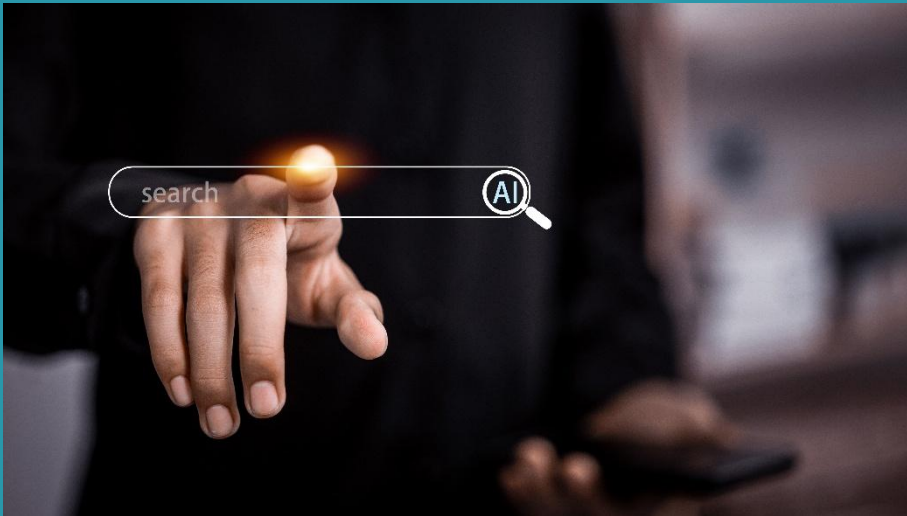




The MSPs Winning AI Referrals

The MSP's Guide to AI Visibility

January 2026



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Summary

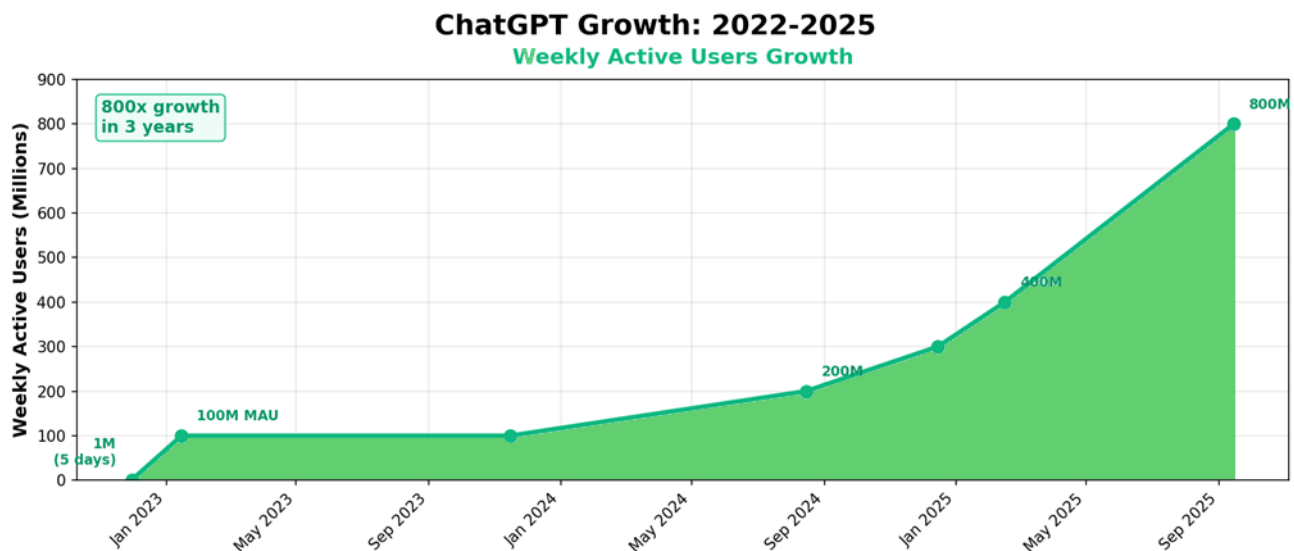
Business owners are increasingly asking ChatGPT, Google AI, and others "who is the best MSPs near me" and similar questions. If your name isn't one of the responses, you're losing out.

Your prospects are already asking AI which MSP to hire.

Is your company's name the answer?

