SEARCHPILOT RESEARCH

Controlled Experiments on Google AI Search Visibility

How a team can tell whether a change helps or hurts AI visibility. Results from 115 controlled tests on some of the world's highest-traffic websites.

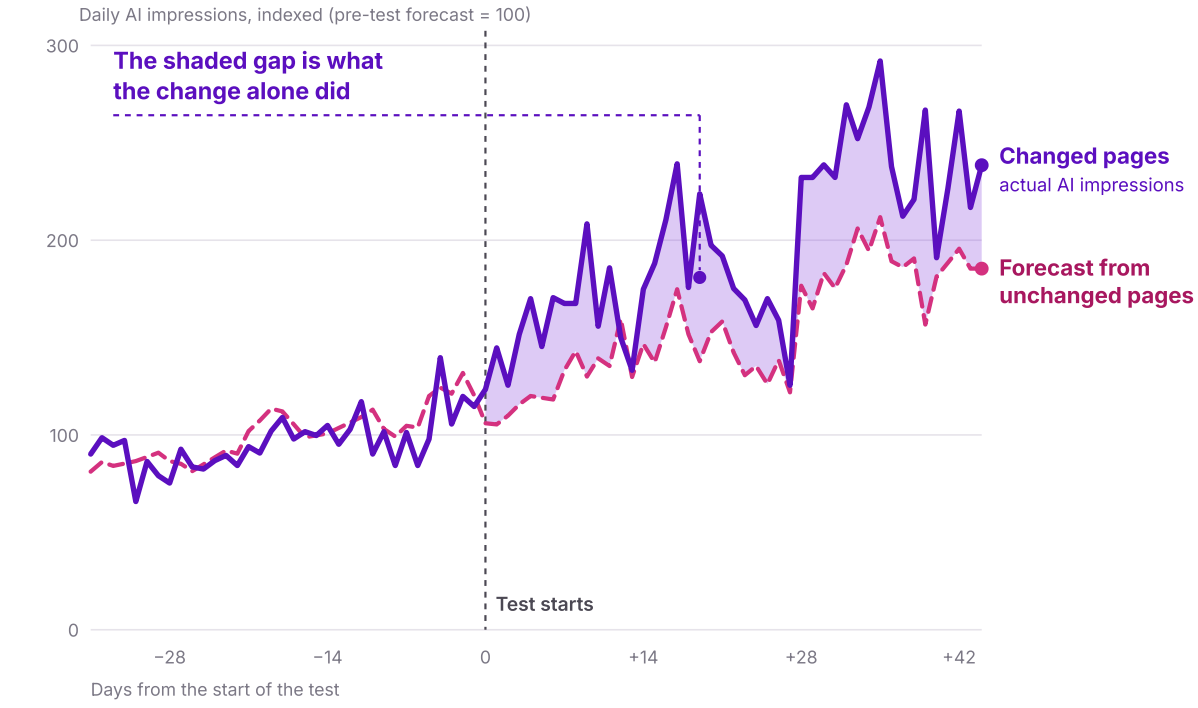
CHANGED PAGES VS FORECAST

Daily AI impressions

How often the changed pages appeared in Google's AI answers, against a forecast from unchanged pages

Changed pages AI impressions each day — **Forecast from unchanged pages** what the changed pages would have got anyway

Gap the effect of the change



An example test from the study. The data is anonymised.

115
controlled tests on 38 domains, across a range of industries

12
tests raised AI impressions

+18%
median gain in AI impressions on those tests

10 of 17
changes that moved AI impressions did not move Google traffic

OVERVIEW

A team can now test whether a page change helps or hurts AI visibility.

In 2026, Google Search Console started to count how often each page appears in its AI answers.* So a change can be tested on part of a site, against a control group of pages. We looked at 166 of these tests, and 115 had enough data to analyse.

