GENERATIVE ENGINE OPTIMIZATION PLAYBOOK

Keltic Lodge Resort, Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia

TABLE OF CONTENTS
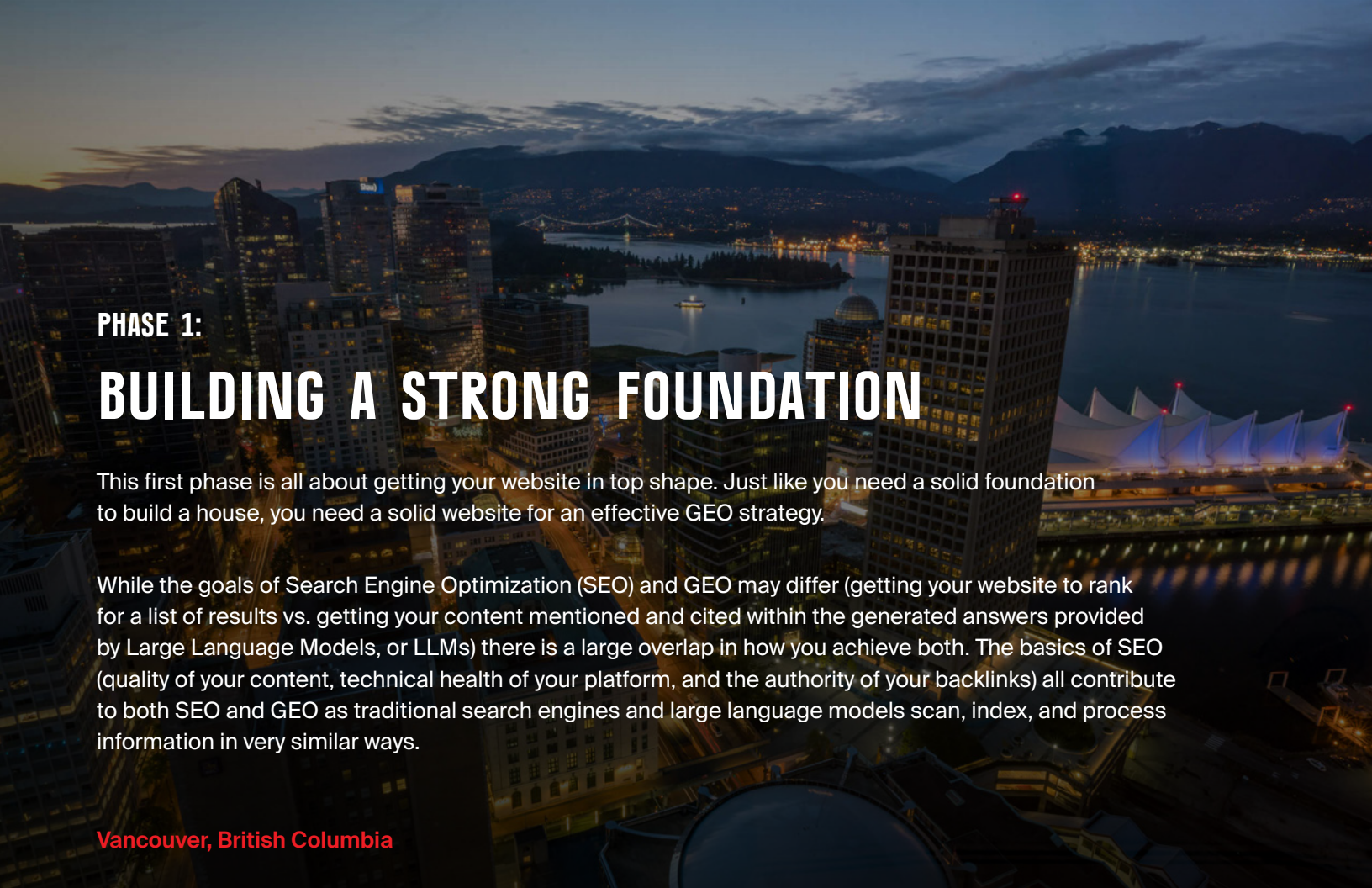
Black Rock Oceanfront Resort, British Columbia

WHAT IS GENERATIVE ENGINE OPTIMIZATION (GEO)?

