NEAR ME BOOST

WHITE PAPER · NOVEMBER 2026

From Search to Answers

The evolution of SEO and AEO, and what it means for local businesses that want to be found, trusted, and recommended.

Keywords → Local & mobile → Quality → Zero-click → AI answers

INSIDE

- How search moved from keywords to entities, quality, and AI answers
- What AI Overviews, ChatGPT, and Perplexity mean for clicks and calls
- The five signals behind AI recommendations, and a 90-day action plan

Near Me Boost
Map Pack SEO · AI Search (AEO) · Reddit & Quora authority

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Search used to send customers to you. Now it often answers for you.

For twenty-five years, getting found online meant ranking a web page for the words people typed. That still matters. But a growing share of questions are now answered directly: in Google's AI Overviews, in ChatGPT, in Perplexity, and in voice assistants, often without a single click.

Answer engine optimization (AEO) is the practice of making your business easy for those systems to find, understand, verify, and cite. It does not replace search engine optimization (SEO). It builds on it. Google itself says the best practices for SEO remain relevant for its AI features, and that there are no special extra requirements to appear in AI Overviews or AI Mode.[1] What changes is the target: instead of only earning a blue link, you are earning a mention inside the answer.

> **The short version:** the businesses AI tools recommend tend to be the ones that are clearly described, consistently listed, well reviewed, and talked about in places those tools read. Each of those is something a local business can work on, starting this month.

In this paper

01	The first era: keywords, links, and PageRank	3
02	Local and mobile search take over	4
03	The quality era: Google rewards usefulness	5
04	Featured snippets and the rise of zero-click search	6
05	AI Overviews, ChatGPT, and the answer engines	7
06	How AEO works: the five signals	8
07	SEO and AEO, side by side	9
08	What local businesses should do now	10
09	How Near Me Boost can help	11
	Sources	12

01 · LATE 1990S TO 2010

Keywords, links, and PageRank

Early search engines matched the words on a page to the words in a query. If you repeated a phrase often enough, you could rank for it. Results were easy to game and often poor.

Google changed the model. In their 1998 Stanford paper describing the prototype search engine, Sergey Brin and Larry Page introduced PageRank: the idea that a link from one page to another works like a vote, and that votes from important pages count for more.[2] Relevance was no longer only about what a page said about itself. It was also about what the rest of the web said about it.

What “SEO” meant in this era

- **On-page keywords.** Titles, headings, and body copy written around the exact phrases people searched.
- **Links.** Earning (and, too often, buying or trading) links to lift a page’s authority.
- **Crawlability.** Making sure search engine robots could reach and read every page.
- **Directories and listings.** Submitting the business to as many directories as possible.

The playbook worked, which is exactly why it was abused. Keyword stuffing, link farms, and thin pages written for robots instead of people became common. Searchers noticed, and so did Google.

> **What carried forward:** the core insight of PageRank, that trust comes from what *others* say about you, never went away. It is the direct ancestor of how AI tools weigh citations, reviews, and community mentions today.

Why it matters for a local business now

Your website still needs to be crawlable, fast, and clear about what you do and where you do it. Those fundamentals are the foundation every later era built on, including AI search. A beautiful site that robots cannot read, or that never says which towns you serve, is invisible to both a search engine and an answer engine.

02 · 2005 TO 2015

Local and mobile search take over

Once maps and smartphones arrived, search stopped being something you did at a desk. It became something you did on the way somewhere, usually looking for a business nearby.

Google Maps launched in 2005, and business listings (today's Google Business Profile) became the storefront most customers saw first. The "local pack," the short list of businesses shown on a map above the regular results, turned into some of the most valuable real estate a local company could hold.