1	**A count per page makes a fair test possible.**	Since May 2026, Search Console counts how often each page appears in AI Overviews and AI Mode. A test compares changed pages with similar unchanged pages.
2	**About one change in ten raised AI impressions.**	12 of the 115 tests that pass our quality check (10%). Another 5 changes lowered AI impressions (4%).
3	**The median gain was +18%.**	A median of about 41,000 extra AI impressions a month per test, on the 12 tests that raised them.
4	**10 of the 17 changes that moved AI impressions did not move Google traffic.**	Another 10 changes moved only Google traffic. No test in this study moved Google's AI impressions and Google traffic in opposite directions. But in a test for Omio that measured ChatGPT clicks, we did find different impacts from the same change: see finding 5.
5	**A change that increased clicks from ChatGPT and other non-Google AI tools likely cost 6.5% of Google traffic.**	Omio, a travel booking platform, measured visits from AI assistants such as ChatGPT, not AI impressions. It tested the change on part of its site and did not roll it out.

"Ever since we rolled out experiments that focused on AI clicks the top question we've been asked is 'what about visibility?'"

Will Critchlow, founder and CEO, SearchPilot

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* Each URL is counted separately, so page totals do not add up to the site total. In AI Overviews, a link counts only once it is scrolled into view. In AI Mode, each follow-up question adds impressions.

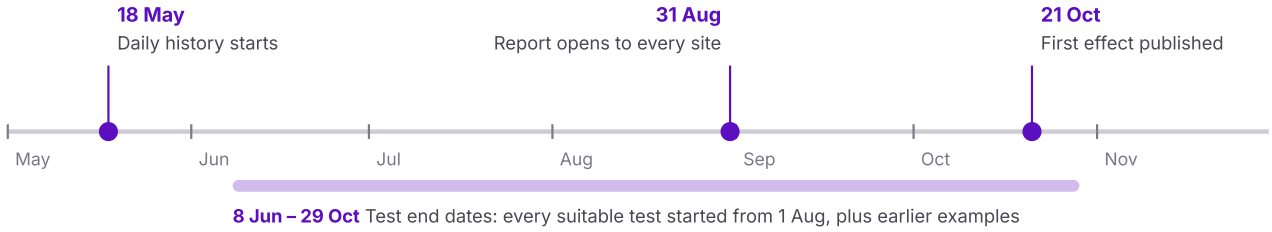
01 · BACKGROUND

After tests on AI clicks, the top question was: what about visibility?

SearchPilot first tested the impact of page changes on clicks from AI assistants. But a page can appear in an AI answer, and shape a decision, without a click. Until recently, there was no count of that, page by page.

How the data arrived

Search Console keeps daily AI impressions from 18 May 2026. When the report opened to every site on 31 August, that history came with it, so tests that had already ended could still be analysed. The study includes every suitable test that started from 1 August, which gives at least 75 days of data before each change, plus some earlier tests chosen as examples.



What Search Console now counts

- \+ Impressions in AI Overviews and AI Mode, combined
- \+ A count for each page, country, device and day
- \+ Daily data from 18 May 2026
- \+ Access for every site since 31 August 2026

What it does not count

- – Clicks
- – Queries or position in the answer
- – Separate numbers for AI Overviews and AI Mode
- – Answers from other AI assistants, such as ChatGPT

Why a rising line is not proof

With Google rolling out AI features more and more aggressively, many sites are seeing growth in AI visibility while doing nothing. Testing is needed to see if a change increased the growth rate.