Think about how you use search engines, such as Google. Traditionally, you would enter a search term or a question and receive a list of related links, but now the first search result you often see is a summarized answer at the top of the results page. This is a "generative engine" at work. Think of it like an AI assistant that reads countless websites for you to fetch you a quick answer.

Generative Engine Optimization, or GEO, is the process of making sure your website's information is easy for these AI assistants to find, understand, and use in summarized answers. For a Destination Marketing Organization, this is crucial. You want the AI to recommend your itineraries, your partners, and your website when someone asks a question like, "What's a fun thing to do in [your destination]?"

This guide will walk you through a three-phase plan to get your organization ready for the new world of search.

Please note: The field of Generative Engine Optimization (GEO) is rapidly evolving. The information and strategies presented in this playbook reflect the current understanding and best practices as of the last update, but may be subject to change as search technologies advance.

PHASE 1:

BUILDING A STRONG FOUNDATION

This first phase is all about getting your website in top shape. Just like you need a solid foundation to build a house, you need a solid website for an effective GEO strategy.

While the goals of Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and GEO may differ (getting your website to rank for a list of results vs. getting your content mentioned and cited within the generated answers provided by Large Language Models, or LLMs) there is a large overlap in how you achieve both. The basics of SEO (quality of your content, technical health of your platform, and the authority of your backlinks) all contribute to both SEO and GEO as traditional search engines and large language models scan, index, and process information in very similar ways.

Vancouver, British Columbia

WHY IT MATTERS

AI

Summary
A well-structured website foundation is crucial as it boosts visibility to search engines and AI, enhances the user experience to drive conversions, and ensures the site is prepared for future technological changes.

Getting your website's foundation right is crucial. Think about it this way:

1. **You'll be easier to find.** When your website is organized and uses the right "tags" like metadata and structured data (pieces of code that provide context about your website and content), AI search engines can understand it better. This makes your site more likely to appear when people search for things you offer, such as "Best places to stay in Toronto" or "adventure tours in New Brunswick".

2. **You'll stand out with AI:** With the rise of Generative AI, search engines are getting better at pulling answers to search queries directly from websites. Clear, structured information makes it more likely that your organization will be featured in those direct answers. Generative AI puts your information right in front of your target audience without them even having to click onto your site.

3. **Your visitors will have a better experience.** A well-organized, fast, error-free website is just plain easier and more enjoyable to use. Happy visitors are more likely to stay on your site, exploring what you offer and ultimately converting.

4. **You're investing in the future:** A strong website foundation sets you up for long-term success as search technology continues to evolve. By investing the time and effort to optimize the basics now, it'll be more efficient for your team to adapt and adjust for any future changes or updates.

HERE'S WHAT TO DO

AI

Summary
To master the basics of Search Engine Optimization (SEO), write clear metadata for all pages, ensure the site is error-free with easy navigation and internal links, and use structured data (schema) to help search engines and AI understand your content.

MASTER THE BASICS OF SEO

Metadata: This is the information that tells search engines what your page is about. Make sure every page has a clear title and a short description (120-160 characters) that accurately describes what's on the page.

Error-Free Website: Use tools to find and fix any broken links or other errors on your site. A clean, well-maintained site is easier for search engines to "read" and understand.

Internal Linking: Link between relevant pages on your own website. For example, if you have a blog post about "the best beaches," link to your "beachfront hotel" page. This helps search engines understand how your content is connected.

Easy to Navigate: Make sure that users (and search engine bots) can find any page on your site in six clicks or less. A simple, logical menu structure is key.

Structured Data & Schema: This is a special code you can add to your website that explicitly tells search engines what your content is about. For example, you can use it to label your business's address, phone number, hours, and even upcoming events. This makes it much easier for Generative AI to quickly grab accurate information about your business or organization.

Read more about this here:

HERE ARE THE TOOLS TO USE*

AI

Summary
These are essential SEO tools to ensure your website is in great shape.

Comprehensive Suites (Ahrefs, SEMrush): Use for technical audits and in-depth analysis.

Google Search Console: Monitor organic performance and crawl errors.

Schema Validators: Verify structured data to ensure eligibility for rich results.

No Cost **Rich Results Testing Tool / Schema.org Validator:**
Schema.org, and Google have free tools that help you check if your structured data is set up correctly.

