
The SMB Guide to AI Search

How to Get Cited by ChatGPT & Perplexity

The plain-English guide for small business owners — covering why you're invisible to AI, what to fix first, and what realistic results actually look like. No jargon. No hype.

■■ US

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By **Raheel Anwer** & the AI SEO Agency Team · April 2026

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Important Notice

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AI SEO Agency provides the technical and narrative infrastructure AI models require to find and trust a business. Citation timing depends on LLM training cycles (typically 4–8 weeks). No specific ranking outcomes or citation frequencies are guaranteed. Results vary based on business category, geographic market, existing digital footprint, and LLM update schedules.

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CHAPTER INTRO

The quiet revolution nobody told you about

Something changed in how people find businesses. It didn't make headlines. There was no announcement. One day, your potential customers started asking an AI assistant for recommendations instead of typing into Google — and the businesses that showed up in those answers started winning customers who had already decided they wanted help.

The businesses that didn't show up? They were invisible at the most valuable moment in the buying journey: the moment of intent.

THE 40-SECOND VERSION

AI tools like ChatGPT, Perplexity, and Google AI now influence purchasing decisions before any human-to-human contact happens. Most small businesses are invisible to these tools — not because they're not good enough, but because they've never given AI the structured information it needs to identify, verify, and recommend them. This guide shows you how to fix that.

This guide is written for business owners who are excellent at what they do and frustrated that their digital presence doesn't reflect it. It is written in plain English. It contains no unnecessary jargon. Every recommendation is actionable, and the first chapter's quick wins can be started today.

AI SEO Agency has worked with SMBs across the US, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the UK. The patterns we've observed are consistent across sectors and geographies: the businesses AI recommends aren't always the best — they're the ones that made it easy for AI to understand them. This guide shows you exactly how to do the same.

CHAPTER 1

The structural problem behind AI invisibility — and why it's fixable

The Core Problem in Plain English

When someone asks ChatGPT to recommend a plumber in Melbourne, or asks Perplexity for the best HR consultants in Toronto, the AI isn't running a Google search. It's not checking Yelp. It's drawing on information it already has — information from its training data — to generate an answer.

If your business isn't clearly represented in that training data — if your digital presence doesn't give AI the structured, verifiable information it needs — the AI doesn't include you. Not because it dislikes you. Because it doesn't know you well enough to stake its credibility on recommending you.

What AI Training Data Actually Is

Large language models — the AI systems behind ChatGPT, Perplexity, Claude, and Google AI — are trained on enormous amounts of text from the internet. Your website, your Google Business Profile, your industry directory listings, news mentions, social profiles, and customer reviews all potentially contribute to what AI 'knows' about your business.

The problem is that most of this information is unstructured. Your website might say 'we've been serving the Melbourne area for 22 years.' A human reader instantly understands that. An AI model has to make probabilistic inferences: Is this Melbourne, Australia or Melbourne, Florida? What industry? What services specifically? With vague data, AI confidence is low. With low confidence, AI doesn't recommend.

KEY INSIGHT

AI tools don't recommend businesses they're uncertain about. Uncertainty isn't caused by poor quality — it's caused by unclear, inconsistent, or absent structured business information. This is entirely fixable.

The Five Most Common Reasons AI Can't Find You

Your business name is inconsistent

Your website says 'Henderson & Cole', Google Business Profile says 'Henderson and Cole Accounting', and your Facebook page says 'Henderson Cole'. Three variations. AI treats them as potentially different entities.

You have no machine-readable identity data

Most websites are built for human readers. Structured identity data — the kind AI reads directly — is absent on the majority of SMB websites.

Your service descriptions are vague

Marketing language like 'comprehensive solutions for your business needs' provides zero useful information to an AI system. It needs specifics: what you do, who you do it for, where you operate.

There's no external verification

AI systems are sceptical by design. They look for multiple sources confirming the same information. A business with no directory listings, no press mentions, and no industry association presence looks unverifiable.

Your Google Business Profile is incomplete

GBP data directly influences AI answers, especially for local searches. An incomplete profile is a missed signal.

The Good News

Every single one of these problems is fixable. Unlike building a business reputation — which takes years — building AI-readable business identity can be done in days. The infrastructure exists. The standards are open. You just need to implement them correctly.

Chapters 2 through 5 of this guide walk you through exactly how to do that. But first, let's understand what AI is actually checking when it considers recommending a business.