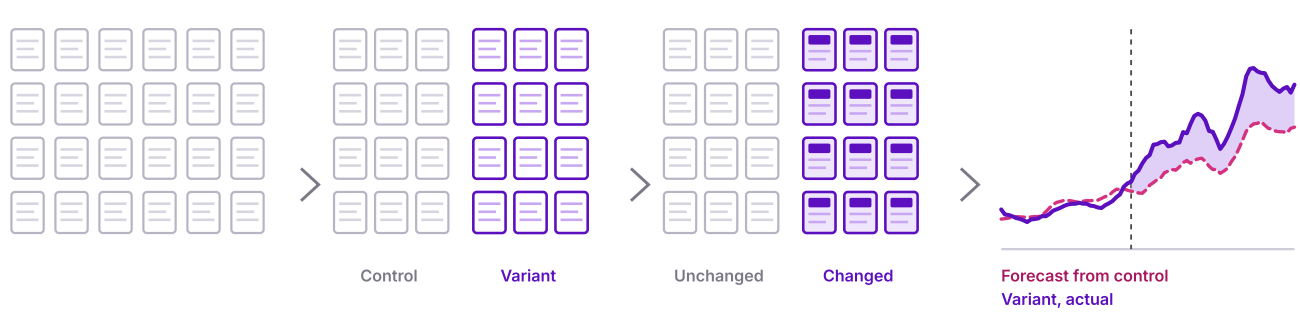
WHAT THIS MEANS

A count per page, every day, is what a fair test needs. Search Console now gives it.

02 · METHOD

The unchanged pages show what the changed pages would have done without a change.

A search engine sees one version of each page, so a page test cannot split users. SearchPilot splits pages. Its SEO tests use the same method.



01

Split pages, not users

Similar pages of one type, such as product or category pages, go into a control group and a variant group. Only the variant pages are changed.

02

Forecast from the control

Before the change, the two groups move together, and a model learns how. After it, the control pages' performance is used to forecast the performance of the variant pages. The gap is the effect.

03

Give a range, not one number

Every result has a 95% credible interval, the same default as SearchPilot's organic traffic tests.

The sample

A test needs enough data to analyse. We left out 51 tests because they had too little data.

166 tests
From 42 domains.

→

115 pass the quality check
From 38 domains.

+

51 left out
Under 100 AI impressions a day, or a 95% range wider than 50 percentage points.

WHAT THIS MEANS

Anything that hits both groups, such as a new AI model, seasonality or a Google update, shows up in the forecast too. So it does not count as an effect of the change.

02 · METHOD

A change counts as a gain or a loss only when its whole 95% range is above or below zero.

If the range includes zero, the test is inconclusive. It can still be useful in avoiding the need to maintain or expand expensive features that don't add value.

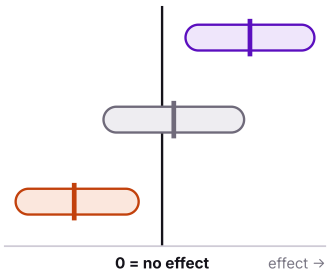
Three ways a test can end

Each bar is a 95% range. The vertical line is the best estimate.

Win
Whole range above zero: the change helped

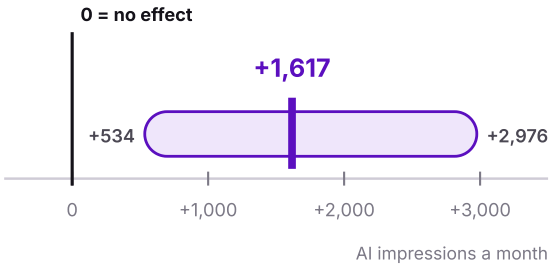
No clear change
Range includes zero: the test cannot tell

Loss
Whole range below zero: the change hurt



How the 95% range is built

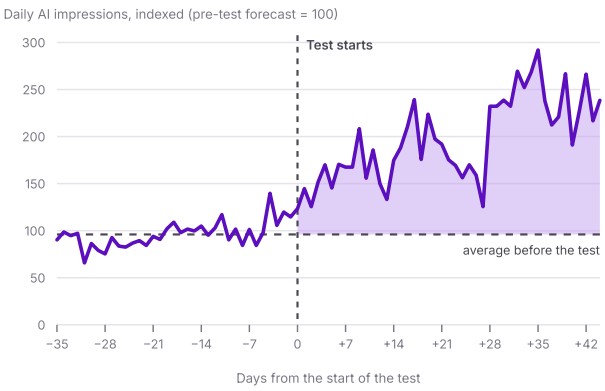
SearchPilot's model forecasts the changed pages' performance from the unchanged ones, the same model it uses for SEO tests. The 95% credible interval is the range that, given the data, holds the true effect with 95% probability. It is the same 95% default SearchPilot uses for SEO tests on organic traffic.