No Cost **Google Search Console:**
This is a free tool from Google that shows you how your site is performing in search results. It will alert you to any errors that are impacting performance on your site, and give you valuable data about how people are finding your site.

Low Cost **Ahrefs, SEMrush, Screaming Frog:**
These are powerful tools that can help you with all aspects of SEO, from finding commonly searched keywords to spotting technical errors on your site.

These are industry standard tools to consider. Destination Canada does not endorse these tools or brands.

PHASE 1:
HERE'S HOW TO MEASURE SUCCESS

WHAT TO KEEP AN EYE ON

AI

Summary
Measuring site health is essential as it directly impacts how search engines and AI consider and use your website. Strong scores in these areas ensure your content is easily discoverable and provides a positive user experience, ultimately leading to better visibility and engagement.

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1. **Site Health Scores:** Many SEO tools give your site a "health score." Aim to get this score as high as possible by addressing any errors. Many tools suggest 80-90/100 as a good goal.

2. **Core Web Vitals:** These are measures from Google that check how fast and user-friendly your site is and provide a score. You can find this information in your Google Search Console or by running a Page Speed Test.

3. **Crawl Errors:** Monitor Google Search Console for any errors that Google "robots" encounter when they try to read your site. You want to have zero crawl errors and ensure all of your important content has been "indexed", meaning Google has read and understood it.

4. **Valid Schema:** Use the recommended testing tools to make sure your structured data is set up correctly.

5. **Organic Conversions & Return On Investment (ROI):** Ultimately, the goal is to reach more travellers and promote our destinations. Track how many people who find you through search end up clicking through to a partner, booking an experience, making a reservation, or taking another desired action on your site.

WHAT TO WORRY LESS ABOUT

AI

Summary
With the shift to Generative AI, the focus has moved from rigid keyword rankings and direct website clicks to a more nuanced understanding of content and user intent. AI aims to provide direct, comprehensive answers, making individual keyword performance less critical. Instead, the emphasis is on establishing your content as a valuable source of information across a broader range of related concepts and ideas.

Individual Keyword Rankings: In the past, the goal was to rank in search for keyword phrases. With GEO, we want to be cited as a trusted source within a generated response. Don't obsess over individual keyword rankings – where you fall within a generated response no longer matters as much, only that you are present.

Instead, focus on groups of semantically related prompts or content ideas, known as Entities. Entities are like keywords that centre around people, places, things, and ideas. Destinations, businesses, and activities are all Entities.

Website Visits (as a main goal): Generative search is designed to give people answers without having to click through to a website. As a result, you might see fewer website visits, but the people who do visit your site are much more likely to be interested in what you have to offer.

PHASE

1.0 Checklist

Essipit, Quebec

Every page has a unique, descriptive title.

Every page has a compelling meta description that summarizes the information on the page.

All broken links have been fixed.

You have a clear and logical internal linking structure.

All important content is accessible within six clicks from arriving on the homepage.

You have implemented structured data for your business's key information (address, phone number, etc.).

You have set up and are regularly checking Google Search Console.

Your website is mobile-friendly and loads quickly.

PHASE 2:

PARTNERSHIPS & BUILDING YOUR REPUTATION

Now that your website is in good shape, it's time to work with others to build your online reputation. Think of this as getting "votes of confidence" from other trusted sources on the internet. The more reputable websites that vouch for you by linking to your site, the more likely they will be to reference you in their responses.

GEO should not end with your website. DMOs should be thinking about optimizing their content and presence, regardless of the platform. Partnering with the right creators, being on the right platforms, and consistently communicating with users across platforms will be necessary for a successful GEO strategy. LLMs will pull information about your destination from every corner of the web. Embracing a multi-channel strategy is critical for success.

Middle Cove Beach, Newfoundland and Labrador

WHY IT MATTERS

AI

Summary

A strong online reputation, built through backlinks from partners, consistent local business information (Name, Address, Phone number or "NAP"), and positive customer reviews, is crucial for improving search engine trust, attracting more customers, and building a powerful brand.

Building partnerships and boosting your online reputation is incredibly important for a few key reasons:

1. **Boosts Your Trustworthiness:** When other respected websites link to yours, it's like a vote of confidence. Search engines see these "votes" and realize your website is a reliable source of information, making them more likely to show your site in search results.

