NO IDEA WORKSHOP RECAP | NOVEMBER 18, 2026

# Answer Engine Optimization for Local Business

Your next customer might ask AI where to go. Here's what helps your business make the list.

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WHY THIS MATTERS

# More customers are asking AI where to go

**45%**

of consumers used AI tools for local recommendations this year, up from 6% the year before

BrightLocal, 2026

**37%**

of people who use AI tools now start their searches there instead of Google

Eight Oh Two survey of 500 AI users, 2026

**AEO adds to SEO. It doesn't replace it.** Google is still where most searches start, so you need both.

A REAL EXAMPLE FROM THIS WEEK

# Ranking first on Google didn't get them recommended

### The business that called us

300+ Google reviews, 4.9 stars, #1 on Google and Bing. They'd seen a drop in new customers and noticed they weren't showing up in ChatGPT. When we described their services without naming them, they didn't come up.

### Who ChatGPT picked

About 24 reviews, 4.7 stars, but plenty of videos and before-and-after photos showing the work. More evidence for AI to draw on.

The data backs this up: ChatGPT recommended **1.2%** of business locations studied, vs. **35.9%** appearing in Google's local 3-pack.

Source: SOCi Local Visibility Index, 2026 (multi-location brands)

HOW ANSWER ENGINES DECIDE

# AI looks for proof you're real, specific and good at what you do

| Where it looks | What it learns |
|---|---|
| Your website | What you do, where, and for whom |
| Reviews | What customers actually experienced, and how recently |
| Listings | Google, Bing, Apple Maps and Yelp, which now licenses its data to ChatGPT |
| Video and mentions | Whether other people talk about you. YouTube mentions had the strongest link to AI visibility (Ahrefs) |
| The person asking | Their location, and their saved preferences if memory is turned on |

Sources: Ahrefs study of 75,000 brands, 2025 (correlation, not proof of cause); Axios, July 2026

REVIEWS

# Specific reviews, answered quickly

1. **Specific beats generic.** "Great service!" doesn't tell AI what you did. "Best deep-tissue massage I've had in Carbondale" does.

2. **Reply to every review, good and bad.** 89% of consumers expect a reply, and 70% expect one to a negative review within 1 to 3 days.

3. **Vary your wording.** Half of consumers are put off by templated replies.

4. **A reply doesn't change the star rating.** It changes the story around it, for customers and for AI.

Sources: BrightLocal Local Consumer Review Survey, 2026; LocalImpact, State of Online Reviews, 2026

HEALTHCARE AND BANKING

# Regulated businesses play by different review rules

### Expect fewer details

Patients and account holders rarely post specifics about their doctor, health or bank. That's normal, not a failure.

### Healthcare: never confirm a patient

Don't mention care or even confirm someone is a patient in a reply. Federal regulators have fined practices for it, including $10,000 and $30,000 settlements.

### Banking: take it offline

Never discuss accounts or personal details publicly. Thank them, invite them to call, and sign with a real name.

Source: HHS Office for Civil Rights settlements, 2019 and 2023

REVIEWS INTO CONTENT

# Give your best reviews a second life

| Turn this | Into this |
| --- | --- |
| A great written review | A short video of that customer telling their story |
| Reviews spread across Google | A customer-stories section on your website |
| A one-line "thanks!" reply | A reply that names the service and the town |
| "Leave us a review" | "What did you like, and what could we do better?" |

One local business with just 24 reviews turned that feedback into video testimonials, graphics and before-and-after posts across every platform.

Never write, buy or reward reviews. Google and the FTC both prohibit it.

CONTENT STRATEGY

# Content should be evidence, not filler

**Talk about it**

Explain your services and what you do differently.

**Show it**

Your staff, your space, your work, before and after.

**Let others say it**

Reviews, testimonials, partners and local press.

**Real beats polished. Generic AI posts cost trust: posts labeled as AI-made got 7 to 8% fewer likes.**

Source: USC study of 1M TikTok posts, Journal of Consumer Research, 2026

PLANNING

# Plan content around your real customers

1. **Know who each post is for.** Most businesses serve more than one type of customer.
2. **Name the place.** "Downtown Murphysboro," not "the best food downtown." AI needs to know which downtown.
3. **Share the small details.** A real person answers the phone. A free drink when you arrive.
4. **Answer common questions in your own voice,** and say what the experience will be like.
5. **Use a consistent calendar, not trends.** Trends get likes but rarely set you apart.

DISTRIBUTION

# One video, tailored for each platform

### Do this

Mix formats: video, photos, graphics, posts, blogs and web pages.

Fit the title, caption, description and tone to each platform.

Name files clearly: furnace-install-murphysboro.jpg, not IMG_4512.jpg.

### Captions, done right

Upload a caption file (.srt) where the platform allows it, like YouTube, LinkedIn and Facebook. Search can read that text.

