



A PRACTICAL FIELD GUIDE

Search Marketing.

How people search, how platforms decide what they find,
and how to place the right business in the right search at
the right moment — from Google to AI answers.

A PRACTICAL FIELD GUIDE

Search Marketing

Search Marketing: A Practical Field Guide

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The full text and the audiobook are available online.

Set in Playfair Display, Source Serif and Inter. Working manuscript,
September 2026.

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Do not assume.

Research.

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INTRODUCTION

I Didn't Want to Be a Marketer

I did not grow up wanting to work in marketing. In fact, I spent a long time trying to move in the opposite direction.

I was born in Bogotá, Colombia. My father worked in advertising and was a great salesman, but I was never attracted to the idea of making art to sell a product. I wanted art for its own sake. I wanted music. I wanted martial arts. I wanted to make things because they were beautiful, expressive, or meaningful - not because they could help move inventory.

At the same time, I knew something else about myself: I wanted to make money.

That desire was not abstract. I wanted stability and financial freedom because I understood what it felt like not to have them. My father could sell, but he was not especially financially savvy, and I grew up craving the security that money seemed able to provide. Art mattered to me, but financial freedom mattered more.

That tension shaped the beginning of my career. I wanted the independence to create whatever I wanted, but I first needed to learn how to support myself.

Learning Through Music

I tried to start businesses and made many of the mistakes new entrepreneurs make. I had ambition, but not yet the knowledge or experience to turn that ambition into something reliable. Then I made what still feels like one of the craziest decisions of my life: I tried to become a singer.

I worked on music for five years. I did not become a star, but I built an audience, completed projects, and learned lessons that would later shape everything I did professionally.



Learning through music. For five years, music became the place where I learned discipline, consistency, and how to build a project.

Music taught me discipline. It taught me that becoming an artist was not a moment of inspiration; it was a process. You practiced, studied, produced, published, listened, adjusted, and returned to work. It taught me how to build a project over time and, more importantly, how to learn. The work ethic I later brought to marketing was developed through music, oddly enough.

Music also helped me understand what I did not want. I realized I did not want fame. I wanted the money I had imagined would come with it. Those were not the same goal, and confusing them could have cost me many more years.

By the time I was around twenty-three, I knew three things. I could work hard. I could learn. And I still needed to make money.

So I started looking for a job.

Doing SEO Without Knowing It

I was good at writing - not only songs, but writing in general. So the first job I found was not exactly writing songs. It was writing news.

I believed I had been hired simply to write articles. I did not understand that I was entering marketing, and I certainly did not think of myself as an SEO professional.

My assignment was straightforward: write two news articles a day, approximately 300 words each. I went to Google Trends, looked for stories that were beginning to attract attention, tried to publish early, and followed the SEO recommendations inside Yoast, a WordPress plugin. At that point, my understanding of optimization was simple: I wanted Yoast's indicator to turn green.

That was it. I was not thinking about search intent, website architecture, backlink profiles, schema markup, or conversion. I was trying to write something relevant, publish it at the right moment, and satisfy the instructions on the screen.

I repeated that process more than 2,000 times over three and a half years.

Writing itself came easily to me. Consistency did not. Producing two articles every day sounds simple until you have to do it again tomorrow, and the day after that, while studying and

managing the rest of your life. I was not always as consistent as I should have been, but I was good enough to bring traffic to the site and keep the job.

My mother kept telling me, "Keep that job. You never know where it will take you."

She was right.

The job did not pay much, but it became the first piece of a career I could not yet see. It gave me a portfolio, a work habit, and practical experience writing for search before I understood that search engine optimization was the name of the technique I was using.

This is one of the strange things about a career: sometimes the opportunity that changes your direction does not announce itself as important. It looks like a small job you are tempted to abandon.

The Hardest Writing Job I Ever Had

When it was time to complete my university internship, my writing experience opened another door. I found an internship with a foreign company, one of the best-paid opportunities available to me. It paid about 400 euros a month. I kept the news-writing job, which paid another 200 euros, so I was making approximately 600 euros while I was still a student.

That amount may not sound extraordinary, especially outside Colombia. Everyone moves at a different pace. For me, at that point, it was progress. I had not graduated, and I was already earning considerably more than many interns around me.

The internship was in cybersecurity content. For nine months, I wrote 622 articles averaging roughly 750 words each. I wrote 611 of them manually. Only eleven were written with help from ChatGPT, which became available near the end of that period.

The scale was brutal. I spent six months as an intern earning 400 euros and continued for another three months as a freelancer for about 450 euros. It was not much of a raise for staying, and the workload was affecting me. I became depressed. Eventually, I quit.

At the time, I thought the main thing I was learning was cybersecurity, not SEO. In retrospect, I was also developing an enormous tolerance for research, deadlines, repetition, and unfamiliar technical subjects. I learned how quickly a person can build knowledge when there is no alternative but to sit down and produce.

Still, there is a difference between difficult work that develops you and difficult work that empties you. Leaving was necessary.

I kept the newspaper job because those 200 euros gave me a little oxygen, but they were not enough to live on. I needed another job.

Choosing SEO

I then joined a marketing agency. I began as a writer and also started finding freelance clients. My income improved before I had even graduated. In September 2023, the month I finished university, I made about \$1,500. In Colombia, that put me ahead of where many new graduates begin.

I was proud of that progress, but I still wanted more. More importantly, I was beginning to see how I could get there.

There were two paths in front of me. I could become a better-paid content writer, or I could develop into an SEO specialist and eventually lead the division in which I worked. Content writing was one part of SEO, but SEO covered a much larger system and had greater demand. It offered more ways to create value and, therefore, more room to grow.

I chose SEO.

From that point, I became a dedicated student of everything beyond the article itself. I used the agency as a place to learn by doing. I volunteered for different SEO tasks, studied how the pieces connected, and got my hands on as much of the work as possible. Keyword research led to competitor analysis. Content led to website architecture. Websites led to technical performance, local visibility, backlinks, measurement, and strategy.

After roughly a year at the agency, I became its SEO manager, a role I performed for about three years. By the end of that chapter, I was running the entire web development department.

That progression did not happen because I followed a perfect career plan. It happened because I kept working on something before I understood where it could take me, then recognized an opportunity and decided to study it seriously.

Why I Wrote This Book

There is a personal reason this book exists. I set myself the goal of publishing a book before I turned thirty, and this is my thirtieth-birthday gift to myself. That deadline helped me begin, but it is not the main reason I chose this subject.

I wrote this book to share the philosophy that guides my work. It is less concerned with collecting techniques than with the strategy and mindset required to succeed in search marketing. Platforms, algorithms, and tactics change. A clear understanding of what marketing is for - and a disciplined way of making decisions - lasts longer.

The ideas come from my experience: thousands of articles, years of agency work, freelance projects, client campaigns, mistakes, experiments, wins, and the patterns I saw repeat across them. Some of my conclusions are conventional. Others may be controversial. I will tell you clearly what I believe, what I have observed, and what I would do if I had to begin again.

The central lesson is simple: do not assume. Research.

Do not assume you know how customers describe a service. Find the words they actually use. Do not assume you know what Google wants to rank. Examine what is already ranking. Do not assume a competitor is bad news. Treat that competitor as proof that a market exists and as a source of information about how the market behaves. Do not assume a report full of numbers will keep a client. Learn what the client needs to understand.

Although the examples focus on search, the philosophy applies across marketing: observe, form a theory, test it, measure what happened, and adjust.

That is how I learned search marketing before I even knew I was doing it. It is how I built a career from a small writing job. And it is the approach I will share with you in the pages that follow.