2. **Improves Local Visibility:** Consistent NAP information (Name, Address, Phone Number — the essential contact info) across the web is vital for establishing yourself as a credible source online. DMOs are encouraged to work with their partners to make sure partner information is kept up to date within the DMO's online directory of partner listings. This helps both the partner and the directory both demonstrate to LLMs that the information on the DMO directory is reliable, and reinforces trust between the LLM and the partner brand.

3. **Attract More Customers:** Positive online reviews act like word-of-mouth recommendations on a massive scale. People trust what others say about a business more than what the business says about itself. Good reviews can prompt a traveller to choose your destination or services over a competitor.

4. **Strengthens Your Brand:** Beyond just having a great website, a solid and positive online reputation is crucial for becoming a recognized and respected voice in the travel industry. It translates into more visibility, more trust, more affinity, and ultimately, more business.

HERE'S WHAT TO DO

AI

Summary

To improve your online presence, build reciprocal links with partners, encourage positive customer reviews, and maintain consistent business information (Name, Address, Phone number – or "NAP") across all online directories.

1. **Build Reciprocal Links:** This is a fancy way of saying, "You link to me, I'll link to you." Partner with other local Destination Marketing Organization (DMO) (e.g. provincial, regional), other tourism businesses, and relevant organizations. When other reputable websites link to yours, it tells search engines that you are a trusted source of information. It's like getting a recommendation from someone well-respected in your community.

   Read more about this here:

2. **Focus on Digital Public Relations (PR) & Reputation:**
   Encourage happy travellers and guests to leave reviews on sites like Google, Yelp, and TripAdvisor. Positive reviews are like glowing testimonials that can help reinforce positive overall sentiment about a destination, answer queries about the destination (e.g. is [your destination] family friendly?), and reach new audiences.

   Make sure your partners' business information (Name, Address, Phone number – or "NAP") is consistent across your platform and with other directories. Inconsistent information can confuse both users and generative engines.

HERE ARE THE TOOLS TO USE*

Citation Management & Local SEO

`No Cost` **Google Business Profile:** This is a must-have for any local business. Claim and fully optimize your free Google Business Profile, and encourage your partners and stakeholders to do the same. This is often the first place people land when searching for local businesses on Google Maps and Search.

`Low Cost` **YEXT, Brightlocal:** These services help you manage your business listings across dozens of online directories, ensuring your NAP information is consistent everywhere. Encouraging your partners and stakeholders to be diligent about how their information appears online will save you a lot of time and provides peace of mind that your information is always up to date.

`Enterprise` **Customer Relationship Management (CRM):** CRM platforms assist DMOs with the management of partner information, providing an accessible platform for partners to maintain and update business information and information related to their offers and upcoming events.

Backlink Management

`No Cost` **Google Sheets/Excel:** Keep a spreadsheet to track your outreach to potential partners for backlinks.

`Low Cost` **AHREFS:** This tool can help you see who is already linking to your website and find new opportunities to get more valuable links.

`Low Cost` **Buzzstream:** Tools like Buzzstream allow brands to manage multiple outreach campaigns at once and capitalize on email conversations from multiple sources.

These are industry standard tools to consider. Destination Canada does not endorse these tools or brands.

HERE'S HOW TO MEASURE SUCCESS

WHAT TO KEEP AN EYE ON

AI

Summary
Strong scores in domain authority, consistent business information, and successful outreach efforts signal to search engines and potential visitors that your DMO is a reliable and authoritative source, ultimately leading to greater visibility, more referrals, and a stronger brand presence.

Domain Rating/Authority: Many SEO tools give your website a "score" for how strong and trusted it is. The higher the score, the better. Getting links from other trusted sites will increase your score.

NAP Consistency: Use a tool like Brightlocal to check that your business information is consistent and up-to-date everywhere online, including crucial details like your hours of operation. Inaccurate or outdated business hours are a significant pain point for customers and visitors, as they can lead to frustration and missed opportunities. Ensuring this information is precise across all platforms helps prevent negative experiences and builds trust.

Outreach Success Rate: Track how many of the partners you reach out to end up linking back to your site. This helps you assess what's working in your outreach efforts, and where you need to focus.

