

How to Optimize for AI Search in Your Startup's First 90 Days

When I launched my first startup back in 2018, I spent weeks fine-tuning meta descriptions and chasing backlinks. A year later, Google rolled out BERT, and half of that work stopped mattering. Now we are watching something bigger: generative AI is rewriting how people find information. For a startup with limited runway, the question is not whether to optimize for AI search, but how to do it without burning your entire marketing budget on experiments that might not pay off.

After working with about two dozen early-stage companies on their organic growth strategies, I have seen what works and what wastes time. The mistake most founders make is treating AI search optimization like a new silo. They think they need separate content for ChatGPT, separate pages for Google, and separate feeds for Bing. That is not how it works. What actually matters is building a foundation that serves both traditional search engines and generative models well.

You can think of it as a three-phase plan for the first 90 days. The goal is to get your site ready for whatever interface people use to discover your startup, whether that is a classic search results page or a conversational AI that synthesises answers from multiple sources.

Phase 1: Understand How AI Search Actually Works

Before you can [optimize for AI search](#), you have to understand what the models are doing under the hood. Large language models like GPT-4 or Claude do not crawl your site the way Googlebot does. They are trained on vast datasets, and when a user asks a question, the model generates a response based on patterns in that training data. But here is the nuance that matters for startups: many AI search tools now incorporate retrieval-augmented generation, or RAG. That means they pull real-time information from live web sources and then synthesise a response. If your content is not structured clearly, the model either ignores it or misinterprets it.

I learned this the hard way with a client in the B2B SaaS space. We had written a detailed comparison page that used industry jargon and nested tables. The page ranked well in Google. But when we tested it against a popular AI search tool, the model could not extract a single accurate feature comparison. The content was too fragmented. We had to rewrite the entire page with clear, atomic statements that a model could parse.

The key takeaway: AI search favors clarity, structure, and authority. If your content is a wall of text with buried answers, it will not perform well in generative answers.

Phase 2: Decide Between SEO, AEO, and GEO

This is where most startup guides get academic. They present SEO, AEO (Answer Engine Optimization), and GEO (Generative Engine Optimization) as three separate disciplines you must master. In practice, you have three months and a small team. You have to pick one lane and execute it well.

Here is the framework I have used with startups to make that call:

- **SEO first** if your startup operates in a competitive space where users still type queries into a search bar. E-commerce, local services, and SaaS products with well-known categories fall here. The AI search traffic is still a fraction of traditional organic traffic, and you cannot afford to ignore the main channel.
- **AEO first** if your product answers a specific question that people ask repeatedly. Think of a startup that helps users compare insurance plans or calculate loan repayments. Voice search and featured snippets are your low-hanging fruit. Optimizing for direct answers can drive quick wins.
- **GEO first** if your audience is early adopters who already use ChatGPT or Perplexity as their default research tool. Developer tools, AI startups, and niche B2B products often fit this profile. You want your content to be the source that generative models cite when they answer user questions.

Most founders overestimate how much their audience uses AI search. I recommend running a quick survey: ask your first 100 users how they found you. If fewer than 10% mention an AI tool, put your energy into SEO and AEO for the first 90 days. You can always shift later.

Phase 3: Practical Steps to Optimize for AI Search

Once you have chosen your primary focus, the tactics become concrete. Here are the steps I have seen produce results across multiple startups.

Write for the entity, not just the keyword

Traditional SEO trains you to target exact-match keywords. AI search models understand entities and relationships. If you write a page about "project management software for remote teams," the model looks for signals that connect the concepts: remote work, team collaboration, task tracking, integration with Slack, and so on. Your content should naturally include those related entities without forcing them in.

Structure content in question-answer pairs

When a user asks an AI tool a question, the model wants to find a clear answer. I have started structuring key pages with explicit Q&A sections. For example, instead of writing a paragraph that says "Our tool helps teams manage sprints," I write a heading that says "How does your tool handle sprint planning?" and then answer directly underneath. This makes it trivial for a RAG model to extract the answer.

Build topical authority with clusters

AI models weigh authority heavily. If your site has one page about a topic, it is less likely to be cited than a site with ten interlinked pages that cover the topic from multiple angles. In the first 90 days, pick one core topic that matters most to your startup and create three to five content pieces around it. Link them together. That cluster signals depth to both search engines and generative models.

Keep your NAP and factual data consistent

This sounds basic, but I see startups skip it. If your business address, phone number, or founding date appears differently on your site versus a directory, the AI model loses confidence in your accuracy. Before you even start writing, audit your citations. Make sure every mention of your business name, location, and contact details is identical across every platform you control.

What Not to Do in Your First 90 Days

Not every popular tactic works for a startup with limited time. Here are three things I have seen drain resources without real returns.

- **Don't chase every new AI tool release.** A new AI search product launches every week. Most will disappear. Pick the two or three that matter to your audience and focus your testing there.
- **Don't rewrite your entire site.** You do not need to restructure everything for AI search on day one. Start with your highest-value pages, the ones that drive leads or conversions, and optimize those first.
- **Don't ignore traditional SEO completely.** Even if you decide to optimize for AI search first, the majority of your traffic in year one will still come from Google. Keep the basics intact: clean URLs, fast load times, mobile-friendly design, and proper heading hierarchy.

Measuring What Matters

After 90 days, you need to know whether your approach is working. Traditional metrics like organic traffic and bounce rate still apply, but you also want to track AI search performance. Because direct analytics from AI tools are limited, I use proxy signals. I monitor branded search volume: if more people search for your startup name after AI tools start mentioning you, that is a good sign. I also check referral traffic from AI platforms that do send users, like Perplexity or Bing Chat. Finally, I run manual queries once a week. I ask the AI tool a question my startup should answer and see whether it cites my content. That qualitative check tells me more than any dashboard.

The truth is, no one has cracked the code on AI search optimization yet. The models change faster than best practices can keep up. But startups have an advantage: speed. You can test an approach, measure its impact, and pivot in a week. Big companies are still debating whether to create a separate AI search team. You can just start. If you stay focused on clarity, authority, and answering real user questions, you will be in a strong position no matter how the technology evolves.