



Scott Tischler

FOUNDER & CHAIRMAN · AIRECOMMEND.AI

STRATEGY

AEO vs. SEO: Why Ranking #1 No Longer Wins

By Scott Tischler · July 28, 2026 · 9 min read

The metric we've optimized for twenty years is quietly dying

I've spent two decades in marketing technology — at American Express, MetLife, UBS, and now building Alrecommend.ai — and I've watched a lot of "the rules just changed" moments turn out to be noise. This one is not noise.

For most of my career, the entire discipline of search marketing pointed at a single number: your position in a list of ten blue links. Rank #1 and you won. That number is losing its meaning, and fast. The buyer increasingly never sees the list. They ask ChatGPT, Perplexity, Gemini, or Google's AI Overviews a question and get a synthesized paragraph with two or three sources named inside it. If you're not one of those named sources, your #1 ranking is a trophy in an empty room.

In our State of AI Search 2026 research at Alrecommend.ai, 37% of consumers now start their searches with an AI tool rather than a traditional search box. And on Google itself, between 58% and 68% of searches now end without a single click to any website — the answer appears on the results page, and the journey stops there. The click, which is the atomic unit SEO was built to earn, is disappearing.

This isn't a reason to panic. It's a reason to re-tool. Let me draw the line between the old game and the new one clearly, because most of what you already know still matters — it just isn't sufficient anymore.

SEO optimized for a ranking. AEO optimizes for a citation.

Search Engine Optimization was always a game of **position**. You produced a page, and algorithms decided where it sat in an ordered list. The user did the rest of the work: scanning, clicking, comparing, deciding. Your job ended at the click.

Answer Engine Optimization is a game of **inclusion**. A large language model reads the live web (and its training corpus), and assembles an answer. There is no list to climb. There is a far harsher binary: you

are either in the answer or you are invisible. The AI has already done the scanning, comparing, and deciding on the user's behalf. Your job now is to be the source it trusts enough to quote and name.

That shift — from earning a position to earning a citation — changes almost everything downstream. Here's the contrast at a glance:

Dimension	SEO (the old game)	AEO (the new game)
Goal	Rank in a list	Get cited in an answer
Unit of success	The click	The mention / citation
Surface	10 blue links	ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, AI Overviews, Perplexity, Grok
User behavior	Scans and clicks	Reads a synthesized answer
Winner	One page at position #1	The 2–3 sources named in the answer
Keyword model	Head terms, exact match	Natural-language questions, intent
Content shape	Long pages built for dwell time	Extractable, self-contained claims
Authority signal	Backlinks, domain authority	Consistency + citability across the web
Measurement	Rank, CTR, sessions	Citation share, share of voice in answers
Feedback loop	Weekly rank tracking	Prompt testing across models

Read that table one row at a time and you'll notice something important: the columns aren't opposites. AEO is not the demolition of SEO. It's the next layer built on top of it — and some of the foundation carries straight over.

What carries over (don't throw the SEO playbook away)

If a consultant tells you SEO is dead and you should scrap everything, close the tab. Several SEO fundamentals are **more** valuable in an AEO world, not less, because AI systems lean on the same signals to decide who's credible.

Technical crawlability. An LLM's retrieval layer still has to reach and parse your page. Clean HTML, fast load times, logical structure, and an absence of render-blocking nonsense matter as much as ever. If Googlebot struggled with your site, the AI crawlers will too.

Genuine topical authority. Depth still wins. A site that comprehensively covers a subject — the way a specialist covers their field — earns the model's confidence. Thin, scattered content was mediocre for SEO; for AEO it's fatal, because the model has no reason to choose you as the authority.

Structured data and schema. Marking up your entities, FAQs, products, and organization details was a nice-to-have for rich snippets. It's now a primary way you hand machines clean, unambiguous facts about who you are.

Real backlinks and brand mentions. Being referenced across the credible web still signals trust. AI systems weigh corroboration heavily — if five reputable sources say the same thing about you, you become a safe fact to repeat.

