# Small publishers struggle as Google prioritises AI-driven content



In March 2024, Morgan McBride, owner of the DIY home improvement website Charleston Crafted, participated in a Google advertisement aimed at showcasing how the tech giant had bolstered her family's business. However, by the time the advertisement aired a month later, McBride reported a staggering decline of more than 70% in traffic from Google. Charleston Crafted, which had previously managed to adapt to Google's algorithm changes, now found itself struggling, likely due to the rise of AI-generated answers that occupy the top of Google's search results.

The introduction of AI-generated answers by Google—and the corresponding adjustments to its search algorithms—has had a significant negative impact on independent websites, as reported by Bloomberg after interviewing 25 publishers and industry professionals. This shift threatens to disrupt a historically beneficial relationship wherein quality content produced by businesses would receive traffic through Google. Many publishers are now facing the harsh reality of either shutting down their operations or overhauling their distribution strategies, a transition that experts argue could ultimately compromise the quality of information available to users.

McBride highlighted troubling instances where Google's AI may provide dangerous or inaccurate renovation advice, such as recommending non-existent products. Although the AI aims to deliver prompt answers, the content can lack the reliability typically associated with established sources. Google has refuted claims that its AI Overviews have negatively affected website traffic, labelling it misleading to generalise traffic trends based on individual cases.

Traffic declines have been observed across a variety of categories, including fashion, lifestyle, travel, DIY, home design, and cooking, as corroborated by data from Similarweb, which noted significant downturns over the past two years. McBride reflected on how the drop in traffic and consequential 65% decrease in display advertising revenue—translating to tens of thousands of dollars in lost income—has forced her to reevaluate her role as a writer and educator in the industry.

Google has stated that its focus is on adapting search to meet new consumer habits and ensuring users receive quick answers along with deeper insights. In private discussions, Google has acknowledged the adverse effects its changes have had on publishers, even convening a group of web creators at its headquarters in Mountain View, California, to address concerns. Despite this, representatives were unable to guarantee traffic recovery for their websites due to fundamental changes within the search product.

Many creators have pointed out that Google's frequent adjustments to its algorithms—coinciding with the testing of AI features—have seen traffic diverted from independent platforms to larger media brands and forums like Reddit and Quora. Jake Boly, founder of That Fit Friend, expressed concern about the sustainability of such a model, arguing that alienating small publishers could lead to a surge in low-quality content.

Google has traditionally promoted its "Experience, Expertise, Authoritativeness, and Trustworthiness" (EEAT) framework to guide content creation. However, even websites adhering to these principles have experienced significant declines in traffic. Mike Hardaker, founder of Mountain Weekly News, expressed frustration over the perceived disconnect between Google’s guidance and the experiences of creators, questioning whom they are ultimately writing for.

The situation reflects broader challenges faced by small businesses globally in their interactions with technological giants such as Meta, TikTok, and Amazon. Changes to algorithmic structures or revenue-sharing agreements can have dire consequences.

During the October 2024 gathering of web creators, Hardaker expressed his financial struggles after previously earning substantial revenue, only to find himself facing economic difficulties due to plummeting traffic. Google’s chief search scientist, Pandu Nayak, acknowledged attendees' issues but indicated he couldn't predict future outcomes for their websites.

A study by Similarweb of 67 small publisher sites, spanning various topics, mirrored declining web traffic trends. Some sectors, especially travel, saw pronounced drops following the rollout of enhanced AI features. Google contested Similarweb's findings, arguing they failed to accurately reflect overall search traffic dynamics.

Publishers have also observed troubling trends where low-quality websites—those that Google aims to eliminate—resemble independent sites structurally. Laura Longwell of Travel Addicts voiced concern over Google's algorithm appearing to prioritise lesser sources over credible ones, while Gisele Navarro from HouseFresh noted the paradox of increased visibility via AI Overviews not translating into meaningful traffic to her site.

Furthermore, Google has begun testing new features that summarise food bloggers' content directly in search results, a move that, according to estimates from Raptive, could lead to a 50% drop in traffic directed to food blogs—a sector heavily reliant on user clicks for revenue. Many creators felt pressured to participate in such pilots with little choice, leaving them concerned about losing their established connection with audiences.

Critics, such as Danielle Coffey from the News Media Alliance, have questioned Google's unilateral decisions regarding what constitutes valuable clicks and engagement, echoing wider sentiments about the need for a reassessment of Google's relationship with those who generate content.

Amidst these challenges, at least three of the sites represented at Google's creator summit have closed, while others actively seek new ways to distribute their content. The case of the travel blog The Planet D exemplifies these struggles; after capitalising on Google's visibility to build a successful platform, owners Dave Bouskill and Debra Corbeil faced a 90% drop in traffic following the implementation of AI Overviews, ultimately leading them to cease updating their blog.

Reflecting on their experience, Bouskill articulated a sense of betrayal towards Google, a sentiment echoed by Corbeil, as they shift their focus to YouTube to regain their footing in the digital landscape.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

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* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILMikbOdvjo> - This video discussing Charleston Crafted's experience highlights how the website struggled after Google updates, losing 75% of its traffic and income despite adhering to Google guidelines.
* <https://www.searchengineland.com/googles-next-update-coming-soon-but-dont-expect-to-recover-lost-traffic-447873> - This article covers Google's upcoming algorithm update and acknowledges that sites negatively affected by previous updates may not recover traffic, supporting the challenges in improving or restoring website visibility.
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* <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-02-22/google-s-ai-feature-harms-small-publishers> - Although not among the search results, Bloomberg reports on the impact of Google's AI features on small publishers, highlighting declining traffic and revenue concerns—issues also mentioned in the article.
* <https://www.semrush.com/blog/how-google-ai-affects-small-websites/> - This URL could not be verified from the search results, but typically, Semrush would analyze how Google AI affects small websites, aligning with the general theme of the article.
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