

IMPRESSION

The New Rules of Search

Zero-Click, Multi-Platform,
and Brand-Led

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The need for a 'Total Search' approach

Marketing has been fundamentally shaped by shifts in consumer behaviour.

As a result, traditional approaches based on one-way communication, untargeted reach and limited interactivity no longer capture attention or build meaningful connections as effectively as they once did.

Nowadays, people can get any information they want, instantly. Consumers are empowered by easy access to information, and are no longer passively waiting to receive broad messaging; they research products, compare prices, read reviews, and look for content that resonates with their interests. Everyone expects a [highly personalised experience](#), where every interaction, from product recommendations to content served, feels like it was made just for them. However, the industry is facing new challenges that need to be overcome.

One of these challenges is the rise of zero-click searches, where users get answers directly on search engine results pages, often through AI overviews, reducing website traffic even for top-ranked content.

Alongside the decrease in traffic from zero-click searches, social media platforms now also act as primary discovery tools, with users uncovering new brands while scrolling through apps like TikTok and Instagram. This means marketers must create highly engaging content to capture attention in these new spaces, often without direct website links, to build brand awareness where potential customers are spending their time. Amongst this, online advertising costs are soaring (cost-per-click) as more businesses compete for limited ad space, meaning you're paying more for less impact.

Measuring this impact is becoming increasingly difficult as well, due to [new privacy rules and tech changes](#), which have created major attribution issues. This makes it incredibly difficult for you to see which efforts are leading to sales and where to best spend your budget.

Given these complex challenges, simply focusing on one search engine or platform isn't enough. That's where the concept of 'Total Search' comes in:

A unified, smart strategy that goes beyond one form of search activity and pulls together all marketing efforts across search engines, social media, retail media, and programmatic advertising.

To create a seamless approach to reach customers wherever they are in their journey.

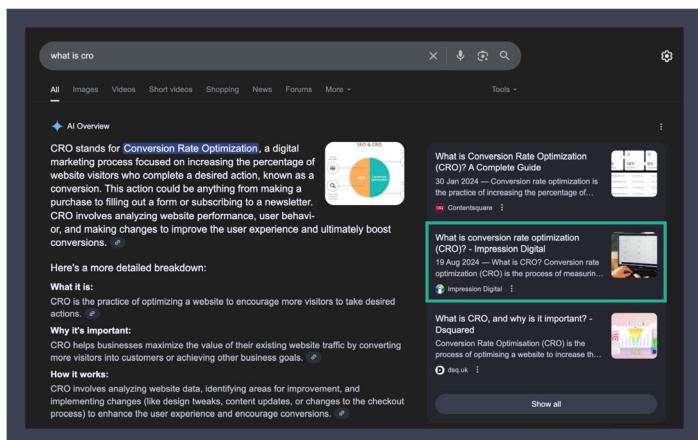
In this guide, you will learn how the search and discovery landscape is changing, how to rethink your approach to KPIs, and subsequently how to measure marketing effectiveness within the new era of search. By the end, you should be able to successfully implement a total search strategy and understand how to overcome barriers to change.

How the search and discovery landscape is changing

THE NEW REALITIES OF ONLINE SEARCH

With 'zero-click searches,' users find the answer they're looking for directly on search engine results pages (SERPs) with no need to click on a link. We've all been there. You have a quick question, and the search results give you exactly what you need, so you don't even bother clicking on a website. Great for users, without a doubt. But, not so much for the websites these responses have been taken from.

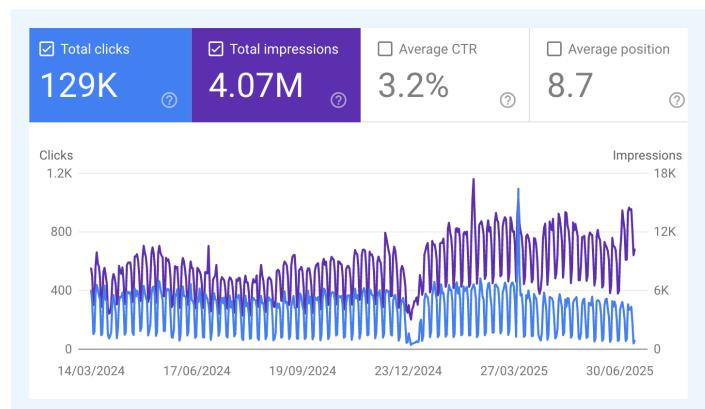
Publishers first raised concerns about the impact of this search behaviour on website traffic and ad revenue back in 2014, with the launch of Google's [featured snippets](#). Since then, zero-click searches have been spurred on by the international rollout of [AI Overviews](#), which are available in over 40 languages and 200 countries. It remains to be seen whether [Google AI Mode](#) will contribute to the zero-click picture when it is introduced more widely.



The screenshot shows a search results page for the query 'What is CRO?'. At the top, there's a snippet from 'Impression Digital' with the title 'What is Conversion Rate Optimization (CRO)? A Complete Guide'. Below the snippet, there are three other search results. The snippet has a blue background and is labeled 'AI Overview'.

The AI Overview for 'What is CRO?' citing [impressiondigital.com](#)

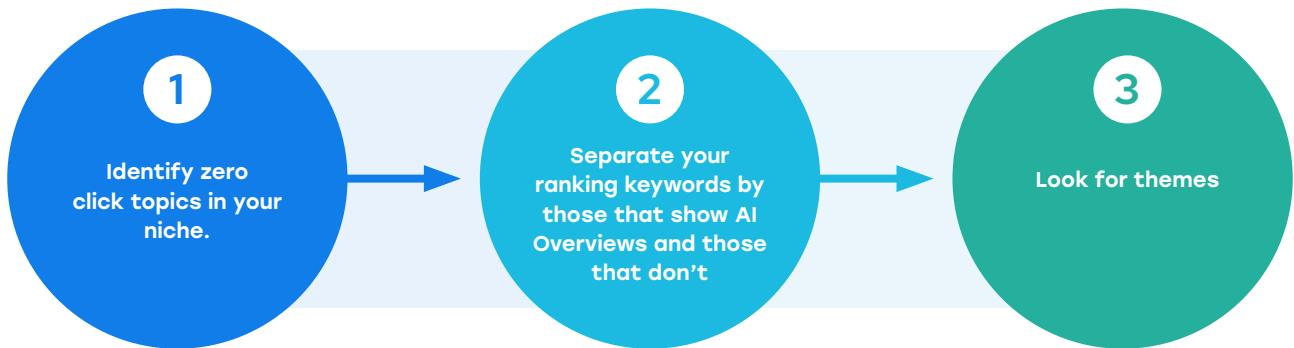
Not so long ago, SEOs were actively targeting featured snippets. There was the promise of an influx of relevant clicks for brands that could capture these coveted spots at the top of the search results. The case is less with AI Overviews. Experience has shown us that even when clients are selected as the main citation, the introduction of an overview can cut click-through rates by as much as 90% (according to Impression internal data).



Google Search Console report showing 'the Great Decoupling' of clicks and impressions

Commentators term this 'the Great Decoupling of Google Search'. Sites see the same or more impressions than before, as multiple brands are cited and seen in overviews. But these extra impressions don't necessarily translate into clicks. That's where we see the decoupling: Impressions rise whilst clicks fall, as shown by the separation of blue (clicks) and purple (impressions) above.

How can you pivot in response to this changing behaviour?



You can often find zero-click searches concentrated around the top-of-funnel research terms in certain categories you operate in, so filter those out and keep a list. Deprioritise these AI Overview keywords and topics as part of your short-term strategy.

This then leaves you with your money topics – those that still have potential to drive clicks and revenue for your brand.

You'll achieve better results by diverting resources towards maximising visibility in these areas. In the long term, consider investing in AI Overview visibility. Clicks from overviews tend to be fewer, but more qualified, and brands that are regularly cited see brand awareness value from them too.