CHAPTER 2

Identity, Verification, and Proof — the AI trust triangle

When an AI tool generates a business recommendation, it's performing a rapid, probabilistic assessment. It can't visit your premises. It can't call your customers. It can only work with the information available to it — and it evaluates that information across three dimensions.

Check 1: Identity — Can AI clearly identify your business?

The first question AI asks is deceptively simple: do I know who this business is? This means a consistent, unambiguous business name — the same across every digital touchpoint. It means a verifiable address. It means a clearly declared service category. It means a founding date, a contact email, and a description that matches across your website, your GBP, and your directory listings.

THE FIX

The Fix: Audit every place your business name appears online. Standardise it completely. Then add structured identity data (JSON-LD schema) to your website that explicitly declares all of this information in a format machines can read directly — without inference.

Check 2: Verification — Can AI confirm what your business does?

Identity isn't enough on its own. AI also needs to verify that your declared identity is accurate. This is why specific, factual descriptions of your services matter so much. 'We provide comprehensive solutions' cannot be verified. 'Henderson & Cole provides tax preparation, bookkeeping, and financial planning services to small businesses in the Greater Melbourne area' can be cross-referenced against multiple sources.

THE FIX

The Fix: Rewrite your core business descriptions using specific, verifiable language. Name your services explicitly. Name your geographic service area. Name your target client type. Give AI something concrete to work with.

Check 3: Proof — Do other sources confirm your business exists and delivers?

The third check is the hardest for many SMBs to address, but it's critical. AI systems apply a scepticism filter: if only one source (your own website) claims something, that claim carries low weight. If five independent sources confirm the same information about your business, confidence is high.

THE FIX

The Fix: Build external proof signals. This means accurate, consistent listings in industry directories. It means asking satisfied clients to post specific, detailed reviews. It means getting mentioned in local press or trade publications. It means joining and being listed by industry associations. Each external mention that confirms your business identity adds to AI confidence.

The AI Trust Triangle

Think of these three checks as a triangle. A business needs all three to be recommended with confidence. A business with perfect identity but no external proof looks like a website with no real-world presence. A business with great proof but vague identity is hard to categorise correctly. A business with strong verification but inconsistent identity confuses the system. You need all three sides solid.

CHAPTER 3

The technical infrastructure that makes your business legible to AI systems

This chapter covers the technical foundation of AI visibility. It is written for business owners, not developers. You don't need to implement this yourself — but you need to understand what needs to be done and why, so you can brief a developer or evaluate a service provider effectively.

JSON-LD Schema: The Machine-Readable Identity Card

JSON-LD schema is a small block of structured code added to your website that explicitly tells AI and search engines who your business is, what it does, where it operates, and how to contact it. Unlike your visible website content — which AI has to interpret — schema provides direct, unambiguous declarations that machines read instantly.

Think of it as your business's identity card for the digital world. A human-readable website is your shopfront. JSON-LD schema is the paperwork that proves who you are to systems that can't walk through the door.

The 9 Schema Types Every SMB Needs

- **Organization** — Declares your business at the entity level — legal name, URL, contact, social profiles, and a unique persistent identifier.
- **LocalBusiness** — Confirms your physical presence, service area, opening hours, and location coordinates.
- **ProfessionalService** — Describes your service categories and what you offer — critical for professional services firms.
- **Service** — Individual product or service declarations with descriptions and pricing where applicable.
- **FAQPage** — Structured Q&A; that AI tools extract directly when answering questions about your business.
- **WebPage / WebSite** — Declares the overall site structure and its relationship to your organisation entity.

- **Person** — Names and credentials your key team members, linking them to the organisation.
- **BreadcrumbList** — Declares site navigation structure for AI understanding of content hierarchy.
- **Review / AggregateRating** — Structured review data that adds social proof in a machine-readable format.

IMPORTANT

Schema types are only effective when they are interconnected using @id references — linking each schema block back to the same Organisation entity. Disconnected schema blocks are significantly less effective than a properly linked schema graph. This linking is what AI SEO Agency does in every Build engagement.

The AI Trinity: Three Files That Make AI Agents Work For You

llms.txt

A structured Markdown document placed at your website root that AI agents read directly. It declares your business name, services, pricing, team, and contact details in a clean, unambiguous format. Think of it as a briefing document written specifically for AI.

robots.txt

Tells crawlers — including AI crawlers like GPTBot (ChatGPT), PerplexityBot, Claude-Web, and Google-Extended — which parts of your site they can access. Most SMB robots.txt files accidentally block AI crawlers. Yours should explicitly welcome them.

sitemap.xml

A complete map of your website's pages, sections, and last-modified dates. Ensures AI indexing systems find every page, not just your homepage.