CHAPTER 1

Marketing's Most Important Rule



The most dangerous sentence in marketing often begins with two innocent words: "I think."

I think customers will understand this name. I think they care about this feature. I think this design looks better. I think this is what they would search. I think this is the kind of content they want.

There is nothing wrong with having an idea. Every strategy begins with one. The mistake is treating that idea as if it were already a fact.

That is the most important rule I want you to remember throughout this book: do not make marketing decisions based only on your taste, beliefs, or assumptions. Research first.

A Simple Definition

A good product does not sell itself. People must discover it, understand it, trust it, and choose it among alternatives. The distance between a valuable offer and the people who might buy it is why marketing exists.

For the purposes of this book, my definition is simple:

Marketing is a set of techniques used to sell a product or service within its natural market and beyond.

Marketing can build awareness, preference, trust, reputation, and an audience. Those outcomes do not always demand an immediate purchase, but they should support a useful exchange between a business and the people it can serve. Marketing creates that path deliberately instead of waiting for a good offer to become visible by accident.

The Number One Mistake

The number one marketing mistake is making assumptions.

Business owners naturally know more about their products than most customers ever will. That expertise is valuable, but it can also create distance. The company may use a technical name while customers use a simple one. The owner may care deeply about a feature buyers barely notice. A designer may prefer an elegant headline that leaves visitors unsure about what the business actually sells.

Personal preference can quietly replace evidence.

This becomes especially dangerous when the person making the decision has authority. A client says, "Our customers would never search that phrase," and nobody checks. A manager dislikes a keyword because it sounds unsophisticated, even though it is the language customers use. A team builds a page around the service name used inside the company without asking whether the market recognizes it.

These decisions may feel creative or strategic. In reality, they are guesses with a budget attached.

The golden rule: Never make a marketing decision based only on taste, belief, or assumption. Research first.

An assumption is not always useless. It can become a hypothesis. The difference is that a hypothesis is meant to be tested. "Customers care about speed" is an assumption if we simply build the campaign around it. It becomes a hypothesis when we examine customer interviews, reviews, search behavior, competitor positioning, sales conversations, and campaign results to determine whether speed actually influences the decision.

The problem is not thinking. The problem is refusing to check whether our thinking matches reality.

Research does not need to begin with an expensive report. It begins with a question.

How do customers describe the problem? What do they search when they need help? Which alternatives do they compare? What makes them hesitate? Which result do they choose? What information do they need before they feel ready to act?

Once the question is clear, the market leaves evidence in many places. Search results reveal the language and formats associated with a query. Reviews reveal what customers praise, misunderstand, and resent. Competitor websites reveal how existing businesses package their offers. Sales calls reveal recurring objections. Analytics reveal what users click, ignore, and abandon. Keyword tools reveal patterns of demand, even when their numbers are estimates.

The marketer's job is to collect enough of this evidence to make a better decision.

Sometimes the clearest answer comes from a keyword database. Sometimes it comes from reading customer reviews, studying competitors, listening to sales calls, or performing the same search a customer would make. Good research is not defined by how complicated it looks. It is defined by whether it reduces uncertainty enough to choose a direction, execute it, and learn from what happens.

Marketing as a Scientific Practice

Marketing is not an exact science. Human behavior is too contextual for that. The same message can perform differently across markets, platforms, audiences, and moments. A technique that works for one business may fail for another. Even a successful campaign may become less effective as competitors react and customer behavior changes.

But marketing should still be approached scientifically.

That means we observe before we conclude. We turn assumptions into hypotheses. We make the variables as clear as the situation allows. We execute, measure, compare, and adjust. We document what happened so that the next decision begins with more knowledge than the previous one.

The basic cycle is simple: observe, ask, form a hypothesis, execute, measure, adjust, and repeat.

This approach does not remove judgment. Data does not make decisions by itself. Research can be incomplete, metrics can be misleading, and the market can send conflicting signals. Someone still has to interpret the evidence and choose a course of action.

The scientific approach improves that judgment by forcing it into contact with reality.

If the result supports the hypothesis, we have evidence to continue. If it contradicts the hypothesis, we have learned something valuable before investing even more in the wrong direction. A failed test is less expensive than an untested belief repeated for years.

Research Does Not Kill Creativity

Some people treat research and creativity as opposites. They imagine that research produces safe, predictable work while creativity requires ignoring what already exists.

I see it differently.

Research gives creativity a useful problem to solve. It tells us who needs the offer, how those people understand their problem, what they have already seen, and where existing solutions fall short. Those constraints give imagination direction.

Without research, creativity can become self-expression paid for by the client. With research, creativity can become a new way to connect real demand with a valuable solution.

The distinction matters because marketing is not art for art's own sake. I love art, and part of me once resisted marketing for exactly that reason. Marketing uses writing, design, music, video, and storytelling, but it applies them to a commercial objective. The work can still be beautiful. It can still be original. It simply has something specific to accomplish.

That objective creates accountability. We cannot defend a decision only by saying that we liked it. We need to explain what we learned, why we chose the approach, and what happened after it reached the market.



The Rule Behind This Book

Everything that follows begins with this rule. Before optimizing a website, we will research how people search. Before choosing a page or content format, we will examine search intent. Before deciding what a successful page should contain, we will study the competitors already appearing in the results.

Research does not guarantee that every decision will succeed. It makes failure more informative and success more repeatable. It helps us choose opportunities instead of chasing everything. It gives us a basis for saying yes, no, or not yet.

When you face a marketing decision, do not begin by asking, "What do I like?"

Ask, "What does the market show us?"

Then use your judgment. Make the decision. Measure the result. Allow the evidence to change your mind.

Search Marketing: What Is SEO and Will It Die?



Search marketing begins with a simple fact: when people look for something, position matters.

I like to trace the instinct behind search marketing to the telephone directory. Businesses knew that people searched alphabetically, so some chose names beginning with *A* or even *AI* to appear before their competitors. Whether or not that was the first form of search optimization, the logic is familiar: understand how a search system organizes information, then improve your chances of being found.

That is search marketing.

Search marketing is the practice of improving the visibility of a business wherever people search.

The platform may be a directory, a marketplace, a map, a social network, a search engine, or an AI assistant. The interface changes. The commercial objective does not: be present when someone is actively looking for an answer, product, or service you can provide.

What SEO Actually Means

Search engine optimization, or SEO, is one part of search marketing. It is the practice of improving a website and its wider online presence so that search engines can understand it, trust it, and present it for relevant searches.

In practice, Google became the main focus of SEO. Search became part of everyday life, and *Google it* became a natural response whenever we needed information. That behavior created an enormous commercial opportunity. If people use a search engine to find a service, appearing near the top can place a business directly in front of existing demand.

SEO developed around that opportunity. The work became part science, part craft: study what people search, observe what the results reward, improve the assets you control, and measure whether visibility turns into business.

We do not see the entire ranking system. We see its results and work backward. That is why the rule from the previous chapter matters. SEO is not about forcing our preferences onto a platform. It is about researching the market and the search environment, forming a hypothesis, executing, and adjusting.

Will AI Kill SEO

Every major change in search produces the same question: is SEO dead?

AI has made the question feel more urgent because people can now ask a platform for an answer instead of reviewing a traditional list of links. But a different interface does not eliminate the need to retrieve, evaluate, and organize information.

Some AI answers come from what a model learned during training. But when an AI search experience needs current or source-backed information, it must retrieve and rank material from the web. It may use a traditional search provider, its own index, or another retrieval system. Google has stated that its generative search features draw on its core Search ranking systems and index. ChatGPT search also retrieves information from web sources.

AI does not eliminate search. It often moves search behind the answer.