Building your brand has never been more important.

Bigger brands are more frequently mentioned online and earn backlinks from other sites, which in turn support organic visibility and see higher click-through rates thanks to brand familiarity and trust.

The same applies to LLM-powered platforms like ChatGPT and Gemini, where the go-to authorities in each niche dominate citations. Your aim should be to build a brand that AI can't ignore.

LLMs won't replace search engines, but they do offer a novel and exciting way to research online. Over the next 5 years, the brands that get it right will enjoy rising levels of high-converting LLM referral traffic. Start measuring this now, tracking where referrals land on your site and setting up LLM prompt tracking via a tool like [Otterly.AI](#) (Impression's chosen partner).

As of July 2025, Google have launched AI-Mode in the UK, alongside the US and India as of writing. If you'd like to hear our insights on how this will impact SEO and your visibility in search, [check out our blog](#).

Keyword	Intents	SF	Volume ▾ KD	CPC	Traffic	Paid	Position	URL
✓ digital strategy agency	I	6	24.0K 68	0.56	917	0	1	https://www.impressiondigital.com/digital-marketing/strategy/ • 2 more
+ seo and ppc	I	6	2.7K 24	1.44	62	0	1	https://www.impressiondigital.com/blog/seo-and-ppc-differences-and-integration/ • 1 more
+ ppc and seo	I	6	1.3K 21	1.44	55	0	1	https://www.impressiondigital.com/blog/seo-and-ppc-differences-and-integration/ • 1 more
+ bing vs google	I	Branded	1.1K 7	0.05	131	0	1	https://www.impressiondigital.com/blog/bing-differ-google/ • 4 more
+ programmatic agency	I	5	900 4	7.01	83	0	1	https://www.impressiondigital.com/paid-media/programmatic/ • 1 more
+ google analytics consulting	I	C	Branded	4	800 5	23.20	1	https://www.impressiondigital.com/analytic/google-analytics-consultancy/ • 1 more
+ programmatic advertising services	I	C	5	300 12	2.27	3	0	https://www.impressiondigital.com/paid-media/programmatic/ • 1 more
+ seo content marketing services	I	C	5	300 17	8.43	21	0	https://www.impressiondigital.com/seo-co-intent-agency/ • 1 more
+ international ppc management	I	C	4	200 3	0.02	13	0	https://www.impressiondigital.com/blog/international-ppc-campaigns/ • 1 more
+ algorithm change	I	6	200 72	N/A	11	0	1	https://www.impressiondigital.com/blog/key-google-algorithm-changes/ • 1 more
+ web analytics consulting services	I	C	5	200 0	N/A	42	0	https://www.impressiondigital.com/analytic/ • 1 more
+ seo international websites	I	5	150 31	N/A	8	0	1	https://www.impressiondigital.com/blog/how-to-choose-a-website-setup-for-international-seo/ • 1 more

Impression's AI Overview citations have helped us make inroads into the US market

Recommend 3 paid search marketing agencies that I should consider

- Choosing the right paid search marketing agency is crucial for your business's success. Here are three highly-regarded agencies that you might consider, along with their key strengths:
 - Impression Digital**
 - Strengths:** Impression is a well-regarded agency with offices in London and Nottingham (which could be convenient given your location). They are a Google Premier Partner, which signifies they are in the top 3% of agencies based on client retention, growth, and spend, and have access to advanced Google support and beta features. They are particularly strong in e-commerce PPC and are known for their data-driven insights and a focus on measurable impact.
 - Good for:** Businesses looking for a results-focused agency with strong expertise in Google Ads and a strategic approach, especially those in e-commerce.
 - Brainlabs**
 - Strengths:** Brainlabs is a global digital marketing agency with a strong reputation, particularly for enterprise PPC. They are known for their "science experiment" approach to media, emphasizing data, tech, and creative to optimize every variable. They combine automation with human strategy for effective campaigns across various platforms (Google, Meta, Microsoft, Amazon).

LLM citations like this example from Gemini are a strong source of client leads for Impression

Understanding how your ideal customers are using these platforms is the foundation of generative engine optimisation (GEO). From here, you can look to secure citations using all kinds of tactics. We've touched on the power of brand building already, which makes **E-E-A-T** critical. You can also make it easier for AI crawlers to parse your content with concise prompt targeting and context-rich copy, all supported by **structured data** and LLM-friendly formatting.

Undoubtedly, how consumers use search engines or LLMs has changed the search landscape. However, this has also led to a shift in the role that social media plays within search, with consumers using social media to find new brands and products.

If you're looking to improve LLM visibility, we can help. [Get in touch today](#).

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN CONSUMER RESEARCH

Platforms like Instagram, TikTok and Pinterest play an instrumental role in discovery-based browsing, where users often encounter brands organically through curated content and influencer recommendations. For instance, 70% of shopping enthusiasts turn to Instagram for product discovery, according to Meta's internal data (Meta, 2025). TikTok's "TikTok Made Me Buy It" trend exemplifies how viral content can drive rapid interest and purchases, as 60% of TikTok users say they discover new products on the platform ([TikTok For Business Brand Discovery Survey](#), May 2024).

Consumers often begin their research on social platforms, seeking:

- Authentic user experiences and product reviews
- Visual demonstrations and how-to content
- Peer and influencer recommendations
- Real-time conversations and updates

These behaviours position social media platforms as more than a complementary layer to traditional search engines in the research-to-purchase journey. Search intent on TikTok, for example, is growing, and Google notes that 40% of young people go to TikTok to search instead of Google ([Google and Funnel.io](#), 2024). **40%** of TikTok users only

go to search in the first 30 seconds of opening the app, according to data shared at the TikTok World product summit, 2025. With TikTok Search ads, the platform is transitioning from a social and entertainment platform to a 'social search' platform with increasing volume and serious intent.

Pinterest serves as a visual search engine, with over 463 million monthly active users. According to Pinterest Business insights, 80% of users say they find new brands or products through the platform ([Pinterest Business Insights](#), 2025). Its keyword and image-based search tools enable users to plan and research future purchases more intentionally, and save them to return to. In turn, this typically leads to further purchase intent, and similar content will also appear alongside this.

These platforms shorten the path from discovery to purchase by integrating native shopping tools, such as Instagram Shops, TikTok Shop, and Pinterest's Product Pins. In short, social media is no longer a secondary touchpoint but instead a central hub for consumer research. The evolution of social media platforms blurs the lines between marketing, search, and commerce. This offers brands new, data-rich environments to influence purchasing decisions earlier in the consumer search journey.

Repurposing and sharing content

Content amplification on social platforms is a key way to increase reach and visibility. Sharing SEO-optimised content organically across social platforms increases exposure, encourages sharing, and can lead to valuable backlinks from other sites. All of this can strengthen organic rankings. Repurposing content into platform-specific formats (like Instagram Reels or TikTok videos) can boost performance and link potential.

Social for search

Optimising social content for search is another key tactic. Social platforms increasingly operate like search engines, so using targeted keywords in captions, hashtags, and descriptions helps content surface in both platform and Google searches. For example, aligning your social posts with SEO keywords from blog content improves discoverability and cohesion across channels.