Google Business Profile: Your Highest-ROI Quick Win

For local businesses, a complete and accurate Google Business Profile is the single highest-impact free action available. Google AI's ability to surface local businesses in AI-generated answers is directly connected to GBP data quality. A verified, complete GBP with accurate category, services, hours, and photos significantly increases your likelihood of appearing in Google AI answers for local queries.

If your GBP is incomplete, unclaimed, or inconsistent with your website — fix this before anything else. It costs nothing and has an immediate effect.

CHAPTER 4

The content principles that earn AI citations and convert real customers

There is a widespread misconception that AI-visible content requires technical jargon, unnatural sentence structures, or keyword-stuffed text. It doesn't. The content that performs best with AI tools is also the content that performs best with human readers: accurate, specific, well-structured, and written in plain English.

The reason is simple: AI tools extract information the same way a careful human reader extracts information — by looking for clear, specific, attributable statements. Vague language fails both audiences.

The Vagueness Problem

Most SMB website copy is optimised for impressiveness rather than accuracy. The result is sentences like these:

- *"We deliver comprehensive solutions for businesses of all sizes."*
- *"Our team brings extensive cross-sector expertise to every engagement."*
- *"We're committed to excellence in everything we do."*

These sentences contain zero extractable information. An AI model reading them cannot determine: what industry this is, what services are offered, who the clients are, where the business operates, or what differentiates it. It learns nothing it can use to recommend you.

What Good Looks Like

COMPARE THESE TWO DESCRIPTIONS

WEAK: 'We provide outstanding plumbing services across the region.' STRONG: 'Henderson Plumbing provides residential and commercial plumbing installation, repair, and emergency call-out services across Greater Melbourne, Victoria. The business was established in 2009 and is licensed under the Victorian Building Authority (licence no. XXXXX). Average response time for emergency calls is under 2 hours.'

The strong version tells AI: the entity name, the service categories, the service area, the establishment date, the licensing credential, and a specific performance claim. Every element is extractable. Every element is verifiable. Every element builds confidence.

The Five Content Principles for AI Visibility

1. Entity-first sentences

Open every key paragraph with your business name as the subject. Not 'we' — the actual name. 'Henderson Plumbing provides...' not 'We provide...' This creates unambiguous attribution that AI can assign to your entity.

2. Specific over general

Replace every vague qualifier ('comprehensive', 'extensive', 'outstanding') with a specific claim. How many years? How many clients? What specific services? What geographic area? What credentials?

3. Subject-verb-object structure

Write in active voice with clear subjects and objects. 'Henderson Plumbing installs hot water systems in Melbourne homes' is extractable. 'Hot water system installation services are available' is not.

4. Fact-Box Summaries

Add a structured summary block at the top of every key page — listing your business name, services, location, credentials, and contact in a clean, scannable format. This is the primary thing AI systems extract from a page.

5. Answer the questions customers ask AI

Create content that directly answers the questions your customers are typing into ChatGPT and Perplexity. 'What should I look for in a plumber?' answered by Henderson Plumbing, with Henderson Plumbing's name and contact details attached, makes Henderson Plumbing the source AI cites.

The Source of Truth Document

One of the highest-impact, lowest-cost tools for AI visibility is a single Markdown document — typically called 'llms.txt' — placed at your website root. This document contains the definitive, structured facts about your business in a clean format that AI agents read directly.

It includes: business name (legal and trading), address, phone, email, services with descriptions, pricing (if public), team members and credentials, geographic service area, founding date, and key claims. It is the single document that, more than any other, closes the gap between what AI believes about your business and what is actually true.

CHAPTER 5

Why AI needs outside confirmation — and how to give it

You could have the most perfectly structured website in your industry, with flawless schema, a complete GBP, and beautifully written entity-first copy. If no external sources confirm your business identity, AI tools will still treat you with low confidence.

This isn't a flaw in the system. It's a feature. AI models are trained to be sceptical of self-declaration. Anyone can build a website and claim anything. External sources confirming the same information are much harder to fabricate — which is why they carry so much more weight.

The Types of External Proof That Matter

Directory Listings

Industry-specific directories — not generic link farms — that list your business with accurate, consistent name, address, and service information. For Australian businesses, this includes True Local, Yellow Pages, and relevant trade directories. For US businesses, Yelp, Angi, and industry-specific directories. For UK businesses, Yell, Checkatrade, and FreeIndex. Each listing that matches your website's information exactly adds a corroboration signal.