That is why accessible and trustworthy online content still matters. The user may no longer see ten blue links, but a system still has to decide which sources deserve to shape the response.

This does not mean SEO and AI optimization are identical. AI systems may combine sources, answer questions directly, and choose what to mention in ways that differ from a traditional results page. We will address those differences later in the book. For now, the important point is that good SEO remains a strong foundation for visibility in AI-mediated search.

SEO may lose tactics. It may gain new formats, measurements, and platforms. The name may even become less useful one day. The discipline survives because the underlying behavior survives: people search, systems choose what to show them, and businesses want to be chosen.

The Discipline Is Bigger Than Google

The mistake would be to define our profession too narrowly. If we think SEO means only manipulating a Google results page, every change will look like a threat. If we understand the broader discipline as search marketing, change becomes something we can study.

Search marketing can exist anywhere three conditions are present: people use a platform to look for something, the platform decides which information to present, and we can influence the assets or signals it evaluates.

As long as those conditions remain, there will be work for search marketers.

I do not expect SEO to disappear soon. I expect it to evolve into a broader practice that includes search engines, AI platforms, maps, marketplaces, directories, and whatever people use next.

Do not become loyal to an interface. Become excellent at understanding how people search and how platforms decide what they find.

Keyword Research: How Do People Search for You?



Keyword research is not a vocabulary exercise. It is market research expressed through searches. Its purpose is to discover how people describe a need when they are trying to solve it—and to turn that evidence into a plan.

The name of your service is not necessarily the way people search for it. Your client may use an industry term. Their customers may describe a problem, an outcome, a location, a price, or a question instead. If you optimize only for the language used inside the business, you may build the right page for the wrong phrase.

The first discipline of keyword research is therefore the same rule that guides this book: do not assume. Investigate.

Begin with the Customer, Not the Tool

Before opening any software, understand what the business sells, whom it serves, where it serves them, what a customer is worth, and which problems lead people to buy. Listen to the words used in sales calls, emails, reviews, support conversations, and forms. If the website already receives traffic, examine its Search Console queries. They often reveal language the business never thought to target.

Then put yourself in the customer's position. If you needed this service but did not know the company existed, what would you search? If you did not know the technical name of the solution, how would you describe the problem?

This shift matters. Good keyword research is not about finding different ways to say what the business wants to sell. It is about finding the language demand already uses.

Google Is the Best Place to Start

The most useful free keyword-research environment is Google itself. Search your first ideas and pay attention to the language Google suggests, the questions it surfaces, the related searches it presents, and the words repeated across the results. Collect every relevant variation. Do not judge too early; build a working list first.

Suggestions are clues, not measurements. Autocomplete is influenced by real searches, but also by location, language, freshness, personal context, and Google's policies. It can reveal how people phrase a need, but it does not tell you that the first suggestion has the most volume.

The results page is even more valuable because it shows what Google currently believes will satisfy the search. This is where keyword research becomes strategy.

If the results are mainly service pages, the query probably needs a strong commercial page. If they are guides or videos, the searcher may be trying to learn. If a local pack dominates, a Google Business Profile and local presence are essential. If marketplaces or directories control the page, being present on those platforms may be more important than creating another article.

Do not decide the asset first and force a keyword onto it. Let the search reveal the asset you need.

Read Intent Before Volume

A keyword is not just a string of words. It is evidence of a task someone wants to complete.

Search intent is commonly described as informational, navigational, commercial, or transactional. Someone may want to learn, reach a particular brand, compare options, or take action. These labels are useful, but the live results are the final test. Two similar phrases can produce different pages because they represent different expectations. Two different phrases can belong together because they express the same need.

Before evaluating a keyword, ask:

What is the searcher trying to accomplish? What type of result are they choosing? What would completely satisfy them?

That answer determines the format, message, proof, and next step the asset must provide. A transactional search usually needs a direct path to purchase or contact. An informational search needs a clear answer. A comparison search needs credible distinctions. Matching the words without matching the intent is not optimization.

Add Data Without Worshipping It

Once you have language and intent, add measurements.

Google Ads Keyword Planner is the best starting point for Google search-volume data. Set the correct location, language, network, and date range before drawing conclusions. Look beyond the average: inspect seasonality and variations. Remember that the numbers are historical and aggregated, not a perfect count of future demand. Its Competition metric refers to advertisers, not the difficulty of ranking organically.

Google Trends answers a different question. It shows relative interest over time and across locations, which is excellent for detecting momentum and seasonality. It is normalized on a scale, not an absolute volume report.

Search Console gives you first-party evidence: the queries for which your site already earns impressions and clicks. It can expose near-wins, unexpected demand, and language worth developing. It is still incomplete—some queries are withheld and the available data reflects your existing visibility, not the entire market.

Platforms such as Semrush and Ahrefs are worthwhile because they expand the list, expose competitors, estimate traffic, and provide keyword-difficulty scores. Those scores are useful, but they are estimates built with different formu-

las. They do not know your exact relevance, reputation, content quality, conversion rate, or ability to create a better result.

Use difficulty as a filter, never as a verdict. Open the results and inspect the competition yourself.

Pick Your Battles

This is the most important secret in this book: **pick your battles.**

The best keyword is not necessarily the one with the most searches. It is the best intersection of three things:

Business value. Does the search lead naturally toward a profitable product or service? How likely is the searcher to become a customer, and what is that customer worth?

Demand. Is there meaningful interest in the topic? Consider volume, variations, trend, and the total traffic potential of the subject—not one number in one tool.

Attainability. Can you create the right asset and credibly outperform what is already visible? Consider the actual competitors, their relevance and authority, the result format, your resources, and the time available.

High demand, low difficulty, and a high-ticket service can be an extraordinary opportunity. But high volume is not mandatory. Ten precise searches may be worth more than ten thousand casual ones if a single conversion pays for the work. Likewise, a large audience is useless when the query has no relationship to the business.

Paid competition and bid estimates can suggest commercial value because advertisers are willing to compete for the click. They are clues, not proof. The economics of your offer—not a tool's label—decide whether a keyword is a money keyword.

A simple rule is to treat opportunity as multiplicative:


$$\text{Opportunity} = \text{value} \times \text{demand} \times \text{attainability}$$

If one factor is close to zero, the opportunity collapses. This keeps you from chasing impressive numbers that cannot produce a result.



Turn Keywords into a Map

The finished research should not be a giant list. It should be a map of decisions.

Group variations that express the same intent and produce substantially similar results. Those terms usually belong to one cluster and one excellent asset. Choose a primary keyword to define the asset, then use natural secondary variations to cover the complete need. Separate terms when the intent or the result type changes.

This prevents two common mistakes: creating a thin page for every variation and making several pages compete for the same search. One need should have one clear best destination.

AI can help cluster a large list and propose a structure. Feed it the keywords and their data, ask it to group them by intent, and use the output as a first draft. Then verify the important groups in Google. A model can organize language quickly; it cannot replace the market evidence visible in the results.

For every cluster, record the primary need, intent, location if relevant, preferred asset, business value, demand, difficulty estimate, actual competitors, and priority. Then assign it to one of three decisions: build now, pursue later, or ignore.

That is the real deliverable of keyword research: not a spreadsheet, but a sequence of informed choices.

The Research Loop

Keyword research is not completed once and forgotten. After publishing, real impressions, clicks, leads, and sales teach you what the initial tools could not. Some assumptions will be confirmed; others will be corrected. Update the map and choose the next battle with better evidence.

Tools will change. Search interfaces will change. The strategic discipline will not: listen to the market, understand the intent, verify the opportunity, and invest where demand, value, and attainability meet.

That is how people search for you—and how you decide whether being found is worth the fight.

