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From SEO Agency to AEO Practice: Repositioning for the AI Era

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

The agencies calling me right now are not asking whether AI search matters. They watched their clients' organic traffic soften as answer engines started resolving queries without a click. They are asking a harder question: how do we reposition the whole practice before the ground moves under us?

I have run marketing technology inside American Express, MetLife, and UBS, and I now run Alrecommend.ai helping businesses become the ones AI systems recommend. From that vantage point, the answer is clear. **Answer Engine Optimization (AEO) is not a new tactic bolted onto SEO. It is the next form of the discipline** — and the agencies that reframe fastest will take the clients from the ones that hesitate.

Here is the transition, concretely.

What is AEO and how is it different from SEO?

Answer Engine Optimization is the practice of getting your client recognized, cited, and recommended inside AI-generated answers — ChatGPT, Gemini, Perplexity, Google's AI overviews, and the rest. SEO optimized for a ranked list of links a human clicks. AEO optimizes for a synthesized answer a machine composes, often with no click at all.

The distinction matters because the unit of success changed. In SEO, you won a position. In AEO, you win **inclusion in the answer** and, ideally, a recommendation by name. That reframes what you measure, what you deliver, and what you sell.

The good news for agencies: this is an evolution, not a demolition. Much of what made you good at SEO still applies. But the deliverables and the reporting have to change, and so does the story you tell clients.

What should you keep from SEO?

Do not throw out your craft. The fundamentals that AI systems reward overlap heavily with what good SEO always required:

- **Technical health.** Crawlable, fast, well-structured sites are still the price of entry; AI crawlers need clean access to your content.
- **Quality content that answers real questions.** This matters more now, not less.
- **Authority and trust signals.** The E-E-A-T thinking you already do maps directly onto how models decide whom to trust.
- **Structured data.** Schema was useful for rich results; it is now foundational for machine understanding.
- **Keyword and query research** — reframed as understanding the actual questions and prompts people ask.

If your team already does these well, you are not starting over. You are redirecting proven skills toward a new endpoint.

What is genuinely new in an AEO practice?

Here is what you add. These are the deliverables that separate an AEO practice from an SEO shop that changed its slide deck.

Entity authority building. Answer engines reason about entities — brands, people, products — not just pages. A core new deliverable is establishing your client as a well-defined, well-connected entity: consistent identity across the web, a `sameAs` graph, and corroboration from third-party sources. This is often the highest-leverage work you can do.

Advanced schema and structured data. Beyond the basics, you are implementing Organization, Person, Product, and FAQ schema deliberately, so machines can extract clean facts about your client and state them confidently.

Prompt and answer monitoring. You now track how your client appears across AI systems for the questions that matter — whether they are named, how they are described, and who shows up instead. This is the AEO equivalent of rank tracking.

Share-of-model reporting. The new headline metric. Across a defined set of buyer questions, how often does the client appear in AI answers versus competitors? This is the number executives will actually care about.

Content engineered for citation. Question-shaped headings, direct answers up front, self-contained quotable sentences, clear definitions — content built to be lifted into an answer, not just to rank.

How do the old and new deliverables map?

Use this to reframe your existing service menu rather than reinventing it from scratch.

SEO deliverable	AEO evolution
Keyword rankings report	Share-of-model / answer-inclusion report
Rank tracking	Prompt and answer monitoring across AI engines
On-page optimization	Content engineered for citation and extraction
Backlink building	Entity authority and third-party corroboration
Basic schema for rich results	Deliberate entity schema and sameAs graph
Technical SEO audit	AI-crawlability and entity-clarity audit

Notice that every row is a natural progression. You can walk a client from what they already understand to what they now need — which is exactly how you sell it.

How should you package and price AEO?

Pricing is where agencies get nervous, so be direct with clients. AEO is early, higher-value, and harder to fake than commodity SEO — which is an argument for pricing it up, not discounting it.

Three packaging models work well.

The audit and foundation engagement. A defined-scope project: entity audit, schema implementation, baseline share-of-model measurement, and a roadmap. This is low-risk for the client and a strong entry point that naturally leads to retainer work.

The AEO retainer. Ongoing entity building, content engineered for citation, monthly prompt monitoring, and share-of-model reporting. Price it against the strategic value of being recommended by AI, not against a per-hour content quota.

The hybrid. Keep the SEO retainer for clients who still need it, and add AEO as a distinct line item. This lets you upsell your existing book of business without forcing an all-at-once switch.

Whatever the structure, tie the fee to outcomes leadership cares about — presence in AI answers for high-intent questions — rather than activity counts. AEO justifies premium pricing precisely because it is where the attention is moving and few agencies do it credibly yet.