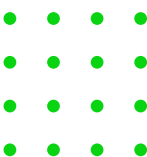
How Users Search for MSPs is Changing Fast

Google Search remains the primary tool people use to search for information and for products/services. But AI Chatbot use is rapidly rising. 77% of Americans are using ChatGPT as a search engine, and 24% say they turn to ChatGPT before Google.¹



Even more concerning, Google is changing its strategy and fully embracing AI. Instead of search results, Google is delivering AI Overviews (AIOs) as answers to queries. And these

¹ <https://www.contentgrip.com/ai-search-trend-adobe-report/>



AIOs often don't have any source links that would allow users to click through to your website.

Google's new business strategy: answer all queries with AIOs to keep users in their AI Overviews. Once Google routinely captures users through their AI answers, they'll charge businesses for placement in these answers, just like they currently charge for placement at the top of search results.

The change is happening quickly. According to a SEMRush study, "92-94% of AI Mode searches were zero-click searches" meaning the users got an AI result and did not click from the search results to a website.²

There is some good news, though. When users do click through to a website, they have an average worth of 4.4x that of an organic search user. These users convert 23 times better than organic users.³ Probably because they are further down the research funnel, already educated, and closer to making a vendor/product decision.

92-94%
of AI Mode
searches are
zero-click
searches

MSPs have a real opportunity for growth if they actively strive to get cited in AI as a source for high-intent queries.

How fast is the change to AI Search taking place? Fast.

SEMRush predicts that AI search visitors will surpass traditional search visitors by early 2028.⁴

Are you ready?

² <https://www.semrush.com/blog/google-ai-mode-seo-impact/>

³ <https://www.getpassionfruit.com/blog/are-ai-search-referrals-the-new-clicks>

⁴ <https://www.semrush.com/blog/ai-search-seo-traffic-study/>

The Current State

In some channels, there's an air of panic about AI. You'd think SEO (Search Engine Optimization) was dead. I have news for you—[SEO is still important and will be for a while](#).

If you've invested in your SEO, that investment will reap rewards for some time. Moreover, solid SEO is a key foundation for any AEO (AI Engine Optimization) you conduct. So, if you're behind on your SEO, it's still worth investing in that foundation.

But now is the time to start doing AEO, as well. AI use is only going to grow, and optimizing AI will become more and more important. Those that don't invest will be left behind.

In 2026, leading in AEO puts you at a competitive advantage.

By 2028, not having AEO will put you at a distinct disadvantage.

Original Research:

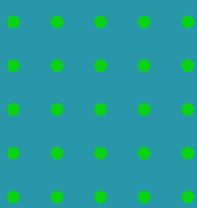
How AI Platforms Cite MSP Content

There's a lack of data on how AIs handle queries about Managed Service Providers (MSPs). So, I decided to find out by conducting a study. The results were enlightening. While these results align with the general trends we're seeing in AI search, I uncovered specific findings of interest to MSPs.

The Research

I examined three AI platforms—Google AI Overviews, ChatGPT, and Perplexity—to see how they respond to MSP-related search queries. I collected data on 30 queries across two intent types (general and local intent) and five query categories (Informational, Commercial, Local, Problem-Based, Service-Specific).

The 30 queries were performed on all three platforms—automated on Google and manually on ChatGPT and Perplexity—and the results analyzed. For the full study report, see https://neicolecrepeau.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/MSP_AI_Final_Study_Analysis_Report.pdf.



Takeaways from the Study

Here are the key findings:

- **AI visibility is achievable**
In this dataset, MSP's own websites represent [78% of citations](#).
The right content on your website boosts your chances of appearing.
- **Content strategy matters**
Blog content impacts informational queries; homepage and service pages on your site help capture the highest intent prospects.
- **Local SEO still matters**
Google shows AI Overviews for [only 13.3% of local queries](#).
That means traditional organic and local pack results remain critical for these queries.

Google AI overviews steal traffic

Google AI Overviews are starting to dominate in search results. Google AI Overviews appeared for 46.7% (14/30) of MSP-related queries overall. But this rate varies dramatically by query intent.

[General queries](#)—those without local context—[showed AIOs 80% of the time](#). But when queries asked for local MSPs/services, AIOs appeared only 13.3% of the time.

That's good. It means that [for users seeking a local MSP](#), Google is relying on traditional search results such as the local pack.