Research Notes

Google documents the definitions and limitations of Keyword Planner, Google Trends, Autocomplete, and Search Console query data.

The foundational informational, navigational, and transactional taxonomy comes from Andrei Broder's *A Taxonomy of Web Search*. Keyword-difficulty methods differ across providers; see the published methodologies from Ahrefs and Semrush.

SEO Competitor Analysis: Competition Is Good News



If you are new to business, the word *competitor* can feel discouraging. You may want to build something original without looking at anyone else. You may even believe that studying competitors will make your work less creative.

Do not make that mistake.

Competition is evidence. It tells you that a market exists, that people are spending money, and that someone has already found a way to reach them. A market with no competitors may sound attractive, but it often means you must create demand before you can capture it. That is a much harder and more expensive battle.

The presence of competitors is therefore good news. In search marketing, it gives you something even more valuable: a visible record of what the market and the search engine are already rewarding.

Your Search Competitors May Surprise You

The businesses you compete with commercially are not always the websites you compete with in search.

A local company may find directories, publishers, marketplaces, government pages, or national brands above it. An informational article may compete with a video. A service page may compete with a map result. Search competition is defined by who occupies the space you want—not only by who sells the same thing.

Start with the keyword clusters you selected in the previous chapter. Search the primary term for each one and record the results that repeatedly appear.

Separate direct business competitors from search competitors, but study both. The direct competitors reveal the offer. The search competitors reveal what wins visibility.

Do not analyze one query and assume you understand the market. Look across the entire cluster. A site that appears once may be incidental. A site that appears repeatedly is teaching you something.

The Real Objective Is Understanding Intent

Competitor analysis is not primarily about copying pages or collecting traffic estimates. Its most important purpose is to understand search intent more precisely.

Keyword research gives you a hypothesis about what people want. The results show you how that need is currently being satisfied. Your competitors make the expectation visible.

Study the dominant type of asset. Are people being shown service pages, category pages, guides, comparisons, videos, local profiles, or listings? Then study what those results have in common. What questions do they answer? What information appears early? What proof do they provide? What action can the visitor take? How local, specific, visual, or comprehensive are they?

Repeated patterns are signals. If nearly every winning page includes pricing, examples, locations, detailed specifications, or a clear comparison, that information may be part of what searchers expect. It does not mean you must imitate the page. It means you must understand the need the pattern is serving.

The goal is not to make a better-looking version of the first result. It is to satisfy the underlying intent more completely and efficiently.

Study Winners and Near-Winners

Begin with the strongest results, but do not stop there. Examine lower-ranking pages and results that are close to breaking into the most visible positions. The difference between winners and near-winners can be more instructive than the difference between a winner and a completely irrelevant site.

Navigate the websites. Spend time using them as a potential customer would. Search tools can summarize a competitor, but they cannot replace the experience of the page itself.

For each important competitor, investigate five areas:

Relevance. How directly does the asset address the query and its intent? Is the primary subject immediately clear?

Completeness. Does it answer the full need, including the questions and objections that arise before someone acts?

Experience. Is the page fast, readable, credible, easy to navigate, and useful on a phone? Is the next step obvious?

Authority. What evidence supports the business or publisher—experience, reviews, original information, citations, recognition, or links from other websites?

Search presence. Which related keywords, pages, locations, listings, and result formats does the competitor occupy beyond this single page?

Record what each competitor does well, what appears weak, and what is missing. Treat those observations as hypotheses. A missing feature is not automatically the reason a page ranks lower, and a visible feature is not automatically the reason another ranks first. Search algorithms contain many variables you cannot see.

Your analysis becomes useful when patterns repeat across several competitors and several queries.



Use Tools to Establish a Benchmark

If you have access to a platform such as Semrush or Ahrefs, use it to extend what you observed manually. Estimate the competitors' organic traffic, leading pages, ranking keywords, backlink profiles, and changes over time. This can reveal where their visibility is concentrated and which parts of their strategy produce the most apparent value.

The word *estimate* matters. Third-party platforms do not have access to a competitor's private analytics or sales data. They model performance from their own databases. Use the numbers to compare direction, scale, and relative strength—not as verified revenue or exact traffic.

A benchmark should answer practical questions. How established are the current winners? How many useful pages support their visibility? Are they dominant across the topic or strong on only one query? Does the opportunity require one exceptional asset, a complete local presence, or a larger body of content? What level of authority would be difficult—but realistic—to build?

This protects you from arbitrary goals. “Increase traffic” is vague. “Become competitive with the current leaders for this cluster” gives you a visible standard.

Find the Gap Without Becoming a Copy

Competitor research should expand your thinking, not reduce it to imitation.

First, identify the table stakes: the elements required to satisfy the intent at all. Then identify opportunities to be meaningfully better. You may offer clearer information, stronger evidence, a faster experience, a useful tool, original data, better images, a more specific local answer, or a simpler path to action.

Do not add length merely because a competitor wrote a long page. Do not add features merely because everyone else has them. Every element should earn its place by helping the user complete the task behind the search.

The best gap is not always missing content. It may be missing trust, missing clarity, missing usability, or missing distribution. Sometimes competitors have already said everything, but none of them has made the decision easy.

That is where creativity belongs: not in ignoring the market, but in understanding it well enough to see what it still needs.

Turn the Analysis into Decisions

The final deliverable should be concise. For every target keyword cluster, write down:

Who currently wins. What intent they satisfy. Which asset format wins. What appears necessary. Where the experience falls short. What you can credibly do better.

Then translate those findings into requirements for your own work. Decide which asset to create, which information it must include, what proof it needs, how it will differ, and what level of authority or distribution must support it.

Competitors do not give you the answer. They give you evidence. Your job is to interpret that evidence without assuming that correlation is causation and without losing sight of the customer.

Competition proves the market exists. Analysis reveals how that market behaves. Strategy begins when you decide where—and how—you can win.

On-Page SEO: Build the Right Website



You now know how people search, what they intend to find, and what the current winners provide. The next step is to build the asset that satisfies that demand.

Start with the website. Not every search result comes directly from one, but nearly every part of an online presence can be connected to it. Google Business Profiles, directories, social accounts, citations, articles, products, and campaigns can all point back to this central source.

Someone may discover the address on a billboard, brochure, vehicle wrap, storefront, event display, radio advertisement, or another traditional channel and visit it directly. The website then bridges attention created outside the internet with an experience the business controls.

It can receive demand from search, digital platforms, referrals, and the physical world. It is where you control the structure, message, experience, and path to conversion.

On-page SEO is the practice of making every page unmistakably relevant, useful, understandable, and accessible—to the customer first and to the search engine at the same time.

Begin with the Search Intent

The most important optimization is not a tag or a line of code. It is building the right page.

Return to the search results and competitor analysis. If people expect a service page, do not give them a general blog post. If they need a comparison, do not give them an aggressive sales pitch before answering their question. If the search is local, location, availability, proof, and a clear way to contact the business must be visible.

Your objective is not to reproduce the current results. It is to provide everything necessary to satisfy the intent, then make the experience clearer, faster, more complete, and easier to act on.

Before designing the page, finish this sentence:

The person searching this keyword needs to

-----.

Everything on the page should help them complete that task. Anything that does not help should have to justify its presence.

Name the Brand with the Domain in Mind

I know people love their brands. I also know what I have repeatedly observed: a domain that contains the main money keyword can be an enormous competitive advantage.

A keyword-rich domain does not rescue a weak site. It does not replace authority, useful content, links, or a good experience. But when the rest of the SEO is executed properly, I consider the main keyword in the domain a winning advantage—not a cosmetic detail. I have benefited from making this choice and suffered the consequences of ignoring it.