Burned-in captions help viewers on Reels and TikTok, but they're part of the picture, so search can't read them. Use both.

**Skip geotagging photos.** Google strips that data on upload, and tests show no ranking benefit.

Sources: Whitespark Local Search Ranking Factors; Search Engine Land geotagging study, 2025

MEASUREMENT

# Map the customer journey before you rebuild anything

### Where do they start?

A video, a social post, a search, a referral.

### Where do they go next?

Your website, your profile, your phone line.

### Where do they leave?

That's the step to fix: the landing page, intro or call to action.

**Likes aren't the only signal.** Someone can watch a video, never like it, and visit your website a week later. Attribution shows that; likes don't.

Also check your site for broken links, bad redirects and missing pages.

CHECK YOUR VISIBILITY

# How to test what AI says about you, fairly

1. **Use a Temporary Chat or turn memory off.** Telling ChatGPT to "remove my bias" doesn't erase what it already knows about you.
2. **Ask like a customer.** Describe the need and the town, not your business name.
3. **Try more than one tool:** ChatGPT, Gemini, Perplexity and Google's AI Mode.
4. **Ask the same question a few times.** Answers change from one try to the next.
5. **Then ask what's missing:** "What would make you recommend [business]?"

Source: OpenAI, Memory and Temporary Chat controls

TIMING

# How long does this take?

### Google SEO

Typically four months to a year to see results, per Google's own guidance on hiring an SEO.

### AI answers

No published timeline. ChatGPT and Perplexity search the live web, so new content can appear quickly, but nobody can promise a date.

### Keyword stuffing

Against Google's spam policies, and it gave no lift in AI visibility in testing. In some tests it made things worse.

Plan in months. Measure every month.

Sources: Google Search Central (Maile Ohye); Aggarwal et al., GEO study, KDD 2024

LISTINGS AND PHONE CALLS

# Keep your details identical everywhere

### Match your info

Same name, address, phone and hours on your website, Google, Bing, Apple Maps, Yelp and Facebook. AI tools got business details wrong about 1 in 3 times.

### AI may call you

Google's AI now calls some businesses to ask about prices and availability. It says up front that it's automated, and you can opt out in your Business Profile.

### Watch for scams

Your Google Business Profile is free. Google never charges to verify or fix a listing. Hang up and check it yourself.

Sources: SOCi Local Visibility Index, 2026; Google "Ask for Me" announcements; Google Business Profile help

MENUS, PHOTOS AND LINKS

# Make it real, and make it readable

### Menus and photos

Type your menu as text on your website. A PDF or a photo of the menu alone is harder for AI to read.

Use real photos of your food, people and space. Google won't penalize AI images, but customers trust them less, and your Business Profile requires photos of the real business.

### Two kinds of links

**Backlink:** another website linking to yours, like the chamber, local news or a partner.

**Internal link:** your own blog post linking to your service or about page.

Both help. They just aren't the same thing.

Sources: Google Search Central on AI images (Gary Illyes, 2025); The Harris Poll on trust in AI ads

ACCESSIBILITY

# Accessibility deadlines for grant-funded and healthcare organizations

| Who | Standard | Deadline |
|---|---|---|
| Receives HHS funding, 15+ employees | WCAG 2.1 AA | May 11, 2027 |
| Receives HHS funding, fewer than 15 | WCAG 2.1 AA | May 10, 2028 |

The rules cover websites, apps and content you post, including social media. Start now: add alt text to images and captions to videos.

Both deadlines were pushed back one year in May 2026. Private businesses can still face ADA claims. This is not legal advice.

Source: Federal Register, HHS Section 504 interim final rule, May 11, 2026

WHAT TO DO THIS MONTH

# Five things that make a difference

1. Reply to every review, specifically and within a few days.
2. Make your details match on Google, Bing, Apple Maps, Yelp and Facebook.
3. Rewrite one page so it says what only you can say, and where you are.
4. Post one real video with your name and town in it, with a caption file.
5. Test yourself in ChatGPT in a Temporary Chat, asking like a customer.

SOURCES

# Where the numbers come from


BrightLocal, Local Consumer Review Survey, 2026

Eight Oh Two, 2026 AI and Search Behavior Study

SOCi, Local Visibility Index, 2026

Ahrefs, AI brand visibility study of 75,000 brands, 2025

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HHS Office for Civil Rights, HIPAA review-response settlements

USC, AI disclosure and engagement, Journal of Consumer Research, 2026

Aggarwal et al., GEO: Generative Engine Optimization, KDD 2024

Google Search Central: guidance on SEO timelines and AI-generated images

OpenAI: Memory and Temporary Chat controls

Whitespark and Search Engine Land: geotagging studies

Google "Ask for Me" and Business Profile help pages

The Harris Poll: trust in AI-generated advertising

Federal Register: HHS Section 504 extension, May 2026