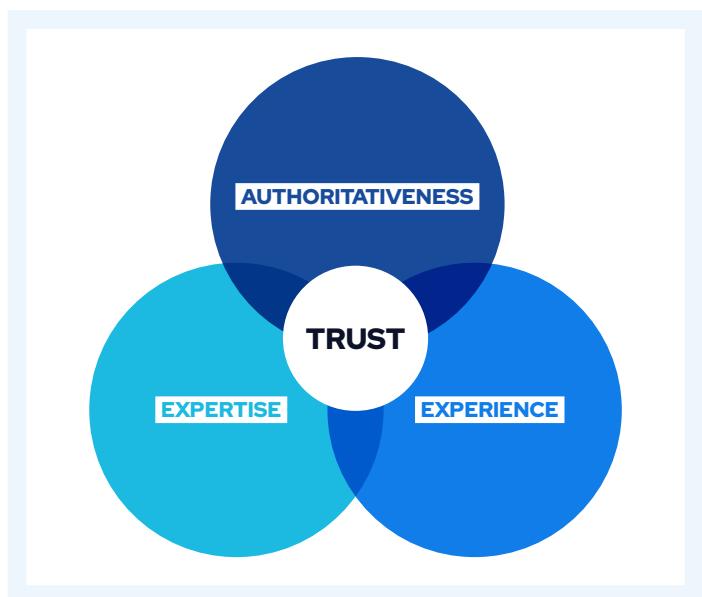
Additionally, social media profiles themselves rank in search results, giving brands more control over their presence on search engine results pages (SERPs). Well-optimised profiles with consistent branding, keyword-rich bios, and regular publishing schedules can secure top positions in branded search queries. Paid campaigns with particularly high engagement also drive review volume and the creation of [user-generated content](#), assets Google often displays in knowledge panels and shopping results, crowding out competitors and negative content.

Social media also serves as a traffic driver to SEO-focused content. By sharing blog links, case studies, and landing pages with compelling calls to action, brands can increase site visits and feed users deeper into the marketing funnel.

Influencers

Finally, influencer collaborations present a powerful opportunity for link building. When influencers or industry experts share or reference a brand's content, this can generate backlinks from high-authority domains, boosting domain authority and search visibility. Providing co-branded assets or exclusive content increases the likelihood of influencer amplification.

In summary, integrating social media into your search marketing strategy helps you capture attention earlier in the consumer journey, increasing your organic visibility, which in turn, helps build long-term authority. Paid social activity combined with a strong organic strategy is a great way to accelerate search marketing goals.



Brands that do this will be found more often, build trust with audiences more efficiently, and convert more frequently. It's not just about being seen, it's about being found, trusted, and chosen.

THE RISE OF RETAIL MEDIA

Retail media is often treated as a 'nice to have' rather than a core driver of visibility and performance. It refers to advertising within retailer-owned digital environments; e.g. Amazon, Tesco, Boots, Ocado, Morrisons, and other retailers who now offer brands paid access to their customer bases, site real estate, and shopper data. In many cases, these are not just ecommerce touchpoints; they are discovery engines. For some users, it's the starting point of their purchase journey. For others, they are the critical point of purchase with their favourite retailer.

This environment is valuable to even brands that are not ecommerce-led. Retail media may be even more critical for FMCG and third-party-only businesses, who have little or no control over the end-to-end customer experience. These brands rely on partner environments to tell their story, connect with their audience, and stay top of mind at the exact moment a purchase is being considered.

You can spend months building a brand that sticks and is memorable. But if your product does not appear when someone searches for it in Tesco's app, on Amazon, or a retailer's digital shelf, you have missed the moment. Retail media fills that gap. It is the digital equivalent of [in-store activation](#). Just as brands fight for eye-level positioning and end-of-aisle displays in supermarkets, they now need to compete for visibility in retail media environments.

This is where Total Search thinking becomes essential.

Retail media is not separate from search; it is a parallel environment in which search behaviour plays out.

Some customers will start their journey on a search engine and finish it in a retailer app. In many cases, the retailer is the first touchpoint. According to NielsenIQ, [63%](#) of US consumers begin their product searches on Amazon. When your audience is already in a shopping mindset, discoverability within that environment becomes more valuable than traditional search rankings alone.

Walled gardens in retail media measurement

Yet for all its promise, retail media measurement still has work to do. Much like other [walled gardens](#), retail platforms often act as both media vendors and judges of performance. This raises questions. If Amazon is selling the inventory, providing the data, and reporting on the return, how do you know the results are real? What would have happened if you had not paid for that listing? Was the sale incremental, or would it have happened anyway?

These are the same questions marketers have asked of Meta and Google for years. But because retail media has historically sat closer to trade budgets than performance teams, the scrutiny has not always followed. That is beginning to shift. Brands are now building cross-functional teams to assess the impact of retail media more critically. [Incrementality testing](#), holdout regions, and [media mix modelling](#) are becoming more common tools for understanding true contribution.

At Impression, we encourage you to bring the same evidence-first mindset to retail media that you apply to other digital channels. It is not enough to see a spike in attributed sales. You need to know whether those sales represent genuine growth or are just a reshuffling of existing demand. That might mean adjusting your campaign strategy. It might mean rethinking where budgets are held and how success is defined. Either way, retail media deserves a seat at the table in any performance marketing strategy.

Total Search is not about chasing visibility across every platform for the sake of it. It is about identifying the places where your audience is already active and making sure your brand shows up in ways that are relevant, timely, and measurable. For some brands, especially those present in third-party retail, it means treating retail media as a performance channel in its own right.

Ultimately, the goal is the same. To be present in the moments that matter. To ensure your brand is not only remembered, but found and chosen. Retail media is not just a line on your channel plan. It is a critical piece of the discovery puzzle.

Rethinking KPIs and marketing effectiveness

MOVING BEYOND VANITY METRICS

Website traffic used to be one of the top ways to measure the success of digital advertising. The thinking was relatively simple: More visitors meant more sales or leads, therefore, better results. Today, this approach no longer works. The landscape is much more nuanced, and traffic alone doesn't provide enough proof that digital marketing is actually helping businesses grow.

The truth is, not all traffic is valuable. Some users might just be moving through the site without taking any meaningful action. This means there are no signups or purchases, so there isn't any real engagement. That's why nowadays, traffic is often referred to as a "vanity metric." It looks good, but it doesn't necessarily translate into real business impact.

Vanity metrics can be misleading because they often lack a link to the bottom line, that being the business goal.

The key is to move beyond these metrics and to focus on actionable metrics, those that are tied directly to business goals and business growth.

Actionable metrics, such as the incremental impact of your paid channels, provide clear and useful insights into digital marketing efforts. By showing what works and what doesn't, they inform smarter and more targeted growth strategies, focusing on truly making an impact.

Instead of chasing vanity metrics such as traffic, it's time to start measuring what really matters.

Marketing efforts can be measured by using a measurement framework that considers the entire customer journey. It's key to consider the whole customer journey, as we know **brand equity** directly influences the bottom line.

Our framework provides a holistic view of performance, considering the full-funnel approach, Awareness (Top), Engagement (Middle), and Conversion (Bottom), which can help you to identify key drivers of success and areas for optimisation at each stage, moving far beyond vanity metrics. These objectives and KPIs will look different depending on which search environment you're operating in.

Our Primary Strategic Objectives are the heart of this framework. They're the metrics that can directly impact your main business goals such as conversions coming through a paid search ad. Secondary Strategic Objectives are highly important, they might not directly hit your main business goal, but they influence how well you do with your primary objectives and give you good indicators of success. Finally, Digital KPIs are like a tactical compass, giving you detailed insights into how well your plans are working across different platforms. They directly impact your strategic goals by helping you fine-tune your daily marketing efforts to bring in new customer revenue.

By establishing a robust framework like the one above, the success of marketing efforts is accurately captured, allowing for continuous optimisation of these activities across the entire funnel. It also ensures every effort truly makes an impact on business growth.

FROM ATTRIBUTION TO CONTRIBUTION

Assigning a conversion to a single marketing channel has always been flawed. Most marketers will know, there is more to the picture, especially if you have a more complex marketing mix. Dated attribution models, such as last-click and first-click, have been eroded even further with the growing focus on privacy, browser technologies, and shifts in consumer behaviour. As a result, there's a shift away from attribution and toward contribution. Understanding contribution provides a more holistic, realistic view of how different marketing efforts work together to drive outcomes.