Then the phone became the main way people searched. In May 2015, Google reported that more of its searches were taking place on mobile devices than on computers in 10 countries, including the United States and Japan.[3] That April, Google had already begun using mobile-friendliness as a ranking signal in mobile results.[4] By October 2023 it announced that mobile-first indexing was complete: Google now primarily crawls and evaluates the mobile version of a site.[5]

10

countries, including the U.S., where Google said mobile searches outnumbered computer searches in 2015

Source 3

3

factors Google says mainly drive local results: relevance, distance, and prominence

Source 6

How Google ranks local businesses

Google's own help page says local results are mainly based on **relevance** (how well a profile matches the search), **distance** (how far the business is from the searcher), and **prominence** (how well-known the business is). It adds that prominence draws on information such as links and review counts, and that "more reviews and positive ratings can help your business's local ranking."[6]

> **What carried forward:** a complete, accurate Business Profile and steady, genuine reviews became the backbone of local visibility. AI tools now lean on the very same listing and review data when someone asks for "the best" provider near them.

03 · 2011 TO 2023

The quality era: Google rewards usefulness

Through the 2010s, Google shipped a run of updates that made shortcuts less effective and rewarded content written to genuinely help people.

- **Feb 2011 Panda.** A ranking change Google said noticeably affected 11.8% of queries, designed to lower low-quality and copied content and reward original, in-depth work.[7]
- **Jun 2011 Schema.org.** Google, Bing, and Yahoo launch a shared vocabulary for structured data, so sites can label facts like business name, address, hours, and reviews.[8]
- **Apr 2012 Penguin.** Google targets webspam such as manipulative link schemes and keyword stuffing.[9]
- **May 2012 Knowledge Graph.** Google starts understanding "things, not strings": real-world entities and how they relate.[10]
- **Oct 2019 BERT.** A language-understanding model Google said would help it better understand about one in 10 English searches in the U.S.[11]
- **Aug 2022 Helpful content.** Google says it will reward content created for people rather than primarily for search rankings.[12]
- **Dec 2022 E-E-A-T.** Google's rater guidelines add "Experience" to Expertise, Authoritativeness, and Trust.[13]

The shift underneath the updates

Two ideas from this era matter most for AEO. First, **entities**: with the Knowledge Graph, Google began to understand your business as a real thing with attributes (a name, a location, a category, owners, reviews), not just a set of keywords. Second, **trust**: experience, expertise, and a track record visible across the web became central to what ranks.

> **What carried forward:** structured data and entity clarity, originally built for rich results, are now among the clearest ways to tell any machine, search engine or AI model, exactly who you are and what you do.

04 · 2014 TO 2024

Featured snippets and the rise of zero-click search

Before AI wrote answers, Google was already answering questions on the results page, quoting a short passage from one site at the top of the page.

Google describes featured snippets as a way to highlight a passage that answers the question directly, with a link to the source.[14] Alongside snippets came knowledge panels, “People also ask” boxes, local packs with phone buttons, and instant answers for hours, weather, and conversions. Each was helpful to searchers. Each also meant more searches could end without anyone visiting a website.

58.5%

of U.S. Google searches ended with zero clicks in SparkToro’s 2024 study of Datos clickstream data

Source 15

360

clicks out of every 1,000 U.S. Google searches went to the open web (sites not owned by Google)

Source 15

That 2024 SparkToro study, based on Datos clickstream panels from September 2022 to May 2024, found that 58.5% of U.S. and 59.7% of EU Google searches ended without a click on any result.[15] Panel data has limits, which the study itself notes, but the direction is clear.

What zero-click means for a local business

A zero-click search is not always a lost customer. For a local business, the “answer” is often your Business Profile: someone sees your rating, taps call, or asks for directions without ever opening your website. That is why visibility, not just traffic, became the goal.

- **Win the answer box:** write short, direct answers to the questions customers actually ask.
- **Win the profile:** keep hours, services, photos, and categories complete and current.
- **Measure the right things:** calls, direction requests, and bookings, not only website sessions.

> **What carried forward:** writing in clear question-and-answer form, originally to win snippets, is exactly the format AI answer engines find easiest to quote.