The best way to earn that advantage is not to create an unrelated brand and redirect it to a keyword-rich domain. It is to name the brand strategically from the beginning. The brand name and domain should be developed together, after you understand how customers describe the service.

A name must be distinctive, credible, memorable, and capable of becoming valuable. If you want to build a million-dollar company, it should look and sound like one. But uniqueness is not enough. Naming the business after your pet may feel personal; without context, it tells the market nothing about what you do.

People should encounter the name and form a useful first impression. The brand need not be a generic exact-match phrase, but it should make the category, service, outcome, or expertise easier to understand in language the market recognizes. Done well, the keyword belongs naturally in both the brand and domain.

This decision must be made carefully because both a brand and a domain are expensive to change later. Make it after keyword research, not before. Confirm that the term represents the market you actually want, has lasting value, and will not trap the company inside an offer or location it plans to outgrow.

Turn Keyword Clusters into Architecture

The keyword map from Chapter 3 should become the structure of the website.

Assign each important cluster to one page. Keywords that express the same intent belong together. Keywords that represent meaningfully different needs deserve different pages. This gives every page a clear job and prevents several URLs from competing for the same query.

Use a simple hierarchy. The homepage communicates the main category and brand. Core service or product pages target the highest-value commercial clusters. Supporting pages address locations, subservices, comparisons, questions, and informational needs when the research justifies them.

URLs should be short, readable, stable, and descriptive. A person should be able to look at one and understand where they are. Avoid creating URLs from filters, tracking parameters, or technical systems when those variations do not deserve independent pages.

Do not let AI make the final architecture. It can group a large keyword set and propose which terms belong on each page, which is an excellent starting point. Then verify the clusters against search intent and the live results. The structure is a business decision supported by AI—not delegated to it.

Keywords Are the Raw Material

Search engines need language to understand relevance. There is no way around that.

For a page targeting an important commercial query, the main keyword belongs in the page title and the H1. In my work, this is non-negotiable. The title tells searchers and search engines what the result offers. The H1 makes the primary subject of the page visible and unambiguous.

Use the most important natural variations in the supporting headings and body. The H2s should organize the questions, features, objections, locations, or subtopics that complete the intent. This is how one strong page can earn visibility across the full cluster rather than only one exact phrase.

Use the language naturally. A keyword should clarify the message, not deform it. Repeating the same phrase everywhere is not optimization; it is noise. Branding, personality, and persuasive copy can all be added—but they should not replace the words customers actually use.

A practical order is:

Page title. Include the primary keyword, describe the page accurately, and add the brand concisely where useful.

H1. State the main subject once, clearly, with the primary keyword.

Opening copy. Confirm immediately that the visitor has found the right place and explain the value of continuing.

H2s and body. Cover meaningful variations and the complete decision journey without forcing phrases into unrelated sections.

Meta description. Write a concise reason to click. It may influence the search snippet and click-through rate even though it is not a promise that Google will display your exact wording.

Images and media. Use descriptive filenames and alternative text when they genuinely describe the subject. Place media near the content it supports.

Internal Links Create Meaning

Internal links are not housekeeping. They define relationships between pages.

Every important page should be linked from another relevant page through a standard, crawlable link. Use anchor text that tells a person—and the search engine—what they will find after clicking. “Commercial roofing services” carries meaning. “Click here” does not.

Link where the next page would genuinely help. Supporting articles can point toward the commercial page they explain. Service pages can link to related services, locations, evidence, or deeper answers. Strong navigational pages can distribute attention toward the URLs that matter most.

Do not link every page to everything. A useful internal-link structure reflects topical relationships and the customer's journey. When every connection is emphasized, none of them is.

Schema Makes the Page Explicit

Schema markup is structured data added to the page to describe its entities and content in a language machines can process consistently. It can identify a business, product, article, event, review, breadcrumb, person, video, or other supported subject.

Schema deserves attention because it reduces ambiguity and can make a page eligible for enhanced search appearances. Eligibility is not a guarantee that a rich result will appear, and structured data alone does not make a weak page rank.

Use the most specific type that accurately describes the visible content. Mark up what is truly present—never invent reviews, ratings, prices, locations, authors, or availability. Connect the main entity to the organization, website, author, location, and related entities where those relationships are real. Validate the implementation and monitor Search Console for errors.

The principle is simple: the page says something to a person; the schema should describe the same truth to a machine.

Technical Quality Protects the Work

A perfectly written page cannot perform if search engines cannot reliably access, render, index, and understand it.

Make sure important pages are crawlable and indexable. Use consistent canonical URLs. Maintain accurate redirects, a useful XML sitemap, and sensible robots instructions. Fix broken

links and orphaned pages. Check that essential content exists in the rendered page, not only inside an interaction a crawler may never trigger.

Build for mobile use. Compress and properly size images without making them blurry. Use modern formats and responsive delivery where appropriate. Keep templates and scripts efficient. Good Core Web Vitals—loading speed, responsiveness, and visual stability—support both user experience and search performance, but they do not compensate for an irrelevant page.

Accessibility belongs here too. Clear headings, readable contrast, keyboard-friendly controls, meaningful link text, labels, and useful alternative text improve the experience for people and make the page easier to interpret.

The Final On-Page Check

Before publishing, ask:

Does this page satisfy the intended task? Is the primary keyword clear in the title and H1? Do the supporting headings cover the real variations? Is this the only page assigned to this intent? Can users and crawlers reach it? Do internal links explain its relationship to the site? Does the schema describe the visible truth? Is the experience fast, stable, accessible, and easy to act on?

On-page SEO is not decorating a finished website with keywords. It begins before the first page is built. Research determines the architecture. Intent determines the asset. Keywords make relevance explicit. Links create relationships. Schema removes ambiguity. Technical quality ensures the work can be experienced.

Build the right page, make its purpose impossible to misunderstand, and remove every obstacle between the search and the answer.

Off-Page SEO: Build Your Presence Beyond the Website



Your website is the center of your search strategy, but it is not your entire online presence. People also discover and evaluate a business through maps, directories, review platforms, social profiles, articles, associations, partners, and other websites.

Off-page SEO is the work of curating that presence beyond your own site. These assets matter twice: they can generate leads directly, and they can help search engines discover, understand, and trust the business they reference.

The goal is not to scatter your name across the internet. It is to create a consistent, credible presence wherever your customers already search.

Own Your Business Identity Everywhere

Start with citations: online mentions and listings that identify the business. They commonly include the name, category, address or service area, phone number, website, hours, and other practical details.

Do not choose citation sites by quantity. Return to the search results. Which directories, maps, marketplaces, associations, and review platforms appear for your money keywords? Which ones do customers in this market actually use? Those are the profiles that deserve attention first.

Claim and verify them. Complete every relevant field. Use accurate categories, useful descriptions, current photos, and the correct destination page. Most importantly, keep the core business information consistent. A person should never have to wonder whether two listings describe the same company or whether a phone number, address, or schedule can be trusted.

For a local business, the Google Business Profile deserves special attention. It is not merely a reference to the website; it is a search asset of its own. It can produce calls, directions, messages, bookings, and visits before a user ever reaches the site. Treat it with the same care as a principal landing page.

Use a Citation Manager When It Makes Sense

My practical recommendation—especially for a business owner or a company with several locations—is to use a reputable citation manager.

The strongest argument for manual submission is ownership. If every profile is created individually, you are less dependent on a subscription and may retain listings after you stop paying. That is a real advantage.

The cost appears when information changes. A new phone number, address, schedule, category, or website may need to be corrected in dozens of places. Manual management turns one update into a long and error-prone project. A citation manager gives you a central source of truth and distributes changes more efficiently.