The through-line: quality, credibility, and technical hygiene were always the point. SEO tactics that were really **authority** tactics survive. SEO tactics that were **gaming** tactics do not.

What's obsolete (stop doing these)

Some habits that defined a decade of search marketing now actively work against you.

Keyword-density writing. Stuffing a page with variations of a head term to signal relevance is worse than useless. LLMs parse meaning, not term frequency. They can tell the difference between a page that answers a question and one that repeats it.

Position obsession. Tracking your rank for a keyword and celebrating the climb from #4 to #2 measures a game fewer people are playing. When two-thirds of searches don't produce a click, position is a vanity metric masquerading as a KPI.

Click-maximizing dark patterns. The 2,000-word recipe intro, the answer buried below the fold to boost dwell time, the "read more" gates — every trick engineered to trap a human and inflate engagement signals now backfires. AI extractors want the answer up front and clean. Bury it and you simply won't get quoted.

Content built for volume, not extraction. Publishing fifty thin articles to blanket a keyword cluster produced diminishing returns for SEO. For AEO it's noise. One authoritative, well-structured, genuinely useful page beats fifty shallow ones, because the model needs a source it can stand behind.

What's new (the actual work of AEO)

Here's where AEO demands things SEO never asked for.

Extractability. The single biggest shift. Every important claim should be able to stand on its own, lifted out of your page and dropped into an answer without losing meaning or accuracy. That means leading with the answer, using clear declarative sentences, defining terms in place, and structuring content so a machine can find the self-contained unit it needs. Write the way you'd want to be quoted.

Citability and consistency. AI systems triangulate. If your pricing, your positioning, and your core facts say one thing on your site, another on LinkedIn, and a third on a directory, you become a risky source — and risky sources get dropped. Consistency across every place your brand appears is now a ranking factor in the truest sense.

Question-shaped content. People don't type "CRM software best" into ChatGPT. They ask, "What's the best CRM for a 15-person B2B sales team that already uses HubSpot?" Your content has to map to real, specific, natural-language questions and answer them completely, because that's the shape of the prompt the model is trying to satisfy.

Multi-model presence. There is no single algorithm to optimize for anymore. ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, Google AI Overviews, Perplexity, and Grok each retrieve, weight, and synthesize differently. Being cited well in Perplexity tells you little about how you show up in AI Overviews. AEO is inherently a portfolio play across systems.

New measurement. You can't manage what you can't see, and rank trackers are blind to all of this. The new questions are: When someone asks the model about our category, are we mentioned? How often, versus competitors? Which sources does the AI cite instead of us, and why? At Alrecommend.ai we call this **citation share** — your share of voice inside the answers themselves — and it's the metric I'd put at the center of any modern search program.

The payoff for doing this well is real and measurable. In our State of AI Search 2026 research, businesses that implemented full AEO saw 3.8× higher AI citation rates and roughly 142% more AI-referred leads within 90 days. That's not a rounding error on top of SEO. That's a different order of return, from a channel most of your competitors haven't started defending yet.

A word on trust — because this is where it's won or lost

Everything I've described rewards one thing above all: being genuinely, verifiably credible. AI systems are built to avoid repeating things that might be wrong. That makes them, in effect, trust-detection engines. Real expertise, consistent facts, first-hand experience, transparent authorship, corroboration from other credible sources — the E-E-A-T principles Google spent years teaching us — are now enforced by machines that will simply route around you if you don't have them. My honest opinion, and I'll flag it as opinion: over the next few years, the brands that win AI search will be the ones that were actually trustworthy, not the ones best at appearing so. The gap between reputation and reality is closing.

Your 90-day transition plan

Whether you're running a business or an agency, here's the sequence I'd follow. Don't boil the ocean — move in this order.

Days 1–30: See the battlefield. - Build a list of the 20–30 real questions your buyers ask, in their words. - Run each one through ChatGPT, Gemini, Perplexity, and Google AI Overviews. Record whether you're mentioned, who *is* cited, and what those sources have that you don't. This is your baseline citation share. - Audit your technical foundation — crawlability, speed, schema. Fix what's broken. This is table stakes that carries over from SEO.