Customer Reviews

Reviews that contain specific information about your services have higher AI value than generic praise. A review that says 'Henderson Plumbing fixed our blocked drain in under an hour — based in Melbourne and arrived same day' contains your business name, a specific service, your location, and a performance claim. That's a machine-readable proof signal. Train your satisfied customers to write specific reviews.

Trade and Industry Associations

If your industry has a trade body, licensing board, or professional association with a public member directory — get listed. These are high-trust sources that AI models weight heavily. A business listed on the Master Plumbers Australia website, the Law Society, or the ICAEW is confirmed by a trusted third party.

Local and Industry Press

Even a single mention in a local newspaper, trade publication, or industry blog — where your business name, location, and service are named accurately — adds significant corroboration. These mentions don't need to be major features. A quote in a trade publication, a case study contribution, or a mention in a round-up article all count.

Partner and Supplier Websites

If your business has suppliers, partners, or referral relationships, ask them to list you on their website with a brief accurate description. A building materials supplier listing the contractors they work with is a credible external confirmation of your business identity.

The Consistency Rule

Every external mention must match your website exactly. The same business name. The same address format. The same service descriptions. A directory listing that uses a slightly different business name, an old address, or a vague service description doesn't corroborate your identity — it introduces inconsistency that reduces AI confidence.

PRACTICAL ACTION

This week: audit your top 5 directory listings and compare them against your website's structured identity data. Standardise any inconsistencies. This single action, done thoroughly, meaningfully improves AI confidence in your business identity — and it costs nothing.

CHAPTER 6

The metrics that actually matter — and how to track them without paid tools

One of the most common frustrations for businesses investing in AI visibility is the question of measurement. You can't open Google Analytics and see 'AI citations: 47 this month.' The measurement landscape for AI search is still maturing. But there are concrete, practical approaches that give you meaningful visibility into your progress.

The AI Snapshot Audit (Free, Do This Today)

The most direct way to measure your current AI visibility is to perform an AI Snapshot Audit. Open ChatGPT, Perplexity, Claude, and Google AI. Ask each one the same set of questions that your potential customers are likely to ask. Document what each tool says — or doesn't say — about your business.

- "What is [your business name] and what do they do?"
- "Who are the best [your service category] in [your city]?"
- "Is [your business name] reputable?"
- "What should I look for in a [your trade/profession]?"
- "Can you recommend a [your service] specialist near [your location]?"

Document the answers. Score each platform: Does your business appear? Is the information accurate? Are you presented positively? Are competitors appearing when you aren't? Repeat this audit monthly. Over time, you'll see the specific improvements made by the changes you've implemented.

What to Track Month by Month

AI Appearance Rate

Out of your 10–15 test queries, how many responses include your business? Track this number monthly. A rising appearance rate is the primary indicator of improving AI visibility.

Accuracy Score

When your business appears, how accurately is it described? Score on a simple scale: Correct name and location (+1), Correct service category (+1), Correct key credentials (+1), No inaccuracies (+1). Maximum 4. Track improvements over time.

Competitor Appearance Rate

How often do your top 3 competitors appear in the same queries? If they consistently appear when you don't, their AI identity infrastructure is stronger. Use this as a benchmark and a diagnostic.

Google Business Profile Actions

GBP provides data on calls, website visits, and direction requests generated from your listing. These metrics often increase significantly as AI visibility improves, because improved GBP data also feeds directly into AI answers.

Direct Traffic and Brand Search Volume

As AI tools begin recommending your business by name, you'll typically see an increase in direct website traffic (people who already know your name) and branded search volume. This is a lagging indicator but a meaningful one.

REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

AI visibility improvements typically manifest in AI responses within 4–8 weeks of implementation, aligned with LLM training update cycles. Some platforms update more frequently than others. Perplexity uses real-time retrieval and often reflects changes faster than ChatGPT, which relies more heavily on training data. Be patient. Be consistent. Measure monthly, not daily.

CHAPTER 7

A concrete, week-by-week implementation roadmap

This chapter is the most important in the guide. Everything you've read up to this point is context. This is the execution. The 90-day plan is structured in three phases, each building on the last.

