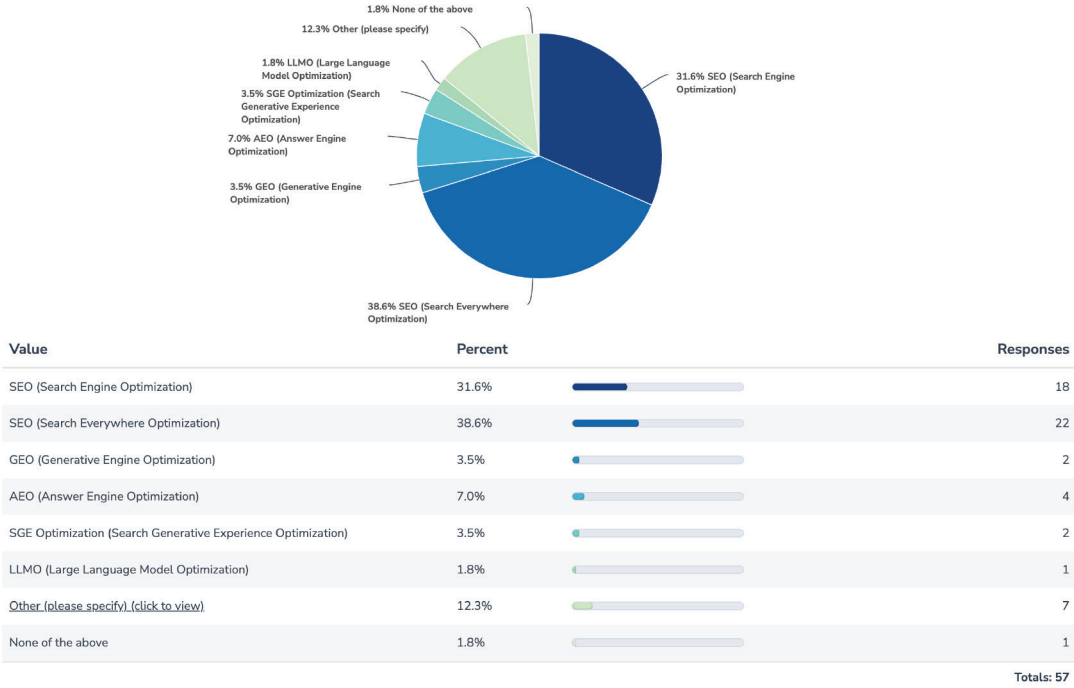
Published by: Yoast

Publication date: April 2026

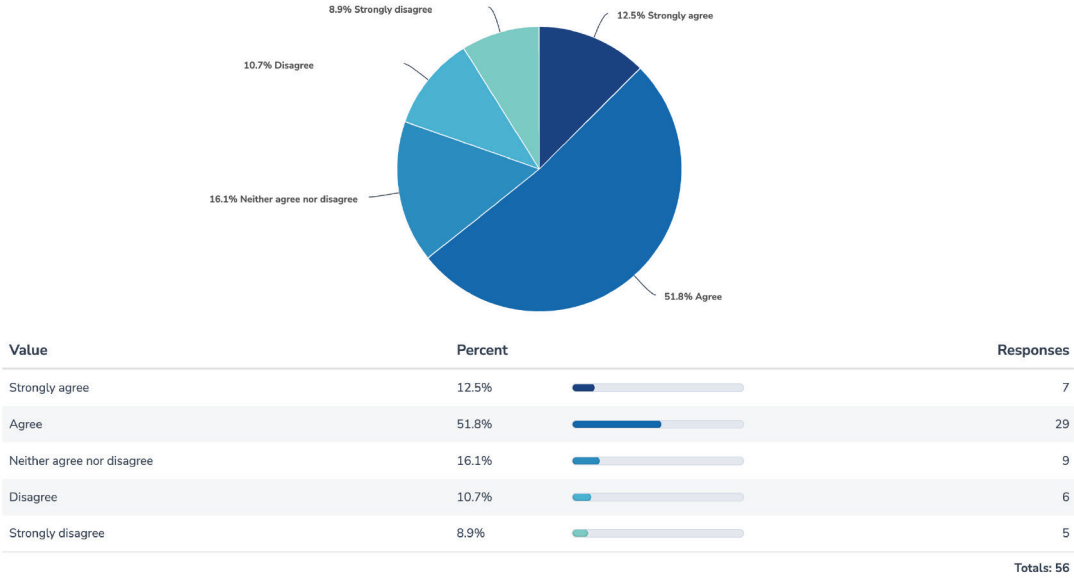
Contact: yoast.com



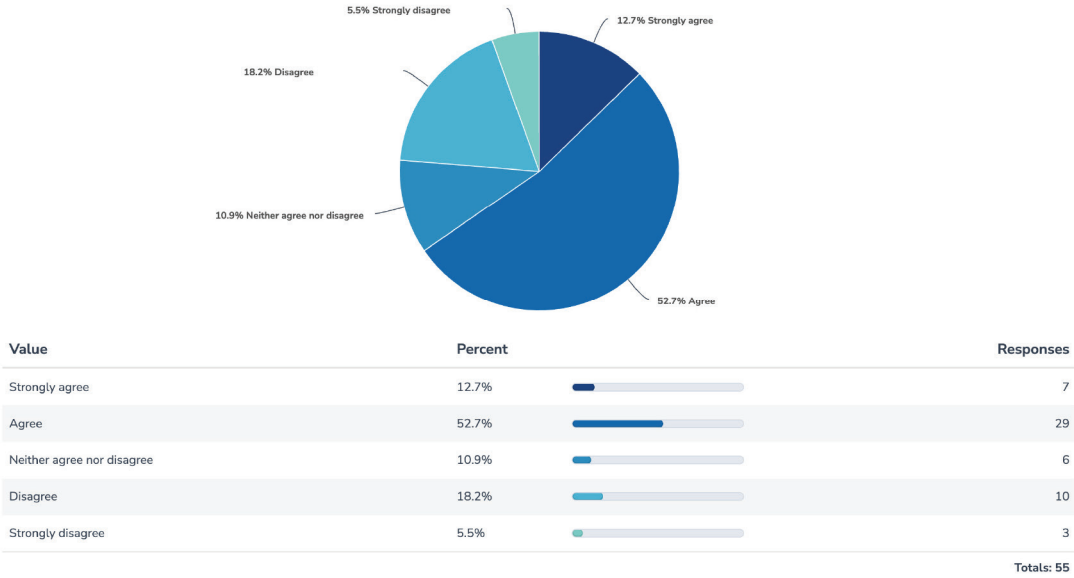
4. In 2025, how do you believe SEO should be labeled?



