

A FIELD MANUAL FROM SECRET OPTIMIZER · EDITION 2026

The Local Search Field Manual

How Your Business Gets Found on Google, Google Maps, and Now AI — Without Hiring an Agency (Yet)

A vet-led playbook for owners who'd rather understand this than get sold it.

★ VET-LED

Ryan Smeltz

Founder, Secret Optimizer · US Army Veteran

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A note before you start

This is a field manual, not a sales brochure. It's built around one subject: how a real local service business — a plumber, an electrician, a salon, an HVAC contractor, a gym, a dentist — actually gets found today. Not five years ago. Today. Google, Google Maps, and increasingly, ChatGPT and Google's AI Overviews.

Most guides like this are written by people who've never run a business with a ringing phone, a truck that needs gas, and a customer who wants an answer now, not next Tuesday. I have. Before Secret Optimizer, I started four other businesses. Three of them died. This guide is built from the lessons in all five.

There are worksheets in here. Short ones — 5 to 15 minutes each. Skip them and you'll have an interesting read. Fill them in and you'll walk away with an actual plan for your business: what to fix first, what it's worth, and what it would take to get it done.

Get a pen, or open a blank doc. Let's get into it.

— Ryan

How to use this guide

This guide covers Search Engine Optimization (SEO) first, because that's still where the money is — real people, searching in real time, for a business exactly like yours. It covers AI search visibility second, because that's the fastest-growing edge of the same problem. It covers automation last, because automation isn't the point — it's just how the work in chapters 2 through 9 actually gets done consistently, whether you do it yourself or someone does it for you.

Read it in order the first time. After that, use the table of contents and jump to what you need.

Is this actually free? What's the catch?

Yes, genuinely free — no email-gated "part 2," no bait-and-switch into a sales call to get the actual content. Every tactic, template, benchmark, and worksheet in this guide is complete, not a teaser for a paid version. You'll see our pricing in Chapter 12 because we're a business and that's honest, not because we hid the useful parts behind it. If you read this cover to cover and

never hire us, that's a fine outcome — a Triangle business owner who understands their own SEO is still good for this community, and some of you will send us a referral down the road because of it.

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Plus: a 100-point self-scoring scorecard, local SEO myths debunked, red flags, safety rules, ready-to-use templates, an industry quick-reference, a sample 30-day calendar, 2026 benchmark data, a curated free-tools list, a glossary, and how to reach me.

WORKSHEET 0

Your Visibility Starting Point

Before you read Chapter 1, spend five minutes on this. It's your baseline. You'll come back to it in Chapter 11.

Where you actually stand today

QUESTION	YOUR ANSWER
Do you rank in the top 3 of the Google Map Pack for your main service + city?	Y / N / Not sure
How many Google reviews do you have?	_____
What's your average star rating?	_____
When was your last Google review? (days ago)	_____
When did you last post to your Google Business Profile?	_____
Do you have a blog or content section on your website?	Y / N
Have you ever checked whether ChatGPT or Google's AI Overview recommends your business?	Y / N
Are you currently paying anyone for SEO or marketing?	Y / N — who: _____

One honest sentence

Finish this: "The reason I haven't fixed my online visibility yet is _____."

Common answers: no time, don't know where to start, got burned by an agency before, didn't know it mattered. Whatever you wrote, keep it in mind — this guide is built to answer it directly.

The 2026 Reality: How People Actually Find a Local Business Now

The three places you get found

Five years ago, "getting found online" meant one thing: ranking on Google. Today it means three things, and most business owners only know about one of them.

1. Google search (blue links). Still real, still the largest single channel by volume, and still the one most owners think of first.

2. The Google Map Pack. The three businesses shown with a map when someone searches "[your service] near me." For a local service business, this is usually worth more than the blue links below it — it's where transactional, ready-to-buy searches land.

3. AI answers. ChatGPT, Perplexity, and Google's own AI Overviews now answer a large and fast-growing share of questions directly, without the person clicking through to any website at all.

Here's the number that matters: zero-click searches — where someone searches, gets an answer, and never clicks a website — passed **68% of all Google searches** in early 2026, up from about 60% just two years earlier. That sounds like the end of SEO. It isn't, and here's why.

The part that's actually changing, and the part that isn't

That 68% number is dragged up almost entirely by informational searches — "how much does a new water heater cost," "how long does a roof last," "signs you need an electrician." Google and AI tools are increasingly happy to answer those directly.

Transactional searches — the ones that actually put money in your account — behave very differently. A study of 540 local searches across six industries found AI Overviews show up in 92-97% of informational searches, but only about 15% of "[service] near me"-style transactional searches. When someone is ready to hire a plumber today, they're still overwhelmingly landing in the Map Pack, not an AI summary.

What this means for you: the searches that pay your bills — "plumber near me," "HVAC repair [your city]," "best salon in [your city]" — are still resolved mostly the old way, through your Google Business Profile and your Map Pack ranking. The searches at risk of disappearing into

an AI answer are the research-phase ones your blog and content would otherwise capture. That's a real, growing problem — but it's not the collapse of local SEO. It's a shift in where the top of your funnel lives.

Why "SEO is dead" is the wrong headline

You're going to hear "SEO is dead, it's all AI now" from vendors trying to sell you something with "AI" in the name. Here's the actual data: search volume for the term "SEO" itself is down sharply this year — but volume for "SEO services for small business" and similar buying-intent phrases is still around 9,900 searches a month at \$37+ per click. Meanwhile "AI search visibility" — the term for the thing that's supposedly replacing SEO — pulls about 880 searches a month. People are still overwhelmingly searching, and paying, for SEO. The AI-search category is real but it's a fraction of the size, and it's not a replacement — it's an addition.

The honest framing, and the one this whole guide is built around: **SEO is still the core. AI search visibility is the fast-growing layer on top of it. Automation is just how the work actually gets done without eating your week.** In that order. That's Chapters 2 through 10, in order.

What this guide is, and isn't

This is not a "10 AI hacks" list. It's the order of operations I use for my own business and install for clients who hire me: Google Business Profile first, reviews second, citations and on-page basics third, content fourth, links fifth, AI-search visibility sixth as a layer on top, and automation last, as the thing that keeps all of it running without costing you 15 hours a week.

Every chapter ends with a short checklist. There are worksheets at key decision points. If you do nothing else, do the worksheets — they're what turn this from an interesting read into an actual plan.

Before you move on

- ☐ I completed Worksheet 0
- ☐ I understand the difference between transactional and informational search
- ☐ I understand why SEO, AI-search visibility, and automation aren't competing priorities — they're layers

DIAGNOSTIC

Score Yourself: The 100-Point Local Visibility Scorecard

Before you go chapter by chapter, here's the whole picture at once. This scorecard mirrors the order of the guide — score yourself honestly now, then come back and re-score after your 90-day plan (Chapter 11) to see the movement.

CATEGORY	POINTS AVAILABLE	YOUR SCORE
Google Business Profile completeness & correctness (Chapter 2)	25	___ / 25
Reviews — count, recency, rating (Chapter 3)	20	___ / 20
Citations & NAP consistency (Chapter 4)	10	___ / 10
Website technical basics (Chapter 5)	15	___ / 15
Content — depth and cadence (Chapter 6)	15	___ / 15
AI-search visibility (Chapter 8)	15	___ / 15
Total	100	___ / 100

How to score each category (give yourself partial credit honestly — this isn't a test to pass, it's a diagnostic):

- **GBP (25 pts):** 5 pts each for: correct primary category, service areas/address set up correctly, posted in the last 7 days, photo added in the last 30 days, all attributes and hours current.
- **Reviews (20 pts):** 5 pts each for: 4.0+ average rating, a review in the last 2 weeks, a real system (not ad-hoc) for asking, a written negative-review response process.
- **Citations (10 pts):** 2 pts each for exact NAP match on Google, Bing, Apple Business Connect, Yelp, and Facebook.
- **Technical (15 pts):** 5 pts each for: passing Core Web Vitals (Chapter 5), no duplicate titles/meta descriptions, phone/address in plain text on every page.

