



**Ian Campbell** talks to two digital marketing agencies about the best content strategies for helping companies reach their audiences

**L**ast month's launch of Google AI Overviews in Ireland introduced yet another route to content discovery for marketers.

Now included on search results pages (when signed in to Google), the artificial intelligence (AI) generated answers to queries are the latest in a long line of tweaks that challenge companies to improve their search engine optimisation (SEO) rankings.

Feeding into this, explains Brian Conlon, head of SEO at Core Optimisation, is answer engine optimisation (AEO), a strategy that moves away from focusing on keywords to providing concise answers to queries that will rank higher in search engine results pages and AI-powered answer engines.

The change is not as radical as some marketers fear. "People are looking at AEO and nearly treating it as if SEO is dead. Though the concept is new, the practice is still pretty much the exact same," he said.

"On one hand, you can say it's more difficult because you've got more elements to optimise for; on the other, you've gone from 10 to a dozen ways to rank your content."

SEO still stands or falls on developing unique and helpful content that is structured for AI to crawl and parse for relevant answers to specific user queries.

"You're using schema markup and structured data to tell crawlers and AI entities what the content is about – if it's an article or an FAQ – and you're breaking down those different elements to help search engines and AI models," he says.

"It's a new concept but the practice – writing quality content and targeting different search features – is old."

Conlon provides a tidy summary of SEO fundamentals, including a responsive website that delivers a great user experience (UX) and a site structure that supports unique content and helpful information.

"Nothing groundbreaking," as he put it, just the elements that algorithms reward, rather than the short-

cuts they don't. There is, however, always room for improvement, like fine-tuning hub and spoke content.

This is when the hub – landing pages or blog posts – is built around a main content pillar with broad keywords that are hard to target and offer little opportunity for differentiation. By providing a spoke – ancillary content that has a relationship with the main pillar – you begin to stand out. Niche keywords are used to emphasise the broad keywords and help develop authority on a topic.

The overarching message for effective SEO, according to Conlon, is quality over quantity, combined with consistency. Publishing poor-quality blogs weekly is a lot less effective than posting a high-quality blog once a month.

"If you have a small team, and are going to post a blog a week, every week, eventually you're going to burn out," he says. "But if you push out high-quality content once a month, search engines will know they can consistently come back, crawl the website, and get up-to-date information."

### QUALITY COUNTS

Essentially, you're trying to appease Google's search quality rater, known as EEAT – expertise, experience, authority and trust. Conlon's agency will work with clients at elevating content, to achieve the higher quality that Google will notice. Bluffing won't work.

"If you're trying to write content that's medically focused and you don't have any way of proving your expertise, or that you should be trusted on the topic, you shouldn't be publishing. Google isn't going to take your content over competitors who have a proven background in it," he warns.

What helps reinforce quality is authorship and bylines, content attributed to named employees who can become thought leaders in their field. "If you have somebody who has a career spanning years, and they can show that experience, that will make a big difference to the authority of the piece," says Conlon.

While generative AI (GenAI) makes light work of content creation, it's no guarantee of quality or originality. Conlon came across a company recently that had 400 ChatGPT-generated blog posts on its website that will do little for SEO ranking.

"You'd be surprised how quickly a human can spot AI-generated content, so that should strike alarm bells for anybody who thinks that they can fool Google or any other search engine. If we can spot it,

Brian Conlon, head of SEO at Core Optimisation: AEO is 'nothing groundbreaking'  
John Allen







Brendan Almack is managing director of Wolfgang Digital: 'Understanding where your customer spends their time is crucial'

you can be sure that Google can spot it.”

With everyone having access to the same GenAI assistants, content risks being replicated, which removes differentiators between one website in a sector and another. There’s also a vanilla tone that give away the source, and little style ticks that betray the AI origins. That’s not to say GenAI is not a significant advance. It’s a massively useful tool that every marketing team should adopt.

“AI and different models can help structure content, and come up with different elements that would appeal to your target market, but it still needs that human touch,” says Conlon. “You

need to do your research, know the data you’re talking about, and be able to fact check it.”

### UNDERSTAND YOUR CUSTOMER

Brendan Almack, managing director of Wolfgang Digital, encourages client companies to think harder about their content strategies. “The days of just producing blog posts, that’s over; that’s not a content-marketing strategy anymore,” he says. “Content lives in different forms and it lives in different places. So understanding where your customer is spending their time and what their discovery process looks like is absolutely crucial.”

The rise of short-form video and high-quality personalised content is the way forward, particularly in business-to-consumer campaigns. Almack says prospective customers want interesting content produced by real people with something new to say. They could be answering big questions in their sector, reflecting a deep understanding of the marketplace, or espousing true thought leadership, opining original ideas – not something you will achieve with ChatGPT.

He is very clear on the best medium for the message. “If you have a choice between reading a long-form blog post or watching a 45-second video on YouTube or TikTok, which one are you going to pick? The best form of content you could produce, hands down, is a short-form piece of video, because it can live on multiple platforms. Right now, it’s probably the most consumed piece of content on the planet,” he says.

The good news, from a budgetary point of view, is that production

quality can be good rather than great – it just has to carry a strong enough message to stop people scrolling on to the next thing.

Core to successful content is what Almack calls “the value exchange”. From the perspective of the company it’s acquiring customer data, usually an email address; even better if there’s a mobile number. From the customer perspective, the content must be relevant to their unique needs.

“The days of blasting one newsletter to all customers are over. That’s not a value exchange; that’s trying to get your message in front of as many customers as possible,” he said. “What’s happening now is a lot more personalised. Customers will get segmented into different groups and see content relevant to them – their life stage and the products they’ve purchased before.”

### OWN YOUR DATA

The biggest battle that every brand faces is new customer acquisition, according to Almack, because customers spend most of the time on platforms that end up holding the data they need. He lists, in order, the most important platforms in Ireland: Google, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram – with a special mention for LinkedIn when it comes to business-to-business marketing. “It’s small, it’s very expensive but in our experience, hugely effective if you’ve got the right product,” he says.

The problem with platforms is that companies spend a lot of time and digital marketing budgets trying to reacquire customers who came to them via third-parties. “The big shift for every brand over the next couple of years will be companies focusing on owning their own customer data, so they don’t have to re-win that customer again,” he adds.

While Google Analytics offers some insight into a customer’s behaviour it’s a “walled garden”, just like the other platforms, and it’s an obstacle to the single source of truth marketers need. This is why companies are changing strategies.

“They are moving outside the platforms to get their insights; creating solutions that look more holistically at their business to get their metrics,” says Almack. “We find we’re working a lot more with finance teams to get to the business data.”

As part of the same journey, Wolfgang Digital is developing customised GPT, where models are used to scrape a company’s internal data, rather than the web. “Train models on the client business data then you’ve got something unique. All of a sudden, you’ve got a bot producing content based on your brand guidelines and knowledge of your ideal customer,” he says. “We’re a year-and-a-half into testing and only scratching the surface. We see massive potential for being able to build out a bot for each client.”

With finance people sitting in on marketing meetings, it’s unsurprising that the focus on types of measurement has changed. “We’re boiling it down to revenue, profit and new customer growth. It’s moving away from marketing metrics to business outcomes and business goals,” says Almack. ■

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