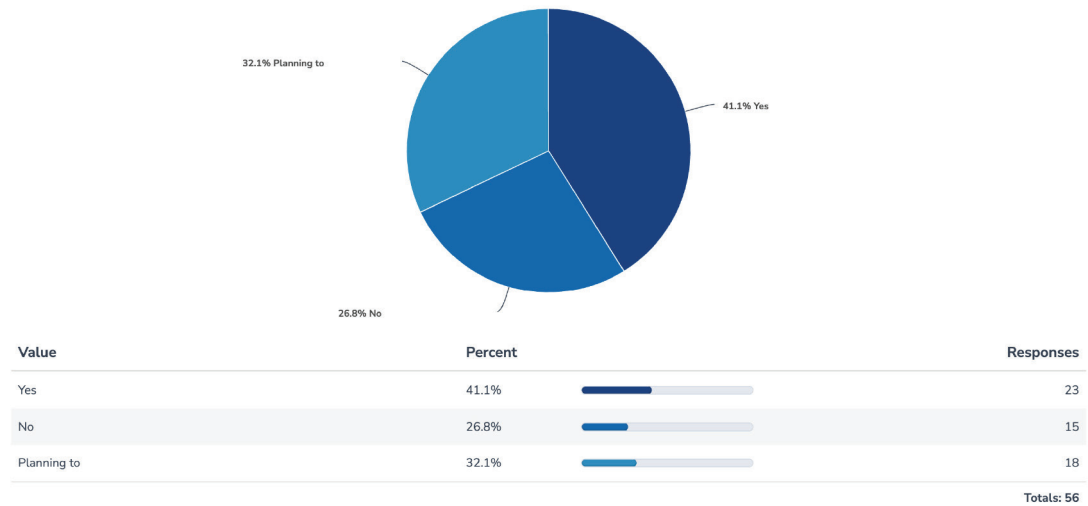
5. To what extent do you agree with the following statement?



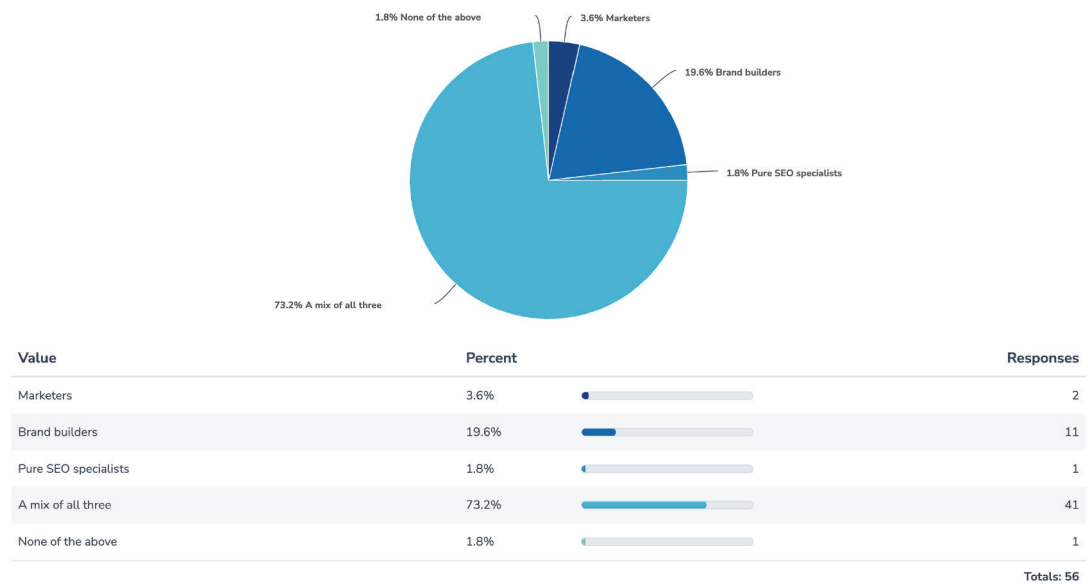
6. To what extent do you agree with the following statement?