Understand the terms before choosing a provider. Some services continue to sync only while the subscription is active, and different platforms handle cancellation differently. Keep an inventory of every profile, preserve the logins whenever possible, and know what happens if you leave. Industry-standard tools are standards for a reason, but convenience should never mean surrendering awareness of your own assets.

Understand What a Backlink Means

When another website links to yours, it creates a backlink. The familiar metaphor is a vote of trust, and it is useful—with one qualification: not every vote has equal value, and not every link is an endorsement.

Search engines use links to discover pages and understand relationships, relevance, and prominence. A contextual link from a credible website in your field can be meaningful because it reflects a real connection. A random link on an unrelated page may mean almost nothing. A pattern of links created only to manipulate rankings can become a liability.

Relevance, context, editorial independence, and the quality of the referring site matter more than a large raw number. Do not panic because an unknown website links to you; ordinary sites acquire strange links without asking for them. Focus on the part you control: do not build a backlink profile that looks manufactured because it is manufactured.

The healthiest profile is a consequence of a real business being discussed, listed, recommended, cited, and connected to its market.

Create Something Worth Citing

The most reliable source of backlinks in my experience has been a good blog.

This does not mean publishing articles merely to keep a calendar full. Use keyword research to identify questions, comparisons, problems, statistics, and decisions that people genuinely investigate. Then create the best useful answer you can.

Original research, clear explanations, practical templates, calculators, definitions, case studies, and well-supported comparisons give other writers a reason to cite you. A commercial page asks for the sale. A link-worthy resource earns attention before the sale and can pass that attention throughout the site through internal links.

This strategy compounds. A useful article can rank, attract the right readers, earn references, strengthen the domain, and support the money pages for years. It is slower than purchasing a package of links, but it creates an asset instead of a recurring dependency.

The principle is simple: if you want people to link to your website, publish something that improves their own content when they reference it.

Start with Relationships You Already Have

The next opportunity is usually closer than people think.

Look at suppliers, professional associations, distributors, technology partners, chambers of commerce, clients, event organizers, and other genuine business allies. Where the relationship is relevant, ask whether they can include your company and website on a partner page, case study, resource list, member profile, or article.

Make the request easy. Explain where the link would help their audience, provide the correct URL, and offer accurate wording or materials they can adapt. The link must make sense even if search engines did not exist. That is a useful test of legitimacy.

Do not turn every relationship into a forced exchange. A natural link documents or supports something real. If the only reason for two sites to link to one another is to manufacture ranking signals, the tactic has already lost its foundation.

Automate the Work, Not the Manipulation

I have used automated backlink-building software and seen improvements in third-party authority metrics. It is also easy to package as a visible deliverable for a client. But this is where discipline matters most.

Automation is valuable for discovering prospects, locating unlinked mentions, checking broken links, tracking outreach, monitoring profiles, and handling legitimate submissions. It can make careful work faster.

If a tool automatically creates large numbers of links on websites chosen only for the link, however, the thin line with spam has already been crossed. Search engines explicitly treat automated link creation intended to influence rankings as link spam. A rising authority score inside an SEO platform does not prove that the links are valuable, safe, or capable of producing business.

Use automation to scale judgment, not to avoid it. Review where the links appear, whether the pages are relevant, whether a person could reasonably encounter them, and whether you would be comfortable showing the complete list to the client.

The same caution applies to buying links. Paid placements may produce a return, but links purchased to pass ranking credit violate search-engine guidelines and carry risk. Advertising and sponsorship can be legitimate; they should be identified appropriately. The price of a link does not turn it into authority.



Build Reputation, Not a Link Count

A simple off-page plan is enough:

First, claim and correct the profiles that customers actually use.

Second, connect every asset to the correct page and keep the business information consistent.

Third, earn genuine reviews and respond to them professionally. Never purchase or incentivize false feedback.

Fourth, publish resources that deserve to be discovered and cited.

Fifth, ask real partners for relevant links that document real relationships.

Finally, monitor new mentions, profile changes, referral traffic, leads, and backlinks. Third-party authority scores can provide context, but they are not the business outcome.

Off-page SEO is not the art of collecting as many URLs as possible. It is the deliberate construction of reputation and distribution beyond the website.

Be present where customers search. Be consistent wherever the business appears. Give people something worth citing. Build relationships worth showing. When the online presence reflects a legitimate, useful, well-connected business, the backlinks become evidence of the work—not the work itself.

SEO Monitoring and Reporting: Transparency Keeps the Client

Results matter. They are why the work exists. But results alone do not keep a client.

Search marketing takes place in an environment we do not control completely. Rankings move. Demand changes. Competitors respond. Search engines update their systems. A well-executed strategy may produce progress before it produces revenue, and a strong month may be followed by a quiet one.

The client should never have to guess what is happening.

In my experience, when the research is sound and the execution is being handled properly, transparent and fast communication is what keeps the relationship. The client needs to know what we are trying to achieve, what has been done, what the data shows, what it means, and what happens next.

Reporting is not the final administrative task in an SEO campaign. It is how the work becomes understandable.

Give the Client a Window, Not a Surprise

Build a dashboard the client can access at any time.

The dashboard should answer the most important questions without requiring a meeting: Are we becoming more visible for the searches that matter? Are more people clicking? Are those visits producing useful actions? Is the strategy moving toward the business goal?

Access creates trust. It removes the feeling that the agency or specialist owns the information and releases it once a month. The client can see the same reality you see.

That does not eliminate the need for a report. A dashboard provides access to data; the monthly report provides interpretation. Send a concise email or summary every month explaining what changed, why it matters, and what you will do next.

Do not make the client decode a screen full of charts. Data without context is not transparency. It is merely exposure.

Report the Strategy, Not Every Number

Before choosing a metric, return to the strategy.

What is the business trying to sell? Which searches represent that demand? Which pages and off-page assets were built to capture it? What action should a qualified visitor take?

The report should follow that chain:

Business objective money keyword search asset user → → → action business result. → If the goal is to generate roofing estimates, a rise in unrelated blog traffic is not the main story. If the goal is local appointments, nationwide impressions may look impressive while contributing almost nothing. A metric is useful only when it helps explain progress toward the agreed objective.

This is why the dashboard should not be identical for every client. The data sources may repeat, but the meaning changes with the business model, market, location, sales cycle, and strategy.

Watch the Money Keywords

At the search level, I focus first on the money keywords identified during research.

Are their average positions improving? Are they earning more impressions and clicks? Is the click-through rate becoming stronger? Which page appears for each query, and is it the page we intended to rank?

These metrics tell a sequence. Position shows whether visibility is improving. Impressions show how often the result is being seen. Click-through rate shows how often that visibility earns attention. Clicks show how much traffic reaches the site.

Read them together. A position can improve while clicks fall because demand declined. Impressions can rise while click-through rate falls because the result is now appearing for broader searches. Click-through rate can improve without more clicks if the search volume is small. One number rarely explains the situation by itself.

Average position is also exactly what its name says: an average. It changes by query, device, location, user, and search-result format. Use it to monitor direction and significant changes, not as a promise that every person will see the same rank.

Most importantly, segment the data. Review the priority queries and their assigned pages instead of hiding them inside sitewide totals. The strategy was built around specific opportunities. The reporting should preserve that focus.

Connect Visibility to Business

Search metrics are leading indicators. They show whether the system is sending attention. The business still needs to know what that attention produces.

Track the actions that represent value: qualified form submissions, calls, bookings, purchases, direction requests, downloads, or other meaningful conversions. When possible, connect those actions to revenue, pipeline, or closed business. A thousand visits are less valuable than ten qualified opportunities if opportunities are what the company needs.