05 · 2022 TO TODAY

AI Overviews, ChatGPT, and the answer engines

Generative AI turned search results into conversations. Instead of ten links, people get a written answer, often with a short list of recommended businesses and the sources behind them.

OpenAI released ChatGPT in November 2022 and added built-in web search in October 2024, with answers that link to their sources.[16] Perplexity built its product around cited answers from the start. In May 2024 Google brought AI Overviews, AI-generated summaries at the top of results, to everyone in the U.S.[17]

2B+
monthly users of Google AI Overviews, per Alphabet's Q2 2025 earnings call (July 2025)
Source 18

800M
weekly ChatGPT users, as stated by OpenAI's CEO at DevDay in October 2025
Source 19

8% vs 15%
of visits with a click on a regular result, with vs. without an AI summary (Pew, March 2025 data)
Source 20

The behavior change is measurable. Pew Research Center analyzed the browsing of 900 U.S. adults in March 2025. When a Google search showed an AI summary, users clicked a traditional result link in 8% of visits, compared with 15% when no summary appeared. Clicks on links inside the summary itself happened in just 1% of visits.[20]

Why this is different from the snippet era

- **Synthesis, not quotation.** AI answers combine many sources. Google says AI Overviews and AI Mode may run a "query fan-out," issuing multiple related searches across subtopics and sources to build a response.[1]
- **Recommendations, not rankings.** Ask "who is the best roofer near me?" and you may get three names with reasons. There is no page two.
- **Many surfaces.** Google, ChatGPT, Perplexity, Gemini, Copilot, and voice assistants each assemble answers differently, but they draw on overlapping signals.

> **The new question:** not only "do we rank?" but "when someone asks an AI about our service in our town, are we named, and is what it says about us accurate?"

06 · THE MECHANICS

How AEO works: the five signals

No AI company publishes a full recipe for which businesses get recommended. But the systems are built to give answers they can support, so they favor businesses that are easy to identify and easy to verify across many independent sources.

1 Entities

Your business as a clearly defined "thing": one consistent name, address, phone number, category, service area, and description everywhere it appears. Inconsistency makes a business harder to identify with confidence.

2 Structured data

Schema.org markup (for example LocalBusiness, Service, FAQPage, and Review) labels the facts on your pages in a machine-readable way.[8,21] It removes guesswork about what your page says.

3 Citations and sources

Mentions of your business on other trustworthy sites: directories, industry associations, local news, partner pages. AI answers often show their sources; being one of them is the goal.

4 Reviews and reputation

Volume, recency, and the language of reviews. Reviews that describe the specific job ("replaced our water heater in Clayton the same day") give machines concrete evidence of what you do and where.

5 Community presence: Reddit and Quora

People ask for real recommendations in communities, and those conversations are increasingly part of what AI systems see. In February 2024 Google announced an expanded partnership giving it access to Reddit's Data API,[22] and in May 2024 OpenAI and Reddit announced a partnership to bring Reddit content into ChatGPT.[23] Helpful, honest participation, and answers on Quora that genuinely solve problems, put your expertise where both people and machines look for second opinions.

Content that answer engines can use

- Pages that answer one real question each, with the answer in the first sentence or two.
- Service pages that name the service, the towns you cover, your prices or price ranges where possible, and proof (photos, reviews, credentials).
- An FAQ written in your customers' words, kept current.

A note on honesty: AEO is not about tricking AI tools. Fake reviews, spam posts, and invented claims can get a business penalized or banned on the platforms that matter. Durable visibility comes from accurate information, consistently repeated, backed by real customers.

07 · SIDE BY SIDE

SEO and AEO, side by side

AEO is best understood as the next layer on top of SEO, not a replacement. Most of the work overlaps. The difference is in the goal and in how success is measured.

