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Showing Up in AI Search

How owner-led businesses get named, cited and recommended by ChatGPT, Google AI Overviews, Gemini, Claude and Perplexity. A practical guide to answer-engine and generative-engine optimization (AEO and GEO).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The search box became an answer box

For twenty years, being found online meant ranking on page one of Google. Today a growing share of buyers never see page one. They read an AI-written answer, accept the two or three businesses it names, and call one of them.

8% vs 15%

Google users clicked a traditional result in 8% of visits when an AI summary appeared, versus 15% when it did not.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER, 2025 [1]

−61%

Drop in organic click-through rate on queries showing an AI Overview, June 2024 to September 2025.

SEER INTERACTIVE, 2025 [2]

+35%

More organic clicks for brands cited inside the AI Overview than for brands that were not.

SEER INTERACTIVE, 2025 [2]

45%

Consumers who used AI tools for local business recommendations in the past year, up from 6% a year earlier.

BRIGHTLOCAL, 2026 [4]

2B+

Monthly users of Google AI Overviews as of mid-2025.

ALPHABET VIA TECHCRUNCH [5]

1.2B

Weekly ChatGPT users reported by OpenAI in September 2026.

THE VERGE, 2026 [6]

What this means for a small or mid-sized business: fewer clicks are available (Ahrefs measured a 34.5% lower click-through rate for the top-ranked page when an AI Overview appears [3]), and the clicks that remain go to the businesses AI chooses to name. Traditional SEO still matters, because AI tools pull from search indexes. But its job has changed. SEO is now the supply chain for AI answers.

> **Our position.** There is no trick that "hacks" AI search. AI assistants repeat what is easy to extract and what many trusted sources agree on. The businesses that show up consistently do three things well: they make their facts easy for machines to read (**foundation**), they answer real questions directly (**AEO**), and they earn mentions across sources AI trusts (**GEO**). Then they measure the only results that matter: calls, booked jobs and signed clients.

SECTION 1

The vocabulary, decoded

Several competing acronyms describe the same shift. They overlap more than vendors admit. Here is how we use them.

TERM	WHAT IT MEANS	HOW SMBSC TREATS IT
AIO AI optimization	Umbrella term for optimizing a business for AI-driven discovery on any platform.	The name of the whole program. Everything below sits inside it.
AEO Answer engine optimization	Structuring content so an engine can lift a direct, concise answer for featured snippets, voice assistants and AI answer boxes.	On-site work we control: question-first pages, schema, lists and tables.
GEO Generative engine optimization	Getting large language models (ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini) to include, cite and recommend the brand when they write longer, conversational answers.	Mostly off-site authority plus content only you can produce. The largest share of effort over time.
LLMO LLM optimization	Making content easy for language models to read, understand and reflect accurately.	Not a separate line item. Covered by consistent facts, schema, an llms.txt file and crawlable pages.

AEO and GEO target two different machine behaviors

AEO targets **extraction**: the engine wants one precise answer from one source. GEO targets **synthesis**: the engine blends many sources into an overview and decides which ones are credible enough to cite.

AREA	ANSWER ENGINE OPTIMIZATION (AEO)	GENERATIVE ENGINE OPTIMIZATION (GEO)
Core objective	Be the immediate, single-source answer to a specific question.	Be included in the synthesis and cited as a credible reference.
Content strategy	Direct, concise, hyper-focused text.	Context-rich, authoritative, comprehensive guides.
Keyword strategy	Long-tail questions and exact intent matches.	Topics, industry terminology and the relationships between entities (business, people, places, services).
Primary tactics	Clean schema markup; a question heading followed by a short answer; bulleted and numbered lists; comparison tables.	Unique data and proprietary statistics; expertise, experience, authority and trust signals; mentions of the brand across many third-party sources.
Treats your content as	A database to pull answers from.	An authority to quote.

SECTION 2

How AI decides who to name

Track 1: live retrieval (results in weeks)

When an assistant does not already know the answer, it runs a web search and summarizes what it finds. Each assistant leans on particular search indexes. If your pages are not in those indexes, the assistant cannot cite them.

ASSISTANT	SEARCH INDEX IT RELIES ON	SOURCE
ChatGPT search	Bing, among other providers	OpenAI engineering statement, 2024 [12]
Claude	Brave Search	TechCrunch, 2025 [13]
Google AI Overviews, Gemini	Google	Google
Perplexity	Bing and Brave, plus its own crawler	Search Atlas field notes, 2026 [14]

Practical takeaway: most small businesses only verify their site with Google. Verifying with Bing Webmaster Tools and submitting new pages through IndexNow is a free step that directly affects ChatGPT and Copilot.