For a local business, include the Google Business Profile as a primary data source. Monitor calls, website clicks, direction requests, bookings, messages, and other relevant interactions available to the profile. A customer may convert directly from the search result without visiting the website, so website analytics cannot tell the whole story.

If directories, citations, partner sites, or campaigns send meaningful traffic, tag their website links consistently with UTM parameters where the platform allows it. This helps analytics identify the source, medium, and campaign instead of mixing valuable referrals into an unclear category.

Use a documented naming convention. `Partner` and `partner` can become separate values. Inconsistent tags create fragmented data and make simple questions unnecessarily difficult to answer.

Separate Direct Data from Estimates

Use the closest available source to the event you are measuring.

Search Console reports Google's own search-performance data for your property. Analytics measures activity on the website. The Business Profile reports interactions with that profile. A customer relationship or sales system records leads and revenue.

SEO platforms such as Semrush and Ahrefs are extremely useful for research, competitor comparisons, rank tracking, and discovering patterns. Their traffic, authority, and keyword figures are estimates or proprietary measurements. That does not make them useless. It means they must be labeled honestly.

Never present an estimated traffic number as if it came from the client's analytics. Never present a third-party authority score as if it were a Google metric. Never allow two tools using different methods to create a false crisis because their totals do not match.

Every dashboard should make the source and meaning of each important metric clear.

Let AI Learn the Strategy

AI can make reporting faster, but only after it understands the campaign.

Do not give a model a table of numbers and ask for an analysis from a blank perspective. Give it the business objective, priority services, money keywords, target locations, assigned pages, completed work, expected time horizon, and the definitions of the metrics it receives.

Then ask it to compare the current period with the relevant previous period, identify meaningful changes, distinguish evidence from inference, and draft an explanation framed around the strategy.

The human remains responsible for the report. Check the numbers, question surprising conclusions, add the operational context, and remove statements the data does not support. Automation should accelerate interpretation, not manufacture certainty.

A well-designed system can collect the data, refresh the dashboard, flag unusual changes, and prepare a first draft. Your value is deciding what matters and what to do about it.

Communicate Bad News Quickly

Transparency matters most when the numbers are uncomfortable.

Do not wait for the monthly report to mention a major ranking loss, tracking failure, broken conversion path, suspended profile, or sudden traffic decline. Communicate quickly. Explain what is known, what is not yet known, what you are checking, and when the client will hear from you again.

Do not hide behind algorithm updates. A change in the search environment may be part of the explanation, but the useful question is what the evidence allows us to do next.

Sometimes the answer is to repair an execution problem. Sometimes competitors have improved. Sometimes demand is seasonal. Sometimes the original hypothesis was wrong. Good reporting makes that visible early enough to adjust.

Honesty does not weaken confidence. Silence does.

The Monthly Report

A useful monthly report can be short. It needs to answer five questions:

What did we do? Summarize the work completed, not every task touched.

What changed? Show the most meaningful movement in visibility, engagement, and business outcomes.

Why do we think it changed? Separate what the data proves from what you infer.

What does it mean for the goal? Connect the movement to the agreed strategy and business objective.

What happens next? State the priorities, adjustments, tests, and any decision or resource needed from the client.

That is enough. The dashboard holds the detail. The report creates understanding. The communication creates continuity.

If the research, strategy, and execution are disciplined, reporting should not be a performance designed to protect you from the client. It should be a shared view of the work.

Show the truth early. Explain it clearly. Keep the client close to the strategy. Results demonstrate the value of search marketing, but transparent communication allows the client to see how that value is being built.

AI Optimization: Improve Your Visibility on AI Platforms



You want to know how to rank in AI?
First, relax.

Do not let a new name convince you that everything you know has become obsolete. AI changes the search experience, but it does not remove the need to find, evaluate, and organize information. If you understand search marketing, you already understand much of the foundation.

The interfaces are new. The underlying commercial problem is not. People ask questions. A system decides which information to use and which businesses to mention. We want the right business to be visible in that answer.

That is still search marketing.

AI Does Not Work from One Database

The simplified explanation of an AI model is often misleading. It does not contain a conventional database with one stored answer for every question.

A large language model learns patterns from its training data. When it answers from that training alone, its knowledge may be incomplete or outdated. When an AI product needs current, local, niche, or source-backed information, it can use a retrieval system to search external information—including the web—and use what it finds to construct an answer.

The retrieval system may rely on a traditional search provider, the platform's own index, connected databases, or several sources at once. It may break one question into multiple related searches. It then evaluates material, combines information, and presents an answer that may include citations or links.

This is why SEO remains relevant. Google has explicitly stated that its AI search experiences are rooted in its core Search ranking and quality systems. Other AI platforms also use web search and retrieval when the question calls for current information.

But do not overstate the conclusion. Not every AI answer searches the live web, and AI optimization is not identical to traditional SEO. A model may rely on training, retrieve from different indexes, combine several sources, or mention a brand without linking to it. SEO is the foundation—not the entire practice.

AI Search Is Easier to Investigate

We have never had a complete view of a search engine's ranking algorithm. We observe the results, study patterns, form hypotheses, and test them.

AI search gives us another useful surface to inspect. We can see the answer, the brands it mentions, and—in many experiences—the sources supporting it. We cannot see the system's complete private reasoning, but we can examine the evidence it chose to expose.

That makes the starting exercise simple:

Ask the questions your customers would ask. Record which companies appear. Open every cited source. Identify what those sources say about the winners. Then compare that evidence with the information available about your business.

This is competitor analysis and content-gap analysis applied to a generated answer.

Test the Market, Not One Prompt

One answer is not a ranking.

AI responses can change with the wording of the question, follow-up context, location, account, model, retrieval method, and time. A business may appear for “best cybersecurity company for a hospital” and disappear for “cybersecurity firms for healthcare.”

Build a small prompt set around the real customer journey:

Discovery prompts. Who provides this service? What are the available options?

Comparison prompts. Which companies are best for a particular need, location, budget, or type of customer?

Validation prompts. Is this company trustworthy? What do customers say? What experience or evidence does it have?

Decision prompts. Which option should I choose, and why?

Test meaningful variations across several AI platforms and, when relevant, different locations, devices, accounts, and clean conversations. Repeat the tests over time. Record mentions, position within the answer, sentiment, cited domains, cited pages, and the claims used to justify each recommendation.

The objective is not to force identical answers everywhere. It is to find recurring patterns.

Follow the Sources

If a competitor appears and you do not, ask why the available evidence makes that recommendation easier.

Perhaps the competitor has more credible reviews. Perhaps it appears in an industry directory that the AI repeatedly cites. Perhaps its services, locations, prices, credentials, or customer type are clearer. Perhaps independent websites confirm its reputation. Perhaps it has published original evidence that directly answers the question.

The gap may exist on your website, but it may also exist somewhere you do not control. AI platforms can rely on review sites, directories, news coverage, forums, marketplaces, professional associations, public records, and other third-party sources.

This connects everything in the book. Keyword research reveals the language. Search-intent analysis reveals the need. On-page SEO makes your own evidence clear. Off-page SEO creates consistent confirmation across the web. Monitoring shows whether visibility becomes business.

AI optimization does not replace those disciplines. It reveals where they are incomplete.

Become Easy to Retrieve and Cite

An AI system cannot use information it cannot reliably access or understand.

Keep important pages crawlable and indexable. Make the essential answer available in text instead of hiding it inside an image, video, or interaction. Use descriptive titles, headings, internal links, and structured data that matches the visible content. Keep product feeds, business profiles, locations, availability, and other factual sources current.