- **Content (15 pts):** 5 pts each for: at least 8 pieces of real local content live, published something in the last 30 days, at least one cost/pricing page live.
- **AI visibility (15 pts):** 5 pts each for: schema markup matches GBP exactly, 15+ FAQ items in direct-answer format, you show up in at least one AI tool's answer for a real customer question.

What your total means:

- **80-100:** You're ahead of most local businesses in this ICP. Focus on maintaining consistency (Chapter 10) and the AI-search layer (Chapter 8), which is where even strong performers usually have room.
- **50-79:** Solid foundation with real gaps. Use your lowest-scoring category as your Chapter 11 priority #1.
- **Below 50:** Normal starting point for most owners who've never done this systematically. Start at Chapter 2 and work through in order — don't skip ahead to Chapter 8 until your GBP and reviews scores are both above 15/20 combined equivalent.

SIDEBAR

Five Local SEO Myths, Debunked

Before the tactical chapters, a few outdated ideas worth clearing up — because acting on any of these actively wastes time or risks a penalty.

Myth: "Keyword stuffing your business name helps you rank." It's actually one of the most common Google Business Profile suspension triggers for trades (Chapter 2). It can get your entire listing taken down, not just penalized.

Myth: "Buying reviews or offering a discount for one works." Google's 2026 policy actively detects this, and it's grounds for having reviews removed or your profile flagged (Chapter 3). It's also just not necessary — a real ask, at the right moment, works better anyway.

Myth: "More pages always means better rankings." Templated pages with the city name swapped out and nothing else different are a known spam pattern Google's systems are built to catch (Chapter 6). A handful of genuinely specific pages beats dozens of thin, near-duplicate ones.

Myth: "AI content gets penalized just for being AI-written." Google's own stated position is that it penalizes low-value content regardless of how it was produced — not AI-assistance itself (Chapter 6). The bar is genuine usefulness, not authorship.

Myth: "SEO and AI-search visibility are two different things you have to choose between." They're not. AI-search visibility (Chapter 8) is built on the same foundation as everything in Chapters 2-7 — schema, reviews, citations, content. There's no such thing as "picking AEO over SEO."

CHAPTER 2

Google Business Profile: Your Highest-Leverage Asset

If you fix exactly one thing after reading this guide, fix your Google Business Profile (GBP). It is the single highest-leverage asset a local service business has, and most owners have never touched it past the day they claimed it.

Category selection: stop stuffing, start choosing

Google now offers over 4,000 business categories. The instinct is to select as many as possible — more categories, more visibility, right? Wrong. Category-stuffing is explicitly discouraged and increasingly flagged. Pick **one specific primary category** that matches exactly what you do (not "contractor" — "HVAC Contractor"), then add 2-3 genuinely relevant secondary categories. Your primary category feeds both classic Map Pack matching and how AI tools match your business to a query — getting it precisely right matters twice as much as it used to.

Service-area business? Set it up correctly

If you're a plumber, electrician, HVAC contractor, or anyone who goes to the customer rather than the other way around, you're a Service Area Business (SAB) in Google's eyes. Two things matter here:

1. **Hide your address.** Go to Edit Profile → Location and toggle off the public address if you don't have walk-in customers. Showing a residential or non-public address on an SAB listing is one of the more common suspension triggers for trades.
2. **Define your service areas precisely.** You can list up to roughly 20 service areas, and they should sit within about a 2-hour drive of your actual base — claiming service across three states when you're a two-truck operation reads as spam to Google, not ambition.

Posts and photos: the cadence that actually matters

Weekly GBP posts correlate with sustained visibility in your Performance tab; profiles that go 30+ days without a post show a measurable drop-off. The floor for photos is 4-6 new ones a month — real photos of real jobs, not stock images. One 2025 industry study found fully-

complete profiles (posts, photos, hours, attributes, Q&A all current) show up in search 80% more often, with 4x more site visits and 12% more calls than incomplete ones. Completeness alone is a bigger lever than most owners realize.

One caveat: Google discontinued the public Q&A feature in late 2025. If someone tells you to "seed your Q&A section" as a 2026 tactic, they're working from an outdated playbook.

Why HVAC, plumbing, and electrical get suspended more than anyone else

Trades get flagged at a disproportionate rate. The most common triggers: keyword-stuffed business names ("Best Plumber in [City] 24/7 Emergency" instead of your actual registered business name — this alone drives roughly a quarter of trade suspensions), a virtual office or PO box address on a service-area listing, and duplicate listings from an old franchise or previous owner that never got merged or removed. A suspension can cost an emergency-service trade well over \$20,000 a month in lost calls while you fight the appeal. Get your listing name, address, and category exactly right up front — this is the cheapest insurance you'll ever buy.

What actually moves your Map Pack ranking

Local SEO experts are surveyed on this every year. The current weighting: **proximity** to the searcher matters most (roughly half the ranking weight — and it's the one factor you can't influence, which is why the rest of this chapter matters even more), **GBP signals and relevance** next (about a third), then **on-page factors** and **reviews** roughly tied behind that and rising each year. Two newer factors entered the mix in 2026: social signals and AI-search visibility signals — more on that in Chapter 8.

Worksheet 1 — Your GBP Audit

Go to your Google Business Profile right now and check each box honestly:

- ☐ Primary category is specific and accurate (not generic)
- ☐ Address is hidden if you're a service-area business
- ☐ Service areas are defined and realistic
- ☐ Business name matches your actual registered/DBA name exactly (no keywords stuffed in)
- ☐ You've posted in the last 7 days
- ☐ You've added a photo in the last 30 days

- ☐ Hours are current, including holiday hours
- ☐ All attributes relevant to your business are filled in

Count your checked boxes: _____ / 8. Below 6? This is your Chapter 11 priority #1.

Before you move on

- ☐ I completed Worksheet 1
- ☐ I fixed my category selection if it was wrong
- ☐ I know whether I'm a Service Area Business and set it up correctly
- ☐ I understand the top suspension triggers for my industry

Reviews: The System That Actually Moves the Needle

Recency beats volume now

For years, the advice was "get as many 5-star reviews as possible." That's outdated. Current research (BrightLocal's 2026 Local Consumer Review Survey, over 1,000 consumers) found 74% of people want to see reviews from the last three months, and 32% want reviews from the last two weeks. A business with 200 reviews and nothing new in six months now reads as less trustworthy than a business with 40 reviews, five of them from last week. **The system that works is continuous, not a one-time push.**

The bar is rising, fast

Star-rating expectations jumped hard in a single year: 68% of consumers will now only consider a business rated 4 stars or higher (up from 55% the year before), and 31% require 4.5+ (up from 17%). This is moving quickly enough that "good enough" a year ago may not be good enough now. 97% of people read reviews before choosing a business, and 85% say they're more likely to use a business after reading positive ones.

How to actually ask (without being annoying)

The businesses that generate reviews consistently do it as a system, not a favor they awkwardly ask for once. Ask at the moment of highest satisfaction — right after the job is done and the customer has said something positive, not three days later in a generic follow-up email. Text-based requests with a direct link tend to outperform email asks. Keep the ask to one sentence: "Thanks again for trusting us with [the job] — if you have 30 seconds, a Google review helps other [city] homeowners find us: [link]."