Why a before-and-after view misleads

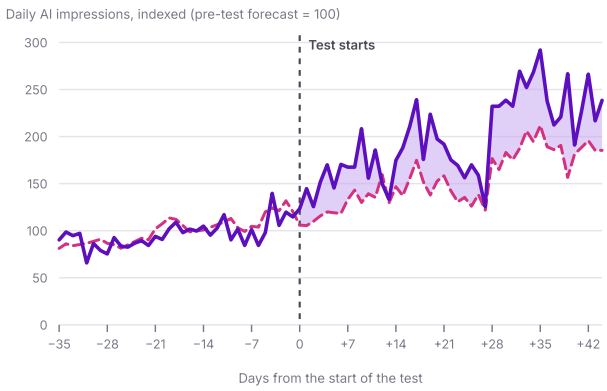
Before and after only

Credits the change with the whole rise above the pre-test average.



With a control group

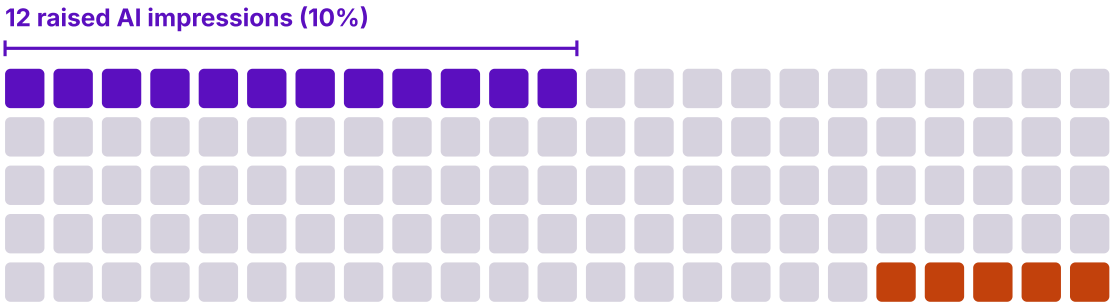
Credits the change with the gap above the forecast only.



03 · RESULTS

Across 115 tests, 12 changes raised AI impressions and 5 lowered them.

These are the 115 tests that pass our quality check, on 38 domains. Each square below is one test, coloured by its result on AI impressions.



Each square is one test. 115 tests that pass the quality check.

10%

raised AI impressions

12 of the 115 tests.

+18%

median gain

On those 12 tests: a median of about 41,000 extra AI impressions a month per test.

4%

lowered AI impressions

5 of the 115 tests.

What the changes were

These were SEO tests, analysed for their effect on AI impressions. Some were written with AI answers in mind. Others, such as meta description and technical changes, were not expected to move AI visibility.

TYPE OF CHANGE	RAISED	LOWERED
Added content, or made it more prominent (extra copy, FAQ content, summary or highlight blocks)	7	0
Changed titles or meta descriptions	3	2
Removed an existing element from the page	2	0
Reduced existing copy	0	1
Added a new link	0	2
All tests that moved	**12**	**5**

WHAT THIS MEANS

Page changes raised AI impressions about as often as they raised Google traffic. But here's the catch: they were not always the same changes.

03 · RESULTS

10 of the 17 changes that moved AI impressions did not move Google traffic.

Each of the 115 tests has two results: one on AI impressions, and one on organic sessions from Google. The grid counts the tests by both. In 88 tests, neither moved.

