Answer Engine Optimization: A Critical Aspect of AI Few Are Talking About

Answer engine visibility is replacing search engine results ranking.

Most AEC firms are missing half of the conversation when it comes to AI. They're only seeing AI through the lens of efficiency, as a tool that helps us make things better, faster, and cheaper. However, AI is not just affecting the supply side of the economy. It's also affecting the demand side. It's replacing the lead-generation systems most businesses have relied on for decades.

Before 1998, if you needed a plumber, pizza, CPA, or attorney, you didn't Google it. You grabbed the Yellow Pages. For those not yet 30, the Yellow Pages were an actual section of the phone book. Bright yellow pages that alphabetized business listings. If your business wasn't there, it didn't exist. And if you wanted to stand out, you paid for a bigger ad.

In 1998, Google indexed the internet. Suddenly, the Yellow Pages weren't just outdated, they were irrelevant. Why flip through a book when you could type a few words and browse websites, see pictures, read reviews, compare prices, and decide with confidence, all without talking to a single person?

That shift wasn't gradual. It happened fast, and it's happening today with AI.

AI is doing to search engines what search engines did to the Yellow Pages.

Instead of heading straight to Google, more and more people start with tools like ChatGPT, Perplexity, Claude, or Gemini. Why? **Because AI removes the research legwork.** It's easier, conversational, and to the point. You ask a question, it checks hundreds of sites, assesses which sources are reputable, and hands you an actionable answer. Not a list of ten blue links. No ads crowding out the top spots. Just one clear answer.

In traditional search, the UI is set up to allow people to browse and discover. In answer engines, it's set up for action.

We have a conversation with AI, it does the research for us, and then suggests what our next move should be. It is our personal research assistant and advisor. If your firm is not cited as the next step, then no one is going to see you.

That's where AEO (Answer Engine Optimization… sometimes referred to as GEO or Generative Answer Optimization) comes in.

AEO is about making sure your website content is structured, cited, and credible so that AI bots, which are sent out to find answers, actually use your content as a response to someone's question.

AI bots are like us. AI was literally built to mimic human reasoning, and because of this, they are lazy and care about trust a lot.

Think about how you use the internet. You want information that is easy to consume from reliable sources. If a website is hard to use, you'll bounce and find another one. If a website looks sketchy, you'll leave. On the other hand, if a website is easy to navigate and read, while having a ton of positive reviews and trust signals, then you'll stay for what you need and come back repeatedly in the future.

AI bots are the same, but completely blind to the visual side of the internet. They don't see colors or typography. They see code structure, text within the code, and trust signals. If the code and schema that hold your website together are not properly structured, AI bots will find it difficult to navigate and will bounce. If the text does not answer common questions that users ask AI, it will leave. If your business does not have reviews, credible backlinks from strong referring sites, or schema detailing out different awards and achievements, then the bots will move on to a site it deems trustworthy.

AEO isn't some mysterious black art. It's about making sure your expertise is visible to answer engines in a way they recognize and trust.

Investing in answer engine optimization is becoming just as foundational as building a website with strong SEO was back in the early 2000s. It is a must, especially knowing that traditional search will be a thing of the past.

People will either stop using traditional search, or companies like Google will force us to use their AI search. Users are already ditching traditional search for their favorite AI en masse, and Gemini AI-powered search is being pushed more and more. Plus, whole browsers built with AI directly into them, like OpenAI's Atlas, are currently being released and adopted.

Great AEO is also great SEO, but the converse is not true. AEO checks all of the boxes for SEO, plus many new criteria that are exclusive to answer engines. Focusing on AEO has no drawbacks because it bridges the transition from traditional search to AI search while being fully ready for an AI-only search future. Now, some of you might be thinking: "We're good. We get our business through relationships." I hear that a lot. I get it because our industry is relationship-based. Referrals have always been king.

But here's the reality: even in relationship-driven industries, AI is becoming your new referral partner.

One of our clients is a nonprofit commercial bank, and they began investing in AEO in June and have closed four multimillion-dollar loans, all from AI searches. Another client, a personal injury attorney who focuses on cruise ship and water toy rental injury lawsuits, has gained new clients from AI. Each of these companies has relied on referrals to generate new business, and will continue to do so for a few more years. But they have seen the power of an AI referral firsthand. This new marketing channel has already added value to their bottom line.

For better or worse, people trust what AI recommends. Looking at the traffic on my company's site, we have seen that users who come from traditional Google or Bing searches versus AI searches spend the same amount of time on our site, but the traffic from AI searchers converts THREE TIMES as much as traffic from traditional searches. Why? Because they have higher intent. They asked AI, and AI showed them a quick overview of us with our strengths and trust signals, with a link to book a discovery call. The time they spent on our site was filling out the form to reach out, rather than kicking our tires and leaving.

If your website is built only for people to read and Google to index, you're leaving a major marketing channel untapped.

AI tools are scanning constantly, forming opinions, and shaping recommendations in real time. The more they see you as a trusted resource, the more likely you are to be included in those recommendations.

This is the time to position yourself. Don't cling to the Yellow Pages of our time. Feed AI the information it needs, in the format it understands, so it can confidently recommend you when someone asks for the best in your field. Done well, this isn't just protection against losing opportunities; it's a way to win more of them.

AI isn't just changing how we work and the supply side of the economy. It's opening new paths for demand and for how work finds us. For any business, even professional services that thrive on referrals, that's an opportunity worth acting on.

*Byline: **Joshua Hanosh** is the co-founder and Vice President of Strategy at Three29. He specializes in AEO, brand strategy, and marketing for industries like A/E/C, manufacturing, law, SaaS, and finance. Josh regularly speaks on how AI is reshaping search, sales, and lead generation. Three29 is a Sacramento-based web development and marketing agency that helps brands turn complex buyer journeys into measurable growth. From websites to lead gen, we help brands stay visible, credible, and competitive in a changing landscape.*

Connect with Joshua on LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/in/joshua-hanosh/