FIELD GUIDE 01 · CONTENT

The Question-First Content Plan

How to build a content calendar from what customers actually ask, use AI without publishing filler, and keep it going when you're busy.



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Most content plans start with "what should we post?" A better starting point is "what do people keep asking us before they buy?" Answer those questions well, in public, and you have a content plan that's useful even if nobody ever books a call.

The old playbook said to build detailed buyer personas, map content to a four-stage buying cycle and fill a calendar three months out. The bones are still good. What changed is the environment around them:

- **Search answers back now.** Google's AI Overviews and AI Mode summarize answers and link to sources. Google says there are no special extra requirements to appear there beyond normal SEO fundamentals and helpful, people-first content.
- **Generating text is nearly free.** That makes generic content worth less, not more. Google's spam policies specifically call out using generative AI to produce many pages without adding value.
- **Trust signals matter more.** Who wrote it, how it was made and whether it reflects real experience are part of how readers (and Google's quality guidance) judge a page.

So the job is the same, with sharper edges: publish fewer, better answers that come from real conversations.

Step 1: Build a question bank, not a persona deck

Personas can turn into fiction fast ("Marketing Mary, 34, loves lattes"). A question bank is harder to fake because every entry has a source.

WHERE QUESTIONS COME FROM

- Sales calls, intake forms and quote requests (with permission, and with personal details removed)
- Support emails and the same three questions your team answers every week
- Reviews of your business and of competitors, especially the 2- and 3-star ones that explain what was missing
- Community threads, comment sections and Q&A sites where your buyers talk to each other
- "People also ask" boxes and related searches in Google

For each question, write it the way the customer said it, not the way you'd phrase it in a brochure. "Why is my quote so different from the last guy's?" beats "Understanding pricing variance."

PRIVACY CHECK

Customer conversations are not raw material you own. Strip names, emails, phone numbers, addresses and anything sensitive before a question goes into a shared doc or an AI tool. If you can't share a detail with the customer in the room, don't paste it into a prompt.

TAG EVERY QUESTION THREE WAYS

1. **Stage.** Is the person just noticing a problem, comparing options, or ready to choose?
2. **Stakes.** What does getting it wrong cost them: money, time, safety, embarrassment?
3. **Proof needed.** What would make your answer believable: a photo, a number, a process, a named source?

This replaces the persona with something you can act on. A question tagged "comparing · high stakes · needs process proof" practically tells you what to write.

Step 2: Match the format to the stage

The original guide mapped content types to buying stages. That still works, as long as you treat it as a starting point rather than a law.

STAGE	WHAT THE READER NEEDS	FORMATS THAT TEND TO FIT
Noticing a problem	Plain-language explanation, reassurance	Short posts, explainer videos, FAQ answers
Researching options	Honest trade-offs, what to watch out for	Guides, checklists, comparison articles
Comparing providers	Evidence, process, fit	Case write-ups (with permission), process pages, pricing logic
Ready to choose	Clarity, next step, low friction	Service pages, booking or contact pages, onboarding FAQs

A useful test before you publish anything: **If this were the only thing someone read from you, would they be better off?** If not, it's not ready.

Step 3: Use AI as a research assistant, not a ghostwriter

AI tools are genuinely useful in a content workflow. They're also very good at producing confident, generic paragraphs. Here's a division of labor that keeps the useful part.

GOOD JOBS FOR AI	JOBS THAT STAY HUMAN
Clustering a messy question list into themes	Deciding which questions matter to your business
Suggesting outlines and gaps you missed	Supplying real examples, opinions and experience
Turning your rough notes into a cleaner first draft	Fact-checking every claim, number and link
Rewriting a long piece into a short social version	Approving anything published under your name
Drafting title and meta description options	Judging tone, privacy and whether it's actually helpful

Google's own guidance on AI-generated content says to fact-check and review it before publishing, including metadata like titles and descriptions, and to consider telling readers how automation was used when they'd reasonably wonder.

