Answer Engine Optimization (AEO)

A Practical Guide for Consultants & Sales Teams

What Is AEO?

Answer Engine Optimization (AEO) is the practice of structuring and presenting content so that AI-powered systems — like ChatGPT, Google's AI Overviews, Perplexity, and voice assistants — select it as the direct answer to a user's question.

Where traditional SEO gets your website *ranked*, AEO gets your brand *quoted*.

> **Simple analogy:** SEO is like getting your book onto the library shelf. AEO is getting your book to be the one the librarian reads aloud when someone asks a question.

Why AEO Exists Now

Search behaviour has fundamentally changed. Users are no longer typing keywords and clicking links — they're asking questions and expecting instant, spoken or summarized answers.

Year	Zero-Click Searches (Google)
2022	~50%
2024	56%

Year	Zero-Click Searches (Google)
2025	69%

What this means: Nearly 7 in 10 searches today end without a single click to any website. If a business isn't optimized to appear *inside* the AI's answer, they are effectively invisible — even if they rank #1 on Google.

Additionally:

- ChatGPT now serves over **800 million users weekly**
- **61% of US adults** used AI to search for information in the past 6 months
- When Google's AI Overview appears, the top organic search result loses **34.5% of its clicks**

SEO vs. AEO — Side by Side

	SEO	AEO
Goal	Rank on search results pages	Be cited inside AI-generated answers
Success metric	Clicks, traffic, rankings	Citations, brand mentions, "share of answer"
Optimizes for	Keywords, backlinks, page authority	Structured content, factual clarity, AI trust signals
User behaviour	User clicks a link and visits the site	User reads or hears the AI's answer directly
Platforms	Google, Bing	ChatGPT, Perplexity, Google AI Overviews, Siri, Alexa
Content format	Long-form keyword-rich pages	Clear, structured, question-and-answer content
Replaces SEO?	—	No — it builds on top of it

> **Key message for clients:** AEO does not replace SEO. It's the next layer. Businesses that already invest in SEO are halfway there — they just need to restructure and extend their content strategy.

Core Terminology

Answer Engine

An AI-powered platform that generates a direct answer to a user's question, rather than returning a list of links. Examples: **ChatGPT, Perplexity, Google AI Overviews, Gemini, Siri, Alexa**.

Zero-Click Search

A search that ends on the results page because the answer is displayed directly — no website visit occurs. This is the environment AEO is designed for.

> *Example:* A user searches "what's the best CRM for small business?" Google's AI Overview summarizes three options. The user picks one. No website was visited.

AI Overview (formerly SGE)

Google's built-in AI-generated summary that appears above traditional search results. It pulls content from websites it deems authoritative and structures it into a direct answer.

E-E-A-T

Stands for **Experience, Expertise, Authoritativeness, Trustworthiness**. These are the signals AI systems use to decide whether a source is credible enough to quote. Originally a Google quality guideline, it's now central to AEO.

> *Example:* A financial planning firm that publishes detailed, accurate, well-cited content from a named author (a certified financial planner) will score higher on E-E-A-T than a generic blog post with no author attribution.

Schema Markup / Structured Data

Code added to a webpage that tells AI and search engines exactly what the content means — not just what it says. It uses a standardized vocabulary from **Schema.org**.

Common types for AEO:

- `FAQPage` — marks up a list of questions and answers
- `HowTo` — marks up step-by-step instructions
- `Article` — identifies author, date, and topic
- `LocalBusiness` — provides structured business info

> *Example:* Without schema, a page about a plumber reads as a wall of text to an AI. With `LocalBusiness` + `FAQPage` schema, the AI knows the business name, location, hours, and can pull specific answers from the FAQ section.

Featured Snippet

A highlighted box at the top of Google search results that displays a direct answer pulled from a webpage. This is an early form of AEO — and winning featured snippets is now a stepping stone toward full AI citation.

Share of Answer (SoA)

The percentage of relevant AI-generated responses where a brand is cited or mentioned. This is the primary KPI for AEO — equivalent to "share of voice" in traditional marketing.

> *Example:* If someone asks 10 different AI tools "what's the best accounting software for contractors?" and your client's brand appears in 4 of those answers, their Share of Answer is 40%.

Generative Engine Optimization (GEO)

A closely related term to AEO, sometimes used interchangeably. GEO specifically refers to optimizing for **generative AI** platforms (LLM-based tools like ChatGPT and Gemini), while AEO is a broader term that includes voice assistants and featured snippets.

> For most sales conversations, **AEO** is the preferred term — it's more accessible and describes the outcome (being the answer) rather than the technical mechanism.

Conversational Query

A search phrased as a natural question the way a person would speak it, rather than a string of keywords. AEO is built for these.

Keyword-style (SEO era)	Conversational (AEO era)
"Ottawa plumber emergency"	"Who's the best emergency plumber in Ottawa?"
"CRM software small business"	"What CRM should I use for a 5-person sales team?"
"protein after workout"	"How much protein should I eat after the gym?"