Handling a bad review — the 2026 rules

Google tightened review policy in March 2026 with active AI detection for manipulation. Two things you legally and practically cannot do anymore: you can't offer a discount or incentive in exchange for a review, and you can't name a specific employee in a review-solicitation offer. When you respond to a negative review, keep it professional, keep it public, and don't include

any promotional language in the reply itself — Google can flag that too. Google approves fewer than 1 in 5 review-removal requests, so your energy is better spent writing a good, calm public response than fighting to get a review taken down.

Worksheet 2 — Your Review System

QUESTION	YOUR ANSWER
Who on your team is responsible for asking for reviews?	_____
At what moment in the customer journey will you ask?	_____
What's your exact ask script (write it now)?	_____
How will you respond to a 1-2 star review — draft one sentence now	_____

Before you move on

- ☐ I completed Worksheet 2
- ☐ I have a specific person and moment responsible for asking for reviews
- ☐ I have a written response template for negative reviews that includes no discounts or promotions

Local Citations & Trust Signals

Citations aren't what they used to be — but they're not nothing

Five years ago, "get listed on 100 directories" was a primary SEO tactic. Today, citation consistency is a smaller piece of the Map Pack ranking (roughly one-fifteenth of the weight) than GBP, reviews, or on-page work. Don't spend a weekend submitting to 80 low-quality directories. Do get your business name, address, and phone number (NAP) consistent across the handful of sources that actually matter.

The prioritized list (do these, in this order)

1. Google Business Profile (already covered — this is not technically a "citation" but it's the foundation everything else confirms)
2. Bing Places
3. Apple Business Connect
4. Yelp
5. Facebook Page
6. The three data aggregators: Data Axle, Foursquare, and TransUnion Digital Business Profile (formerly Neustar Localeze) — these three feed hundreds of smaller directories and voice-search sources like Siri and Alexa. Fixing these three is worth more than fixing fifty small directories individually.
7. Better Business Bureau
8. Nextdoor
9. One vertical-specific directory (Angi or HomeAdvisor for trades; Healthgrades or Zocdoc for dentists)
10. Your local Chamber of Commerce directory

Ten citations on authoritative sources like this outperform fifty on low-quality directories. Quality, not quantity.

The 2026 wrinkle: citations matter more for AI, not less

Here's something worth knowing: while citations carry less weight for classic Google ranking than they used to, they carry more weight for AI-search visibility — consistent NAP data across the web functions as a confidence signal for how AI tools verify your business actually exists and is legitimate. This is the first place in this guide where SEO work and AI-search work are literally the same task. More on that in Chapter 8.

Worksheet 3 — NAP Consistency Check

Go through the 10 sources above. For each, write exactly how your business name, address, and phone number appear:

SOURCE	NAME MATCHES?	ADDRESS MATCHES?	PHONE MATCHES?
Google Business Profile			
Bing Places			
Apple Business Connect			
Yelp			
Facebook			
Data Axle / Foursquare / TransUnion			

Any mismatches — even "Street" vs. "St." — are worth fixing.

Before you move on

- ☐ I completed Worksheet 3
- ☐ My NAP is consistent across at least the top 6 sources
- ☐ I understand citations feed AI-search verification, not just classic ranking

On-Page & Technical SEO Basics

This chapter is deliberately short. Most small-business websites get the same handful of things wrong, and fixing them doesn't require becoming a developer.

If you don't have a website yet: what you actually need

You don't need a custom-built site or a \$10,000 web design project. For the overwhelming majority of businesses in this guide, a WordPress site (or a simpler builder like Squarespace) with five pages does the job: **Home, Services, About, Contact, and a blog/content section.** That's it. The five-page site, done well against the basics in this chapter, will outperform a beautiful 20-page site with weak fundamentals every time.

If you're choosing a platform: WordPress gives you the most control and the widest plugin ecosystem for SEO tools, and it's what most agencies (including us) build on. Squarespace and Wix are faster to get started on and fine for a simple five-page site if you're not ready to think about hosting and plugins yet. Whatever you choose, the fundamentals in this chapter apply the same way.

Page speed (Core Web Vitals)

Google measures three things: how fast your main content loads (under 2.5 seconds is the target), how stable the page is while loading — nothing jumping around as images pop in (a stability score under 0.1), and how quickly the page responds when someone taps something (under 200 milliseconds). The single most common killer of all three on small-business sites: unoptimized images and render-blocking scripts left over from a page builder or old theme.

Mobile-first basics

Google indexes your mobile site as the primary version, not your desktop one. The most common mistake: content that's hidden inside a mobile accordion or tab that never actually loads into the page — meaning Google may not see it at all. Your phone number, address, and hours should be in plain text on the page, not buried in an image or a script that loads after the fact. Buttons and links should be big enough to tap without zooming in (roughly the size of a fingertip), and body text should be readable without pinching to zoom.

Titles, meta descriptions, and headings

Title tags: 50-60 characters, including your core service and city. Meta descriptions: 140-160 characters, written like an ad, not a keyword list. One H1 per page matching the page's actual purpose. H2s for each sub-service or FAQ. Don't skip heading levels, and don't run near-duplicate titles across similar service or location pages — that's one of the most common technical mistakes we see on small-business sites, and it actively confuses both Google and AI tools about which page to show.

Internal linking, kept simple

You don't need a complex linking strategy. You need: Home links to every service page, every service page links to at least one relevant blog post and to your contact/quote page, every blog post links back to the service page it's related to. Two inbound links per page, minimum, with descriptive link text (not "click here").

Worksheet 4 — Quick Technical Audit

- ☐ I've run my homepage through Google's PageSpeed Insights tool (free, just search for it)
- ☐ My phone number and address appear as plain text somewhere on every page
- ☐ Every page has a unique title tag and meta description
- ☐ Every service page links to at least one blog post and my contact page

Before you move on

- ☐ I completed Worksheet 4
- ☐ I know my current PageSpeed score
- ☐ I've fixed at least one duplicate title or missing meta description

Content That Actually Ranks (and Converts)

The formats that actually work for a local service business

Not all content is equal. The formats that consistently perform for businesses like yours:

Cost/pricing pages. "How much does [your service] cost in [your city]" is one of the highest-intent searches a prospective customer runs — and one of the least-answered honestly by competitors, who hide behind "call for a quote." Answering it directly, even with a range, builds trust and captures the search.

FAQ pages. These do double duty — they capture long-tail search questions, and they're exactly the format AI tools pull from when answering questions about your industry. More in Chapter 8.

Service-area pages. If you serve multiple towns or neighborhoods, each deserves its own page — but it needs genuine local specificity (named neighborhoods, actual landmarks, city-specific FAQ), not the same paragraph with the city name swapped. Google's spam systems are built to catch exactly that pattern.

Before/after case studies with real numbers. "We fixed a leak" beats nothing. "We stopped a \$400/month water bill leak in 45 minutes for a homeowner in [neighborhood]" beats "we fixed a leak."

Worked examples, by format

Reading "write a cost page" is abstract. Here's what each format actually looks like filled in, so you're not starting from a blank page.

Cost/pricing page example (HVAC):

Title: How Much Does AC Repair Cost in [City], NC?

Most AC repairs in [City] run \$150-\$600, depending on the issue. A capacitor replacement is usually the cheapest fix, typically \$150-\$250 installed. A refrigerant leak repair with recharge runs \$350-\$600 depending on the type of refrigerant your system uses. If your compressor has failed, you're likely looking at \$1,200-\$2,500 — and at that point, it's worth comparing repair cost against replacing a unit older than 10-12 years. We'll always tell you honestly which side of that line you're on before we start work.

