

MENTORME · CLEAN OPERATOR SEO

The 2026 AI-SEO Playbook

How founders rank #1 on Google *and* get cited by ChatGPT, Perplexity, Gemini & AI Overviews — without an agency, using AI as the operator.

Synthesized from 8 leading SEO operators + 1.4M-prompt citation studies

00. The one idea that changes everything

GEO is not a new discipline. It is SEO. Google has confirmed that its generative features (AI Overviews, AI Mode) are "rooted in core search ranking." Every credible operator we studied agrees: optimize *once*, correctly, and you win Google rankings *and* AI citations together. Stop chasing "AEO/GEO" as a separate game — it's a marketing label.

THE MINDSET SHIFT

You don't need to **rank** to get **cited**. You need to be **indexed**. In a 1-billion-site study, ~20–28% of the pages most cited by ChatGPT had **zero** Google ranking, and cited sources were routinely DR 6–21. Authority is no longer the gate. **Relevance, format, and indexation are.**

43.8%

of ChatGPT citations are "best of" listicles

~50%

of URLs an LLM retrieves actually get cited

88%

of AI citations come from general web search

89.8%

citation rate for human-readable URL slugs vs 1.1% for /abc123

01. Content: what actually gets ranked & cited

The two highest-leverage assets

- **"Best X" listicles** — the single most-cited AI format (43.8% of ChatGPT citations). Build comparison and "best [thing] for [audience]" pages.
- **Statistics / data roundups** — the #1 *free*-backlink magnet. AI auto-inserts links to data sources. One operator earned 6 links from DR 58–71 sites off just 3 stats articles. Aggregate 40–60 real stats, cite every source, stay neutral (don't sell).

Move from informational to buyer-intent

Generic "what is X" content is dead — AI answers it in-pane, zero clicks. Win bottom-funnel: **X vs Y**, **best X for [use case]**, **how much does X cost**, **X alternatives**. Source angles from Google autocomplete, validate with Reddit + high-view YouTube.

Beat the 2026 "AI slop" update with a forcing input

Google's 2026 core update kills commodity AI listicles. Before generating *anything*, inject something only you have. Four proven templates:

TEMPLATE

THE HUMAN-ONLY INPUT IT FORCES

Case Study	A real result + what you did differently
Original Data Study	Your internal data + a surprising, citable finding
First-Hand Review	How you actually tested it + what surprised you
Contrarian Take	Your position + why the consensus is wrong

Own "NEW" and trending topics

LLMs have stale training data (often ~1 year behind). New products, models, and events are open gaps – publish first and become *the* source. Find them with Google Trends + Exploding Topics; publish on the upswing, before peak.

THE FRESHNESS ENGINE

Add a **daily "News" hub** to your site. AI citation sets reshuffle every ~2 days, so publishing frequency is what keeps you in the rotation. A solo "Not a Tesla App"-style news hub reportedly hit 160K visits/mo. Recency + hub structure (curated knowledge) is a top lever for both Google freshness and LLM citations.

02. The AI-citation gatekeepers (optimize these 3)

From a teardown of 1.4M ChatGPT prompts – the model decides which pages to even *open* from the **title + URL alone** (that's all retrieval returns first). So:

- **Title** – semantically match the user's prompt *and* its "fan-out" sub-questions. (To see fan-out queries: DevTools → Network → search the response for "query".)
- **URL slug** – human-readable & keyword-rich (`/best-ai-tools-for-founders`), never `/p?id=123`. 89.8% vs 1.1% citation rate.
- **Indexation** – be in the classic search index (88% of citations). Top-10 ranking is *not* required.

Two more high-signal levers

- **YouTube mentions** have the *highest* correlation with AI brand visibility – higher than backlinks or DR. A companion video for key pages is a real ranking asset.
- **Reddit** is consumed heavily as a consensus layer (it's ~68% of *non-cited-but-read* URLs). Genuinely helpful, non-spammy answers there shape what models "learn" about you.

Contrarian notes from the data: schema markup shows ~zero measurable impact on AI *citations* (still useful for Google rich results), and `llms.txt` has no proven citation effect. We keep both – they're cheap and harmless – but don't rely on them.

03. The production method — Claude as operator, not writer

- **Claude is the strategist.** Feed it a URL + goal → it runs competitor analysis, finds keyword/content gaps, and returns titles clustered by funnel stage as a clean CSV for bulk generation.
- **Citation cloning (get cited in ~24h).** Run your buyer-intent prompt in Google AI Mode + ChatGPT → note the cited URLs + the format they share → clone and 10x the best one, mentioning your brand → index it.
- **"Golden content" blueprint.** Have Claude analyze the live SERP (who ranks, # of images/tables/links, H2/H3 structure) and output a generation prompt + outline. "Get everything competitors have, plus more."
- **The 95% rule.** Make Claude ask clarifying questions until it's ≥95% confident before producing. Generic prompts → generic output.
- **The G.O.A.L.S. protocol** for high-stakes output: **G**oal, **O**utput spec, **A**cceptance criteria (numbered, yes/no), **L**imits, **S**top-and-verify — with a *separate* evaluator agent (fresh context) auditing each criterion before ship.

