

The Next SEO: How to Get Found When Customers Ask AI (Not Google)

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Abstract

Customers are increasingly discovering businesses by asking AI assistants for recommendations, comparisons, and next steps—not just by searching Google and clicking blue links. Classic SEO still matters, but it is no longer the only way people find you.

This paper explains (in plain English) the three ways AI-driven discovery works: answer selection, recommendations, and task completion. It then outlines a practical “next discoverability layer” small businesses can build toward:

- Verified business identity (so systems can trust you’re real)
- Real-time structured business data (so systems can understand you accurately)
- Callable capabilities (so systems—and customers—can complete tasks like booking, quoting, or ordering)

You’ll finish with a clear list of what your website should include over the next 12–24 months to stay visible and competitive.

1 The Core Idea (in one paragraph)

In the AI era, “getting found” is shifting from ranking a webpage to being a trusted business that an assistant can understand and confidently recommend—and, increasingly, transact with.

That means your online presence needs to be:

- **Trustworthy** (verified identity + consistent business info)
- **Understandable** (structured, machine-readable facts)
- **Usable** (simple tools/APIs that complete real customer tasks)

Protocols like MCP (Model Context Protocol) may help assistants interact with your tools (Anthropic 2024; Zhang et al. 2025), but the bigger point is: AI discovery rewards businesses that are easy to verify, easy to interpret, and easy to act on.

2 How AI Discovery Actually Works (3 channels you should design for)

Think of AI-driven discovery as three different “funnels”. You may show up in one, two, or all three.

2.1 Channel 1: AI-augmented search (summaries, citations, “best answer”)

What it looks like: A customer asks, “Who does emergency plumbing near me?” or “What’s the best payroll software for small teams?” The AI answers with a shortlist and sometimes citations.

What the AI needs from you:

- clear pages that explain your services, locations, pricing approach, and policies;
- consistent facts (hours, address, phone, service area);
- signals that you are credible (reviews, brand mentions, business profiles).

What to build: Keep doing SEO basics, but write pages that are easy to extract answers from:

- short plain-English explanations;
- FAQs with direct answers;
- service area pages;
- transparent policies (returns, cancellations, turnaround times).

2.2 Channel 2: Recommendations (the AI picks options like a concierge)

What it looks like: “Recommend a local accountant who works with e-commerce businesses.” Or “Find a florist who can deliver tomorrow under £50.”

What the AI needs from you:

- proof you’re a real, reputable business;
- data that matches the customer’s constraints (budget, location, availability, niche);
- reliable reputation signals (reviews, ratings, authority platforms).

What to build:

- consistent business identity across the web (more on this below);
- structured service data (what you do, for whom, where, typical pricing bands);
- strong profiles where people and systems check trust (Google Business Profile, industry directories, marketplaces if relevant).

2.3 Channel 3: Task completion (the assistant does the thing)

What it looks like: The customer says: “Book me an appointment,” “Get a quote,” “Order,” “Check availability,” or “Schedule a call.”

What the AI needs from you:

- a way to perform the action safely: booking, quoting, ordering, support tickets;
- clear rules and boundaries (what’s allowed, cancellation rules, deposit rules);
- a reliable interface (API or a well-structured workflow).

What to build:

- a booking flow, quote builder, product selector, or order flow that works smoothly;
- behind-the-scenes integrations (calendar, inventory, CRM);
- optionally: tool standards (like MCP or OpenAPI specs) so assistants can interact more directly (Anthropic 2024).

3 The “Next Discoverability Layer” (simple definition)

When people say “SEO”, they usually mean “ranking for keywords”. In AI-driven journeys, the emerging layer is less about keywords and more about:

- **Verified business identity**
- **Real-time structured business data**
- **Callable capabilities**

3.1 (1) Verified business identity

Meaning: Systems can confirm your business is real and consistent.

Why it matters: AI assistants and platforms are risk-sensitive. They want to avoid recommending fake, scammy, or outdated listings. Verification reduces uncertainty.

What “verified” looks like in practice:

- Your Name/Address/Phone (NAP) are consistent across: your website, Google Business Profile, and key directories relevant to your industry.
- You have a real-world footprint: reviews, photos, posts, consistent branding.
- Where available: platform verification (e.g. Google verification, Apple Business Connect, social verification, payment verification, domain/email verification).