46.7%

of MSP-related queries in
Google showed Google AI
Overviews in response

Intent Type	AIO Rate	Queries
General Intent	80.0%	12/15
Local Intent	13.3%	2/15

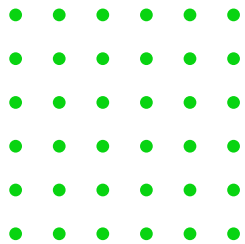
The type of query also impacts whether an AIO appears. Some questions are more likely to get an overview, where others are more likely to get traditional search results.

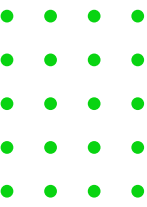
Category	Examples	AIO Rate
Service-Specific	"cloud managed services provider" "IT help desk outsourcing"	100%
Commercial	"best MSPs for small business"	85.7%
Informational	"what is a managed service provider"	66.7%
Problem-Aware	"my business keeps getting hacked"	50.0%
Local	"managed IT services Seattle"	13.3%

Zero-click continues to advance—But we’re not there yet

Google has been striving toward zero-click answers: where users find their answer in the search results and don’t link back to a website, like yours. AI Overviews continue to advance zero-click. 57% of AIOs served in this study had no source citations. That means no backlinks to an MSP website.

But that means 43% of AIOs did have backlinks. Key to know: some queries were more likely to include backlinks.





Query Pattern	AIOs with Sources	AIOs without Sources
Informational (what is an MSP, benefits of MSPs)	100%	0%
Service-Specific (cloud, cybersecurity)	100%	0%
Commercial/Evaluative (best MSPs, top MSPs, how to choose)	17%	83%
Problem-Aware (specific technical issues, security needs)	0%	100%
Local (best IT company in Seattle, top MSPs in Denver)	0%	100%

As you can see below, Google AIOs were less likely to appear for Problem-Aware and Local queries, in general. Instead, traditional results appeared.

Category	AIO Rate
Service-Specific	100%
Commercial	85.7%
Informational	66.7%
Problem-Aware	50.0%
Local	13.3%

Note: Problem-Aware queries had a smaller sample size; these findings are directional.

On the other hand, ChatGPT and Perplexity did include sources for Problem-Aware and Local queries. [For those AIs, MSP websites were a primary source.](#)

Important: The 72% service page citation rate for local queries comes **entirely** from ChatGPT and Perplexity. Google AIOs appeared for only 13.3% of local queries. When they did appear, they included zero source citations. This means:

- To get visible in Google local queries, → Optimize for Local Pack (GBP, reviews, local citations)
- To get visible in ChatGPT/Perplexity local queries → Optimize service pages and the homepage

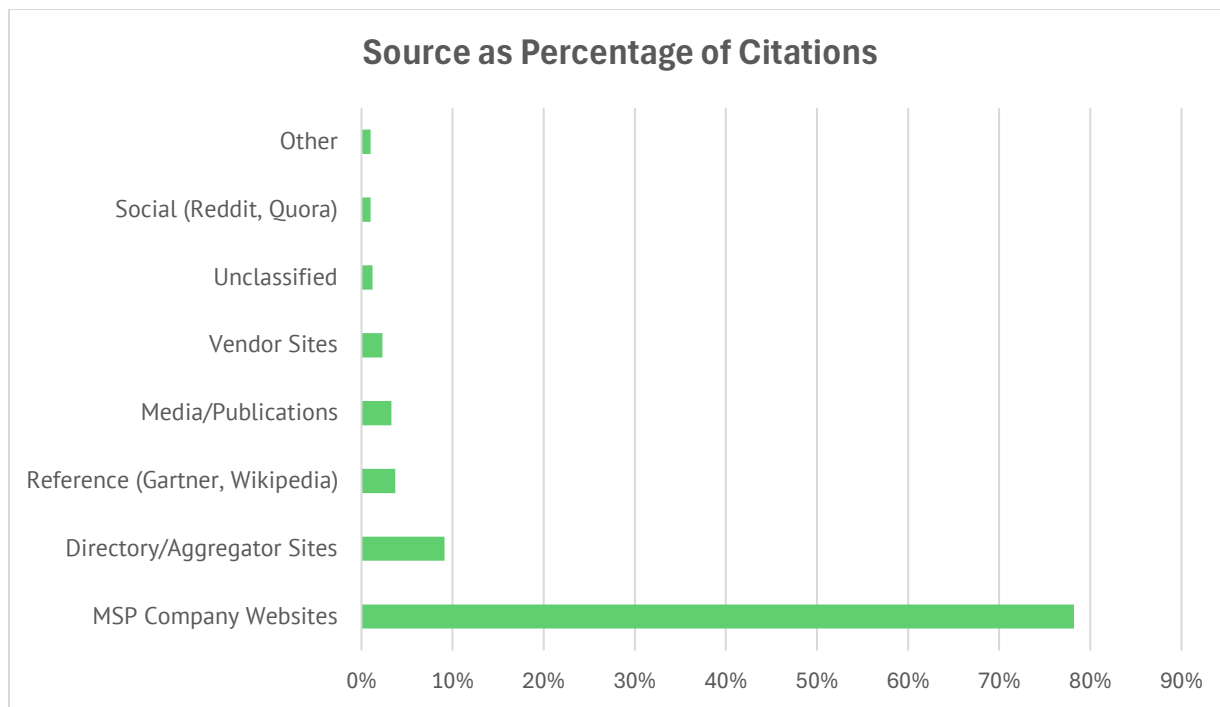
High intent queries, such as those about specific problems, services, or locales, had the lowest rates of AIO answers and the highest rate of citations in other AIs.