FAQ page example (salon):

Q: How far in advance should I book a balayage appointment?

A: Book 2-3 weeks out for balayage, especially on weekends. It's a longer service (2.5-3.5 hours) and our colorists only take 2-3 per day to make sure each one gets full attention.

Service-area page example (plumbing, real local specificity):

Instead of: "We proudly serve [Suburb], providing top-quality plumbing services to homeowners." (this could be any suburb in America — Google's spam systems are built to spot this exact pattern)

Write: "We're the plumbing crew most [Suburb] homeowners call when a 1990s-era polybutylene pipe finally gives out — it's the single most common emergency call we get in the older sections near [actual landmark/neighborhood name]."

Before/after case study example (roofing):

"A homeowner near [neighborhood] called after a storm knocked three shingles loose. What looked like a \$400 patch job turned out to be failed flashing around the chimney — the kind of thing that causes a slow leak for two years before anyone notices water damage in the attic. Full flashing repair ran \$1,100, but it likely saved this homeowner \$8,000-\$12,000 in eventual drywall, insulation, and mold remediation."

Notice none of these are generic. Each one includes a real number, a real local detail, or a real decision point a customer actually faces. That specificity is what both search engines and AI tools are increasingly rewarding — and it's the thing a templated, mass-produced blog post can't fake.

A realistic cadence for a one-person operation

You do not need to publish daily. Two to four solid posts a month, published consistently, outperforms a burst of ten posts followed by three months of silence — sporadic publishing actually reduces how often Google crawls your site at all. Expect 3-6 months before you see meaningful traction, and 6-12 months before it compounds into real, durable ranking. Anyone telling you 30 days is either wrong or selling something.

Using AI to draft without hurting your credibility

Google's own stated position: it doesn't penalize content for being AI-assisted. It penalizes low-value content, regardless of how it was made. The practical takeaway: AI can draft a solid first pass, but the finished piece needs real photos (not stock or AI-generated images), specific local details a generic pass wouldn't include, and a human edit adding something only you would know. That combination — not the writing tool — is what search engines and AI tools are actually evaluating. We'll come back to exactly how this works in Chapter 10.

Worksheet 5 — Your First 90 Days of Content

List 8 topics using the formats above (aim for at least 2 cost/pricing, 2 FAQ, 2 service-area, 2 case-study):

8.

At 2-4 posts a month, that's your next 2-4 months planned.

Before you move on

- ☐ I completed Worksheet 5
- ☐ I have at least 8 content topics identified
- ☐ I understand realistic timelines (3-6 months to traction, 6-12 to compounding)

Local Link Building, the Non-Spammy Way

Links from other websites to yours are still a real ranking factor — but the small-business version of this looks nothing like what most "SEO link packages" sell you.

What actually works

Chamber of Commerce membership. A public, Google-crawled member directory listing is worth more than most owners realize — often carrying the authority equivalent of 10-15 lower-quality citation links in a single legitimate placement.

Local sponsorships. Youth sports teams, 5Ks, community festivals — these earn natural links from local news sites, school sites, and community organizations, and they mirror genuine community involvement rather than looking purchased.

Supplier and manufacturer dealer pages. If you're an authorized dealer or installer for a brand (Trane, Carrier, Daikin for HVAC; major fixture brands for plumbing), ask to be listed on their local dealer-locator page. This applies narrowly by industry, but where it applies, it's high-value and effortless to claim.

Press. Getting mentioned by a local news outlet is one of the strongest link signals available, and it doesn't require a PR firm — most local reporters take pitches directly. If you have real news (a new hire, an expansion, a community project, a milestone), that's a story, not just a link opportunity.

What to avoid entirely

Paid link packages, guest-post-for-a-fee arrangements, link exchanges ("link to me, I'll link to you"), and anything bought on a freelance marketplace. Google's spam detection systems catch these patterns quickly, and the downside — a manual penalty — is far worse than the upside of a few cheap links.

Before you move on

- ☐ I checked whether my Chamber of Commerce membership includes a directory listing
- ☐ I identified one realistic sponsorship or community opportunity this quarter
- ☐ I checked whether any supplier/manufacturer I work with has a dealer-locator page

Getting Found by AI: The Layer on Top of SEO

This is not a different discipline

Everything in this chapter builds directly on Chapters 2 through 7. It is not a separate skill, and you do not need to choose between "doing SEO" and "doing AI search visibility." The businesses winning here are the ones with a strong SEO foundation who've added a few specific things on top. If you've skipped straight to this chapter, go back — none of this works without the foundation.

Why this matters now

A test of 600 AI queries across ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, and Perplexity for local plumbers found that 95% of the businesses tested showed up on only one of the four platforms, and none showed up on all four. That's not a saturated, competitive space — it's wide open. Almost nobody in most local markets has claimed this yet.

The technical layer, in plain English

Schema markup, stacked. Schema is structured data that tells search engines and AI tools exactly what your business is, in a format they don't have to guess at. Pages using multiple complementary schema types together (your business info, your specific service, your FAQ content) reportedly earn roughly twice the AI citation rate of pages using just one type. Your schema needs to match your Google Business Profile exactly — same name, same address, same phone, same hours — or it actively hurts your credibility with AI systems instead of helping it.

FAQ content, structured clearly. Google removed the visible FAQ dropdown from search results in May 2026, but the underlying question-and-answer structure still matters for how AI tools pull and cite your content. Build 15-20 direct-answer FAQ items per key service — each one a real question a customer would actually ask, answered directly in the first sentence or two.

Answer-first writing. Roughly 44% of AI citations pull from the first third of a page's text. Every heading on your site should be followed immediately by a direct answer, not three paragraphs of throat-clearing before you get to the point.

Freshness. Content updated within the last 30 days earns roughly three times more AI citations than stale content. A monthly refresh pass on your highest-value pages is worth more here than almost anywhere else in this guide.

llms.txt — low priority, low cost. This is a newer file some AI systems (Anthropic's Claude and Perplexity, confirmed) read to understand your site; Google and OpenAI have not confirmed they use it, and adoption sits around only 1 in 10 sites. It's cheap to add and worth doing, but don't expect it to move the needle much on its own — treat it as a nice-to-have, not a priority.

Building your 15-20 FAQ items — worked examples

The instruction "write direct-answer FAQ content" is easy to say and easy to do badly. Here's the pattern, worked out for five different verticals, so you can see exactly what "answer in the first sentence or two" actually looks like:

Electrician: Q: Do I need a permit to install a new electrical panel? A: Yes, in almost every North Carolina municipality, a panel upgrade requires a permit and inspection — it's not optional, and skipping it can void your homeowner's insurance if there's ever an electrical fire. We pull the permit as part of every panel job.

Auto repair: Q: Is it bad to keep driving with the check engine light on? A: It depends on whether it's steady or flashing. A steady light means get it checked within a week or two. A flashing light means pull over and get it towed — that usually signals a misfire that can destroy your catalytic converter within minutes of continued driving.

Dentist: Q: How often do I actually need a cleaning? A: Twice a year for most patients. If you have gum disease or a history of heavy tartar buildup, we may recommend every 3-4 months — that's a clinical decision, not an upsell, and we'll show you why on your X-rays.

Gym: Q: Do I have to sign a long-term contract? A: No. We offer month-to-month membership at a slightly higher rate, or a 12-month rate that's about 20% cheaper. Most members start month-to-month and switch once they know they're sticking with it.

