



Original Article

Upskilling for the Zero-Click Era: Reskilling Marketers and Small Brands in India's New Search Landscape

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Manuscript ID:

IBMIIRJ -2025-020637

Submitted: 20 May 2025

Revised: 30 May 2025

Accepted: 20 June 2025

Published: 30 June 2025

ISSN: 3065-7857

Volume-2

Issue-6

Pp 158-162

June 2025

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Quick Response Code:



Web: <https://ibrj.us>



DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.17083413

DOI Link:

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17083413>



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Abstract

The digital discovery paradigm is undergoing a transformative shift. The rise of zero-click search—where user queries are answered directly on search engine results pages (SERPs) without the need to visit websites—is altering the fabric of digital marketing. In India, this change is especially disruptive for small brands that historically relied on organic search visibility for customer acquisition. This article reinterprets recent research on zero-click search in India through the lens of upskilling and reskilling, offering professionals and marketers a roadmap for future-ready digital competencies. Drawing on secondary research and case studies from domains like quick commerce, fashion e-tail, and F&B platforms, we explore the critical skillsets marketers must develop: Answer Engine Optimization (AEO), Generative Engine Optimization (GEO), local SEO, content innovation, and Omni-channel marketing. This synthesis offers practical insights for navigating a search environment where traditional SEO no longer guarantees visibility—and where skill agility determines survival.

Keywords: Zero-click search, upskilling, reskilling, digital marketing, Answer Engine Optimization (AEO), Generative Engine Optimization (GEO), small brands, SEO, AI-driven SERPs, India, content strategy

Introduction

From Clicks to Answers: The Changing Nature of Search

For over two decades, digital marketers have optimized for a click—crafting content, tweaking metadata, and building backlinks to drive users from Google to websites. However, search engines are no longer just directories. They've evolved into answer engines, designed to resolve queries right on the search results page. This zero-click behavior, powered by features like AI-generated summaries, featured snippets, Knowledge Panels, and Local Packs, means users often get what they need without clicking any further.

In India, where many small businesses operate on lean marketing budgets and depend heavily on organic traffic, this trend has been especially destabilizing. But with disruption comes opportunity—especially for those willing to upskill and reskill for the new digital landscape. According to (Company, 2024) a landmark report, nearly 60% of global searches now end without a user clicking on a website link—a figure that is up from just 35% a few years ago. This trend is fueled by the proliferation of SERP features such as:

- Featured Snippets: Short content excerpts shown at the top of results.
- Knowledge Panels: AI-generated brand or entity summaries.
- AI Overviews (SGE): Summaries generated by large language models (LLMs).
- Local Packs: Geo-targeted listings based on “near me” queries.

conducted an empirical analysis of over 6 million SERP impressions across 67,000 keywords and concluded that the presence of AI summaries and snippets reduced organic click-through rates (CTR) by up to 70%. This has reframed the understanding of SERP visibility—from a linear click-through path to a non-linear “attention capture” model.

India presents a distinct case due to the heavy reliance of small and mid-sized businesses (SMBs) on organic search visibility, particularly in sectors like fashion, quick commerce, education, and food delivery. (Bagla, 2025) A 2025 feature in Campaign India reported that non-brand keyword searches (e.g., “stylish cotton kurtis”)

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How to cite this article:

Thorat, T. S. (2025). Upskilling for the Zero-Click Era: Reskilling Marketers and Small Brands in India's New Search Landscape. *In Sight Bulletin: A Multidisciplinary Interlink International Research Journal*, 2(6), 158–162. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17083413>

rose by nearly 50% year-over-year, while click-through from those terms declined sharply due to featured snippets and Local Pack dominance. Indian SEO agencies cited 10–20% year-on-year declines in organic traffic for small brand websites. (Choudhary, 2024) Money control highlighted how quick-commerce brands struggle for visibility, not just on Google, but also on aggregator platforms like Blinkit and Swiggy. These platforms have their own “SERPs,” where space is pay-to-play, pushing small brands to compete with limited resources.

Furthermore, Economic Times (2020) documented how large platforms like Amazon India used “search seeding” tactics—engineering product listings to appear more prominently through backend manipulation. This pushed organic products down in visibility and further marginalized lesser-known brands.