These queries are your most valuable because they are from highly interested prospects and they are your best opportunity to get a click through to your website.



Your website is critical

We know that AIs make use of a variety of sources for their data, well beyond company websites. While my research showed that many sources were used, I was surprised to find that [company websites dominate when sources are cited](#).



Two directories are widely used in the MSP world: Cludtango and Clutch. As you can see from the above chart, Directory/Aggregator Sites are the second largest source cited by AIs. However, those results are primarily due to ChatGPT, which heavily favors these directories, [citing directories 25% of the time](#).

It's important to remember that each LLM has its own preferences when it comes to sources:

- Perplexity heavily favors MSP websites (89.8%) with minimal directory reliance (2.6%).
- ChatGPT shows the highest directory usage (25%)—nearly 10x higher than Perplexity.
- Google AIO cites zero directories and relies more on reference sources (12%) like Gartner and Wikipedia.

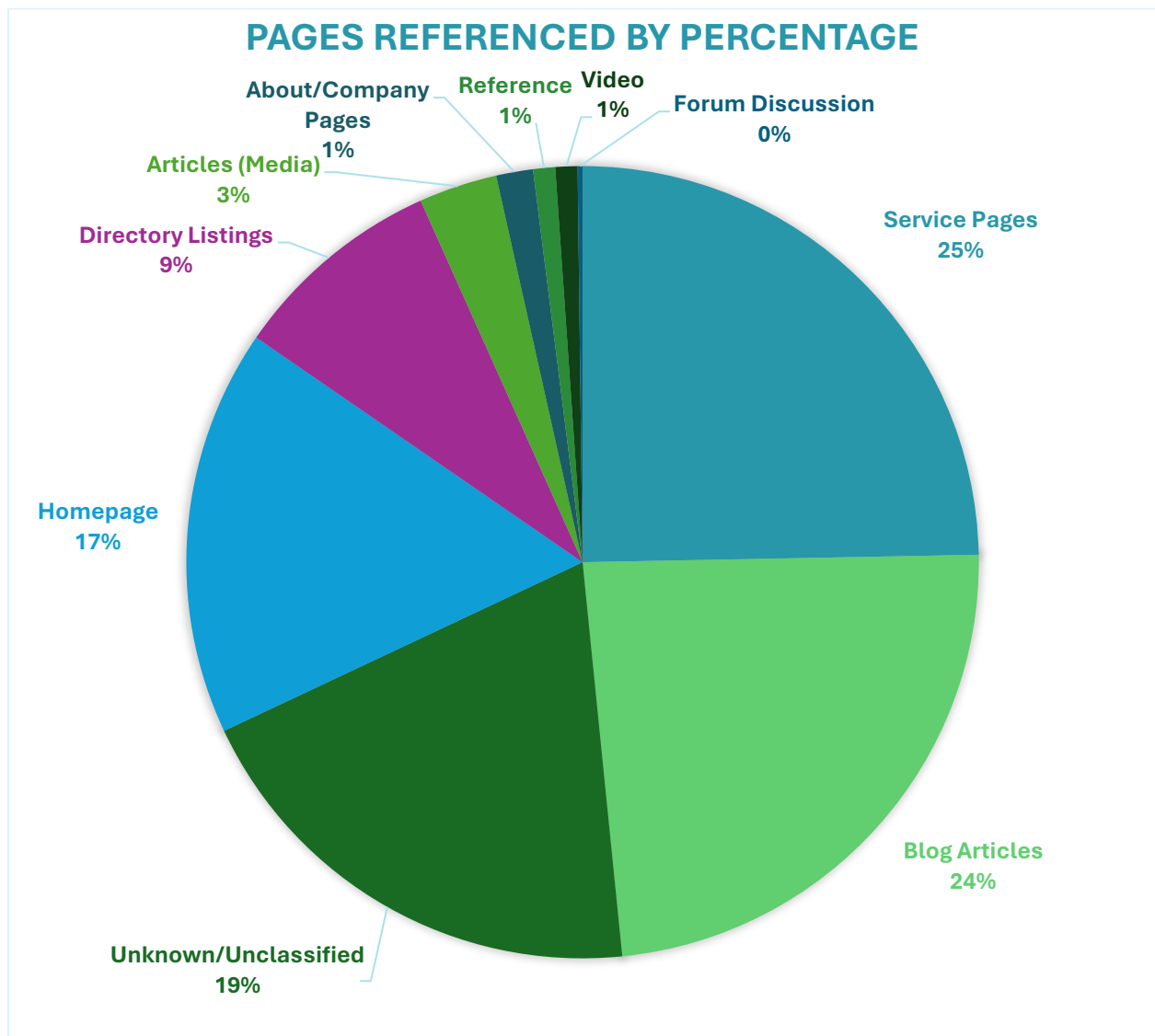
The data shows you need to use multiple strategies to ensure you're cited in AI responses. PR, social media, articles, etc.