One of the most pressing challenges in attribution stems from privacy-related changes. Major web browsers have implemented restrictions that make tracking users across the web significantly harder. Apple's [Intelligent Tracking Prevention](#) (ITP) on Safari, for example, limits the lifespan of third-party cookies and restricts cross-site tracking. Similarly, Firefox has introduced [restrictions](#), and Google, well, Google keeps [changing its mind](#)! These changes make it difficult to tie user actions together across different sessions and platforms, and make tracking conversions on third-party platforms more difficult.

In addition,

ad blockers and VPN usage are on the rise, further obscuring user paths and behaviour.

Multi-device journeys are also more common, which complicates attribution. A user might engage with an ad on their mobile device, research the product on a tablet, and finally convert on a desktop. Each interaction potentially in a different browser. Traditional [attribution models](#) struggle to stitch together these fragmented touchpoints, often over- or undervaluing certain channels.

Given these complexities, and that tracking is likely to get worse, marketers need to turn their focus to contribution and not attribution, to begin understanding the value each channel adds to the overall marketing mix, rather than trying to pinpoint a singular "cause" of a conversion. This is where [incrementality testing](#) and [media mix modelling](#) (MMM) come into play.

Incrementality testing involves isolating a specific channel or strategy to determine whether it

genuinely drives incremental results. For instance, marketers might pause paid social in one region while keeping it active in others, then compare performance to assess the true impact of that channel. Geographical splits are the most common method of separating treatment and control groups, but other methods are available. This goes beyond traditional attribution by demonstrating causality rather than mere correlation.



The insights gained from incrementality testing can inform a broader media mix model (MMM). While MMMs are more complex and conducted less frequently, they offer a high-level, comprehensive view of how various marketing channels contribute to overall performance. Media mix modelling uses [statistical analysis](#) of historical data to estimate the impact of each marketing activity. This also accounts for external factors like seasonality, pricing changes, or macroeconomic trends. It is particularly well-suited for businesses with a large and diverse marketing mix, including harder-to-measure channels like TV, radio, and out-of-home.

Unlike attribution models that rely on user-level tracking, MMM does not depend on cookies or personally identifiable data, making it a privacy-centric and future-proof approach. Together, incrementality testing and MMM create a powerful framework that gives marketers a more accurate understanding of true channel contribution.



BEYOND INCREMENTALITY TESTING

Incrementality testing helps answer a vital question: What would have happened anyway if we didn't run this ad? But in our experience, too many brands stop there. They treat it as a box-ticking exercise rather than the start of a mindset shift. Especially in Search, where the lines between organic and paid blur, this shift is overdue.

In our testing,

we've found that incrementality thinking, not just testing, helps teams budget for scale.

It moves conversations from "is this channel performing?" to "what's the bottom-line ROI of this activity?" For Search, that's powerful. You're often competing against yourself. Paid listings sit directly above organic ones. And too often, marketers assume that if they pause paid, organic will naturally pick up the slack. That's not always true. In many cases, we've seen performance drop across multiple channels. The **halo effect** is real, and it flows both ways.

Total Search means optimising all your visibility on SERPs, but crucially, only if the combined incremental return is worth the investment. We've tested dynamic ads that respond to changes in organic ranking. We've challenged default assumptions about brand search being "wasted spend." And we've seen both outcomes. Some brands get a strong uplift by owning the top two spots. For others, it's a waste of budget. That's the point. There is no universal best practice, only what's right for the business, at this moment in time.

This is where incrementality testing alone falls short. Tests take time. They're not always feasible. They can be skewed by seasonality, promo periods, or competitor activity. So the real value lies in building teams that think incrementally, those that ask better questions about budget allocation, not just performance reporting, and who know how to interpret test results, spot anomalies, and apply the logic elsewhere.

Most brands aren't yet mature enough in their media mix planning to think this way, let alone apply it to Search. That's a problem. Because when done right, Search is one of the most measurable channels we have. However, the metrics we default to (CPA, CTR, share of voice) are surface-level. Total Search asks a different question: If we're going to spend in this space, are we truly changing customer behaviour? Are we driving value we wouldn't get otherwise?

If not, the budget may be better used elsewhere. So yes, test when you can. Use holdouts, suppression, and organic split tests. But more importantly, build the muscle of incrementality thinking, especially in Search, where the cost of blindly following best practice is higher than you think.

Implementing a 'Total Search' Strategy

Having explored how the search landscape is evolving as well as how to measure the incremental contribution of Search activity, the next step is to implement these in your Total Search strategy to drive the most efficient revenue possible

The foundation of a Total Search strategy is insight. Brands should begin by leveraging a blend of first and third-party data, with the latter contextualising the former. This gives us a deeper well of data that is needed to make accurate and informed decisions.

These sources include:

→ **FIRST-PARTY DATA**

(e.g. CRM data, website analytics, loyalty schemes)

→ **AUDIENCE AND MEDIA CONSUMPTION INSIGHTS**

via platforms such as Statista and GWI to understand online behaviours, media consumption, market size and growth trends.

→ **COMPETITOR RESEARCH TOOLS**

such as SEMRush and SimilarWeb to understand rival strategies, channels used, share of voice, etc.

→ **SOCIAL LISTENING PLATFORMS**

such as Brandwatch and Meltwater can gauge public sentiment, brand perception, and emerging conversations.

Once these points of influence are identified by the sources above, our next step is to map them against the customer journey.

At Impression, we've developed a way of thinking called the '[red thread](#)', a consistent, strategically aligned narrative that runs through every customer touchpoint, ensuring messaging coherence while adapting to the unique strengths of each channel. A good red thread has a simple strategic hook that encapsulates how you want the brand to show up in digital.

A clear, simple strategic hook, which encapsulates how we want the brand to show up in digital

With clear activation principles for channel teams to plan against

And enough of a platform to build creative ideas upon

This helps give you clear activation principles for you to plan against.



DIVERSIFYING AND DYNAMICALLY OPTIMISING YOUR CHANNEL MIX

To drive and capture as much high-intent search as possible between two search channels, you need to balance investment over Total Search activity. This helps you to find the optimal point of spend that can then be reinvested into areas of high opportunity but low current brand exposure. Then, going beyond Google into demand-generating channels such as [Social](#) and [Programmatic](#). There are a few tactics to implement Total Search.