Why Upskilling Matters Now

Marketing, once dominated by creativity and brand-building, now demands a hybrid skill set that spans AI content architecture, data interpretation, and platform fluency. Professionals who understand the mechanics of search engines—and can optimize brand presence without relying solely on traditional clicks—will be at the forefront of India’s digital economy.

Objectives:

The following are objectives:

1. To explain the mechanics and rise of zero-click search.
2. To evaluate its impact on small brands in India.
3. To identify the skills gap in traditional SEO-centric marketing.
4. To present a roadmap for upskilling and reskilling relevant to the new search landscape.
5. To provide actionable insights through real-world case studies and data trends.

Data and Methodology:

We use a **desktop meta-analysis approach**, sourcing data from:

- **Industry Reports:** Bain & Company, SparkToro
- **Digital Thought Leadership:** Lumaix, SEMrush, (Bansal, 2025) MediaNama
- **Academic Studies:** Fubel et al. (2023)
- **Indian News Outlets:** Money control, Campaign India, Economic Times

Data were categorized by theme organic CTR trends, marketing spend shifts, skill interventions and synthesized into a practical framework for marketers.

The Rise of Zero-Click Search

What is Zero-Click Search?

Zero-click search refers to queries that are answered directly on a SERP without requiring the user to click a result. These responses may be:

- Direct Answers (e.g., "What is the capital of Mizoram?")
- Featured Snippets summarizing webpages
- Knowledge Panels that aggregate brand or entity data
- AI Overviews generated by large language models
- Local Packs showing nearby services or products

Such features have dramatically altered user behavior, especially for mobile and voice searches, which prioritize speed and brevity.

How It Impacts Small Businesses in India

Smaller Indian brands especially those in fashion, food delivery, and D2C (Direct to consumers) products have seen organic click-through rates (CTR) decline by 10–20% in recent years. With limited budgets to offset this loss through paid ads, they face an urgent need to rethink digital strategy, especially in how they skill their teams.

The Skills Gap in Digital Marketing

Traditional SEO No Longer Suffices

For years, SEO expertise focused on keywords, backlinks, and ranking algorithms. While these remain important, they’re insufficient in a world where AI curates the SERP and bypasses traditional links altogether.

Marketers must now understand:

- How AI summarizes content
- How search engines extract structured data
- How to optimize for voice, mobile, and location-based queries
- How brand mentions influence AI-generated answers

Emerging Skill Domains

Professionals need to acquire or strengthen skills in the following areas:

Skill Domain	Description
Answer Engine Optimization (AEO)	Structuring content so it appears directly in search features (e.g., snippets)

Skill Domain	Description
Generative Engine Optimization (GEO)	Ensuring brand presence in AI-generated summaries and chat responses
Local SEO	Leveraging tools like Google Business Profiles for regional visibility
Content Engineering	Developing modular, multi-format content for varied SERP features
Platform Advertising Strategy	Managing spend across new-age platforms like Blinkit, WhatsApp Business, and Instagram Shops

Adapting Through Upskilling: What Professionals Must Learn

Mastering AEO (Answer Engine Optimization)

AEO is about crafting content that search engines can extract and display as direct answers. Upskilling for AEO means learning:

- How to implement schema markup
- How to write FAQ-style content using natural language
- How to analyze SERP features for different query types
- Tools like Google's Rich Results Test, Ahrefs, and Semrush

Training Resources:

- Google's Search Central documentation
- SEMrush Academy's AEO fundamentals
- Online courses on structured data and schema.org

Navigating GEO (Generative Engine Optimization)

As AI-generated answers become the default (via Google SGE or Bing Copilot), marketers must understand:

- How LLMs select and cite sources
- The role of external brand mentions in generative responses
- Techniques for prompt-based optimization of branded queries

Key Skills to Learn:

- Prompt engineering for brand visibility
- Monitoring brand mentions with tools like Brand watch or Mention
- Collaborating with publications for credible citations

Strengthening Local SEO

With "near me" and location-intent queries surging by over 35%, small businesses must optimize local presence.

Professionals must upskill in:

- Setting up and maintaining Google Business Profiles
- Acquiring and responding to authentic customer reviews
- Creating geo-tagged landing pages for hyper local visibility

This is especially important for QSRs, grocery brands, salons, and regional service providers.