High-Quality Referring Domains: Focus on getting links from a variety of relevant and reputable websites. Prioritize quality over quantity.

WHAT TO WORRY LESS ABOUT

AI

Summary
Some previously prioritized metrics are less critical now as the strategy shifts towards establishing comprehensive authority and trustworthiness, emphasizing quality over quantity in online reputation.

Google Post Metrics: Don't stress too much about the number of views on your Google Business Profile posts. While they can be helpful, they aren't the main indicator of success for this phase.

"No Follow" Referrals: Some links are marked as "nofollow," which means they don't pass as much authority along to your site. Don't worry about these – instead, focus your efforts on getting "do-follow" links from quality sites.

Sheer Number of Backlinks: It's better to have a few high-quality links from relevant websites than hundreds of low-quality links.

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2.0 Checklist

Thor Peak, Nunavut

You have a list of potential partners to reach out to for backlinks.

You have a reciprocal linking strategy in place with your relevant DMOs and partners.

You have claimed and fully optimized your Google Business Profile, and encouraged/instructed your partners to do the same.

Your business' Name, Address, and Phone number are consistent across all major online directories, and you have encouraged/instructed your partners to do the same.

PHASE 3:

ADVANCED CONTENT & MEASUREMENT

This phase is about creating the kind of content that generative AI loves and learning how to measure your success in this new landscape. It's about being smart and deliberate with your content so when people ask questions, your site is the go-to source for answers.

Ottawa Convention Centre, Ottawa, Ontario

WHY IT MATTERS

AI

Summary
During this phase, you'll be able to see how your efforts are truly paying off.

1. **Become the Answer:** In a world where AI is giving direct answers, you want your content to be the source for those answers. By creating high-value, quality content and making it easy for AI to understand, you position yourself as an authority on topics related to your business.

2. **Direct AI Visibility:** Getting your content into AI Overviews and having Generative AI models directly mention your brand is the goal, putting your business directly in front of potential customers who might not even click to a traditional website.

3. **Make Smarter Decisions:** By tracking new metrics like LLM mentions and AI Overview appearances, you'll have a clearer understanding of how your content performs, empowering you to develop a more informed content strategy and where to invest your time and resources more effectively.

HERE'S WHAT TO DO

AI

Summary

To optimize for Generative AI, create an LLMS.txt file to guide models, write high-value expert content that is true to your niche, demonstrates E-E-A-T and answers specific questions, and ensure all content is formatted for easy readability.

CREATE A "TREASURE MAP" FOR AI WITH LLMS.TXT

This involves creating a special file on your website (called LLMS.txt) that tells Generative AI models where to find your best, most helpful content. Think of it as a treasure map that leads them directly to the answers and helps them quickly and accurately pull relevant information from your site.

Read more about this here:

CREATE HIGH-VALUE CONTENT THAT IS DETAILED, DIGESTIBLE, AND HELPFUL TO USERS:*

Answer Specific Questions: Consider all the questions people ask about your destination or business, then create pages on your website that provide clear, direct answers. These long-tail questions can be sourced with traditional keyword research, social media listening or even from first party chatbot and search functionality within the platform.

Be an Expert: Create in-depth guides, "how-to" articles, and detailed resource pages that show you are an expert in your field. This is what search engines call "E-E-A-T" (Experience, Expertise, Authoritativeness, and Trustworthiness). It means your content should demonstrate that you know what you're talking about, based on deep knowledge, being a recognized authority, and having a trusted digital platform. Writing toward and leveraging known entities (locations, organizations, events, and including well known public figures at the DMO) via content and Structured Data can bolster the authenticity of your content.

Make it Easy to Read: Even expert content needs to be easy to skim and digest. Audit your content to incorporate short paragraphs, clear headings, bullet points, and lists to make your content easy to scan. Get to the point quickly and avoid fluff or jargon.

Note: High value or "good" content can be difficult to define, as what makes a piece of content good is often subjective. "Good" content should be content that does a better job than your competitors at helping your customers and visitors achieve their goals. It could be more detailed, easier to understand, or more engaging.