	Traditional SEO	Answer engine optimization
Goal	Rank a page in the results and earn the click	Be named, cited, or recommended inside the answer
Where it shows	Google and Bing results, the Map Pack	AI Overviews, AI Mode, ChatGPT, Perplexity, Gemini, Copilot, voice assistants
Unit of work	Keywords and pages	Questions, entities, and facts
Trust signals	Links, relevance, Business Profile, reviews	The same, plus consistent mentions across many sources and communities
Content style	Comprehensive pages targeting a topic	Direct, quotable answers backed by evidence
Technical layer	Crawlability, speed, mobile, internal links	The same, plus structured data that makes facts unambiguous
How it's measured	Rankings, clicks, calls, direction requests	Whether you're cited or recommended for target questions, and what the answer says about you

Where storefronts and service-area businesses differ

Storefront businesses (restaurants, shops, clinics) live and die by the Map Pack. Distance to the searcher matters, so the Business Profile, photos, and reviews do most of the heavy lifting, and AI answers draw heavily on the same listing data.

Service-area businesses (plumbers, roofers, cleaners) often hide their address and can be at a disadvantage in map results far from their base. AEO can be especially valuable here, because AI answers to "who should I hire" lean on reputation and mentions, not just proximity.

> **Bottom line:** if your SEO foundation is weak, AEO has little to build on. If your SEO is strong, AEO is how you protect that investment as more questions get answered before anyone clicks.

08 · ACTION PLAN

What local businesses should do now

You do not need a big budget to start. You need accurate information, a steady rhythm, and a way to check whether it is working.

FIRST 30 DAYS **Fix the foundation**

- Claim and complete your Google Business Profile: primary category, services, hours, service area, photos, and a plain-language description.
- Make your name, address, and phone identical on your website, Google, Bing, Apple Maps, Yelp, Facebook, and key industry directories.
- Check that your site loads fast on a phone and states clearly what you do and which towns you serve.

DAYS 31 TO 60 **Make your facts machine-readable**

- Add LocalBusiness and Service structured data, and FAQPage markup where you have real FAQs.
- Write one page per core service and per main town, each answering the questions customers ask before they call.
- Start a simple review routine: ask every happy customer, and reply to every review.

DAYS 61 TO 90 **Build presence where answers come from**

- Earn mentions from local organizations, suppliers, and news. Sponsor, partner, and get listed.
- Answer real questions on Reddit and Quora under your own name, with honest, helpful detail.
- Publish short, quotable answers on your site, and update them when facts change.

Track what AI says about you

- [ ] Pick 5 to 10 questions customers really ask, such as “best [service] in [town].”
- [ ] Each month, ask them in Google, ChatGPT, Perplexity, and Gemini. Note whether you are named and which sources are cited.
- [ ] Correct wrong facts at the source: your profile, your site, or the listing the AI is quoting.

09 · NEAR ME BOOST

How Near Me Boost can help

Near Me Boost helps local businesses get found on Google and recommended by AI. We work on both layers this paper describes: the search foundation and the answer layer on top of it.

Map Pack SEO

For storefront businesses that need to show up in Google's map results for the searches that bring in customers, with monthly ranking reports.

AI Search (AEO)

Citation-ready answer content, structured data, and entity building aimed at ChatGPT, Perplexity, Gemini, and Google AI Overviews, with monthly reports on whether you were cited.

Reddit & Quora authority

A managed, honest presence in the communities where people ask who to hire and where buyers research before they call.

Websites

Simple, elegant, mobile-first websites built to be read by search engines and AI tools, with hosting and monthly care.

Start with a free visibility review

In a short call, we will look at how your business appears in Google's Map Pack and in AI answers for a few of your most important questions, and tell you plainly what we would fix first. If we are not the right fit, we will say so.

See where you stand in search and AI answers

Book a free 15-minute call, or reach out directly.

nearmeboost.com/audit 919-584-3263 boost@nearmeboost.com

This white paper is for general information. It describes publicly reported changes to search and AI products as of its publication date. Platforms change often; results vary by market, competition, and the accuracy of a business's information. Near Me Boost does not guarantee specific rankings or AI citations.

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