How do you sell AEO to clients who still think in SEO?

Lead with the shift they can already feel. Most clients have noticed that answers increasingly resolve without a click, and that their team now checks ChatGPT before Google for some questions. Name that reality, then reframe it as opportunity.

A few moves that land:

- **Show them the mirror.** Run their key buyer questions through the major AI systems live and show whether they appear and how they are described. Nothing sells AEO faster than a client watching a competitor get recommended in their place.
- **Anchor on a familiar metric, then upgrade it.** Position share-of-model as "rankings for the AI era" so it feels like continuity, not a leap of faith.
- **Frame the risk of waiting.** Entity authority compounds; the client who builds it now is harder to displace later. Early movers get baked into how models describe the category.
- **Be honest about measurement.** AEO reporting is younger than SEO analytics. Set expectations around reasoned ranges and directional trends rather than false precision, and you will build the trust that keeps the retainer.

What does the transition roadmap look like for your agency?

Do not rebrand overnight and hope. Sequence it. First, **retrain your team** on entity thinking, AI-crawlability, and citation-engineered content — most of your people already have the underlying skills. Second, **build the new deliverables** as repeatable products: a standard entity audit, a schema playbook, a monitoring setup, a share-of-model report template. Third, **pilot with two or three willing clients** to prove the model and generate case evidence. Fourth, **reposition your offer and pricing** around AEO once you have results to point to.

The agencies that win the next few years will not be the ones with the most keywords in a spreadsheet. They will be the ones that made their clients the answer. That is the practice worth building, and the window to build it is open now.

Key takeaways

- ② AEO is the evolution of SEO for answer engines: the goal shifts from ranking a link to being included and recommended inside AI answers.
- ② Keep your SEO fundamentals — technical health, quality content, trust signals, structured data — and redirect them toward machine understanding.

- ② The new deliverables are entity authority building, advanced schema, prompt/answer monitoring, share-of-model reporting, and citation-engineered content.
- ② Share-of-model — how often a client appears in AI answers versus competitors — is the headline metric executives will care about.
- ② Price AEO as high-value, hard-to-fake work tied to outcomes, not per-hour activity; audits, retainers, and hybrids all work.
- ② Sell it by showing clients live whether AI recommends them, reframing the risk of waiting, and being honest about early-stage measurement.

Frequently asked questions

What is the difference between SEO and AEO?

SEO optimizes for position in a ranked list of links a person clicks, while AEO optimizes for inclusion and recommendation inside AI-generated answers that often produce no click. AEO changes the unit of success from a ranking to being named in the answer, which reframes what you measure, deliver, and sell.

Should an SEO agency abandon SEO to pursue AEO?

No. AEO is an evolution of SEO, and fundamentals like technical health, quality content, trust signals, and structured data still matter. The smart move is to keep those skills, add new AEO deliverables, and often run a hybrid so clients who still need SEO get both.

What new deliverables define an AEO practice?

Entity authority building, advanced and deliberate schema, prompt and answer monitoring across AI systems, share-of-model reporting, and content engineered to be cited. These are the deliverables that separate a real AEO practice from an SEO shop that only changed its terminology.

What is share-of-model reporting?

Share-of-model measures how often a client appears in AI-generated answers versus competitors across a defined set of buyer questions. It is the AEO equivalent of rankings and typically the headline metric leadership cares about, because it shows whether the brand is present where buyers now get answers.

How should agencies price AEO services?

Price AEO as higher-value, harder-to-fake work tied to outcomes leadership cares about, rather than to per-hour activity counts. Effective models include a defined-scope audit and foundation engagement, an ongoing AEO retainer, and a hybrid that adds AEO as a line item alongside existing SEO work.

How do you sell AEO to a client who only understands SEO?

Show them live whether AI systems recommend them for their key buyer questions, then anchor share-of-model as rankings for the AI era so it feels like continuity. Reinforce that entity authority compounds, so early movers

are harder to displace, and be honest that measurement is younger than SEO analytics.

Can existing SEO skills transfer to AEO?

Yes, substantially. Technical optimization, content quality, E-E-A-T trust building, structured data, and query research all map onto how AI systems decide whom to cite and recommend. Most SEO teams are redirecting proven skills toward a new endpoint rather than starting over.

How long does it take to reposition an SEO agency as an AEO practice?

It is a sequenced transition rather than an overnight rebrand: retrain the team, productize the new deliverables, pilot with a few clients to gather evidence, then reposition the offer and pricing. Agencies can begin piloting within a quarter and build a credible, results-backed AEO offer over the following months.

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.