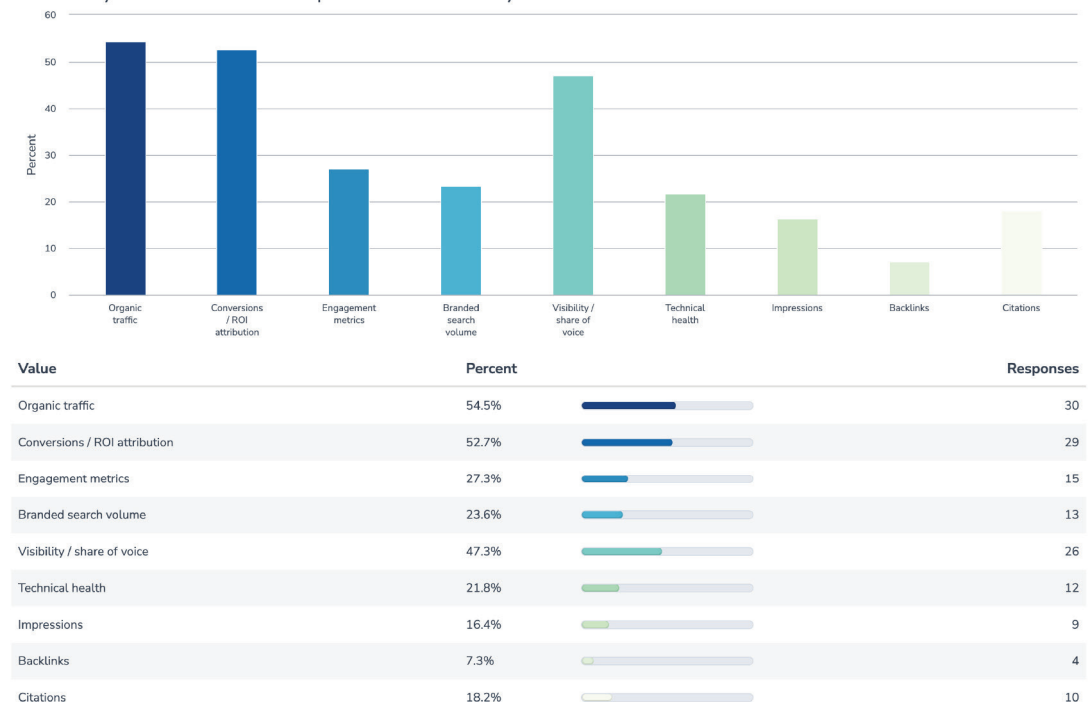
7. Are you actively optimizing for Large Language Models (LLM optimization)?



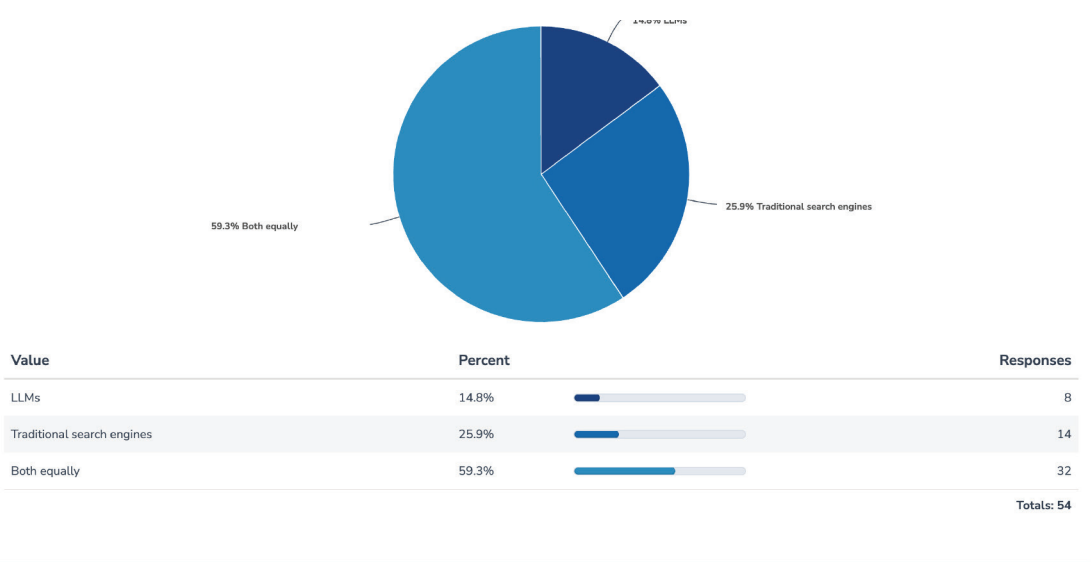
8. In 2025, should SEOs think more like...