But you can start with your website.

Content matters

This study clearly shows that MSPs need to be strategic about where they put their content efforts. Top website pages cited:

- Blogs and articles—24% of time
- Service pages—25% of the time
- Homepages—17% of the time

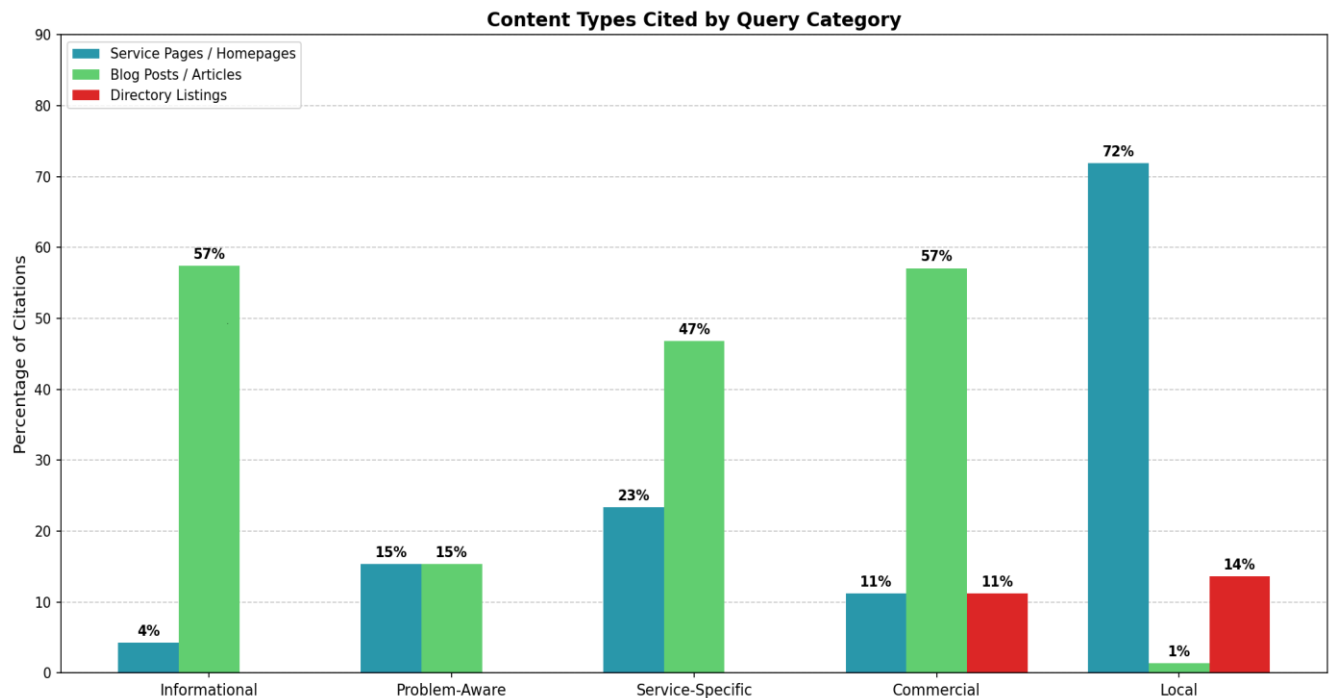


Remember, though, that some queries are more valuable than others, because they're more likely to give backlinks and are asked by prospects with higher intent.

The two most valuable types of queries are:

- Local, i.e. "managed IT services Seattle"
- Problem-Aware, i.e. "my business keeps getting hacked"

For these queries, service pages (Cybersecurity, Cloud Management, etc.) play a surprisingly important role.

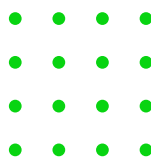


To appear in the most relevant queries for your most serious prospects, optimize your home page and service pages.

The recommendation is clear. To boost your appearance in AI:

- Focus your blog content on informational and commercial topics.
- Ensure your service pages and homepage are optimized for local queries.





The High Price of Inaction

The results of my study clearly show that MSPs who are proactive can raise the chances of being mentioned in AI results. And can get backlinks from AIs to their own websites.

The time to act is now. MSPs who establish AI visibility early will have compounding advantages. Just as early SEO adopters dominated page one for years, early AEO adopters stand a better chance of becoming the "default answer" AI engines learn to recommend.

MSPs that snooze on AEO will lose mentions, backlinks, and the prospects that come with them.

What Is a Forward-Thinking MSP to Do?

MSPs that are ready to move forward can develop a step-by-step AI Engine Optimization plan. The good news is that we know what to do. The challenge is that the process does require some expertise and a methodical approach. Following are the basic steps for a staged plan to implement AEO. The steps are straightforward to understand, but execution does require consistent effort and some technical know-how.

For a more detailed guide, complete with checklists, look for my upcoming eBook, [Implementing an AI Optimization Strategy: Guide for MSPs](#). Sign up to receive the eBook when it's published.

Don't abandon SEO—Double-down on It

