

GEO vs SEO vs AEO: what should your business pay for?



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If you've been offered SEO, AEO, and GEO, the useful question isn't which acronym sounds newest. It's what would help the right customer find your business, understand why you're a fit, and get in touch.

I wouldn't start by buying three separate packages. I'd ask the provider to show me the problem, the first piece of work, and how we'll know that work was done properly.

Here's how I'd sort through a proposal.

1. Understand the labels without getting stuck on them

SEO means search engine optimization. AEO means answer engine optimization. GEO means generative engine optimization. These are overlapping descriptions of work, not three cleanly separated channels. Google treats optimization for its own AI search features as part of SEO. [Google's AI search guide](#)

Providers use these terms differently. This is a working comparison, not a universal platform standard:

What you're comparing	SEO	AEO	GEO
What the work aims to do	Helping people discover useful pages in search	Helping people get a useful answer	Being a useful source in AI-generated responses
Where customers may see it	Search results, including Google's AI features	Answer-style search experiences	AI-generated answers and their source links
What to inspect	Page access, relevance, and useful information	Clear questions and complete answers	Accurate, well-supported source material
Evidence to request	Relevant search exposure and visits	Dated evidence of the answer or placement being discussed	Platform-specific impressions or citations where reported
Mistake to avoid	Treating a ranking as a sale	Assuming an FAQ guarantees placement	Treating one AI mention as broad demand

For example, Google chooses featured snippets. A publisher can't designate a page as one. A clear answer is useful to a reader; it isn't a promise of that search placement. [Google's featured-snippet guidance](#)

For the broader picture, read [how AI search works for a service business](#).

2. Buy work that addresses a problem you can show

At SAMethod, I'd use four questions to review the scope. They can overlap. They're a way to investigate, not a score for your business or a list of official ranking factors.

Can the right customer find you?

Ask which service, page, and customer search the proposal addresses. Look for evidence that the page can appear in search and whether it has been shown for relevant searches over a stated period.

One search where you don't see yourself isn't enough to diagnose the problem.

A useful first deliverable: a documented access or indexing check, followed by a specific correction if one is needed. Confirming that correction is different from proving that more customers found you.

Can they understand what you do?

Demonstration: Imagine a homeowner looking for someone to repair a leaking roof. This is a teaching example, not a client result. Your page says you provide “complete property solutions,” but doesn't explain whether you repair roofs or serve that homeowner's area.

Before commissioning more articles, I'd clarify that service page using facts the business can stand behind.

A useful first deliverable: a page that makes the service, location, limits, and next step clear. Ask someone unfamiliar with the business to explain it back to you.

Can they trust what you're saying?

Look at the point where a customer is deciding whether to contact you. Can they see real examples of your work, what you did, and what the evidence actually shows?

A useful first deliverable: one example you have permission to share, with its context and limits. A documented repair process may be useful proof of the work. It isn't automatically proof of increased revenue.

If the proposal includes outside mentions or links, ask why those places are relevant to your customers. Don't accept invented testimonials or undisclosed paid endorsements as evidence.

Can they take the next step?

Before buying more traffic, check whether a relevant visitor can understand the offer and contact you. A missing analytics event may mean tracking is incomplete; it doesn't prove that nobody inquired.

A useful first deliverable: a checked inquiry journey, including confirmation that the request reached the business. Keep test requests separate from real prospects. Then assess whether actual inquiries become useful conversations.

3. Ask these questions before signing

Use these seven questions to compare proposals on the same terms:

1. **What problem are we fixing first?** Name the page, service, and customer decision.
2. **What shows that it's a problem?** Ask for the source, date range, and limits of the evidence.
3. **What exactly will you deliver first?** A revised page or a repaired inquiry path is clearer than "better AI visibility."
4. **What's excluded?** Establish what the fee doesn't cover and what would cost extra.
5. **Who owns the accounts and work?** Confirm your access to the website, reports, and content, including if you stop working together.
6. **How will we check the deliverable?** Agree on something both sides can inspect.
7. **What would justify continuing?** Separate completed work, search visibility, inquiries, and sales. Ask when you'll review each.

A provider can reasonably commit to specific work and reporting. A proposal shouldn't treat a search platform's future recommendation, or a customer's buying decision, as something it controls.

4. Read the report in business terms

Ask for a plain-language explanation of each number:

- **Shown in search:** Google's Generative AI performance report measures impressions in AI Overviews and AI Mode: occasions when links to your site were shown, not visits or inquiries. These impressions are also included in Web performance data, so don't add them again. [Google's report documentation](#)
- **Cited in an answer:** Bing reports citations across supported AI experiences. Its citation counts aren't a position or importance score. [Bing's AI Performance documentation](#)
- **Visited or inquired:** Website and inquiry records answer a different question. Check their setup before relying on them.
- **Became a customer:** Follow the inquiry into a qualified conversation and completed sale. A visibility report alone can't establish that outcome.

My recommendation is to keep those stages separate. That makes it easier to see what's improving, what's still unknown, and where the next piece of work belongs.

5. Your next move

Take one current proposal - or one page you'd like to improve - and write this sentence:

“For this service, I want this type of customer to take this next step.”

Then use the seven questions above to name one deliverable and how you'll check that the work is complete. You don't need to settle every acronym before making that decision.

When you're ready to work through a page, use the [practical AI-search guide](#).

Do I need separate SEO, AEO, and GEO retainers?

The names alone don't establish separate work. Compare the actual deliverables, overlap, evidence, and ownership before deciding what support you need. See [what SAMethod's implementation support includes](#).

Do I need a special AI file on my website?

Not for Google Search: Google says it ignores `llms.txt` and doesn't require special AI markup. That doesn't mean there are no eligibility checks. [Google's AI search guide](#)

The Search generative AI control defaults to allowing inclusion. A separately registered section of your website can inherit the wider site's setting. Ask whoever manages Search Console to check Settings → Search generative AI for the relevant site or section before changing anything. [Google's inclusion-control guidance](#)

Does an AI mention mean this is working?

It shows a specific appearance in a specific context. Keep that evidence, but don't turn it into a claim about every search - or revenue you haven't traced.

Want help choosing the first priority?

If you'd like help deciding what to work on first, my Free Revenue Opportunity Review looks at how customers find you across search, AI tools, and social media, why they might choose your business, and how easily they can get in touch.

You'll receive free written recommendations and a walkthrough. Any paid implementation is a separate, optional decision.

Request a free growth review