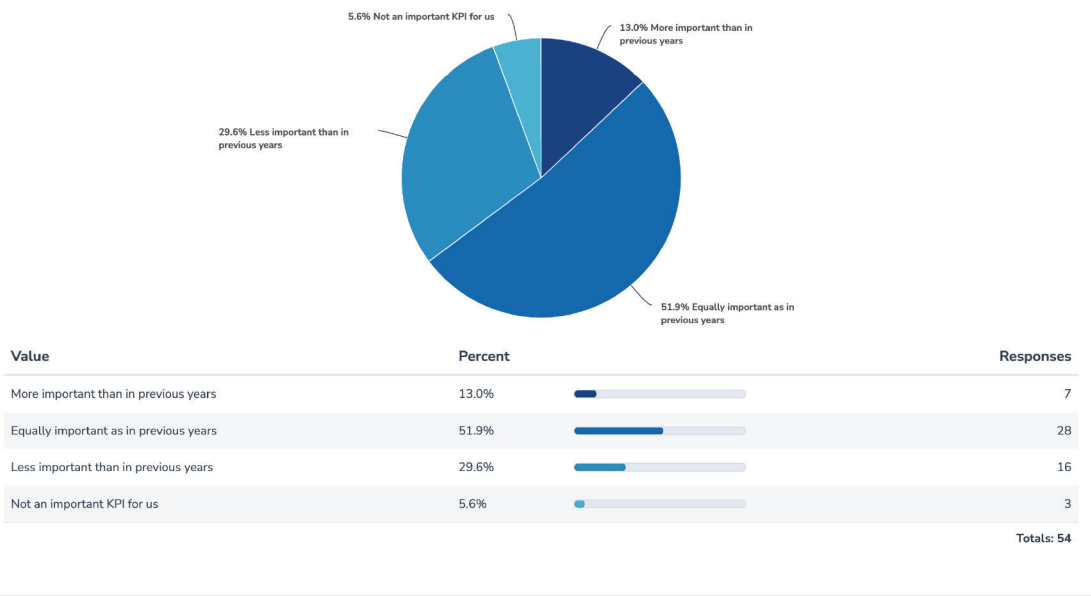
9. What do you believe are the most important SEO metrics for you in 2025?



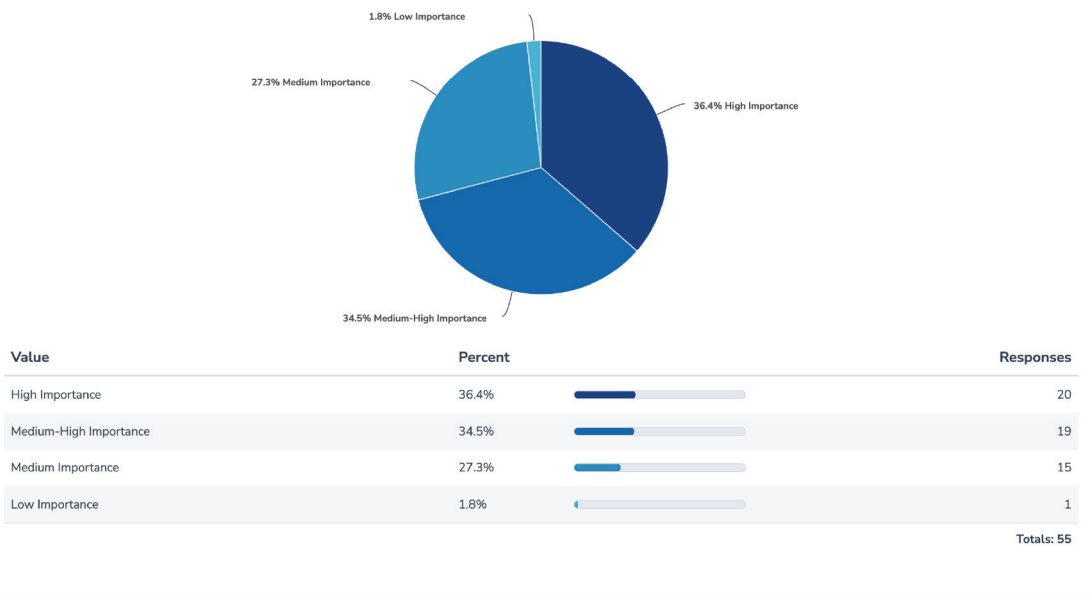
10. Do you think marketers should be spending more resources on optimizing for LLMs or traditional search engines?