SEO will still be relevant for some time. Add AEO optimization but continue your SEO efforts. The study results show that Google relies on local pack results for many queries. So optimize for local search.

Finally, many SEO best practices form the basis for AEO. If you've been neglecting your SEO, now is the time to refocus. Based on my research findings, here are the SEO best practices that directly translate to AEO success for MSPs.

Build a solid technical foundation

- Ensure fast load times for your website, mobile responsiveness, and crawlability.
- Implement schema markup (LocalBusiness, Service, FAQ, HowTo). This helps AIs understand content context.

- Make sure your website uses HTTPS and an accessible site architecture.
- Ensure your content is rendered in HTML that search engines and AI crawlers can read.
- Do a technical SEO audit and address issues.

IF TERMS LIKE SCHEMA MARKUP AND SERVER-SIDE RENDERING AREN'T FAMILIAR, YOU MAY WANT TO LOOP IN YOUR WEB DEVELOPER OR AN **SEO SPECIALIST FOR THIS PHASE.**

Create structured, scannable content

- Use clear H2/H3 hierarchies that signal topic organization.
- Content should lead with direct, quotable answers, then expand with more details.

Ensure local SEO fundamentals

- Optimize your Google Business Profile. It still drives Local Pack, which dominates local queries on Google.
- Include location pages on your website and include unique content on each page with genuine local differentiation—not just city-name swaps.
- Include local case studies and testimonials mentioning client location/industry.
- NAP (name, address, phone number) consistency across directories that you appear in. Inconsistent information confuses Google.

Make sure your website is solid

Now is the time to re-evaluate your website and make sure it is well-structured, has all the pages relevant to SEO and AEO, and that the content aids AI engines.

E-E-A-T Signals (Experience, Expertise, Authoritativeness, Trust)

- Include author bios on blog posts, including credentials and relevant experience.
- Build out your About page with company history, certifications, awards, and team expertise.
- Publish case studies that demonstrate real client outcomes with specific, measurable results.

These signals help AI platforms decide which sources to trust and cite over competitors.