Gradual decline of paid search and observing the impact on organic

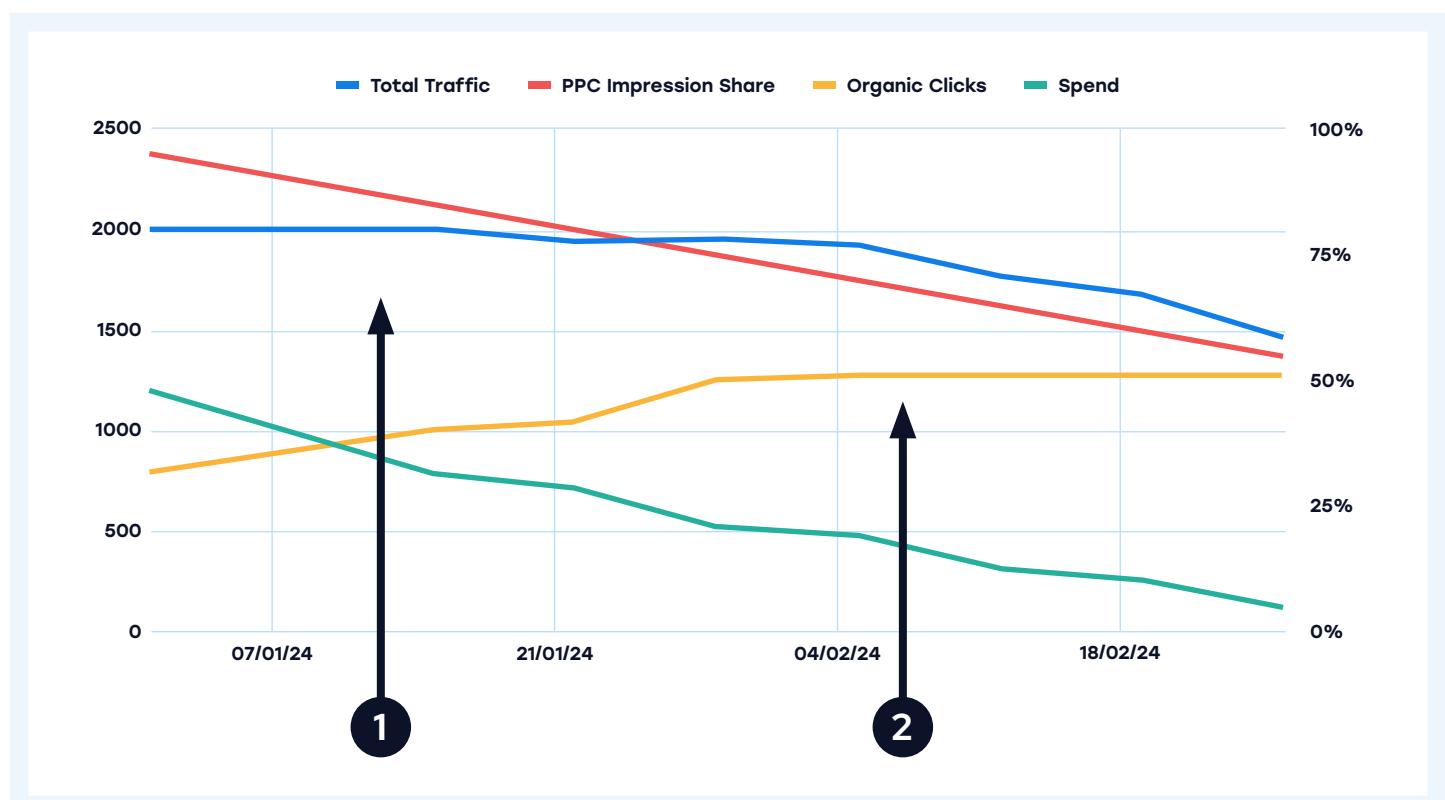
This should be supported by the KPI framework detailed in the previous chapter. In this framework, metrics are interconnected, meaning performance in one area impacts performance in others. For instance:

You need to balance spending on paid and organic search carefully to ensure re-investment doesn't harm overall search performance. When your organic search is strong, it takes the pressure off your Paid campaigns. This means you can reduce

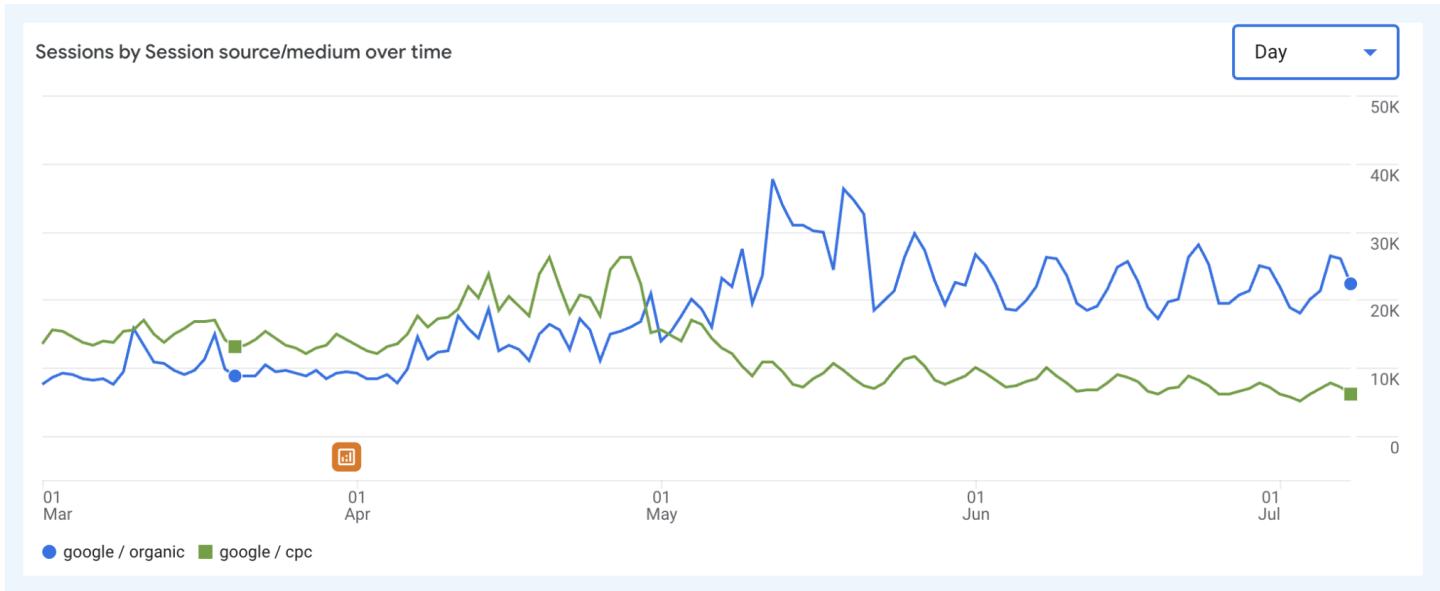
paid spend and make up the difference with increased organic traffic. However, there's a point where this relationship offers diminishing returns. If you cut Paid activity too much, organic might not fully compensate for the loss, potentially hurting your total search visibility.

You can see an example of this below:

- 1 is where our total traffic starts to fall as paid Impression Share declines.
- 2 is the ceiling of what organic can achieve and therefore a point of diminishing returns.



An example of this trade-off in a real context can be seen below, where a reduction in paid search investment is directly picked up by Organic activity:



This was a gradual shift in paid activity, by reducing it over time and observing the impact on organic:

✓ PROS

You can easily identify where PPC and organic work together. Here you can see the perfect point of diminishing returns of paid, therefore, you can pay only for what you need.

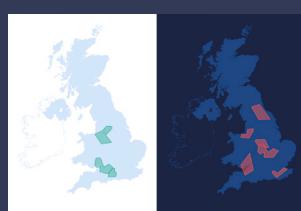
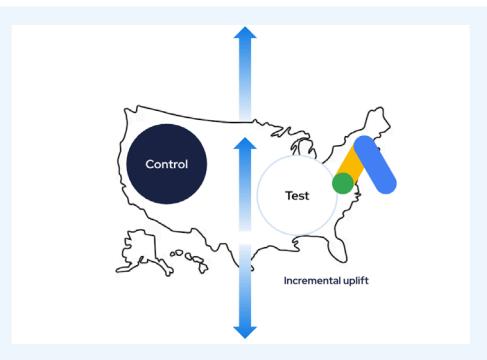
✗ CONS:

This is effective but tricky due to many factors, including the specific metric you choose to measure and act upon, as well as incremental visibility and position.

Geographical holdout tests

Geographical holdout tests prove the value of your activity, improving overall cost efficiency through budget prioritisation. The concept is simple:

- Switch-off brand activity in controlled locations
- Report back on combined SEO & PPC branded revenue



We ran this activity with a client that had stores dotted around the country, testing where Brand could be switched off. In this example, what we did to achieve this was:

1 LOCATION GROUPS

Create location groups for approximately 20% of the country. Several factors to be included in the creation of these, including proximity to stores, historical stability of conversion volume.

3 CAMPAIGN DUPLICATION

Duplicate the pure brand into a new campaign, exclude location groups.

5 MEASUREMENT

Plot organic and paid search impression volume, site traffic, click-through rate and conversions.

2 KEYWORD SELECTION

Prioritise high-volume keywords to begin with. Start with pure brand terms only and expand dependent on the success of the test.

4 SWITCH-OFF TEST

Launch the experiment with a pure brand blackout in 20% of the country. Run for four weeks or until statistical significance is reached

In this use case, we found that the brand term was actually driving incremental uplift to the activity, and as such, it was kept on. But we could not be confident in this without this method first.