Phase 1: Foundation (Days 1–30)

Weeks 1–4

Week 1: The AI Snapshot Audit

Query ChatGPT, Perplexity, Claude, and Gemini with 15 questions about your business and industry. Document every response. Identify: where you appear, where you don't, what's inaccurate, and which competitors consistently appear when you don't. This is your baseline.

Week 2: Identity Standardisation

Audit every place your business appears online — website, GBP, Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, Yelp, and any industry directories. Standardise your business name, address, phone number, and service description to match exactly. Create one canonical version and apply it everywhere.

Week 3: GBP Completion

Complete your Google Business Profile in full. Add every service you offer. Add photos. Write a description using entity-first, specific language. Set your service area. Add your website. Ensure your category is the most specific available.

Week 4: Baseline Schema Implementation

Add Organization and LocalBusiness JSON-LD schema to your website. If you're not technical, this is the point to brief a developer or engage AI SEO Agency. At minimum, declare your business name, address, email, phone, service categories, and founding date in machine-readable format.

Phase 2: Content & Verification (Days 31–60)

Weeks 5–8

Week 5: Homepage Rewrite

Rewrite your homepage copy using entity-first language, specific service descriptions, and a Fact-Box Summary at the top. Replace all vague benefit language with specific, verifiable claims.

Week 6: Service Page Optimisation

Apply the same principles to your core service pages. Each page should open with your business name, state the specific service, name the target client, and include specific credentials or claims relevant to that service.

Week 7: FAQ Content Creation

Create a FAQ page that directly answers the top 10 questions your customers ask AI about your industry. Use structured FAQ schema. Answer in plain English. Attach your business name and contact to every answer.

Week 8: External Proof Campaign — Round 1

Submit or update listings in your top 5 industry-relevant directories. Ensure each listing uses your canonical business name and description exactly. Ask 3–5 recent satisfied clients to post specific, detailed reviews.

Phase 3: Amplification & Measurement (Days 61–90)

Weeks 9–12

Week 9: The AI Trinity

Add llms.txt, review your robots.txt to ensure AI crawlers are explicitly welcomed, and submit your sitemap.xml to Google Search Console. These three files work together to give AI agents direct, structured access to your business information.

Week 10: Partner Proof Signals

Contact 3–5 business partners, suppliers, or professional associations. Ask for a listing or mention on their website that includes your business name, service category, and location. Even a brief directory entry on a high-trust domain significantly improves corroboration.

Week 11: Content Expansion

Publish 2–3 pieces of content that position your business as the local or sector authority on questions your customers ask AI. Each piece should be written in entity-first style, include a Fact-Box Summary, and answer a specific question completely.

Week 12: 90-Day Snapshot Audit

Repeat the AI Snapshot Audit from Week 1 with the same questions. Compare responses. Document improvements in appearance rate, accuracy, and competitive positioning. Identify remaining gaps. Use this data to plan your next 90 days.

AFTER 90 DAYS

Most businesses that implement this plan fully will see measurable AI visibility improvement by the end of the 90 days. Some will see dramatic improvement. The businesses that see the most improvement are those that implement thoroughly — not those that implement quickly. Quality of implementation matters more than speed.

CHAPTER CLOSE

A final word before you begin

Here's the most important thing to take away from this guide:

The businesses winning AI recommendations right now aren't better than you. They're not bigger. They're not older. They haven't invented some secret technique. They just took the time to tell AI who they are — clearly, consistently, and with enough external confirmation that AI trusted the answer.

You've spent years building a business worth recommending. You have the credentials, the experience, the satisfied clients, and the genuine expertise. The only thing standing between you and AI recommendation is the clarity of your digital identity.

This guide has given you the understanding and the roadmap. The 90-day plan is concrete and actionable. The principles are straightforward. What remains is execution.

"The businesses AI recommends aren't always the best — they're the ones that made it easy for AI to understand them. You already have what AI needs. Now give it the keys."

If You'd Like Help

AI SEO Agency offers three fixed-price products that implement everything in this guide for you — professionally, thoroughly, and with no monthly fees.

The AI Visibility Audit — \$499 USD · 3 business days

A 15-page gap analysis of how AI currently sees your business, with a complete priority fix roadmap.

The AI-Visible Build — \$1,500 USD · 7–14 business days

A complete AI-visible website with 9+ schema types, llms.txt, robots.txt, and sitemap.xml — delivered as clean files you own outright.

The AI-Citation Narrative — \$997 USD · 7 business days

Entity Mapping, 3 GEO-optimised landing pages, and the Source of Truth Markdown document.

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