Comprehensive topic coverage

- Create deep, thorough content about your core service areas. Avoid thin pages without substance or pages that try to cover every service.
- Use internal linking between related topics to build topical authority.

AI platforms favor sites that thoroughly cover a subject rather than those with surface-level content across many topics.

Direct question answering

- Include FAQ sections on pages, ones that mirror the questions prospects ask.
- Create "What is..." and "How to..." content that provides clear, citable definitions.
- Answer the question directly and succinctly at the top. Then provide context and detail in further text. AI platforms will extract direct answers for citations.

Service page depth

- Build detailed pages for your services. Each should have a clear description of what you do, who it's for, and the outcomes you deliver.
- Don't bury key information in PDFs or behind forms. AI crawlers can't access PDFs and need full access to this content.

MY DATA SHOWED AI PLATFORMS CITED SERVICE PAGES 72% OF THE TIME FOR LOCAL QUERIES — THESE PAGES MATTER!

Implement a content strategy with AI in mind

You need to feed the AI engines the information they need to answer prospect questions. And that information needs to be optimized for AI consumption and sharing.

Align content types to query intent

My research shows that blog content dominates citations for informational and commercial queries (57%), while service pages dominate local queries (72%). So:

- Create educational blog content for awareness-stage visibility ("what is an MSP," "MSP vs break-fix").
- Ensure service pages are robust for local and transactional visibility.



Note that identifying which queries actually drive leads in your market—and which content types perform best for each—requires testing and ongoing analysis. Getting this right requires understanding not just which content types perform best, but which queries actually matter in your specific market. A 'managed IT services' query in a saturated metro like Dallas behaves differently than in a smaller market.

Write for citation, not just ranking

- Include quotable, standalone sentences that summarize key points. This is the kind of content AI platforms extract for responses.
- Use specific numbers, statistics, and concrete claims rather than vague generalities.
- Structure content so key insights appear early in sections, rather than being buried in paragraphs.

Cover the questions your prospects actually ask

You know your prospects, so you know the questions they ask. Those are exactly the questions you want to answer. Create a content strategy based on these questions.

- Interview your sales team: what questions come up repeatedly on calls?
- Create content that directly addresses pain points and objections.
- Problem-aware queries ("my business keeps getting hacked") are unique opportunities to be cited as the solution. Identify the ones that lead prospects to you.

Update and maintain existing content

AI platforms favor current, accurate information. If you already have a body of content, refresh outdated blog posts and statistics and take the time to make sure the content is structured for citability.

- Add publication and "last updated" dates to signal freshness.
- Remove or consolidate thin, outdated content that dilutes your site's authority.

Add FAQ sections for direct question answering

Add FAQ sections to relevant pages, and mirror how prospects actually ask questions.

- Use "What is..." and "How to..." content that provides clear, citable definitions.
- Use FAQ Schema to call these sections out for AI.
- Make sure the content is optimized for featured snippets and AI citation.

Start tracking AI: citations and referrals

As always, you need to be able to measure your progress. Unlike traditional SEO where tools automate much of this, AI citation tracking is still largely manual and time intensive.

As you think about progress tracking pick the AIs most relevant to you and focus on them. You'll primarily want to concern yourself with Google AIOs and ChatGPT, because of market share. But if you have reason to believe your prospects lean heavily toward other AIs, then include them for tracking and optimization. For instance, if many of your customers use Microsoft, you might want to consider Copilot.

Building a tracking system from scratch, and knowing what patterns actually indicate progress, takes time and expertise most MSPs don't have. Many find it valuable to involve a professional to set up their baseline.

Platform	Share
ChatGPT	59.5-60.5%
Microsoft Copilot	9-14%
Google Gemini	13-14%
Perplexity	6-7%
Claude	3-4%

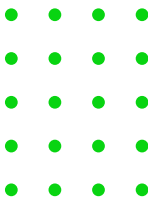
Establish a baseline

- Before implementing AEO changes, test and record your current citation presence across platforms.
- Track both branded queries ("your company name + reviews") and non-branded queries ("MSP in [city]").
- As always, setting a baseline allows you to measure the impact of your optimization efforts.

Set up analytics to capture AI traffic

- Monitor referral traffic from chat.openai.com, perplexity.ai, and other AI platforms in Google Analytics.
- Create a custom segment or report for AI referral sources to track trends over time.

Note: not all AI-driven visits will show clear referral data. But you may see direct traffic increase as AI usage grows.