Keyword mining (the operator filter)

Filter every export to **KD ≤ 10 + Informational intent** (and for new sites, competitor **DR ≤ 10**). Use the **how to [seed]** modifier to surface the long-tail pool, and always set the target country. Plan **20–50 articles per topic cluster** — topical authority beats single posts. "Google ranks pages, not websites."

Programmatic SEO (one template, one variable)

- **Entity piggyback** — ride existing name search volume ("[celebrity] height/IQ"), bridge an attribute to your product, mass-produce. Real cases: IQ-test site (~30K/mo), insole brand, nail brand (100K/mo).
- **YouTube → blog arbitrage** — find niches with strong video but thin written SERPs; convert videos to articles (embed + credit the source). One car site: 1.3M visits/mo.
- **News sections** — boost domain topical relevance, making your commercial pages easier to rank.

04. Backlinks — ranked by value & safety

TACTIC	WHY IT WORKS	SAFETY
Statistics / data roundups	AI & writers auto-link to data sources. Passive, compounding.	White-hat ✓
Nonprofit / .org donation & sponsor links	DR 15–45, niche-relevant, tax-deductible. Claude finds "our sponsors/donors" pages + drafts outreach.	White-hat ✓

"Second-degree" link swaps	In Ahrefs, pull a competitor's backlinks, sort by NEW, filter DR 15–45, email recent linkers for swaps. Recency drives acceptance.	Gray-ish ⚠️
Guest posts via footprints	"write for us" + niche; filter to DR ≥ 40. Claude drafts the pitch.	White-hat ✅
Brand mentions	Get featured as #1 across 5+ already-ranking sources → near-guaranteed AI citation. Worth more than raw links.	White-hat ✅
Automated exchange (e.g. Arvow)	DR-matched reciprocal pool, hands-off. Mostly moves <i>DR</i> (a vanity metric); real-ranking impact unproven.	Use with care ⚠️

Health check: keep your **referring-domains-to-backlinks ratio near 1:1** — a big gap is a classic spam signal. Point free links at *data/info* pages, not your homepage or product pages.

05. Technical SEO (the holistic audit)

No single fix ranks you — fixing all the small things together lets you "compete at a higher level." Run a Claude Code audit on each URL covering:

- Crawlability, indexability, canonicals (kill accidental duplicate indexing), redirects, security headers, Core Web Vitals, mobile, JS rendering
- One `<h1>` per page; titles ≤ ~50 chars keyword-first (don't repeat the brand twice); meta descriptions filled to ~160
- **Image alt text as a keyword surface** — descriptive alt beats `screenshot_1.2.5`
- Internal links specified with **anchor text + a reason** for each
- Per-page schema (Organization on home; FAQ + Article on posts). **AggregateRating/review schema on product pages** → **SERP star ratings** = higher CTR + conversions.
- Fast indexing via IndexNow / auto-submit

06. Engagement & freshness — the new ranking factors

Google ported YouTube's engagement logic into Search. It watches dwell time and **pogo-sticking** (instant back-button = bad page). Levers:

- **Refresh your top money page first** — fastest ranking lever there is.
- **Embed video** on key pages to boost dwell time and beat pogo-sticking.
- **Interactive tools** on comparison pages (pricing calculators, fee tables, selector quizzes) — "PayPal fee calculator," not "PayPal fees explained."
- **Local:** daily Google reviews act as a freshness signal.

07. Local SEO (for service businesses)

- Treat the **Google Business Profile as your homepage**. Reverse-engineer competitors' GBP categories and phase yours in over weeks so Google doesn't flag rapid changes.
- Build a page **per service x per city**, each with FAQ schema.
- **GSC gold mine**: pull queries at positions 8–20, non-branded, commercial intent → rewrite those pages in a focused 30-day sprint.
- Mine competitor review sentiment and rewrite your copy in customers' exact words.

08. The 30-day operator sprint

DAYS	FOCUS
1–3	Claude Code technical audit → fix titles, slugs, canonicals, alt text, schema. Submit sitemap + IndexNow.
4–10	Publish 1 cornerstone "best X" listicle + 1 stats/data roundup. Run the keyword-cluster prompt; queue 20+ titles.
11–20	Publish daily (news hub + cluster articles). Start backlinks: nonprofit/.org + stats-asset outreach. Add a companion YouTube video for the money page.
21–27	Citation-clone the top buyer-intent prompts. Refresh the top money page. Add interactive tool to a comparison page.
28–30	Re-audit. Check GSC positions 8–20 → rewrite. Close the loop, measure impressions → clicks.

You don't need to read more SEO. You need to operate it.

This playbook is the strategy. MentorMe is the execution: a fractional CMO + a custom AI clone of your business + a 5-agent AI council that runs this entire system *with* you in 90 days.

See the Founding Member Program → mentorme.com/founding