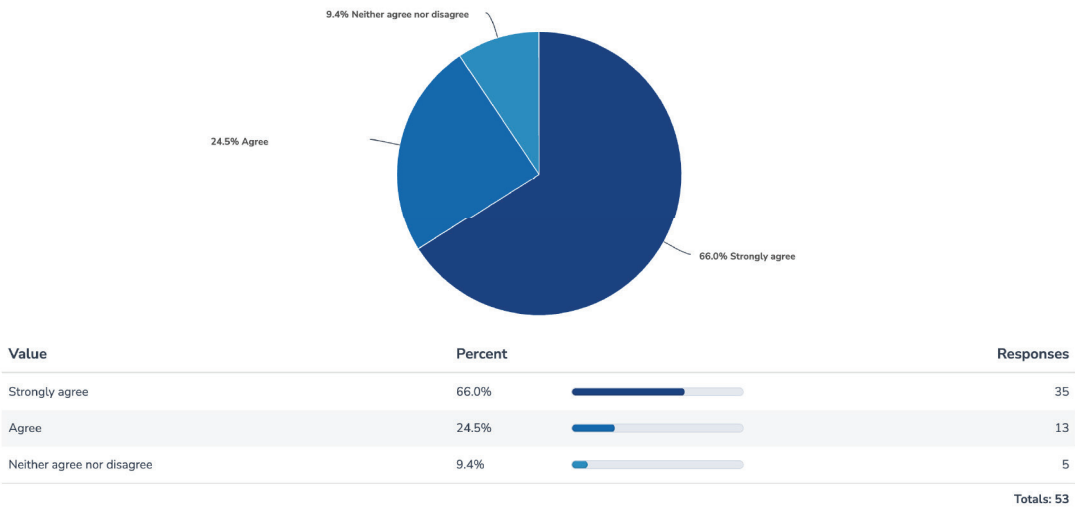
11. How important are rankings as a KPI for you in 2025?



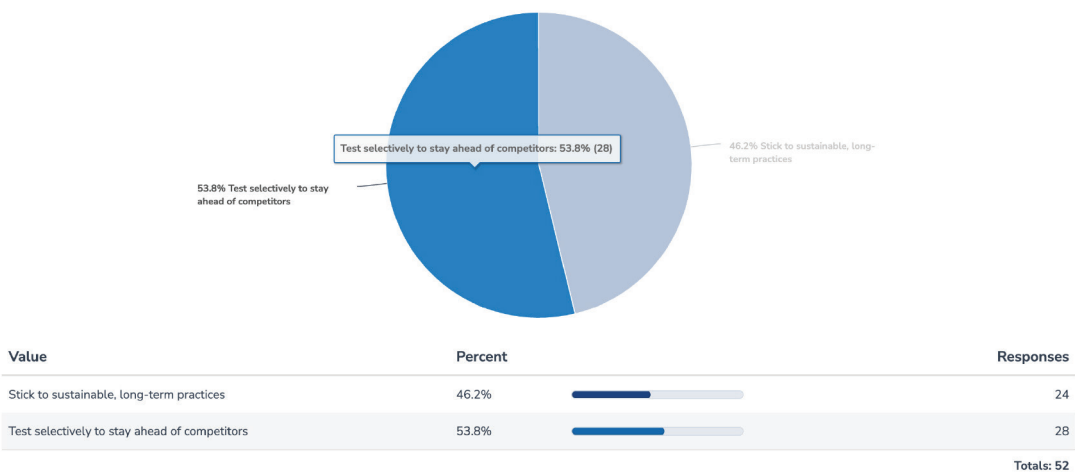
12. How important is being visible in AI overview to you in 2025?



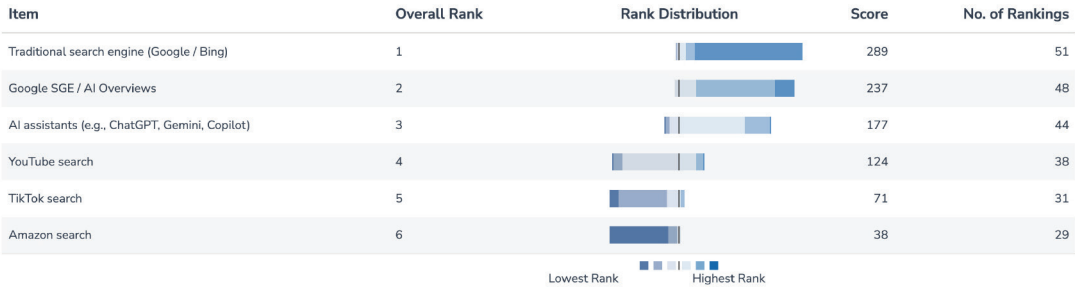
13. To what extent do you agree with the following statement?