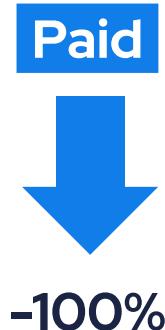
PROS

You can find learnings without it being a detriment to marketing activities. Testing certain locations you've determined as good test beds make it more risk-averse than a full brand switch-off.

CONS:

Not all locations are equal. Turning off activity might have a different impact, i.e. South vs. North, which makes it harder to summarise total results.

Total paid switch-off



This involves turning off all paid activity to find the immediate impact of paid search campaigns on your total search traffic. You may have accidentally done this if the company card has ever declined on Google Ads (a frustrating yet thankfully uncommon occurrence). **Whilst there are merits, this isn't as scientific as our other methods.**

PROS

Results are likely to be quick, as observing the overall impact of paid search on total traffic to the site will be obvious when no clicks are being driven from paid activity.

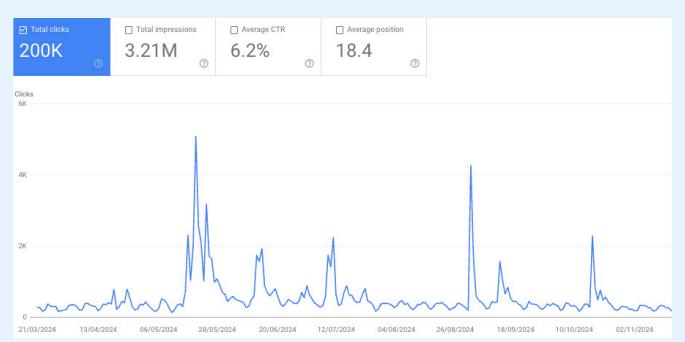
CONS:

However, this is, of course, risky. If it turns out that your paid search is indeed delivering worthwhile traffic to your site, you've found this out by losing it all.

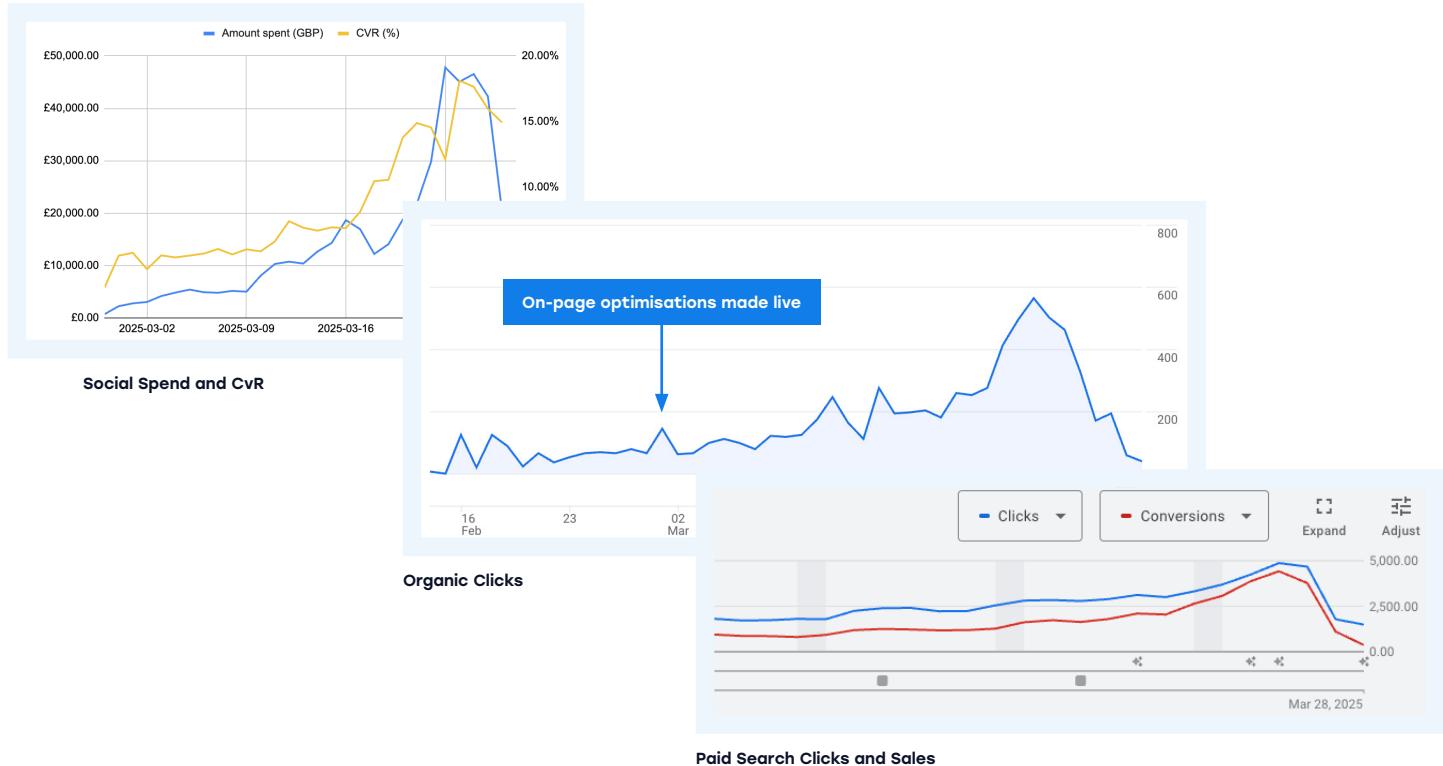
SUCCESSFUL REINVESTMENT INTO DEMAND GENERATION

Whether you achieve a result via incremental changes, full switch-offs, or geo-based testing, successfully finding the diminishing point of PPC returns gives you a budget to reinvest into upper-funnel (brand awareness) activity such as programmatic and paid social. The example on the right shows saved investment for an Impression client, with PPC being put into bursts of TikTok activity, which subsequently resulted in spikes of clicks through organic brand search:

This diversification isn't about doing everything at once, but about intelligently allocating investment to the right channels, at the right moments, for the right audiences.



An example of this is for a client's Mother's Day campaign, where a fully integrated approach, using [PPC](#), paid social, SEO, and [digital PR](#), maximised awareness and sales during a key retail period. This was driven by coordinated messaging and flexible budgeting decisions.



It resulted in an outstanding success overall due to the awareness-driving activity being converted at the bottom of the funnel:

