SEO → AEO: The Next Era of Search

HOW SMALL BUSINESSES CAN BUILD VISIBILITY IN THE AGE OF AI

BY THIAGO FERREIRA

A business can have a strong website, rank well on Google, and still be invisible at the moment a potential customer is making a decision. The reason is simple. Search behavior is changing. Consumers are increasingly turning to platforms such as ChatGPT and Claude for direct answers and recommendations, often without visiting the websites behind them. For a small business, that creates a new question. When AI is asked about your industry, does it know enough about your company to include you in the answer?

Answer Engine Optimization, or AEO, is becoming the next layer of digital visibility. I see it as an evolution of traditional Search Engine Optimization. Traditional SEO is designed to improve visibility within search results. AEO extends that work by making business information clear, structured, and authoritative enough for AI systems to understand and potentially cite or recommend to users. As founder of Elevate AI Consulting, I have been closely following this transition and applying these principles within my own business.

Over the past nine months, I have continuously optimized our website for AI search. Today, I receive approximately five to seven inbound calls each week from prospective clients who found the company through ChatGPT and other AI platforms. The comparison demonstrates why AEO deserves the attention of small businesses that may not have large marketing budgets.

FOR SMALL BUSINESS OWNERS, THESE FIVE STEPS ARE KEY TO PUTTING AEO INTO PRACTICE:

Understand how customers are asking questions.

AI search is far more conversational than traditional search. While traditional SEO has historically placed considerable emphasis on keywords, customers using AI are asking complete questions. What would a prospective customer ask an AI platform when looking for a particular service?



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Those questions should become part of the website. Well-developed FAQ sections, question-based headings, and concise responses give answer engines information that can be interpreted efficiently.

Establish clarity around the business.

AI systems should not have to infer what a company does. The company name, services, location, areas of expertise, credentials, and other relevant information should be clearly defined. This clarity helps AI associate a business with the subjects and services for which it wants to be recognized. Long, unstructured content and excessive keyword use can weaken that clarity by making information more difficult to isolate.

Strengthen the technical structure of the website.

Once the content is clear, the website must be structured in a way that AI can easily understand. Structured data and schema help identify important details about the business and give AI greater context about the information presented. Internal links also connect related services, expertise, and content, helping AI to understand the business as a whole.

Build Credibility through External Validation.

AI systems do not evaluate a business solely on what the company says about itself. Reviews, testimonials, professional credentials, citations, and mentions from external sources provide important validation. Platforms such as Reddit also matter because discussions and recommendations contribute to AI recognition. Businesses should therefore actively build genuine reviews and maintain consistent, credible information across their online presence.

Measure AI search performance

Traditional metrics such as Google rankings, website traffic, and clicks remain relevant, but AEO requires a broader measure of visibility. Businesses should monitor how often they appear in AI-generated answers, whether they are cited, and the sentiment surrounding the brand. A practical starting point is to ask ChatGPT and other AI platforms the same questions prospective customers are likely to ask. The results can reveal whether the company is being recommended, which competitors are gaining greater visibility, and where further optimization may be required.

AEO is still developing, but the shift in how customers search is already underway. As AI becomes a greater part of everyday decision making, businesses that build their visibility early will be better positioned to reach customers at the moment they are searching for answers, services, and recommendations. ■

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