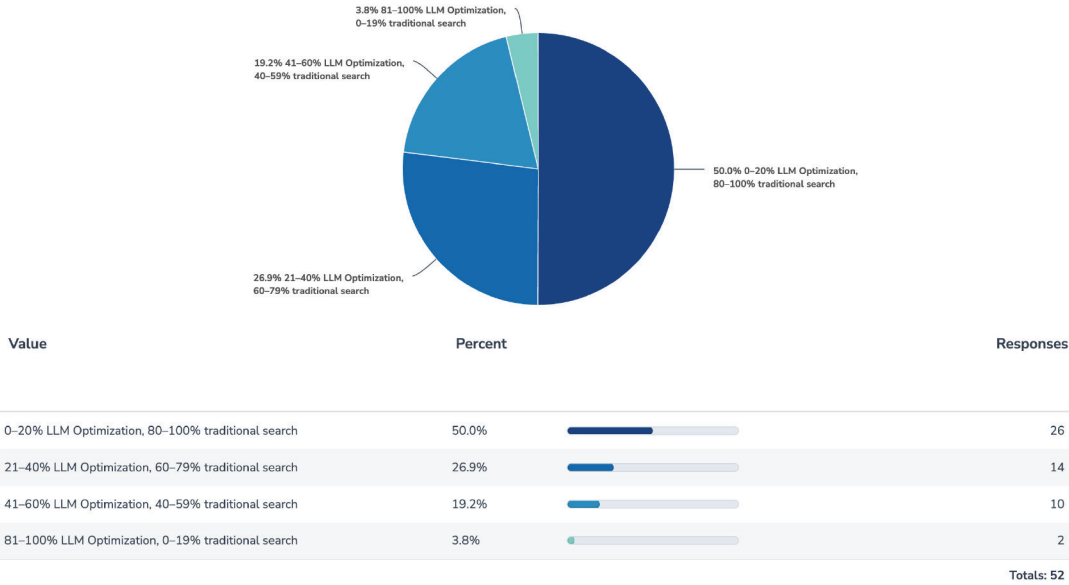
14. What best describes your stance on experimental or “grey area” LLM optimization tactics?



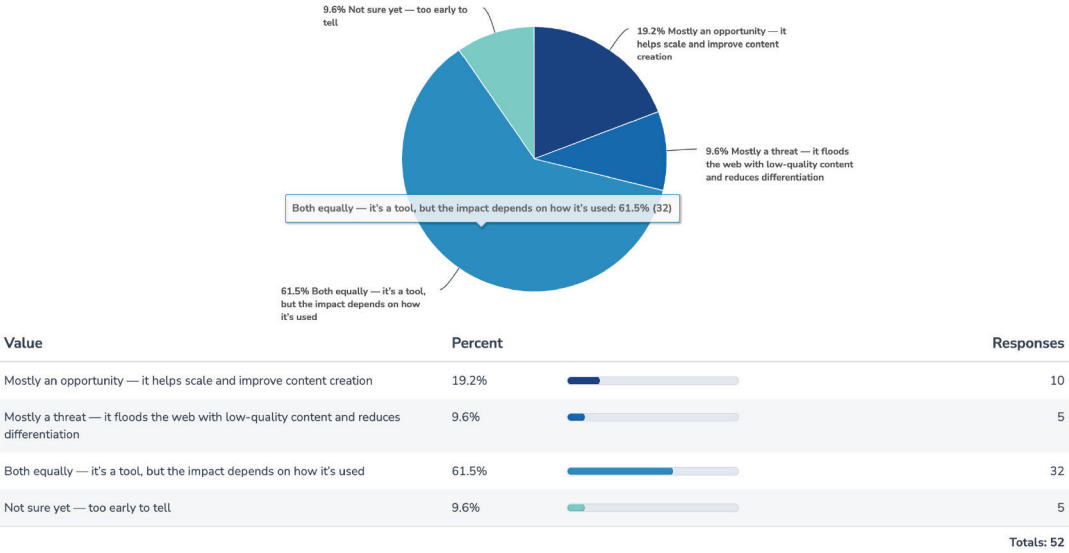
16. Which search channels are you prioritizing most in 2025?



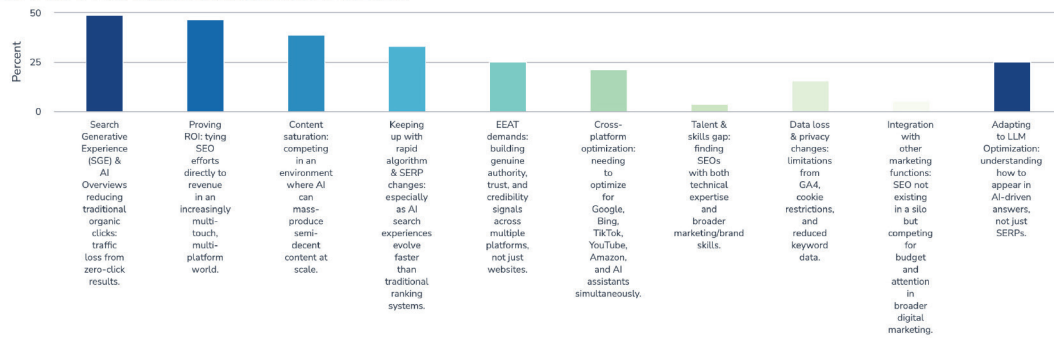
17. What percentage of your SEO strategy in 2025 is focused on LLM Optimization versus traditional search?