EASILY OPTIMIZE YOUR CONTENT

Example:

Unoptimized title:
Inspiration for Your Next Beach Day in [Your Destination]

Optimized title:
How to Build the Perfect Sandcastle: Inspiration for Your Next Beach Day in [Your Destination]

HERE ARE THE TOOLS TO USE*

LLMS Tracking & Analytics:

`Low Cost` **Brand Radar (Ahrefs):** Set up alerts to be notified when your brand is mentioned online. AHREFS has recently added data that allows brands to find mentions within traditional Google Search results and LLM responses (AI Overviews, Perplexity, and ChatGPT). This helps you see how AI is locating, interpreting, and using your brand's information.

`No Cost` **Web Analytics (Ahrefs, Google Analytics):** Keep a close eye on your website traffic to see where visitors are coming from. Reference multiple sources to ensure you are getting the full and complete picture of your traffic.

`No Cost` **Google Search Console:** This (free) tool will tell you if your pages are appearing in Google's AI-powered "AI Overview" results, giving you direct insight into how your content is being used by Google's AI.

Read more about this here:

`No Cost` **Generative AI (GAI) Analysis:** You can use Generative AI tools (e.g. ChatGPT, Gemini) to analyze your existing content. Ask these tools how they might summarize or use your content in a search result — this can provide valuable insights for improvement.

These are industry standard tools to consider. Destination Canada does not endorse these tools or brands.

PHASE 3:
HERE'S HOW TO MEASURE SUCCESS

WHAT TO KEEP AN EYE ON

Summary

Strong performance in LLM mentions, AI Overview appearances, query match relevance, and query coverage shows that your DMO's content is being accurately identified and used as a reliable source of information, leading to increased visibility and impact within generative search results.

LLM Mentions: Are Generative AI models mentioning your business in their answers?[*] You can track this with brand monitoring tools available within AHREFs, SEMRush, and other traditional SEO tools.

AI Overview Results: Is your content showing up in Google's AI Overview? You can see this in your Google Search Console.

Query Match Relevance: When people search, is your content showing up for the right kinds of questions? This can be answered by reviewing your LLM Citations and Mentions and ensuring the results align with your overall content strategy.

Query Coverage: Are you showing up in a wide variety of relevant search results? A high-query coverage means you have a strong presence. This can be measured by comparing your LLM mentions against competing destinations and web platforms to better understand if your coverage is appropriate for your target audience.

Note: The time that it takes for LLMs to respond to optimizations can vary significantly based on the LLM platform. OpenAI and ChatGPT use static training documents to train their models, with major advancements or changes occurring when a new version is released. Other LLMs (Gemini, Google AI Mode, Perplexity) leverage data from traditional web crawls and may update responses as soon as optimizations are indexed.

METRICS WE ARE WATCHING (THE FUTURE OF GEO)

Summary

The future of GEO requires a deeper understanding of platform behavior in generative search, necessitating advanced metrics and tools, and deeper analysis of the resulting data. By focusing on the diversity and semantic similarity of appearances, and the direct citation of content, DMOs will be able to effectively measure and impact how their content is used by Generative AI.

Diversity of Appearance: How many different types of search queries is your content showing up for? This indicates that AI understands the broader context of your content.

Semantic Similarity: How similar in meaning (not just language) is your content to the answers that Generative AI is giving?

Use of Passages/Citations: Is a Generative AI engine directly quoting or citing your website in its answers? This is a great sign that your content is considered authoritative, high-quality, and trustworthy.

PHASE

3.0 Checklist

Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

You have a plan to create content that answers specific customer questions.

Your content is easy to read and well structured.

You have created and implemented an LLMS.txt file to highlight your most valuable content.

You are monitoring your brand mentions online via a tool like Brand Radar.

You are regularly checking Google Search Console for AI Overview appearances.

You are continuously testing new search queries to find opportunities for improvement.

RESOURCES

🔗 **Events schema.org markup**

🔗 **6 ways to get a more customized Search experience**

🔗 **AI features and your website**

🔗 **AI in Search is driving more queries and higher quality clicks**

🔗 **Creating helpful, reliable, people-first content**

🔗 **Google Small Business Advisors**

🔗 **Google Business Profile Help Center**

🔗 **Google Business Profile YouTube Channel**

🔗 **Grow with Google**

West Point, Prince Edward Island