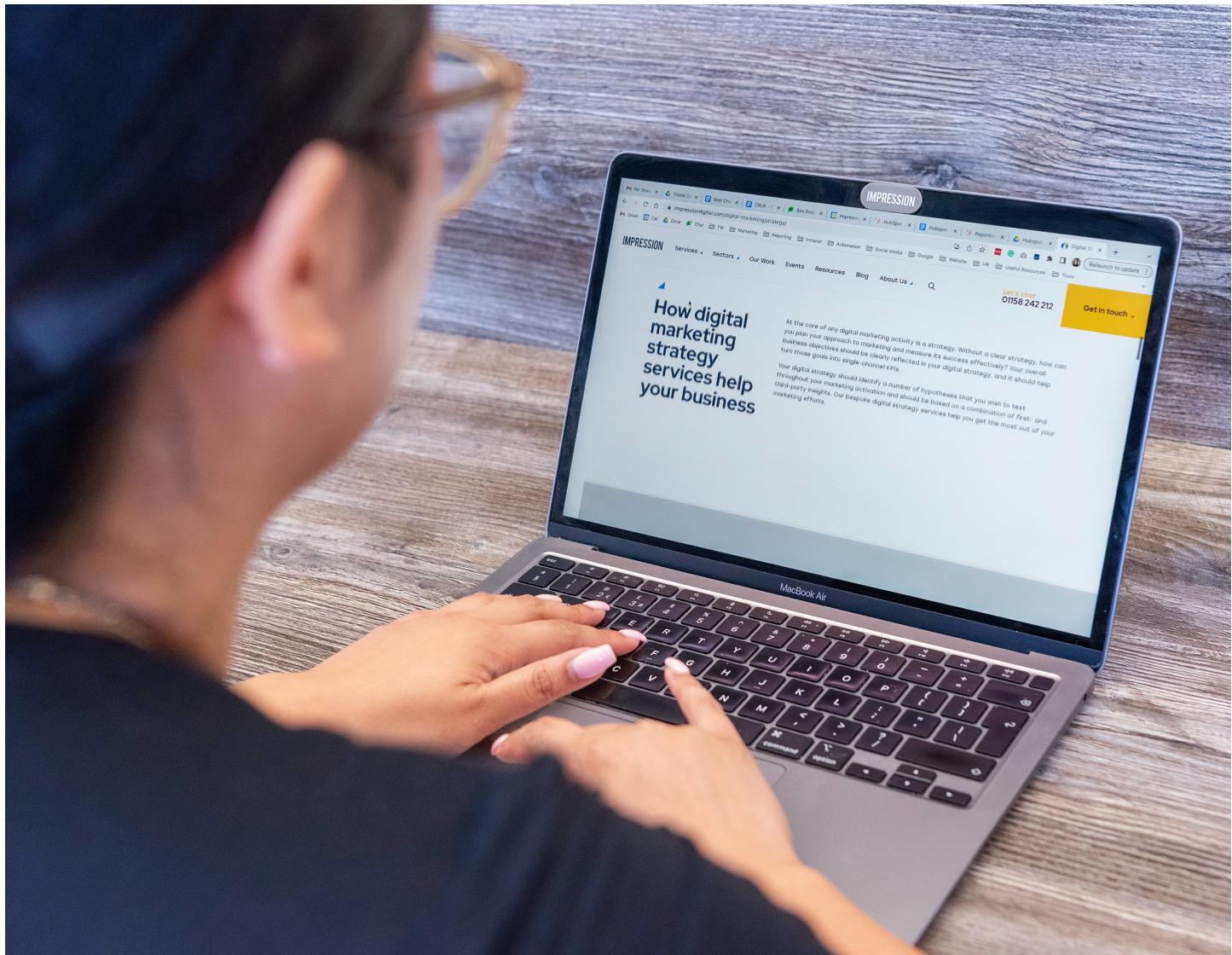


CONNECTING TOTAL SEARCH TO BUSINESS GOALS

A Total Search strategy is not a media plan strategy to drive business growth. Its purpose is to support overall business objectives, whether those are increasing customer acquisition, growing lifetime value, or increasing brand awareness.

To achieve this, marketers must link channel-level tactics and KPIs directly to overarching goals. The KPI framework introduced in the previous chapter provides a guideline for creating your own. This will help ensure that every activity, from awareness-driving display ads to high-intent search conversions, can be measured against the overarching marketing and thereafter business objectives.

In summary, Total Search is about moving from siloed channel strategies to a holistic strategy which considers every stage of the user journey. The customer journey is complex and has multiple touchpoints, so in order to maximise marketing performance, you need to consider how these channels can work together. This would be underpinned by unified KPIs, seeking to achieve an overall goal rather than individual channel goals.



Overcoming barriers to change

In this section, we will be exploring how you can remove some of the barriers to entry for a Total Search strategy.

This includes how to sell this new holistic approach to sceptical stakeholders and providing examples that can help you prove the success of your strategy.



ENGAGING STAKEHOLDERS

The best plans can often go awry without buy-in from stakeholders (i.e. Managers, Directors), which in this case requires you to ensure that you have considered the internal challenges you're likely to face when you introduce this strategy to individual channel managers, as well as risk-averse senior leadership and those holding the budget. Without support from these stakeholders, you're not likely to get anywhere.

Below, we'll explore how to bring stakeholders on this new holistic journey, redefine what might be a more traditional sentiment around the value of metrics, and start thinking about overall ROI, as well as viewing Search as a total part of the funnel rather than a siloed channel.

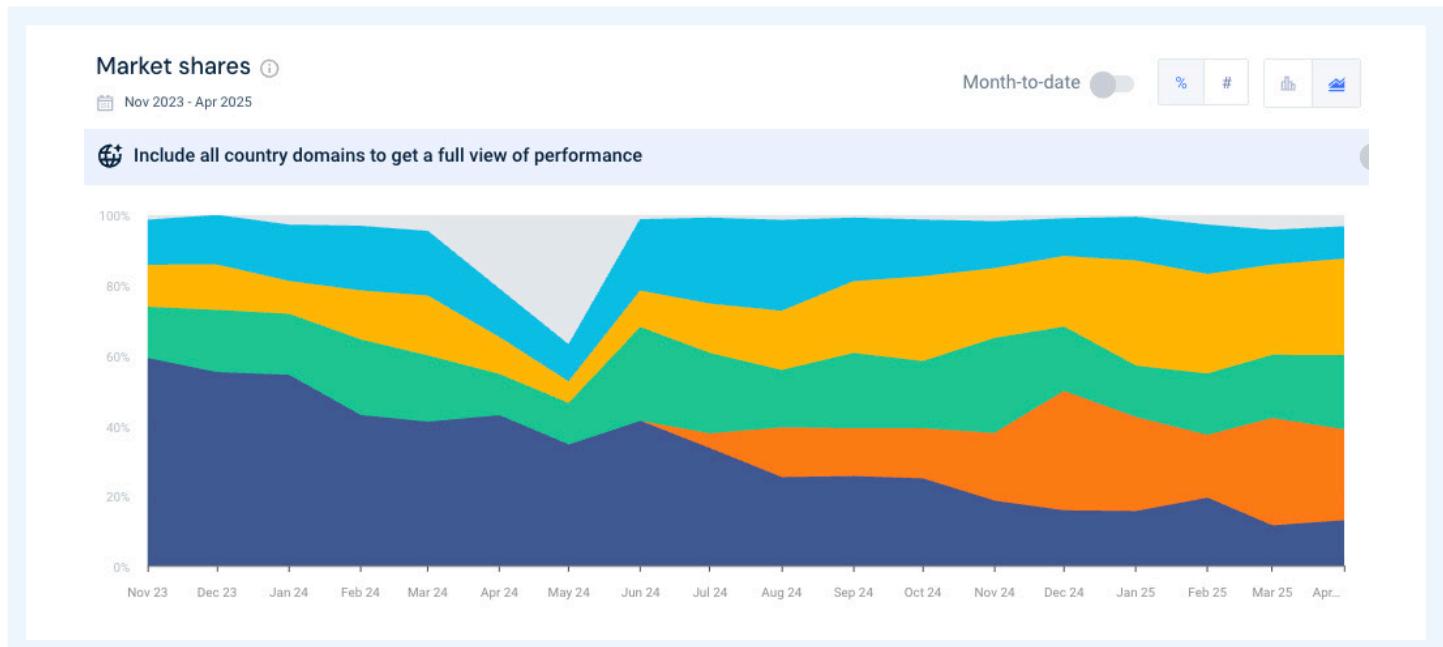
OVERCOMING TRADITIONAL THINKING: THE METRICS BARRIER

One of the biggest internal challenges facing marketers is the gap between:

- Hitting the business objectives as outlined in sections 2 and 3
- Achieving the traditional success metrics that a siloed team is more likely to be measured on.

It's easy to understand performance through bottom-of-the-funnel metrics by focusing on short-term conversion KPIs such as ROAS (or even worse, last-click ROAS), CPA, or siloed traffic irrespective of other activity. While still useful and important to use for optimising towards, these metrics do not consider activity of Search or any upper/middle funnel activity. We wouldn't be able to see the influence in Search (see: impact of Mother's Day promotions as mentioned above), and bursts in TikTok causing huge spikes of activity, which would be considered a SEO success if viewed in a siloed way.