18. Do you see AI-generated content as an opportunity or a threat to SEO?

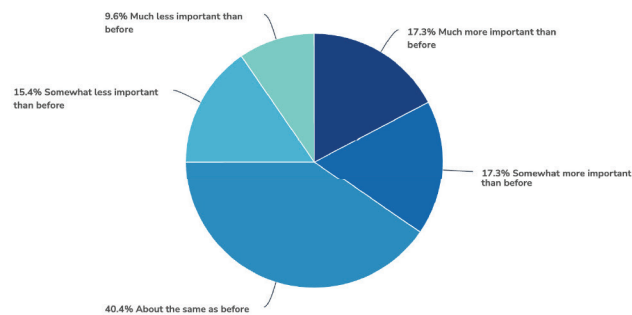


19. What are the biggest challenges in SEO in 2025?



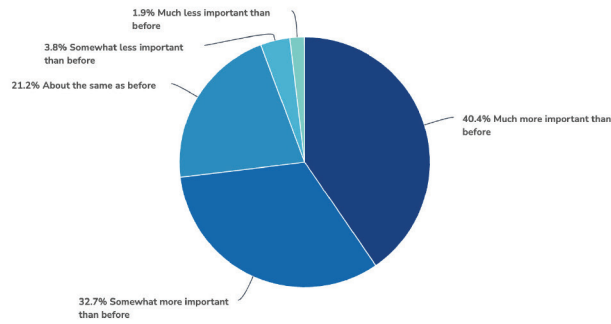
Value	Percent	Responses
Search Generative Experience (SGE) & AI Overviews reducing traditional organic clicks: traffic loss from zero-click results.	49.0%	25
Proving ROI: tying SEO efforts directly to revenue in an increasingly multi-touch, multi-platform world.	47.1%	24
Content saturation: competing in an environment where AI can mass-produce semi-decent content at scale.	39.2%	20
Keeping up with rapid algorithm & SERP changes: especially as AI search experiences evolve faster than traditional ranking systems.	33.3%	17
EEAT demands: building genuine authority, trust, and credibility signals across multiple platforms, not just websites.	25.5%	13
Cross-platform optimization: needing to optimize for Google, Bing, TikTok, YouTube, Amazon, and AI assistants simultaneously.	21.6%	11
Talent & skills gap: finding SEOs with both technical expertise and broader marketing/brand skills.	3.9%	2
Data loss & privacy changes: limitations from GA4, cookie restrictions, and reduced keyword data.	15.7%	8
Integration with other marketing functions: SEO not existing in a silo but competing for budget and attention in broader digital marketing.	5.9%	3
Adapting to LLM Optimization: understanding how to appear in AI-driven answers, not just SERPs.	25.5%	13

20. Compared to previous years, how important are backlinks for SEO success in 2025?



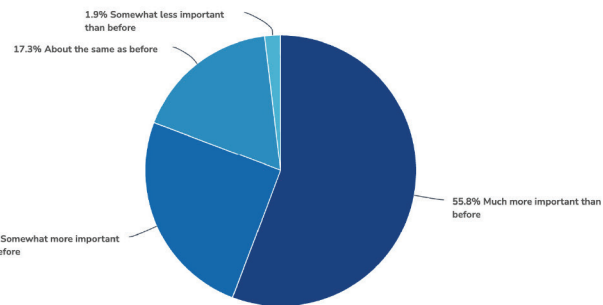
Value	Percent	Responses
Much more important than before	17.3%	9
Somewhat more important than before	17.3%	9
About the same as before	40.4%	21
Somewhat less important than before	15.4%	8
Much less important than before	9.6%	5
Totals: 52		

21. Compared to previous years, how important are citations for SEO success in 2025?



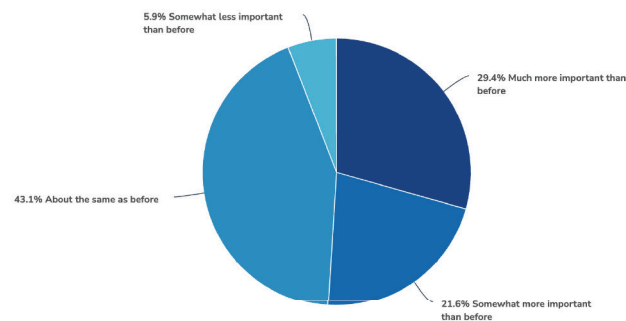
Value	Percent	Responses
Much more important than before	40.4%	21
Somewhat more important than before	32.7%	17
About the same as before	21.2%	11
Somewhat less important than before	3.8%	2
Much less important than before	1.9%	1
Totals: 52		