Track 2: training data (results in model generations)

Each model is trained on a snapshot of the web, much of it drawn from open datasets such as Common Crawl. A business that is widely and consistently described across indexed sites before the next training cut-off becomes part of what the model simply "knows." This is slower, but it compounds.

AI ranks entities, not pages

Search engines once scored a single page for a single keyword. AI assistants try to understand the **business behind the website**: who it is, where it operates, what it is known for, and whether independent sources agree. Every page on your site and every mention off it is evidence.

0.664
Correlation between branded web mentions and visibility in Google AI Overviews, the strongest factor measured.
AHREFS, 75K BRANDS, 2025 [9]

0.218
Correlation for backlinks in the same study. Mentions mattered about three times as much.
AHREFS, 2025 [9]

26%
Brands in the study with zero mentions in AI Overviews.
AHREFS, 2025 [9]

Correlation does not prove causation; Ahrefs makes the same caveat. The pattern is consistent with what we see in client work: what others say about you outweighs what you say about yourself.

SECTION 3

Implementing AEO: optimize for precision

AEO treats your content as a database. The goal is to make it as easy as possible for an engine to pluck the right answer from your page.

1. **Question-first structure.** Use a heading that is the exact question a buyer asks ("How much does a roof replacement cost in Peoria?"). Follow it immediately with a 40 to 60 word answer, then the detail. The word range is a practitioner rule of thumb, not a published Google rule; the principle is to answer before you explain.

2. **Specific schema markup.** Label the facts on each page with structured data: Organization or LocalBusiness (or a sector type such as LegalService or MedicalBusiness), Person for named experts, Service, Product, Article with a named author, and FAQPage. Note: since August 2023 Google shows FAQ rich results only for well-known government and health sites [11]. We still use FAQ markup because it makes pages easier for machines to parse, not because it wins a visual snippet.

3. **Lists and tables.** Break comparisons, prices, steps and timelines into tables or clean numbered lists. Answer engines scan tables for comparison questions.

4. **Mine the real questions.** Pull questions from Search Console queries, Google's "People also ask," sales-call notes and what prospects type into ChatGPT. Write for those, not for a keyword tool's volume estimates.

5. **One consistent fact sheet.** Publish a plain "about us in facts" page (legal name, address, phone, service area, years in business, credentials, notable results) and make every directory profile match it word for word.

> **Example: a question-first block**
>
> H2 How long does a commercial HVAC replacement take in Springfield?
>
> P Most commercial HVAC replacements we complete in Springfield take two to four working days, plus one to two weeks for permits and equipment. Rooftop units on single-story buildings are fastest; multi-zone systems take longer. We schedule work after hours so most businesses stay open.
>
> THEN A table of timelines by system type, a named technician quote, and FAQ and Service schema on the page.

Illustrative example only; the figures are placeholders, not data.

SECTION 3, CONTINUED

Implementing GEO: optimize for synthesis

GEO treats your content as an authority. Because generative engines pull from many pages at once, the goal is to make your business impossible to leave out.

1. **Add unique data and cite sources.** In the original GEO study from Princeton and partners, adding statistics, credible quotations and source citations raised a page's visibility in generative answers by roughly 30 to 40 percent; old-style keyword stuffing did not help [8]. For a small business, unique data means your own numbers: jobs completed, average turnaround, results, survey findings.
2. **Prioritize information gain.** If a page says the same thing as the top ten results, a model has no reason to cite it. Add a perspective, an expert quote or a data point nobody else has.
3. **Show who is behind the content.** Name the expert author, list real credentials and link to their profiles. These are the experience, expertise, authority and trust signals Google's own guidelines describe.
4. **Earn mentions across many sources.** Press releases, guest articles on relevant publications, industry and local directories, award lists, podcasts, YouTube and review sites. Diversity matters more than one big placement, and freshness matters: a steady cadence beats a one-time burst [14]. Collect reviews continuously too: review volume and text are trust signals AI assistants repeat when recommending local providers.

What counts as "unique data" for a small business

ASSET	EXAMPLE
Results and outcomes	Case results, project before-and-afters, savings delivered, with client consent.
Operating numbers	Jobs completed per year, average response time, repeat-customer rate.
Local knowledge	Permit timelines by county, seasonal pricing patterns, common failure points you see in your area.
Expert voice	Named quotes from your owner or senior staff on questions buyers actually ask.
Small surveys	Twenty customer answers to one question, published with the method.

Any figure you publish must be true and verifiable; regulated industries (legal, medical, financial) also need the relevant professional approval before publishing results.

SECTION 4

The SMBSC AI Search Framework

We run AI search as one program with four layers. Each layer feeds the next, and every task is tagged to the layer it serves so nothing is busywork.