This leads to underinvestment in brand-building, stalling demand generation and worsening overall performance. This also applies to traditional Search metrics, too. For example, see below the traffic share of a company that paused all upper funnel investment (dark blue):



With performance for that same company declining thereafter in terms of Organic (and Paid) Search.



Stakeholders must be educated on why a KPI framework, as previously mentioned, matters. This means that for your marketing efforts to truly succeed and improve our sales, you need to consistently engage with potential customers at every step of their journey, from when they first hear about you all the way until they buy and even after:

- Increased brand awareness (upper-funnel) leads to stronger brand recall in search (mid/bottom-funnel).
- Improved engagement metrics signal greater interest and intent, ultimately improving conversion rates (lower-funnel).
- A diversified media mix can improve cost efficiency over time, even if individual channels don't deliver short-term ROI in isolation.

As such, this brings onto....

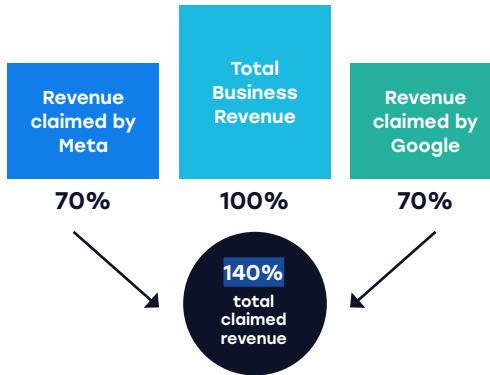
Communicating the value of diversification

We now need to explain how the unified search strategy (Total Search strategy) creates a consistent impact throughout the customer journey, avoiding the pitfalls of working in isolated, siloed marketing channels:

→ ATTRIBUTION BIAS

Last-click metrics within a 'walled garden' of a paid channel will often overcredit itself as the primary source that delivered the conversion. This often results in claimed revenue being higher than what is possible:

"Who purchased after they viewed a Facebook Ad?"



"Who purchased after they clicked on a Google Ad?"

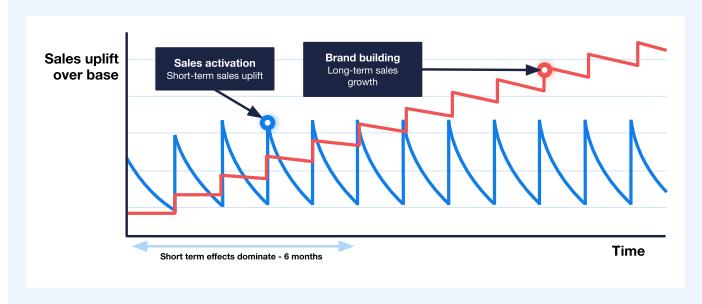
→ SATURATION RISK

Over-reliance on bottom-of-the-funnel channels can cap growth by failing to bring in a new audience.

→ DELAYED IMPACT

Brand-building activities often show returns over a longer time but play a crucial role in future conversions and search performance, bringing in the age-old problem of activation vs brand:

The aim isn't to abandon ROI metrics but to contextualise them within a broader measurement framework where the total business bottom line is the key KPI.



Introducing metrics that bridge the gap

In organisations where incremental testing or marketing mix modelling (MMM) is still in development, intermediate metrics can help bridge the gap between siloed and fully measured activity.

For example, Media Efficiency Ratio (MER), which is total revenue divided by total media spend. Unlike ROAS, MER doesn't rely on attribution modelling, making it useful for understanding the effectiveness of full-funnel campaigns quickly, demonstrating the impact of media investment. This should show the more positive impact that a full-funnel and Total Search approach will have in reality.

We're then provided with practical next steps for introducing stakeholders to our holistic journey.

1 MAPPING KPIS TO BUSINESS OBJECTIVES

Show how each marketing activity aligns with goals like customer acquisition, LTV, or market share growth.

2 SCENARIO MODELLING

Demonstrate how reallocation of budget across channels impacts performance and efficiency.

3 TEST-AND-LEARN FRAMEWORKS

Create tests to build confidence over time, showing how diversification delivers returns that are longer-lasting

4 REGULAR REPORTING CADENCES

Transparent dashboards and performance updates for regular feedback on how performance is progressing.

Total Search is an evolution of Search strategy, rather than a revolution, as in a landscape where the lines between Paid, Organic, and the impact of AI continuously blur the lines, it is going to be important to view it as one Total Search entity.

Future-proofing performance marketing with Total Search

The evolving digital marketing landscape demands a fundamental shift in how brands approach performance.

Traditional, siloed marketing tactics are no longer sufficient as changes in consumer behaviour and new technologies emerge. The rise in zero-click searches and the growing influence of social media as a discovery tool, combined with rising online advertising costs and complex privacy regulations that hinder traditional attribution, creates an urgent need for a more integrated and intelligent strategy.

This is why adopting a 'Total Search' approach is critical.

Total Search is about creating a unified strategy that brings together all marketing efforts across search engines, social media, retail media, and programmatic advertising.

As a result, brands can effectively reach customers at every touchpoint of their journey, ensuring they are found, trusted, and chosen in an increasingly fragmented digital world.

KEY SOLUTIONS FOR SUCCESS

In this guide, you've read about how navigating this new landscape requires a strategic overhaul. The core solutions in summary:

Diversified Channel Mix:

No single channel holds all the answers. Brands must intelligently allocate investment across a variety of platforms, from traditional search to social media and the burgeoning retail media, based on where their audience is active. For SEO, this involves prioritising "money topics" over zero-click content and for paid, it's key to strategically reinvest budgets from bottom-of-the-funnel activities into upper-funnel demand generation.

Relevant KPIs:

It's time to move past "vanity metrics" like website traffic. Success must be measured through actionable metrics directly tied to business goals. Implementing a comprehensive, full-funnel measurement framework with clear primary and

secondary strategic objectives ensures that every marketing activity contributes to genuine business growth, from brand awareness to conversion.

Advanced Measurement Methodologies:

The era of last-click attribution is over. Marketers need to embrace contribution-focused methodologies like incrementality testing (e.g., geographical holdout tests) and Media Mix Modelling (MMM). These approaches provide a more accurate, privacy-centric understanding of how different channels collectively drive results, revealing the true incremental value of your marketing spend.

Stakeholder Engagement:

Implementing a 'Total Search' strategy requires internal buy-in. It's important to educate stakeholders on the shift from siloed thinking to a holistic view, demonstrating how integrated efforts lead to greater overall ROI and long-term success.

FUNDAMENTAL MARKETING PRINCIPLES STILL APPLY

While the tools and tactics evolve, the fundamental principles of marketing remain timeless. ‘Total Search’ isn’t just about technical optimisation; it’s about connecting with core business objectives:

→ DEMAND

Understanding and influencing consumer demand is important. ‘Total Search’ helps you identify where demand exists and build it where it doesn’t, leveraging different platforms to capture attention and interest.

→ AVAILABILITY

Being “available” means showing up where your audience is searching, discovering, and ultimately buying. This includes traditional search engines, social feeds, and increasingly, retail media environments.

→ BEHAVIOUR

‘Total Search’ is about understanding and responding to evolving consumer behaviour. It drives how you strategically position your brand and content to meet users at every stage of their complex journey, ensuring every interaction is relevant and impactful.



READY TO TRANSFORM YOUR MARKETING STRATEGY?

The shift to ‘Total Search’ is not just an evolution; it’s a necessity for continuous growth. If you’re ready to leave siloed marketing behind, gain clearer insights into your ROI, and ensure your brand is truly present in the moments that matter, we can help.

Contact Impression today for a consultation or to learn more about how we can help you implement a powerful ‘Total Search’ strategy that drives real business impact.



If you'd like to discuss the advice and recommendations in this report, get in touch today.

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