22. Compared to previous years, how important is high-quality content for SEO success in 2025?



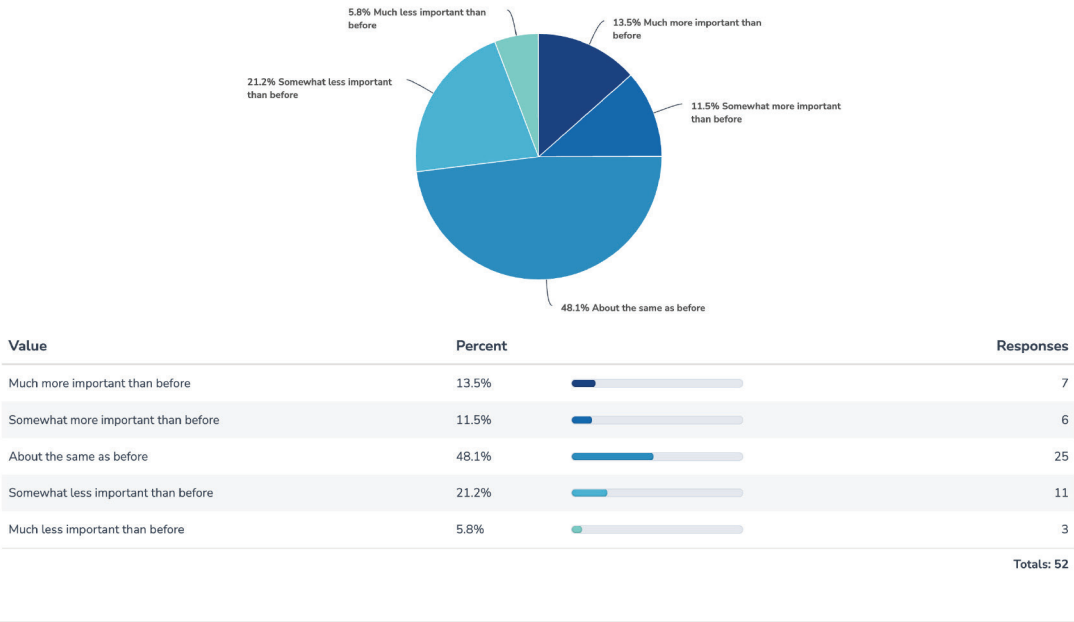
Value	Percent	Responses
Much more important than before	55.8%	29
Somewhat more important than before	25.0%	13
About the same as before	17.3%	9
Somewhat less important than before	1.9%	1
Totals: 52		

23. Compared to previous years, how important is technical SEO for SEO success in 2025?

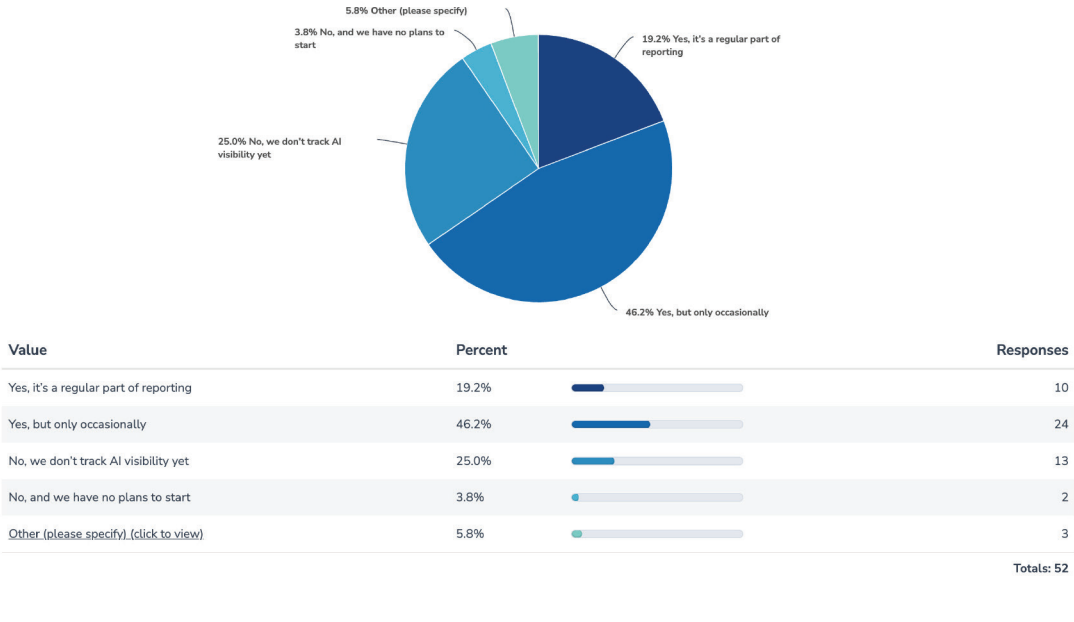


Value	Percent	Responses
Much more important than before	29.4%	15
Somewhat more important than before	21.6%	11
About the same as before	43.1%	22
Somewhat less important than before	5.9%	3
Totals: 51		

24. Compared to previous years, how important is keyword research for SEO success in 2025?



25. Is reporting on AI visibility (e.g., performance in SGE, AI answer boxes, or LLM-driven results) part of your SEO activities in 2025?



26. On a scale of 1–5, how much do you trust Yoast as an SEO authority?

