

Seen by AI

SEO vs GEO — what changed, and how local businesses get found now

A free guide for local business owners

HelloHiAi

AI visibility for local businesses

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Why this guide

Your customers changed how they look for things.

You didn't open your business to study marketing. You opened it to do good work — cook good food, fix teeth, host guests, build things. Marketing was supposed to be simple: be good, be visible, and the customers come.

For twenty years, “be visible” meant one thing: show up on Google when someone searched. That world is ending — not because Google disappeared, but because your customers stopped searching the way they used to.

Today they ask an AI assistant. “Find me a good dentist near me.” “Which hotel in Beirut has the best sea view?” And the assistant answers with two or three names — not a page of links. If your business isn't one of those names, you don't lose a click. You never even enter the conversation.

This short guide explains what changed, what the new game is called, and exactly what you can do about it — in plain words, no jargon.

01 · Chapter 1

How customers used to find you

The old journey was a funnel you could see. A customer realized they needed something, opened Google, typed a few words, scanned ten blue links, clicked two or three websites, compared, and then called or visited. Every step left a trace you could measure: rankings, clicks, visits.

SEO — search engine optimization — was the craft of winning that funnel. It meant choosing the right keywords, earning links from other sites, keeping your website fast and clear, and collecting reviews. Do it well, and you sat near the top of the results page, where the clicks were.

It worked because the customer did the comparing. Google handed them a list, and they picked from it. Your job was to be on the list and look like the best option on it.

SEO's goal was the click: rank high, get chosen from the list.

02 · Chapter 2

What changed: customers ask now

The new journey starts with a question, not a search box. Your customer opens a live AI assistant and asks in full sentences — the way they'd ask a knowledgeable friend.

“I need a quiet café in Hamra with good wifi for working.” “Who's the most trusted plumber in Beirut?”

The assistant doesn't return ten links. It returns an answer: two or three business names, each with a reason. “Try Café X — great wifi, lots of laptop workers, 4.6 stars from 800 reviews.” The comparing that the customer used to do? The AI does it now, inside the chat.

This is the whole shift. The decision moved into the conversation. Most of the time there is no results page anymore, no list to scan, no website visit before the choice is made. The shortlist the AI gives IS the market.

The AI doesn't show a list of links. It gives an answer — and the answer names two or three businesses.

03 · Chapter 3

GEO in plain words

GEO stands for generative engine optimization. Forget the fancy name — here's what it means in practice:

SEO is the work of getting clicked. GEO is the work of getting mentioned. SEO tries to rank your website on a results page. GEO tries to get AI assistants to name and recommend your business inside their answers.

SEO isn't dead, and this isn't either-or. The same foundations — a good website, real reviews, accurate listings — feed both. But the goal moved: from winning the click to winning the mention.

	SEO	GEO
The goal	Rank high, get the click	Get named and recommended in AI answers
Where the decision happens	On the results page, across 10 links	Inside the chat, in one answer
What you optimize	Keywords, links, site speed	Clear facts, trusted sources, reviews
How you measure	Rankings, traffic, clicks	How often you're mentioned and picked
Number of winners	About ten per page	Two or three per answer

SEO = get clicked. GEO = get mentioned. Fewer winners — and the losers are invisible.

04 · Chapter 4

The new customer journey

From the customer's first thought to money in your register, the new journey has four steps. Notice how short it is — and where you can disappear from it.

01 / THE ASK

The question

The customer asks an AI assistant for a recommendation — or the assistant surfaces one on its own. Discovery starts with a prompt, not a search.

02 / THE SHORTLIST

The shortlist

The AI names two or three businesses and says why. This answer is the new front door of your business.

03 / THE CHECK

The quick check

The customer glances at ratings and your Google profile to confirm. Nobody compares ten websites anymore.

04 / THE DECISION

The decision

They call, book, or visit — often without ever running a traditional search.

If you weren't in the AI's answer at step 2, you lost the customer before you knew you were competing.

05 · Chapter 5

What AI assistants look for

AI assistants don't browse the way people do. They read, compare, and trust what they can verify in more than one place. In plain terms, they recommend businesses that are easy to describe with confident facts.

Six signals matter most. First, consistent facts everywhere: the same name, address, hours and phone number on every listing and directory — contradictions make the AI unsure, and unsure means skipped. Second, a complete and active Google Business Profile: correct categories, photos, hours, and recent activity. Third, real reviews that describe the experience in words, not just stars — the AI quotes what customers actually say about you.

Fourth, a website that states the basics plainly: what you do, where you are, your prices, your hours. Fifth, being mentioned by others: directories, local press, social media. And sixth, freshness: recent photos, recent reviews, recent posts. An AI trusts a business that looks alive.

None of this is trickery. It's the same things that made a business trustworthy to humans — just organized so a machine can read them.

AI recommends what it can verify. Consistent facts, everywhere, in plain words.

06 · Chapter 6

Three myths about AI search

“My business is too small for AI to know about.” Size doesn't matter to an assistant — clarity does. A one-location café with consistent listings, real photos and a hundred honest reviews is easier for AI to recommend than a big chain with messy, contradictory information.

“I already do SEO, so I'm covered.” Good SEO is the foundation, but it isn't the whole building. Ranking #1 on Google doesn't guarantee the assistant will pick you: it chooses from what it can verify and describe confidently, and that rewards consistent facts and quotable reviews more than keyword placement.

“This is a fad — people will go back to searching.” People said the same about the move from phone books to Google. Behavior rarely moves backward once something easier arrives. Asking a question and getting a trusted answer is simply less work than comparing ten websites.

Small beats big when small is clearer. Clarity is the new ranking.

Your 11-point visibility checklist

Work through this list once, then revisit it every few months. Every item makes you easier for both Google and AI assistants to find, trust, and recommend.

- ☐ 1. Claim your Google Business Profile and fill in every field: categories, hours, phone, website.
- ☐ 2. Make sure your name, address, and phone number are identical everywhere online.
- ☐ 3. Add at least 10 real photos of your business, your work, and your team.
- ☐ 4. Ask happy customers for reviews — and reply to every review you get.
- ☐ 5. Put your services, prices, and hours in plain text on your website (not just in images).
- ☐ 6. Add your business to the main local directories for your city and industry.
- ☐ 7. Publish one short update or post per month — offers, news, seasonal hours.
- ☐ 8. Make sure your website loads fast and works well on a phone.
- ☐ 9. Ask yourself: could a stranger describe your business in one sentence from your website? If not, rewrite the top of your homepage.
- ☐ 10. Search your own business the way a customer would — and ask an AI assistant about it too. Compare what you see.
- ☐ 11. Add an llms.txt file to your website — a short plain-text map that tells AI assistants what you do and where your key pages are.

How the free audit fits in

Reading about the new journey is one thing. Seeing where YOUR business stands in it is another — and that's exactly what our free audit does.

We take real customer-style questions — the kind your customers actually ask — and run them through live AI assistants. Then we show you the live answers: whether your business was mentioned, which competitors were picked instead, and which sources the assistants trusted.

You get a clear diagnosis in plain words, not a jargon-filled report: where you appear, where you don't, and the first practical things to fix. No fee, no obligation.

See what AI says about your business today — before your competitors do.

Test if AI knows you exist.

Run the free live audit at hellohi.ai. Real prompts, real answers, clear next steps.

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