	AI IMPRESSIONS UP	AI: NO CLEAR CHANGE	AI IMPRESSIONS DOWN	TOTAL
Google traffic up accepted on organic sessions	**6** Both agree	**6** Only Google moved	**0** Opposite ways	12
Google: no clear change closed with no decision	**6** Only AI moved	**88** Both agree	**4** Only AI moved	98
Google traffic down rejected on organic sessions	**0** Opposite ways	**4** Only Google moved	**1** Both agree	5
TOTAL	12	98	5	**115**

Where they agree

95 of 115 tests, but in 88 of them neither moved. No test raised one and lowered the other. 6 of the 12 changes that won on Google traffic also raised AI impressions. 4 of the 5 that lost on Google showed no clear change in AI.

Where they differ

10 changes moved only AI impressions: 6 up and 4 down. A test that measured Google alone would have called them neutral. 10 other changes moved only Google traffic.

WHAT THIS MEANS

A change can look neutral in Google and still move AI answers. It's going to be important to measure both. We have already seen tests that had different effects on Google and ChatGPT: see Omio, next page.

04 · CASE STUDY: OMIO

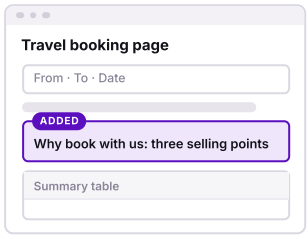
Omio's two changes both raised AI visits. One likely cost 6.5% of Google traffic.

Read the full Omio case study →

Omio is a travel booking platform for trains, buses, flights and ferries in 47 countries. More than 100,000 people travel with it every day. It tested two changes and measured clicks, not AI impressions: visits from AI assistants such as ChatGPT, and from Google.

TEST 1

Brand selling points



HYPOTHESIS

AI tools tend to surface content that says clearly what makes a brand different.

CHANGE ON THE VARIANT PAGES

Clear, well-structured brand selling points on each page, so that an AI can understand and summarise its value.

+18%

Visits from AI assistants

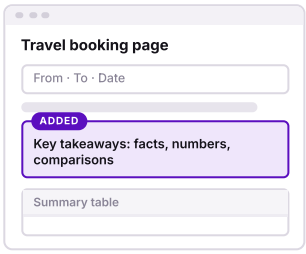
Inconclusive

Google organic sessions

✓ Rolled out to all relevant pages

TEST 2

Key takeaways



HYPOTHESIS

AI tools may prefer structured, summary-style content.

CHANGE ON THE VARIANT PAGES

Bulleted, quantitative and comparative data, added above an existing summary table.

Up

Visits from AI assistants. No figure published.

−6.5%

Google organic sessions

✕ Not rolled out.

What a team can do with each pair of results

	GOOGLE TRAFFIC UP	GOOGLE: NO CLEAR CHANGE	GOOGLE TRAFFIC DOWN
AI up	Roll out	Roll out Omio, test 1	Weigh the two. Test a new version. Omio, test 2
AI: no clear change	Roll out	Do not roll out	Do not roll out
AI down	Weigh the two	Do not roll out	Do not roll out

WHAT THIS MEANS

Both changes raised visits from AI assistants. Only a test that also measured Google traffic told them apart.

Read the full Omio case study →

05 · WHAT IT MEANS

AI visibility work can now be measured, as SEO work is.

A page change can move AI impressions, and a controlled test can detect it. So a team can try a change on part of its site, measure AI visibility and organic search traffic together, and then decide.

What the data cannot tell us yet

- Impressions are not visits. At the time of writing, visits from Google's AI features are bundled with search visits.
- The report has no query data, so we cannot say which questions a page started to appear for.
- AI Overviews and AI Mode come as one number. Other AI assistants are not in it.
- AI models change fast. A gain may not last, so we expect to be doing a lot of re-testing.
- Each result is for one change on one type of page. It does not necessarily translate to other page types or sites.

TEST IT ON YOUR OWN PAGES

See what a change does to AI answers and Google traffic, before it goes site-wide.

SearchPilot runs controlled AI visibility and SEO tests for some of the world's highest-traffic websites, including FTSE 100, S&P 500 and DAX 40 brands.

searchpilot.com/request-a-demo

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