Different platforms use different crawlers and controls. If you want visibility in a particular AI search product, confirm that your site is not blocking the crawler responsible for search discovery. Do not assume that permission for search, model training, and every AI product is controlled in exactly the same way.

Write so the evidence can be extracted without losing its meaning. State what the business does, whom it serves, where it operates, and what makes the claim credible. Support important statements with original data, examples, methodology, dates, authorship, and primary sources where appropriate.

Clarity matters more than writing in a robotic “AI-friendly” style. A concise answer helps, but the complete page must still satisfy the person who opens the citation.

Build Evidence Beyond Your Website

Your website can claim that you are excellent. Other sources help establish whether the market agrees.

AI visibility is partly an entity and reputation problem. The company name, category, location, services, people, and credentials should be described consistently across reliable sources. Reviews should reflect genuine customer experiences. Industry profiles should be complete. Relevant partners and publications should be able to verify the relationships and expertise they mention.

Do not create fake consensus by filling the web with copied profiles, manufactured reviews, or automated articles. Repetition is not credibility. Ten low-quality pages repeating the same claim do not necessarily outweigh one independent, authoritative source with real evidence.

The objective is to make the truth about the business easy to confirm.

Win with Information That Does Not Already Exist

My favorite opportunity in AI search is the content gap.

Generated answers often need several pieces of information to satisfy a complex question. Google describes this as query fan-out: the system may issue related searches across subtopics and data sources before constructing the response.

This creates opportunities beyond competing head-on with the oldest and strongest website for the broadest keyword. Find the unanswered follow-up question, the missing comparison, the underserved location, the new development, or the angle nobody has explained properly.

Publish the first genuinely useful resource. Contribute original experience, a dataset, a test, a method, a case study, or a clear answer supported by evidence. Make the page strong enough that an AI system can use it and a human reader will be glad it did.

Do not confuse a content gap with an excuse to publish something merely because no one else has. Sometimes a topic is empty because nobody needs it. Return to research. The best opportunity combines unmet information with real demand.

That is the same principle we have followed from the beginning: pick your battles.

Ignore the New Fluff

Every platform change creates a market for shortcuts.

Be skeptical of anyone promising guaranteed AI citations, secret internal metrics, or a special file or markup that supposedly replaces SEO. Google states that its AI search features require no special schema or new machine-readable AI file. OpenAI recommends allowing its search crawler if you want content to be discoverable in ChatGPT search, but crawler access only creates eligibility. It does not guarantee selection.

Mass-producing generic AI content is not an AI-optimization strategy. If the material adds no original value, it gives both the system and the reader little reason to choose it.

Use new tools when they help you research, structure, test, and improve the work. Do not buy a new vocabulary when the provider cannot explain the evidence behind it.

Measure What You Can Observe

AI visibility measurement is still evolving. Do not pretend it is more precise than it is.

Maintain the prompt set and repeat it consistently. Track brand mentions, cited pages, cited domains, sentiment, and changes across platforms. Monitor referral traffic from AI products. Use direct platform reporting when it is available, and label third-party visibility scores as estimates.

Then connect the measurement to business outcomes. A citation that nobody sees is less important than a recommendation that sends a qualified customer. A mention can still create value without a click, but the eventual question remains familiar: did the visibility improve trust, demand, leads, or revenue?

Search Marketing Survives the Interface

Do not panic about AI optimization. Study it.

If you are practicing SEO properly, you have already built much of the foundation: accessible pages, clear language, useful content, structured information, credible references, consistent business data, and a reputation beyond your own website.

Now inspect the generated answers. Follow their sources. Find the missing evidence. Test across prompts and platforms. Improve the assets you control and earn better confirmation from the sources you do not.

AI will change how people search. It may change what a result looks like, how attribution works, and which platforms matter. But AI search still needs information, retrieval, evaluation, and evidence.

As long as people or machines search—and we can influence the information they find—search marketing remains possible.

Conclusion: Search Marketing Is a Way of Thinking



Search marketing is not a collection of tricks. It is a way of thinking.

Platforms will change. Interfaces will change. The language of the industry will change. The discipline survives because the human behavior underneath it remains familiar: people need something, they search for it, and they evaluate what they find.

Our job is to understand that process well enough to place the right business in the right search at the right moment.

Begin with Reality

The golden rule of this book is simple: do not build a strategy from assumptions.

Research how people search—not how you imagine they search and not necessarily how the business describes itself. Study the results. Understand the intent behind the query. Look at the competitors already earning visibility. Let the market show you which assets, language, evidence, and experience the search demands.

Then make your decisions.

This does not make marketing less creative. It gives creativity a useful problem to solve. Research defines the field; creativity finds the best route through it.

Pick Your Battles

You do not win by attacking every keyword, copying every competitor, or publishing more pages than everyone else. You win by recognizing the opportunities where demand, commercial value, relevance, and a realistic path to visibility meet.

That is what I mean by picking your battles.

A smaller opportunity you can dominate may be worth more than a famous keyword you cannot realistically reach. A missing answer may be more valuable than another version of a page the strongest websites have already perfected. Strategy is not the art of doing everything. It is the discipline of deciding what deserves to be done.

Build a Complete Presence

Once you understand the opportunity, create the assets that satisfy it.

Make the website clear, useful, fast, structured, and easy to understand. Use the language people actually search. Build the pages around distinct intentions instead of allowing them to compete with one another. Make the business easy to verify beyond its own website through accurate profiles, genuine reviews, relevant citations, credible relationships, and useful content that earns references naturally.

The goal is not to manipulate a platform. The goal is to make the business the clearest and most credible answer.

That principle applies whether the result appears as a traditional blue link, a map listing, a marketplace profile, a video, or an AI-generated recommendation.

Measure, Communicate, Adjust

Research begins the strategy, but it does not end when execution starts.

Monitor the money keywords. Watch visibility, clicks, click-through rate, leads, and the business outcomes that matter. Separate direct data from estimates. Learn from what changes. Adjust when the evidence tells you to adjust.

And communicate.

Good work can still lose trust when it is invisible. Give clients a clear view of what is happening, explain what the numbers mean, and frame every report around the strategy and its goals. Results matter, but transparent and timely communication is what allows people to understand the work before, during, and after those results arrive.

Keep Learning

I entered this field without knowing that the work I was doing had a name. I wrote thousands of articles, followed a plugin until its light turned green, and learned through repetition, responsibility, mistakes, and the trust other people placed in me.

That experience taught me something more valuable than any fixed checklist: learn how to learn.

Search marketing rewards observation. When the platform changes, study the results. When a competitor wins, investigate why. When a strategy fails, return to the assumptions beneath it. When a new interface appears, look past the new terminology and ask the old questions: What is the person trying to find? What information is the system using? What evidence is missing? What can we improve?

If you can answer those questions honestly, you can adapt.

Search marketing will evolve. That is not a reason to panic. It is the reason this work remains interesting.

Research first. Understand the intent. Pick your battles. Build the best answer you can. Measure what happens. Then learn and do it again.

That is the practice.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank my brother, whose interest in this subject gave me countless opportunities to discuss it, question it, and understand my own ideas more clearly.

I also want to thank every boss and client—past and present—who trusted me with their work. That trust gave me the experience and the data behind this book. Without them, I would not have these lessons to share.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Alejandro Muñoz was born in Bogotá, Colombia. He spent five years trying to become a singer before taking a job writing two news articles a day — and only later realized the technique he had been using was called search engine optimization.

After more than six years in search, he now leads SEO for a portfolio of U.S. service brands: strategy, on-page and off-page execution, reporting, and, more recently, web development. He works with businesses that want to be found — in Google, on maps and marketplaces, and inside AI answers. This book is the philosophy behind that work, and his thirtieth-birthday gift to himself.

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