Pet groomer: Q: My dog is anxious at the groomer — can you still do the appointment? A: Usually, yes. We book anxious dogs in our first morning slot when the shop is quietest, and we're trained in low-stress handling techniques. For dogs with severe anxiety, we'll tell you honestly if we think a vet-prescribed calming aid beforehand would help everyone have a better experience.

Notice the pattern: real answer in the first sentence, a specific reason or number immediately after, and total honesty even when the honest answer isn't the most flattering one ("that's a clinical decision, not an upsell"). That specificity and candor is exactly what builds the trust signal both customers and AI tools are looking for.

How to check where you actually stand

You don't need special software to start. Open ChatGPT, Perplexity, and Google, and run the same handful of real customer questions in each: "who's a good [your service] in [your city]," "best [your service] near [your neighborhood]." Note whether you show up, whether a competitor does instead, and whether the answer includes a clickable link or just a mention. Do this monthly. It's the same idea as checking your Map Pack ranking — just for a newer set of surfaces.

Worksheet 6 — Your AI Visibility Check

QUESTION YOU ASKED	CHATGPT RESULT	PERPLEXITY RESULT	GOOGLE AI OVERVIEW RESULT

Before you move on

- ☐ I completed Worksheet 6
- ☐ I checked whether my schema matches my GBP exactly
- ☐ I have at least 15 FAQ items written in direct-answer format for my top service

What Good Should Look Like: Choosing (or Firing) an SEO Partner

This chapter might be the most valuable one in this guide, and it has nothing to do with tactics. It's about a problem bigger than SEO itself: most business owners don't have a good way to evaluate whether the person handling their marketing is actually doing a good job.

The industry has an honest problem, and it's not what you'd think

SEO agencies lose 38% of their clients every year on average — worse, agencies your size (small, founder-led) see 32% annual churn specifically tied to what the industry calls "founder dependency." Here's the part that should change how you evaluate anyone you hire: 48% of clients who leave an agency cite poor communication and delivery as their top reason — but agencies themselves, asked the same question, rank communication 7th on their own list of likely reasons. That's a real, measured gap between what agencies think is wrong and what their clients actually experience.

Separately, only about 3 in 10 business owners describe their experience hiring a marketing provider as genuinely good. More than half say they weren't confident in their hiring decision at all, and 1 in 7 describe the whole process as "practically gambling."

None of this means SEO doesn't work. It means most owners have never had a good way to tell a good provider from a bad one. That's what the rest of this chapter fixes.

Realistic timelines (memorize these numbers)

- **Months 1-3:** Foundational fixes ship — GBP corrected, technical issues fixed, baseline measurements taken. You may not see ranking movement yet.
- **Months 3-6:** First real ranking movement on lower-competition search terms.
- **Months 6-12:** Meaningful movement on your competitive, high-value terms — and this is typically when it starts compounding.

Anyone who promises page-one rankings inside 30-60 days is either misunderstanding how search actually works, or knowingly overpromising. Neither is a good sign.

Red flags, specifically

- Guaranteed rankings, or claims of a "special relationship" with Google — algorithmically impossible; nobody can guarantee this
- Artificial urgency in the sales process ("this price expires today")
- The exact same deliverable list sold to every client regardless of industry
- Cheap, high-volume link-building or directory submissions as a primary tactic
- A contract longer than 6-12 months with real penalties for leaving early
- **The provider retains ownership or admin access to your website, your Google Business Profile, or your hosting** — this is the single biggest red flag, because it means you can't leave even if you want to
- Vague reporting tied to raw traffic numbers instead of calls, leads, or bookings
- Silence, or a reframed vanity metric, when results dip instead of an honest explanation

What good reporting actually looks like

Metrics tied to your actual business outcomes — calls from your GBP listing, direction requests, form submissions, booked jobs — not just "traffic went up." Keyword movement reported only for terms that actually matter to your revenue (moving from position 14 to 6 on a term people search matters; moving from 76 to 41 on a term nobody searches doesn't). And when something dips, a stated reason, not silence.

What a genuinely good monthly report looks like

To make "good reporting" concrete instead of abstract, here's the shape of it:

SECTION	WHAT IT SHOWS	WHAT IT SHOULDN'T BE
Calls & leads	GBP calls, direction requests, form submissions, month-over-month	Just a pageview number
Ranking movement	Only your commercially meaningful terms, with position changes	A 50-keyword table nobody asked for
GBP health	Review count/rating trend, post cadence, completeness	Skipped entirely
Content shipped	What was actually published this month, linked	"Ongoing content work" with nothing to show
AI-search check	Whether you showed up in this month's ChatGPT/Perplexity/AI Overview test queries	Not mentioned at all
Plain-English summary	2-3 sentences: what happened, why, what's next	A wall of charts with no interpretation

If a report you're getting today is missing more than one or two of these, that's a fair, specific thing to raise with whoever's sending it.

Worksheet 7 — Evaluating Your Current (or Next) Provider

- ☐ I own my website login, not just "access" through them
- ☐ I own my Google Business Profile as the primary owner, not just a manager
- ☐ My contract length and cancellation terms are clear and reasonable
- ☐ My reports are tied to calls/leads/bookings, not just traffic
- ☐ I've been told a realistic timeline (3-6 months minimum), not a fast one
- ☐ I get a stated reason when something underperforms

If you can't check most of these boxes for your current provider — or for anyone pitching you — that's worth a direct conversation before you sign anything.

Before you move on

- ☐ I completed Worksheet 7
- ☐ I know exactly what "good" looks like well enough to evaluate anyone I hire

☐ I understand the realistic timeline and won't be talked into believing a faster one

Where Automation Actually Fits In

Notice this chapter comes tenth, not first. That's deliberate. Everything in Chapters 2 through 9 is the actual work that gets your business found. This chapter is about how that work gets done consistently — by you, or by whoever you hire — without it eating a week of your life every month.

The honest problem automation solves

Nearly every task in this guide is repeatable: GBP posts, review requests, citation checks, content drafts, schema updates, monthly reporting. Repeatable, templated work is exactly what AI tools are good at handling as a first pass — not because it replaces judgment, but because it removes the blank-page problem and the "I'll get to it next week" problem that kills consistency, and consistency is what actually moves rankings over time.

What this looks like in practice

Content drafting. AI can produce a solid first draft of a blog post, FAQ page, or GBP post description using your brand voice and service details. A human still needs to add real specifics, real photos, and a final edit — but starting from a draft instead of a blank page is the difference between "we'll get to content eventually" and actually publishing 2-4 times a month.

GBP and social cadence. The single biggest reason small businesses lose visibility isn't quality, it's consistency — posting twice a week for a year beats posting five times one week and disappearing for two months. A weekly-batch system (draft once, review once, publish across the week) makes that consistency achievable for one person.

Review requests. A templated, automatically-triggered request sent at the right moment (right after a job closes, not three days later from a generic system) removes the "I keep forgetting to ask" problem that quietly costs most businesses dozens of reviews a year.

Reporting. Pulling your rankings, GBP performance, and review activity into one monthly summary is exactly the kind of repetitive, data-heavy task that shouldn't require an hour of manual work every month.

AI-search monitoring. Running the same test queries across ChatGPT, Perplexity, and Google AI Overviews every month (from Chapter 8) is tedious to do by hand and easy to automate as a recurring check.

The rule that protects you

Anything customer-facing — an email, a text, a published blog post, a review response — should be a **draft, reviewed by a human, before it goes out**. That's not a limitation of the technology. It's the rule that keeps your voice actually yours, and keeps a customer from ever receiving something that reads as obviously automated. If anyone pitches you a system that auto-sends to customers without review, that's a red flag, not a feature.

