

STRATEGY

The Question Behind the Question: Intent in AI Search

By Scott Tischler · September 11, 2026 · 8 min read

People almost never want exactly what they literally typed. Behind "how do I fix a slow website" is usually "my site is losing me customers and I need it to stop." AI is unusually good at reading that underlying intent — and it rewards the sources that answered the real question, not just the literal one.

This is a meaningful shift from keyword-era thinking. Old search matched words: you targeted the phrase someone typed and tried to rank for it. Answer engines match meaning. They infer what the person is actually trying to accomplish and assemble a response to that goal, drawing on sources that genuinely address it. If your content only answers the surface question while missing the real need, you're less useful to the model than a source that understood what the person actually wanted.

Why intent matters more with AI

Two things make intent central to AI visibility in a way it wasn't for keyword SEO. First, people ask AI fuller, more natural questions than they typed into search boxes — often with context that reveals their actual goal. That richer input gives the model more to infer intent from, and it uses it. Second, the AI is synthesizing an answer to the person's need, not returning a list of pages matching a string. It's actively reasoning about what would actually help. A source that maps to the real intent is what it reaches for.

The practical consequence: content built around the literal keyword, but thin on the actual underlying need, underperforms. Content that clearly understood and addressed what the person was really trying to do gets pulled in — even sometimes for queries whose literal words it doesn't perfectly match, because the model recognizes it as the thing that actually answers the intent.

How to find the question behind the question

- **Ask what the person is trying to accomplish.** For every question your content answers, ask why they're asking. "How do I do X" usually hides "I'm trying to achieve Y and think X is the path." Address Y, not just X.
- **Anticipate the next question.** Real intent unfolds. Someone who asks one thing usually needs the follow-up too. Content that answers the whole arc of intent serves the person better than content that stops at the literal question.
- **Distinguish the intent types.** "What is X" (learning), "how do I X" (doing), "should I X" (deciding), "X vs Y" (choosing), "best X" (selecting) are different intents needing different answers. Match the answer to the intent, not just the topic.
- **Address the unspoken concern.** Often the real question carries a worry the person didn't state — cost, risk, difficulty, whether it's even the right approach. Naming and addressing that concern is what makes content feel like it truly answered them.
- **Don't answer a question they're not asking.** The flip side: reading intent also means not burying someone in information they didn't need. Match the depth and direction to what they actually want.

A concrete example

Take "how do I get my business on ChatGPT." The literal question is about a mechanism. But the intent is almost certainly "I want AI to recommend my business to potential customers, and I don't know how." A source that answers only the literal question — some technical how-to about ChatGPT — misses the point. A source that recognizes the real goal (getting recommended, i.e., AI visibility / AEO) and addresses that is far more useful, and the model can tell. It's answering the person, not the string of words.

The mindset shift

The reframe is to stop thinking about the keywords people use and start thinking about the goals they have. Every query is a person trying to accomplish something, expressed imperfectly in words. The keyword era rewarded matching the words; the AI era rewards understanding the goal and genuinely serving it. That's harder — it requires actually thinking about your audience rather than just their search terms — but it's also more durable, because it aligns your content with being genuinely useful, which is exactly what answer engines are built to surface.

Look at the questions your customers ask, and for each one ask: what are they really trying to do, and what would actually help them do it? Write to that. The businesses that get cited in the AI era are the ones that answered the question behind the question.

Key takeaways

- ◆ People rarely want what they literally typed — behind the surface question is a real goal, and AI is good at reading that intent.
- ◆ Keyword search matched words; answer engines match meaning, inferring what the person is trying to accomplish and rewarding sources that address it.
- ◆ Intent matters more with AI because people ask fuller, context-rich questions and the model synthesizes an answer to the need, not a list of string matches.
- ◆ Find the question behind the question: ask what they're trying to accomplish, anticipate the follow-up, match the intent type, and address the unspoken concern.
- ◆ Content built on the literal keyword but thin on the real need underperforms; content that serves the actual goal gets pulled in, sometimes even for imperfectly-matched queries.
- ◆ The shift is from targeting keywords to understanding goals — harder, but durable, because it aligns with being genuinely useful.

Frequently asked questions

What does 'the question behind the question' mean?

It's the real goal underlying a literal query. Someone asking 'how do I fix a slow website' usually really means 'my slow site is costing me customers and I need that to stop.' Answer engines infer that underlying intent and reward sources that addressed the real need, not just the surface wording.

Why does intent matter more for AI than for traditional SEO?

Because people ask AI fuller, more natural questions that reveal their actual goal, and the AI synthesizes an answer to that goal rather than returning pages matching a keyword string. It actively reasons about what would help, so a source that maps to the real intent gets reached for — sometimes even for queries whose literal words it doesn't perfectly match.

How do I write for intent instead of keywords?

For each question your content answers, ask why the person is asking and what they're really trying to accomplish, then address that goal — including the likely follow-up question and any unspoken concern like cost or risk. Match your answer to the intent type (learning vs. doing vs. deciding vs. choosing) rather than just matching the topic word.

About the author. Scott Tischler is the Founder & Chairman of Alrecommend.ai and a practitioner-authority on AI search and Answer Engine Optimization. With 20+ years in marketing technology — including American Express, MetLife, and UBS — and executive and professional study at Wharton, Harvard, and Oxford, he helps businesses become the ones AI recommends.