Days 31–60: Re-tool the content. - Rewrite your priority pages for extractability: answer first, clear declarative claims, self-contained facts, real structure. - Reshape content around the natural-language questions from your audit, answering each one completely on a page that earns the right to be quoted. - Reconcile your facts everywhere — site, LinkedIn, directories, third-party profiles. Kill the inconsistencies that make you a risky source.

Days 61–90: Build authority and measure. - Earn corroboration: credible mentions, expert bylines, being referenced by sources the models already trust. This is slow, unglamorous, and decisive. - Re-run your question set and compare citation share against your Day-1 baseline. Track it monthly the way you used to track rank. - Assign ownership. AEO isn't a project you finish; it's a discipline you run.

For agencies, one addition: reposition the offer now. Clients still asking "where do we rank?" need to be taught the better question — "where are we cited?" — and the agency that reframes the conversation first will own the category relationship. That's a growth opportunity disguised as a threat.

Ranking #1 was never the goal

Here's the thing worth remembering. Ranking #1 was always a proxy. What you actually wanted was to be the answer — the source a buyer trusts at the moment of decision. For twenty years, the top of the list was the closest thing we had to that. Now the answer is delivered directly, and the proxy has been cut out. The goal didn't change. The mechanism did.

The organizations that internalize this won't spend the next few years mourning the click. They'll spend it becoming the source worth citing. That work — being credible, being clear, being consistent, being genuinely useful — is harder to fake than a backlink profile and far more durable. Which is exactly why I think it's the best position marketing has been in for a long time.

Key takeaways

- 2 SEO optimized for *position* in a list; AEO optimizes for *inclusion* in an AI's answer. With 58–68% of Google searches now zero-click, rank is becoming a vanity metric.

- ② Keep the SEO fundamentals that were really authority signals — crawlability, topical depth, schema, real backlinks. Abandon keyword stuffing, position obsession, and click-trapping dark patterns.
- ② The new work is extractability (answer-first, self-contained claims), fact consistency across the web, question-shaped content, and presence across ChatGPT, Gemini, Perplexity, AI Overviews, Claude, and Grok.
- ② Replace rank tracking with *citation share* — how often the AI names you versus competitors when someone asks about your category.
- ② Alrecommend.ai's State of AI Search 2026 research found full AEO delivered 3.8× higher citation rates and ~142% more AI-referred leads in 90 days.
- ② Run a 90-day transition: audit citation share, re-tool content for extraction, reconcile your facts, build corroboration, then measure and assign ownership.

Frequently asked questions

Should I stop doing SEO and switch entirely to AEO?

No. Treat AEO as the next layer on top of SEO, not a replacement. Technical crawlability, topical depth, schema, and credible backlinks all carry over and are arguably more valuable now. What you retire are the gaming tactics — keyword stuffing, rank obsession, and content engineered to trap clicks. The fundamentals that were really about authority survive; the ones that were about manipulation don't.

How do I even measure AEO if there's no ranking to track?

Shift from rank to citation share. Build a list of the real questions your buyers ask, run them across ChatGPT, Gemini, Perplexity, and Google AI Overviews on a schedule, and record how often you're named versus competitors. That share of voice inside the answers themselves — plus tracking AI-referred traffic and leads separately in your analytics — is the modern equivalent of a rank report.

My content already ranks well on Google. Isn't that enough to get cited by AI?

Not necessarily. Ranking pages are often built for human dwell time — long intros, answers buried below the fold, engagement bait — which is exactly what hurts extractability. AI systems want the answer up front, in clean, self-contained, declarative statements they can lift without losing meaning. High-ranking pages frequently need to be restructured for extraction and fact consistency before they earn citations.

About the author. Scott Tischler is the Founder & Chairman of Alrecommend.ai and a practitioner-authority on AI search and Answer Engine Optimization. With 20+ years in marketing technology — including American Express, MetLife, and UBS — and executive study at Wharton, Harvard, Yale, and Oxford, he helps businesses become the ones AI recommends.