The point of this chapter

None of this changes what to do — that's Chapters 2 through 9. It only changes whether the work actually happens every week, consistently, for the 6-12 months it takes to see results. That consistency gap — not a lack of knowledge — is the real reason most small businesses' SEO efforts stall out after month two.

Before you move on

- ☐ I understand automation supports the work in Chapters 2-9, it doesn't replace it
- ☐ I understand the drafts-only rule for anything customer-facing
- ☐ I've identified which of the repeatable tasks above I'd want handled for me vs. do myself

Your 90-Day Local Visibility Plan

Pull out your worksheets from Chapters 2 through 8. This chapter turns them into one sequenced plan.

Worksheet 8 — Your 90-Day Plan

Days 1-30 — Foundation

- ☐ Fix GBP category, service areas, and business name (Chapter 2)
- ☐ Launch your review-ask system (Chapter 3)
- ☐ Fix NAP consistency on your top 6 citation sources (Chapter 4)
- ☐ Fix at least your worst 3 technical issues (Chapter 5)

Days 30-60 — Content and links

- ☐ Publish your first 2-4 pieces of content from Worksheet 5 (Chapter 6)
- ☐ Pursue one link opportunity — Chamber, sponsorship, or supplier page (Chapter 7)
- ☐ Add or verify schema markup matches your GBP exactly (Chapter 8)

Days 60-90 — AI layer and measurement

- ☐ Build your first 15-20 FAQ items in direct-answer format (Chapter 8)
- ☐ Run your first AI visibility check across ChatGPT, Perplexity, and Google (Chapter 8)
- ☐ Decide which tasks above you'll keep doing yourself vs. hand off (Chapter 10)
- ☐ Re-score yourself on the 100-point scorecard and compare to your Day 1 score

What to expect at each milestone

- **Day 30:** Foundation is fixed. Don't expect ranking movement yet — this is the setup phase every serious plan requires.
- **Day 60:** First content is live, citations are clean, AI-search groundwork is in place.
- **Day 90:** You should have a clear read on early movement on your lower-competition terms, and a realistic picture of what months 4-12 look like.

Before you move on

- ☐ I completed Worksheet 8
- ☐ I have specific dates, not just tasks, attached to my plan
- ☐ I know what "on track" looks like at day 30, 60, and 90

Three Paths From Here

You've read the whole thing. You've got worksheets filled in and a 90-day plan. Now: who actually does the work?

Before you decide, let's address what you're actually thinking

"I tried SEO before and it didn't work." Ask what specifically was done, and check it against Chapters 2-9. Most "SEO didn't work" stories trace back to one of three things: nothing was actually done consistently past month one, the work was generic directory submissions instead of the GBP/review/content work in this guide, or the owner expected 60-day results against a 6-12 month reality. This isn't said to defend a bad past experience — it's said so you can tell, this time, whether the work is actually happening.

"I don't have a website yet." Everything in Chapters 2-4 (GBP, reviews, citations) works before you have a website at all — a Google Business Profile is free and doesn't require one. A basic site becomes necessary once you start publishing content in Chapter 6, but it doesn't have to be expensive or complicated to start.

"I don't have time for any of this." That's the honest reason Chapter 10 and Path 2 exist. Nothing in this guide requires you to personally do the work — it requires someone to. The question is just whether that's you or not.

"How do I know this will actually work for my specific business?" You don't, with certainty — nobody legitimate can promise that (see Chapter 9's red flags). What you do know: the mechanics in this guide (GBP optimization, review velocity, citation consistency, on-page basics, local content, AI-search visibility) are the documented ranking factors as of 2026, not guesses. Applied consistently over 6-12 months, they move the needle for the overwhelming majority of local service businesses in this ICP. The variable isn't whether the mechanics work — it's whether they get executed consistently long enough to compound.

DIY vs. get it done for you vs. hire in-house

A straight comparison, since this is the real decision behind Worksheet 9:

	DIY (THIS GUIDE)	HIRE SECRET OPTIMIZER	HIRE IN-HOUSE
Cash cost	\$0	\$1,500-\$4,500/mo	\$50K-\$70K+/yr salary + tools
Your time cost	8-12 hrs/month, ongoing	~1 hr/month (reviewing reports)	Hiring, training, managing — ongoing
Ramp time	Immediate start, 3-6 months to traction	Immediate start, same 3-6 month reality	30-60 days to hire, then same 3-6 months
Consistency risk	Highest — easy to let it slide during busy weeks	Low — someone else's job to keep it moving	Medium — depends entirely on that one person staying
Best fit	Under \$300K revenue, or owners who want to learn and control it	\$300K+ revenue, time is worth more than the monthly fee	\$3M+ revenue, needs marketing work beyond just SEO

None of these is universally "right" — Worksheet 9 below is built to help you land on the one that's actually right for where your business is today.

Worksheet 9 — Decision Tree

Q1: Do you have 8-12 hours a month to consistently execute Chapters 2-9 yourself?

- Yes → continue to Q2
- No → **Path 2** (get it done for you — your time is worth more than the doing)

Q2: Is your business currently under \$300K in annual revenue?

- Yes → **Path 1** (DIY with this guide is the right call for now — come back to Path 2 when revenue or your time value crosses that line)
- No → continue to Q3

Q3: Would you rather learn and control this yourself, or hand it off and check in monthly?

- Learn/control it → **Path 1**
- Hand it off → **Path 2**

Path 1 — Do it yourself, with this guide

Cost: \$0 (the guide) or run our free tools as you go

Best for: Owners under \$300K revenue, or anyone who wants to learn this and control the build themselves

Everything in Chapters 2 through 11 is enough to run your own local SEO from scratch. Two free tools make it easier to check your work as you go:

- **Free SEO Audit** — run it on your own site to see exactly where you stand against Chapters 2-7, in about 5 minutes.
- **Free AI Search Audit** — run it to see whether ChatGPT, Perplexity, and Google's AI Overviews currently recommend your business, per Chapter 8.

Both are on our website, no email required to start.

Path 2 — Get it done for you

Best for: Owners who've read this and thought "I know exactly what to do, I just don't have 10 hours a month to do it"

We run the entire system in Chapters 2 through 10 as a monthly service — Google Business Profile, reviews, citations, on-page fixes, content, links, and the AI-search layer, all handled, all reported on transparently against the standard set in Chapter 9.

TIER	PRICE	BEST FOR
Local Anchor	\$1,500/mo, no setup fee	Single-location business, \$300K-\$1M revenue
Local Authority	\$2,400/mo + \$750 onboarding	\$1M+ revenue, wants to dominate their market, includes the full AI-search citation push from Chapter 8
Multi-Location	\$4,500/mo + \$1,500 onboarding	2-5 locations, \$1M+ revenue

Founding Member: the first 20 customers get \$497/month for year one, then 20% off their tier for life, plus every add-on service included at no extra cost, for life. Ask how many spots are left.

Every tier includes a real monthly report tied to calls, leads, and rankings that matter — not raw traffic — and a written Performance Promise: if fewer than 3 of your monthly deliverables ship in any 30-day window, that month is free.

Path 3 — Not ready yet

Cost: \$0

If neither path is right today, that's fine. Run the free audits, keep this guide, and come back when the timing's right. Most owners take 6-18 months to make a decision like this. The wrong move is deciding "later" with no actual date attached to it.