LLM (Large Language Model)

The AI technology behind tools like ChatGPT, Gemini, and Perplexity. LLMs generate answers by analyzing and synthesizing massive amounts of text. AEO is, in part, about making your content the kind of text LLMs learn from and cite.

How AEO Works — The Simple Version

When a user asks an AI a question, the AI does three things:

1. **Interprets the intent** — What is the user really asking?
2. **Searches for trusted sources** — Which websites or documents are authoritative on this topic?

3. **Synthesizes and presents the answer** — It pulls the clearest, most credible content and delivers it as a direct response.

AEO is the work of making sure a client's content wins at **steps 2 and 3**.

What AEO Looks Like in Practice

Before AEO

A physiotherapy clinic has a website with a long "About" page and a services list. Their SEO is decent — they rank on page 1 for "physiotherapy Ottawa."

When someone asks ChatGPT "*What should I look for in a physiotherapist for sports injuries?*", the AI answers using content from a major health publication and a competitor's well-structured FAQ page. The clinic is never mentioned.

After AEO

The same clinic restructures their content:

- They add a **FAQ section** with 20 specific questions their patients ask ("How long does recovery from a rotator cuff injury take?")
- They add **schema markup** to their FAQ and their team bios (including credentials)
- They publish a **clear, structured guide**: "Sports Injury Rehab: What to Expect at Every Stage"
- Their Google Business Profile is fully updated and consistent with their website

Now when someone asks ChatGPT about sports physiotherapy in Ottawa, the AI pulls from their FAQ and cites their clinic by name.

The Four Pillars of AEO

1. Structured Content

Content formatted so AI can parse and extract answers — not just walls of text.

- Question-and-answer format
- Clear headings (H2/H3) that mirror real questions
- Bullet points, numbered steps, comparison tables
- Answers that lead with the point, then expand

2. Schema Markup

Code on the page that tells AI systems what the content *means*. FAQ, HowTo, Article, and LocalBusiness schemas are the most impactful for most clients.

3. Authority Signals (E-E-A-T)

Demonstrating that the source is trustworthy and expert:

- Named authors with credentials
- Citations and references to credible sources
- Third-party reviews and mentions
- Consistent business information across all platforms

4. Conversational Intent Alignment

Content written to match how people actually ask questions — not how they type them. This means natural language, full sentences, and addressing follow-up questions within the same page.

Selling AEO as a Service

Who Needs It

Any business that relies on being found online, including:

- Professional services (law, finance, health, accounting)
- Local service businesses (trades, clinics, agencies)
- E-commerce and product brands
- B2B SaaS and tech companies
- Hospitality and tourism

The Client Conversation

Open with the problem:

> "When your customers ask ChatGPT or Google's AI for a recommendation in your category, does your business come up? Right now, probably not — and that gap is growing every month."

Frame the opportunity:

> "AEO is about making sure your business is the source AI tools trust and quote. It's not replacing your existing SEO — it's the next layer that protects your visibility as search behaviour shifts."

Make it concrete:

> "We audit where you currently appear in AI-generated answers, identify the gaps in your content and structure, and build a plan to get your brand cited consistently."

Service Tiers (Example Framework)

Tier	Scope	Good For
AEO Audit	Analyse current AI visibility, identify content and schema gaps, deliver a prioritized report	First engagement, discovery phase
AEO Foundation	Audit + schema implementation + FAQ/content restructure for top 10 pages	Small business, local service
AEO Growth	Foundation + ongoing content creation, Share of Answer tracking, quarterly reporting	Growing brands, competitive categories
AEO Full-Service	All of the above + authority building (PR, review strategy, citation management)	Enterprise, high-competition industries

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Common Objections

"We already do SEO."

> AEO builds on SEO — it doesn't replace it. But SEO alone won't get you cited in AI answers. This is the next layer your competitors are starting to figure out.

"We don't know if this drives real business."

> NerdWallet saw 35% revenue growth despite a 20% drop in website traffic, because their brand was still being surfaced through AI answers and snippets. Visibility now works differently than clicks.

"This feels like it'll change again in a year."

> The underlying shift — users asking questions and expecting direct answers — has been building for a decade (voice search, featured snippets, chatbots). AEO is the maturation of that trend, not a fad.

Quick Reference Cheat Sheet

Term	One-Line Definition
AEO	Optimizing content to be cited in AI-generated answers
SEO	Optimizing content to rank in traditional search results
Answer Engine	AI platform that delivers a direct answer (ChatGPT, Perplexity, etc.)
Zero-Click Search	A search where the user never visits a website
AI Overview	Google's AI-generated summary above search results
E-E-A-T	Experience, Expertise, Authoritativeness, Trustworthiness
Schema Markup	Code that tells AI what your content means
Featured Snippet	Highlighted answer box at the top of Google results
Share of Answer	% of AI responses in your category where your brand is cited
GEO	Generative Engine Optimization — AEO focused on LLM-based platforms

Term	One-Line Definition
LLM	Large Language Model — the AI behind ChatGPT, Gemini, etc.
Conversational Query	A question asked the way a person speaks, not typed keywords

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