FIELD GUIDE 12 · SEARCH & AI ANSWERS

AEO

When Search Answers Back

An SEO and answer-engine field guide for 2026: technical basics, content that earns trust, how AI search features actually work, and how to vet anyone who promises rankings.

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The original e-book opened by calling out the "if we build it, they will come" approach to content. That's still the right place to start. Great content is necessary. It isn't a strategy on its own, and in 2026 the search results page often answers the question before anyone clicks.

AEO (answer engine optimization) is the industry's name for being understood, trusted and cited by AI-driven answers. It's a useful label. It's not a separate discipline with secret rules. Google says plainly that the best practices for SEO remain relevant for AI Overviews and AI Mode, and that there are no additional requirements or special optimizations needed. So this guide covers the fundamentals that serve both.

Part 1: Make sure you can be found at all

Check indexing in Search Console

The original suggested a `site:yourdomain.com` search to see what's indexed. It's a rough spot-check. Search Console's **Page indexing report** is the accurate view, showing which pages are indexed and why others aren't.

- Verify your site in Google Search Console.
- Check that robots.txt isn't blocking important sections, and that any CDN or security layer isn't blocking Googlebot.
- On WordPress, make sure "Discourage search engines from indexing this site" is unchecked once you launch.
- Look for unexpected indexed pages (tag archives, search results, plugin-generated pages) and clean them up.

One version of each page

Make sure `http`, `https`, `www` and non-`www` versions all resolve to one preferred version with redirects, and that duplicate pages point to a canonical URL.

Helpful errors

A custom 404 page that helps people find what they wanted is good practice. It should still return a real 404 status, and moved pages should redirect to their new home.

Images and alt text

Descriptive alt text helps people using screen readers and helps search engines understand images. Write it for humans; don't stuff keywords.

Titles and descriptions

The e-book gave fixed character limits. Google's documentation says there's no limit on meta description length; snippets are truncated as needed to fit the device, and Google often builds snippets from page content. Write titles that describe the page honestly and descriptions that summarize it accurately. Front-load what matters.

Page experience

Fast, stable, mobile-friendly pages help users and align with what Google's systems reward. Use Core Web Vitals (LCP, INP, CLS) as a guide, not a scoreboard to max out.

Part 2: Content that earns trust

Google's guidance on helpful content asks whether content provides original information or analysis, whether it's written by someone who knows the topic, and whether a reader leaves feeling they've learned enough to reach their goal. It also suggests thinking about **Who** created it, **How** (including any AI use) and **Why**.

WHAT THAT MEANS IN PRACTICE

- **Lead with experience.** Real photos, real processes, real numbers you're allowed to share.
- **Answer the question early,** then add the depth.
- **Show authorship.** Bylines and an About page with real background. Fabricated author profiles are explicitly called deceptive.
- **Use AI as a helper,** then fact-check everything, including titles, descriptions and alt text. Google's spam policies name mass-producing pages with generative AI without adding value as scaled content abuse.
- **Update for real.** Changing dates without changing substance doesn't help and can mislead.

Part 3: How AI search features work (per Google)

From Google Search Central's "AI features and your website," checked November 6, 2026:

- AI Overviews and AI Mode may use a “query fan-out” technique, running related searches across subtopics to build a response and surface supporting links.
- To be eligible as a supporting link, a page must be indexed and eligible to show with a snippet. There are no additional technical requirements.
- You don’t need new machine-readable files, AI text files or special schema to appear.
- Traffic from these features is included in Search Console’s Performance report under the “Web” search type.
- Controls: robots.txt manages crawling for Search; `nosnippet`, `data-nosnippet`, `max-snippet` and `noindex` limit what’s shown. Google-Extended relates to some of Google’s other AI systems, not Search.

Other AI assistants run their own crawlers and policies. Check each one’s documentation before deciding what to allow or block. And be skeptical of anyone selling guaranteed AI citations. Google now explicitly includes attempts to manipulate generative AI responses in its definition of spam.

Part 4: Earning attention and links

The e-book’s outreach advice had a good core: find the right editor, understand what they publish, follow their guidelines and pitch something that helps their readers. That still works. A few updates:

- **Don’t guess people’s email addresses** to cold-pitch them. Use published contact routes.
- **Expert-source platforms** connecting journalists and sources still exist (for example, HARO at helpareporter.com). Answer only where you have real expertise.
- **Podcasts and community events** remain good ways to reach new audiences.
- **Unlinked mentions:** politely asking a site that already mentions you to add a link is fine.
- **Gifting and sponsorships:** Google’s link-spam policy includes sending someone a product in exchange for writing about it with a link. Paid or gifted placements should use `rel="sponsored"` or `nofollow`, and the FTC’s Endorsement Guides (16 CFR Part 255) expect material connections to be disclosed.

Part 5: Vetting an SEO or AEO provider

The e-book’s three “fatal traps” were private blog networks, agencies that can’t rank themselves, and rankings for keywords nobody searches. The first and third still hold. I’d replace the second (ranking for “SEO agency + city” is a narrow test) with better questions.

CHECKLIST

Questions to ask any SEO / AEO provider

- [ ] How do you build links? (Walk away from PBNs, link buying or "guaranteed backlinks.")
- [ ] Do you guarantee rankings, traffic or AI citations? (The honest answer is no.)
- [ ] How do you use AI in content, and who fact-checks it?
- [ ] Which keywords or questions will you target, and why do they matter to revenue?
- [ ] What will you report monthly, using what definitions and date ranges?
- [ ] Will I own the content, accounts and data if we stop working together?
- [ ] Can I speak to current clients, with their permission?

WORKSHEET

Your first 90 days

WEEKS	FOCUS	SPECIFIC TASKS	DONE
1–2	Foundations	Search Console verified; indexing, robots.txt, redirects and canonicals checked	
3–4	Page experience	Worst Core Web Vitals pages identified and fixed; mobile check	
5–8	Content	Three to four high-value questions answered thoroughly, with real examples and authorship	
9–10	Attention	One real partnership, podcast or expert-source answer; unlinked mentions followed up	
11–12	Review	Search Console queries and pages reviewed; next quarter’s questions chosen	

The three questions customers ask most that we haven’t answered well online:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

SOURCES CHECKED NOVEMBER 6, 2026

- Google Search Central, "AI features and your website" (developers.google.com/search/docs/appearance/ai-features).
- Google Search Central, "Creating helpful, reliable, people-first content" and "Google Search's guidance on using generative AI content" (developers.google.com/search/docs/fundamentals).
- Google Search Central, "Spam policies for Google web search" (developers.google.com/search/docs/essentials/spam-policies).
- Google Search Central, "Control your snippets in search results" (developers.google.com/search/docs/appearance/snippet) and "Influencing title links" (.../appearance/title-link).
- Search Console Help, "Page indexing report" (support.google.com/webmasters/answer/7440203); "Introduction to robots.txt" (developers.google.com/search/docs/crawling-indexing/robots/intro).
- Google Search Central, "Understanding Core Web Vitals and Google search results."
- Help a Reporter Out (helpareporter.com); U.S. FTC Endorsement Guides, 16 CFR Part 255 (ecfr.gov).

How this guide was made

This guide started as an older agency “SEO secrets” e-book in my reference library covering site audits, page speed, content backlogs, competitor research, editor outreach, SEO copywriting, alternative traffic sources, infographics, email capture and warning signs in SEO agencies. Field Guide 11 is the short cheat-sheet companion. 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.