Before you move on

- ☐ I completed Worksheet 9
- ☐ I know which path fits me right now
- ☐ I've either run the free audits, started my 90-day plan, or booked a call

SIDEBAR

Red Flags When Anyone Pitches You "SEO" or "AI Visibility"

RED FLAG	WHY IT MATTERS
Guaranteed rankings or "special relationship with Google"	Algorithmically impossible — nobody can promise this
Rankings promised in 30-60 days	Contradicts every realistic industry timeline (see Chapter 9)
"SEO is dead, it's all AI now"	Contradicted by the actual search-volume data (see Chapter 1)
The exact same deliverable list sold to every client	A sign of a template, not a strategy for your business
They keep ownership of your website, GBP, or hosting	The single biggest red flag — you can't leave if you can't access your own assets
Reporting only shows raw traffic, never calls or leads	Vanity metrics instead of business outcomes
Silence or a reframed metric when results dip	An honest partner tells you why, even when it's bad news
Auto-sends customer emails/texts without your review	Both a trust risk and a legal risk (see Chapter 10)

SIDEBAR

Safety Rules If You Use AI Anywhere in Your Marketing

1. **Drafts only, on anything customer-facing.** Email, text, reviews, social posts — AI drafts, a human sends. No exceptions.
2. **Never auto-publish blog content.** Unedited AI content reads as unedited AI content, and it doesn't build the trust signals this whole guide is built around.
3. **TCPA is real.** Unsolicited marketing texts to consumers carry real legal penalties — \$500 to \$1,500 per text. Get written opt-in before any SMS marketing.
4. **Treat AI output as a strong first draft, not a finished answer.** It gets facts and numbers wrong sometimes. Your review is what catches it.

APPENDIX A

Ready-to-Use Templates

Copy, adapt to your voice, and use these directly. They're built from the mechanics in Chapters 2, 3, and 8.

Review request scripts (Chapter 3)

Text, sent right after job completion:

"Thanks again for trusting us with [the job] today — if you've got 30 seconds, a Google review helps other [city] homeowners find us: [link]"

Text, slightly warmer version for a repeat customer:

"Always good working with you, [name]. If you don't mind, a quick Google review goes a long way for a small local business like ours: [link]. Either way, see you next time."

Email, for jobs booked further in advance (dental, gym, salon):

Subject: How did we do?

"Hi [name] — thanks for coming in. If you had a good experience, a quick review helps other folks in [city] find us. Takes about a minute: [link]. If anything wasn't right, just reply to this email directly — I'd rather hear it from you first."

Negative review response templates (Chapter 3)

General template (no discounts, no promotions — per 2026 Google policy):

"Hi [name], thanks for the honest feedback. This isn't the experience we aim for, and I'd like to understand what happened — please reach out directly at [phone/email] so we can make it right."

When you believe the review is inaccurate or about the wrong business:

"Hi [name], we take feedback seriously and looked into this — we don't have a record of service matching this description. If this was meant for a different business, we'd appreciate a correction. If we're missing something, please reach out directly at [phone/email]."

Sample GBP post templates (Chapter 2)

Weekly service highlight: "This week's most-requested service: [service]. [1-2 sentences on what it solves]. Serving [city/neighborhoods]. Call or book: [link/phone]."

Seasonal/timely post: "[Season/weather event] is [common problem] season for [your city] homeowners. If you're noticing [symptom], now's the time to get it checked before it becomes [bigger problem]."

Behind-the-scenes/proof post: "Wrapped up a [job type] near [neighborhood] this week — [one specific detail, e.g., a number or before/after]. This is the kind of work we do most days."

Sample schema markup, explained in plain English (Chapter 8)

You don't need to write this code yourself — most website platforms and any competent developer or SEO provider can add it — but here's what it contains, so you know what to check for:

```
LocalBusiness (or the specific subtype: Plumber, Electrician,
HVACBusiness, Dentist, HairSalon, ExerciseGym, AutoRepair, etc.)
- name: [must match your GBP exactly]
- address: [must match your GBP exactly]
- telephone: [must match your GBP exactly]
- openingHours: [must match your GBP exactly]
- priceRange: [e.g., $$]
- areaServed: [list of cities/neighborhoods you serve]

Service
- name: [specific service, e.g., "Water Heater Repair"]
- provider: [links back to your LocalBusiness above]

FAQPage
- mainEntity: [your 15-20 FAQ items from Chapter 8,
each with a Question and an Answer]
```

The single most common mistake: this data existing on the site but not matching the Google Business Profile exactly (a different phone format, a slightly different business name). Check for an exact match, not a close one.

APPENDIX B

Quick Reference by Industry

Everything in Chapters 2-10 applies to every industry in this guide. These are the nuances specific to each:

Plumbing / Electrical / HVAC (trades): Highest suspension risk on GBP — get your business name and service-area setup exactly right (Chapter 2). Emergency/same-day language performs well in content since it matches real search intent. Supplier/manufacturer dealer-locator links (Chapter 7) are a genuine, underused link opportunity in this group.

Roofing / General Contractors: Before/after content with real photos performs unusually well here — visual proof matters more than in almost any other vertical. Insurance-claim process content ("what to do after storm damage") is a high-value FAQ topic almost nobody covers well.

Salons / Spas: Instagram and GBP photos work together — this is the one vertical where visual content on GBP directly drives bookings, not just credibility. Service-specific FAQ pages (by treatment, not just by location) tend to outperform generic service pages.

Gyms / Fitness Studios: Comparison-style content ("what to look for in a gym near [city]") captures high-intent research-phase traffic. Member testimonials with specific results (not just "great gym!") double as both content and reviews.

Auto Repair: Vehicle-specific content ("common issues with a [make/model] at [mileage]") is an underused content angle with real search volume. Trust and honesty framing (Chapter 9's whole message) resonates unusually strongly in this vertical, where customer distrust of the industry is a well-known baseline.

Pet Services (grooming, boarding, training): Local Facebook groups and Nextdoor (Chapter 4's citation list) tend to drive real referral traffic in this vertical specifically — pet owners ask neighbors, not just Google. Anxiety/behavior-focused FAQ content (see Chapter 8's worked example) builds trust fast.

Dental: Insurance and cost transparency content is the single highest-value content type — "how much does X cost without insurance" is both high-search-volume and chronically under-answered by competitors who hide behind "call for pricing." Patient review requests need HIPAA-conscious language — never reference a specific procedure or condition in a public request or response.

APPENDIX C

Sample First-30-Days Calendar

Worksheet 8 gave you the 90-day shape. Here's Days 1-30 broken down to specific days, so "get started" turns into an actual calendar entry.

DAY	TASK
1	Audit your GBP against Worksheet 1 (Chapter 2) — fix category and service areas
2	Hide address if you're a service-area business; fix business name if it's keyword-stuffed
3	Write your review-ask script (Worksheet 2) and tell your team the new process
4-5	Go through Worksheet 3 (NAP check) across your top 6 citation sources
6-7	Fix any NAP mismatches found
8	Run your homepage through a free page-speed checker; note your 3 worst issues
9-10	Fix your top technical issues (titles, meta descriptions, duplicate content)
11-14	Draft your first 2 pieces of content from Worksheet 5
15	Publish content piece #1
16-17	Post to GBP (should already be happening weekly by now — don't let this slip)
18-20	Draft content piece #2; start collecting your first round of reviews from recent customers
21	Publish content piece #2
22-24	Identify one link opportunity from Chapter 7 (Chamber, sponsorship, supplier page) and start that conversation
25-27	Start drafting your first 5-8 FAQ items from Chapter 8
28	Check schema markup matches your GBP exactly (or flag it for whoever manages your site)
29	Run your first AI visibility check (Worksheet 6)
30	Review Worksheet 8 — mark what's done, carry over what isn't, and set your Day 31-60 dates

This is intentionally realistic for one person working this alongside running the actual business — it assumes an hour or two most days, not a full-time project.