Manually monitor your visibility

Plan to dedicate time monthly for monitoring. Or assign it to someone on your team. Sporadic checking won't reveal the patterns you need.

- Periodically test key queries on ChatGPT, Perplexity, and Google AI Overviews to see if you're being cited.
- Track which pages get cited and for which query types.
- Document competitors who appear—this reveals content gaps and opportunities.

Watch for patterns

- Which content types earn citations? (Service pages, blogs, case studies?)
- Which platforms cite you most frequently?
- Use these insights to prioritize future content investments.

Develop and implement a PR/citation strategy

My research showed AI platforms cite media sites, industry publications, and directories—not just your website. Your website is a primary source, but to get mentioned in AIs, you need other sites to mention you too. That requires a PR strategy, and PR is a long game that compounds over time, not a quick fix.

Get mentioned on sites that AI platforms trust

- Pursue mentions in industry publications (ChannelE2E, CRN, MSP-focused outlets).
- Do guest posts and contribute to articles on authoritative sites—preferably with backlinks.

Optimize your directory presence

Directories (Clutch, Cloudfunder, G2, UpCity) appeared in 11-14% of commercial and local query citations. ChatGPT, especially, relies on them. You can't afford to neglect them.

- Claim and fully complete profiles on major directories.
- Actively solicit reviews. Platforms favor listings with recent, substantive reviews.

Build citable partnerships

- Vendor partner pages (Microsoft, Cisco, Datto) that mention your company create third-party citation opportunities.

- Local business associations, chambers of commerce, and industry groups provide authoritative backlinks and mentions.

Create research and data worth citing

- You can stand out by providing original statistics, surveys, and benchmarks. These are more likely to get cited by AI platforms and other content creators.
- Even simple data ("We surveyed 50 SMBs about their IT challenges...") creates citable assets.
- This positions you as a primary source rather than someone citing others.

Original research is one of the most effective ways to earn citations, but it requires methodology, analysis skills, and time to execute well. The research behind this eBook, for example, required custom automation tools, multi-platform API integrations, and statistical analysis. The payoff is significant, but the investment in methodology and execution is substantial.

Pursue digital PR opportunities

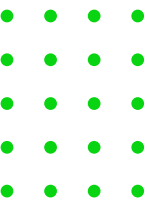
- Respond to journalist queries through HARO (Help a Reporter Out) or similar services.
- Comment on industry news and trends—reporters and AI platforms look for expert perspectives.
- Obtain local business news coverage to create geographic authority signals.

A note on strategy implementation

This guide gives you the roadmap, but I won't sugarcoat it: AEO requires coordinating technical fixes, content strategy, ongoing monitoring, and PR outreach. Most MSPs don't have a dedicated marketing team, which means these tasks compete with everything else on your plate.

Start where you can. Focus on the fundamentals first, then layer in content strategy and PR as capacity allows. Progress beats perfection.





Conclusion

AI is here to stay, and in the next few years, it will become the dominant way that prospects find MSPs. Let's face it: we're in another race. MSPs who linger will fall behind. It will become harder and harder for prospects to find them, translating into less business and lower revenue.

SEO is still critical and will be for a while. But now is the time for forward-thinking MSPs to invest in building their AEO foundation and processes to capture AI mentions. The investment now will pay off for years to come and translate directly into growth.

MSPs that start now will put themselves at a competitive advantage. This is a great opportunity for the MSPs that choose to invest early. They can position themselves to be at the forefront of AEO when it becomes dominant in 2028 and beyond.

To do that, MSPs should start right now to:

- Solidify their SEO foundation.
- Ensure their website is solid.
- Implement a content plan for capturing AEO mentions.
- Begin tracking AI referrals and mentions.

Implementing a comprehensive AEO strategy requires coordinating technical optimization, content architecture, AI platform dynamics, and ongoing monitoring—simultaneously. Most MSPs find that getting the foundation right with expert guidance accelerates results and avoids costly missteps.

**IF YOU'D LIKE TO DISCUSS HOW THESE FINDINGS APPLY TO YOUR
SPECIFIC MARKET AND COMPETITIVE LANDSCAPE,
OR IF YOU'D LIKE MY HELP IMPLEMENTING YOUR AEO STRATEGY,
CONTACT ME AT [HTTPS://NEICOLECREPEAU.COM/CONTACT/](https://neicolecrepeau.com/contact/)**