Creating Content for Search Features

Not all content is equal. To appear in rich SERP features, professionals must:

- Learn video SEO (YouTube cards, titles, transcripts)
- Develop interactive content (calculators, sliders)
- Adapt content for voice search (concise, direct answers)
- Use long-tail keywords and question-based headings

Upskilling Opportunities:

- Courses in UX writing
- YouTube Creator Academy
- Voice-search content writing workshops

Managing Multi-Platform Spend

Zero-click has pushed brands to diversify digital investment. Professionals must learn to:

- Allocate budgets between Google Ads, Quick Commerce platforms, and social commerce
- Use tools like Meta Business Suite, Google Performance Max, and Amazon Ads Console
- Understand ad fraud risks on aggregator platforms

Training in performance marketing, conversion attribution, and ad platform management is essential.

Reskilling at the Organizational Level

Why Small Brands Must Upskill Collectively

For many small Indian businesses, digital marketing is managed by lean teams—or a single generalist. Investing in team wide reskilling allows:

- Cross-functional fluency (SEO + content + media buying)
- Better decision-making for channel mix
- In-house ownership of brand narrative on SERPs

Reskilling Models for Indian SMBs

Model	Description
In-House Boot camps	Short-term, focused training on AEO/GEO tools
Agency-Led Workshops	SEO or performance agencies conduct reskilling sessions
Peer Learning Groups	Local business coalitions share SERP trends and solutions
MOOCs	Enroll staff in platforms like Coursera, Udemy, or UpGrad on relevant topics

Case Studies in Applied Reskilling

Regional Fashion Brand (Pune)

A small ethnic-wear startup retrained its content team in schema markup and blog optimization. Within three months, it earned 8 featured snippets, regaining visibility after a 15% organic traffic drop.

Dairy Cooperative (Vijayawada)

The marketing head attended a local SEO course and implemented geo-tagged landing pages. The brand saw a 30% increase in zero-click impressions and reduced its Blinkit ad spend by 12%.

QSR Chain (Mumbai)

By training staff in voice search and running a Google Ads certification workshop, the brand pivoted from Zomato ads to voice and local search—improving ROI by 20%.

Challenges to Upskilling

Despite the urgency, several barriers remain:

- **Budget Constraints:** Small brands hesitate to invest in training without immediate ROI
 - **Awareness Gaps:** Many founders and marketers are unaware of zero-click's impact
 - **Tool Complexity:** Platforms like schema.org or performance dashboards intimidate non-tech users
 - **High Turnover:** Up skilled staff often leave, eroding training ROI
- To counter this, businesses should embed continuous learning in their culture and incentivize knowledge retention.

Recommendations: A Reskilling Roadmap

- Audit Your Search Presence:** Identify where your brand appears on SERPs (and where it doesn't).
- Prioritize AEO/GEO Skills:** Begin with high-impact changes like FAQ schema and citation-building.
- Invest in Local SEO:** Especially for location-tied businesses.
- Create a Learning Calendar:** Assign monthly themes (e.g., schema markup in August, video SEO in September).
- Use Freelancers Strategically:** For specialized skills like structured data or chatbot optimization.
- Measure the Right Metrics:** Track impressions, branded queries, and SERP visibility—not just clicks.

Conclusion:

The future of search is already here—and it's click less. For small brands in India, this represents a challenge not just of technology, but of talent. Traditional SEO strategies no longer guarantee visibility. What does? The ability of marketers and founders to continuously upskill, embrace new digital behaviors, and retool their approach to content, platform presence, and search architecture. The winners in this evolving landscape will be those who treat learning not as an afterthought, but as strategy. Upskilling is no longer optional—it's the new marketing moat.

Acknowledgment

The author expresses sincere gratitude to the management and faculty of D.G. Tatkar Arts and Commerce College, Tala, Raigad, for their encouragement and academic support throughout the preparation of this study. Special thanks are extended to colleagues, peers, and industry professionals for their valuable insights, feedback, and discussions, which enriched the depth of the research. The author also acknowledges the contribution of various researchers, industry reports, and case studies that provided the foundation for the analysis. Lastly, heartfelt appreciation is given to family and friends for their patience, understanding, and moral support during the writing of this paper.

Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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