> **WHERE THIS GOES WRONG**
> Spinning up 50 near-identical articles ("Best X in [city]") with AI is exactly the pattern Google's scaled content abuse policy describes. One genuinely useful answer beats fifty thin ones.

Step 4: A calendar you can actually keep

The original advice was to plan three months ahead and publish every other business day. For most small teams that turns into a calendar full of guilt. A sustainable rhythm beats an ambitious one.

A REALISTIC STARTING CADENCE

- **One anchor piece every two weeks.** A thorough answer to one high-value question (article, video or both).
- **Three to five small pieces from each anchor.** A short post, a clip, an email, an FAQ entry, a sales-team snippet.
- **One maintenance hour a month.** Update anything outdated, fix broken links, and note new questions that came in.

That's roughly two anchors a month and a steady stream of smaller posts, without pretending you have a newsroom.

WHAT TO TRACK

Skip vanity totals. Watch whether the content does a job:

- Do sales or support conversations reference it ("I read your piece on…")?
- Are people reaching the next step from it (contact page, newsletter signup, booking)?

- In Google Search Console, which queries bring people to it? AI Overviews and AI Mode traffic is included in the Performance report's "Web" search type, not broken out separately.

WORKSHEET

Your question bank (start with 10)

QUESTION, IN THE CUSTOMER'S WORDS	SOURCE	STAGE	STAKES	PROOF NEEDED

Pick your first anchor

Which question above comes up most often *and* has the highest stakes?

What does a genuinely complete answer need to include?

What real example, photo, process or source can you add that a generic AI answer couldn't?

CHECKLIST

Before anything goes live

- [ ] It answers one clear question, stated near the top.
- [ ] Every fact, number and link has been checked by a person.
- [ ] Customer details are removed or used with permission.
- [ ] The title describes the page honestly, without exaggeration.
- [ ] It says who wrote it and, where readers would wonder, how AI was used.
- [ ] There's one obvious next step for a reader who wants more.
- [ ] Someone outside the project could read it and say "that was useful."

Four-week starter calendar

WEEK	ANCHOR PIECE	SMALL PIECES FROM IT	OWNER
1			
2			
3			
4			

SOURCES CHECKED NOVEMBER 6, 2026

- Google Search Central, "AI features and your website" (developers.google.com/search/docs/appearance/ai-features).
- Google Search Central, "Google Search's guidance on using generative AI content on your website" (developers.google.com/search/docs/fundamentals/using-gen-ai-content).
- Google Search Central, "Creating helpful, reliable, people-first content" (developers.google.com/search/docs/fundamentals/creating-helpful-content).
- Google Search Central, "Spam policies for Google web search," scaled content abuse (developers.google.com/search/docs/essentials/spam-policies).

How this guide was made

This guide started as an older content-strategy white paper in my reference library (personas, buying stages, an editorial calendar). I rewrote it from the ground up for how marketing actually works in late 2026, then checked the platform-specific parts against official documentation on November 6, 2026. Platforms change their menus, defaults and policies often, so treat anything tied to a specific tool as "true as of that date" and recheck before you spend money.

A few ground rules I hold myself to in these guides:

- **Examples are illustrative.** Numbers in worked examples are made up to show the math. They are not client results, forecasts or promises.
- **No guarantees.** Nobody can promise you rankings, AI citations, leads or a return on ad spend. Anyone who does is guessing or selling.
- **Named ideas keep their names.** Where a framework comes from someone else, I say so.
- **AI helped, a human decides.** This draft was prepared with AI assistance and is pending my review. If you use AI in any workflow here, keep a person responsible for accuracy, privacy and the final call.

About Jay Minakhom. I build businesses, test technology, and share what I learn about making work and life better. Writing lives at jayminakhom.com. Client marketing work runs through J Squared Productions at jsquaredproductions.com. My newsletter is called *Since you didn't ask* (working title).

This is a draft for review dated November 6, 2026. Not legal, tax or financial advice.