APPENDIX D

2026 Benchmarks: How You Compare

Numbers agencies typically only share on a sales call. Here they are, so you can compare yourself honestly before you ever talk to anyone.

Cost per lead by category (Google/Microsoft Ads, 2026)

CATEGORY	TYPICAL COST PER LEAD
All-industry average	~\$67
Home improvement (general)	~\$91
HVAC — branded search	~\$34
HVAC — non-branded/general search	~\$149-198
HVAC — heating repair specifically	~\$144
Plumbing — branded search	~\$34
Plumbing — non-branded/general search	~\$167-183
General home-improvement range	\$45-\$228, depending on service and how competitive your specific market is

How to use this: if you're paying for ads and your cost per lead is well above these ranges for your category, that's worth a direct conversation with whoever's running them — and if you're not running ads at all, this is roughly what you'd be trading against the SEO investment in this guide, which produces leads at a lower marginal cost over time even though it takes longer to start.

Marketing spend as a percentage of revenue

BUSINESS STAGE	TYPICAL SPEND AS % OF REVENUE
Pre-revenue / very early stage	10-20%
Growing small business (under \$5M)	7-8% (SBA general guidance)
Median for businesses under \$5M	~14%
Established, steady-state	5-8%

Service businesses typically run toward the higher end of these ranges compared to product businesses. If you're spending nothing on marketing today, this table is a useful sanity check for what a reasonable budget actually looks like relative to your revenue — not zero, and also not the inflated number a fear-based sales pitch might throw at you.

Review count and rating benchmarks

BENCHMARK	TYPICAL NUMBER
Consumer trust threshold	~40 reviews before a star rating is seen as trustworthy
Top-3 Map Pack positions, average review count	~47 reviews (vs. ~38 for positions 7-10)
Practical competitiveness threshold	40-50 reviews with continuous, ongoing flow
Baseline credibility threshold	10-20 reviews at 4.0-4.5 stars
Average rating, home services (HVAC, plumbing)	4.4-4.6 stars
Average rating, restaurants/hospitality	4.0-4.2 stars
Minimum viable weekly pace	1-2 new reviews per week

The honest caveat: industry-wide averages are a starting point, not the real target. The number that actually matters is how you compare to the specific 2-3 businesses currently sitting in your Map Pack — if they have 80 reviews and you have 12, that's your real gap, regardless of what the industry average says.

APPENDIX E

Free Tools Worth Knowing About

None of these are ours. All of them are genuinely free, and knowing they exist saves you from paying for something you don't need to.

TOOL	WHAT IT'S FOR
Google Search Console	See exactly which searches bring people to your site, and whether Google can actually crawl and index your pages correctly.
Google PageSpeed Insights	Check your Core Web Vitals score (Chapter 5) in about 10 seconds — just paste in your URL.
Google Business Profile	Your free listing — the single most important asset in this guide (Chapter 2), and it costs nothing to claim or maintain.
Google Trends	See whether search interest in your services rises and falls seasonally in your area — useful for planning content and GBP posts around your actual busy season.
Google's Rich Results Test	Paste in a page URL to check whether your schema markup (Chapter 8) is actually implemented correctly.
Bing Webmaster Tools	The Bing equivalent of Search Console — smaller audience than Google, but free, and Bing powers some AI answer engines directly.

One honest note: we don't gate any of this behind our own paid tools, and we're not going to pretend you need a \$99/month software subscription to do the work in this guide. If you eventually want the work above done for you instead of doing it yourself, that's Chapter 12 — but you don't need to buy anything to get started today.

GLOSSARY

Plain English

TERM	WHAT IT MEANS
AEO / GEO	Answer Engine / Generative Engine Optimization — the practice of getting your business cited or recommended by AI tools like ChatGPT and Google AI Overviews. Not a separate discipline from SEO — a layer on top of it (Chapter 8).
Core Web Vitals	Google's three page-speed and stability measurements: how fast your content loads, how stable the page is while loading, and how fast it responds to a tap or click.
EEAT	Experience, Expertise, Authoritativeness, Trustworthiness — the qualities Google looks for to judge whether content is genuinely useful, versus generic or low-effort.
GBP	Google Business Profile — your free business listing that powers the Map Pack. Chapter 2.
llms.txt	A file some AI systems read to understand your website. Low-cost, low-priority (Chapter 8).
Map Pack	The three local businesses shown with a map at the top of a "[service] near me" search.
NAP	Name, Address, Phone — the three pieces of information that need to match exactly across every online listing of your business.
Schema markup	Structured data added to your website that tells search engines and AI tools exactly what your business is and does, instead of making them guess.
SEO	Search Engine Optimization — the practice of making your website and listings easier for Google (and now AI tools) to find, understand, and recommend.
Zero-click search	A search where the person gets their answer directly and never clicks through to a website.

ABOUT

About Ryan + Secret Optimizer

About me

I'm Ryan Smeltz. I served in the US Army and I'm a 90% service-connected disabled veteran. I live in Zebulon, North Carolina, with my wife Latoya and our two dogs, on the eastern edge of the Triangle.

Before Secret Optimizer, I started four other businesses. Three failed. Every one of them taught me something about the gap between "what a business needs" and "what it actually gets sold." That gap is most of why this guide exists — most small business owners get pitched jargon instead of a plan.

I'm not a developer and I don't have a computer science degree. Everything in this guide is the same order of operations I run for my own business and for the clients who hire me.

About Secret Optimizer

Secret Optimizer is a DBA of LCDRMS Enterprises, LLC, a North Carolina company based in Wake County. We do local SEO and AI-search visibility work for independent service businesses across the Triangle, built on exactly the framework in this guide:

Local Anchor — \$1,500/month, single-location businesses, \$300K-\$1M revenue

Local Authority — \$2,400/month + \$750 onboarding, established businesses, \$1M+ revenue

Multi-Location — \$4,500/month + \$1,500 onboarding, 2-5 location operators

Founding Member — \$497/month for year one, then 20% off for life, first 20 customers only

How to reach me

Email: ryan@secretoptimizer.com — I read every one myself.

Phone/text: (919) 367-1746

Web: secretoptimizer.com

Free SEO Audit: secretoptimizer.com/free-local-seo-audit — run it in about 5 minutes

Free AI Search Audit: secretoptimizer.com/ai-search-audit — see whether AI tools recommend you today

Book a 15-minute call: secretoptimizer.com/call

BEFORE YOU GO

A closing note

You just read a full field manual on how your business actually gets found in 2026 — through Google, through the Map Pack, and through AI tools that didn't exist in this form three years ago. That's a real investment of your attention, and I don't take it for granted.

Whatever you do next — work through this yourself, run the free audits, or book a call — do one thing this week: open Worksheet 8, pick your Day 1-30 tasks, and put dates on your calendar before you close this document.

The order in this guide is deliberate: SEO first, because that's still where the money is. AI visibility second, because that's the fastest-growing edge of the same problem. Automation last, because it's not the point — it's just how any of this actually gets done, consistently, by a business owner with a full week already.

Welcome to the field.

— Ryan Smeltz

Founder, Secret Optimizer

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SECRET OPTIMIZER · THE LOCAL SEARCH FIELD MANUAL

SEO first. AI-search visibility second.
Automation last — because it's not
the point, it's just how the work gets
done.

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