LAYER	WHAT GETS DONE	WHY IT MATTERS TO AI
1. Foundation	Crawlable, fast pages; Google and Bing verification; IndexNow; sitemaps; broken-page and redirect repair; consistent name, address and phone everywhere; an llms.txt file.	AI cannot cite pages it cannot find or facts that conflict.
2. Answer (AEO)	Question-first service and location pages; schema; fact sheet; comparison tables.	Makes you the easy, precise answer to specific questions.
3. Authority (GEO)	Proof pages (results, case studies, original data); press releases; guest articles; awards; directory and association profiles; reviews; video.	Builds the multi-source agreement that leads AI to recommend you.
4. Measure	A fixed set of buyer questions asked to the major assistants every week; Search Console question queries; calls and closed business by source.	Shows which layer is moving revenue, not just rankings.

Six sources of authority

From the Search Atlas Agentic Marketing Summit (June 2026), the sources that build durable consensus in AI answers [14]:

SOURCE	HOW TO USE IT
Press releases	Results, awards, launches, research. Widely syndicated and indexed; embed your Google Business Profile map for a local signal.
Guest articles	Expert-bylined articles on relevant publications. Prefer sites that are indexed by Google and included in Common Crawl.
Cloud-hosted articles	Low-cost contextual articles on major cloud domains for fast supporting signals. A supplement, never the core.
Social and video	YouTube and LinkedIn content that points back to the site and names the expert.
Directory citations	Industry, association and local directories with identical business details.
Review sites	Google, plus the review platforms buyers in your industry actually use.

SECTION 5

Where to invest the effort

Most businesses spread effort evenly and see little movement. We weight it by stage. These are planning targets, adjusted after the first month of measurement.

LAYER	MONTHS 1–2	MONTHS 3–6	REASONING
Foundation: indexing, repair, consistent facts	~35%	~10%	Front-loaded; fixes compound and rarely need redoing.
Answer (AEO): question pages, schema, tables	~25%	~30%	Fast and fully in your control.
Authority (GEO): proof, press, articles, reviews	~30%	~50%	Drives recommendations; decays without a steady cadence.
Measure: weekly AI question scan, scorecard	~10%	~10%	Keeps every hour tied to calls and revenue.

What we deliberately do not do

- **Buy links or use link networks.** They create risk and do not build the multi-source agreement AI looks for.
- **Chase word counts.** Five thousand generic words a month add nothing a model needs. One page with original data can outperform twenty that repeat the top results.
- **Report activity as success.** "Daily algorithm monitoring" and ranking screenshots are not outcomes. Calls, booked jobs and signed clients are.
- **Promise placement in AI answers.** Nobody controls what a model says. We control the evidence it reads, and we measure the result every week.

Why the effort pays even with fewer clicks

AI-referred visitors arrive further along in their decision. In one published case, AI search delivered 0.5% of a software company's traffic but 12.1% of its sign-ups [10]. That is a single company, not a benchmark, but it matches the pattern: being named by AI is worth more per visit than a generic search click.

SECTION 6

How to measure AI visibility

SIGNAL	HOW TO MEASURE IT	CADENCE
AI recommendation rate	Ask the same 20 to 30 buyer questions ("best [service] in [city]") in ChatGPT, Google AI Mode / Overviews, Gemini and Perplexity. Record whether you are named and which sources are cited.	Weekly
Answer coverage (AEO)	Search Console impressions and clicks on question-style queries; whether your page is the cited source for target questions.	Monthly
Authority footprint (GEO)	New third-party mentions, reviews and citations; consistency of business details across directories.	Monthly
Business result	Calls, form leads, booked jobs and closed revenue by source, from call tracking and the CRM.	Weekly / monthly

> **Rule we hold ourselves to:** if a tactic does not move the recommendation rate or the business result within a quarter, we cut it and move the budget.

A 90-day starting plan

Days 1—30: Foundation

- Confirm you own every account: domain, website, analytics, Google Business Profile, call tracking.
- Verify with Google and Bing; turn on IndexNow.
- Fix broken pages and redirects from old domains.
- Publish the fact sheet; align every directory listing.
- Run the baseline AI question scan.

Days 31—60: Answer

- Rewrite your top 10 service and location pages question-first.
- Add schema and author markup.
- Publish 2 to 4 proof pages with your own data.
- Start a close-of-job review request.

Days 61—90: Authority

- Two press releases and three guest articles a month.
- Award and association submissions.
- Monthly scorecard: recommendation rate, calls, revenue.

SOURCES

Sources

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Gartner's 25% figure [7] is a forecast, cited for context only; it is not used in any calculation in this paper. © 2026 SMB Strategy Consultants, LLC.

NEXT STEP

Want to know whether AI recommends your business today, and what it would take to change that? We will run your buyer questions through the major assistants and walk you through the results.

Book a free AI Leverage call