What to do this month:

- standardise your business name formatting everywhere (same punctuation, “Ltd” vs not, etc.);
- match address and phone exactly across profiles;
- ensure your website has a clear contact page, legal business info, and location/service area.

3.2 (2) Real-time structured business data

Meaning: Your business facts are stored in a clean, machine-readable format—not trapped only inside paragraphs of text.

Why it matters: AI systems don’t just “read”; they extract facts and compare options. Structured data reduces ambiguity and improves accuracy.

Examples of structured business data that helps you get recommended:

- services offered (and what you don’t do);
- locations served / radius / in-person vs remote;
- opening hours, holiday hours;
- pricing structure (starting from, minimum job, hourly rate bands, packages);
- availability (next appointment slots, delivery windows);
- policies (cancellation window, deposits, returns, guarantees);

- product attributes (sizes, compatibility, shipping restrictions).

How a small business can implement this without complexity:

- add schema markup (LocalBusiness, Product, Service, FAQ) to key pages;
- **validate your structured data:** once you’ve added schema markup, verify that it is readable and valid. Google’s free Rich Results Test checks whether your pages’ structured data can be parsed correctly and are eligible for enhanced results. This tool does not guarantee rankings, but it helps catch common issues such as missing required fields, invalid property types, or markup that does not match visible page content—problems that can reduce trust or cause your data to be ignored by search engines and AI systems. You can test individual URLs or pasted code snippets using Google’s Rich Results Test.



Scan this QR code to open the Rich Results Test on your phone. Paste your page URL (or your schema snippet) and confirm Google can parse it without errors. Or visit <https://search.google.com/test/rich-results>

- maintain a “single source of truth” internally (even a spreadsheet can work at first);
- connect your website to systems that change often (calendar, inventory, booking tool).

What to do this quarter:

- publish clear FAQ pages and service pages with consistent facts;
- add basic schema (LocalBusiness + FAQ at minimum);
- if you have bookings/stock: ensure your website shows current availability, not “call us to check”.

3.3 (3) Callable capabilities (actions your website can perform)

Meaning: Your website isn’t just information—it can do things reliably:

- generate a quote;
- book an appointment;
- check availability;
- take payment/deposit;
- start an order;
- open a support ticket;
- run an eligibility check or calculator.

Why it matters: AI-driven journeys reward the fastest path to a correct outcome. If your competitor’s site lets a customer complete the task in 60 seconds, they’ll often win—even if your “about page” is better.

Where MCP fits (plain English): MCP is a way to package tools so AI assistants can use them more directly (Anthropic 2024). But you don’t need MCP on day one to benefit. The bigger win is building the capability itself (booking/quoting/etc.) and making it reliable.

What to do in the next 6–12 months: Identify your top 1–2 customer tasks and build them into the site:

- “Request a quote” (with a structured form and clear follow-up)
- “Book a slot” (calendar + confirmation + reminders)
- “Find the right product/service” (simple guided selector)

4 What Small Business Owners Should Build (a practical checklist)

If you do nothing else, use this as your roadmap.

4.1 Level 1: Must-have foundations (most businesses should do these)

- a clear “Services” section (not vague; specific and scannable);
- a clear “Service area / locations” page;
- transparent policies (cancellations, returns, lead times);
- FAQs written in direct Q&A format (easy for AI to extract);
- consistent NAP everywhere (website + Google profile + directories);
- reviews strategy (ask consistently; respond professionally).

4.2 Level 2: Structured data + consistency (makes you easier for AI to trust)

- schema markup for: LocalBusiness, Service (or Product), and FAQ;
- a single “source of truth” for: hours, pricing rules/packages, service areas, booking availability rules;
- keep those facts updated (stale data kills trust).

4.3 Level 3: Callable capabilities (this is where you start winning)

Pick one primary action (booking, quote generation, ordering, availability check, or guided selection). Then make it:

- fast (few steps);
- reliable (works on mobile; confirmations sent);
- safe (clear terms, cancellation rules, data handling);
- connected (calendar/CRM/inventory so it stays accurate).

4.4 Level 4 (optional): “Assistant-ready” tooling standards

Only after Level 3 is working:

- document your actions (what inputs are required, what outputs look like);
- consider exposing capabilities via standard interfaces (e.g. OpenAPI; MCP where relevant) (Anthropic 2024);
- add auditability: confirmations, logs, and clear error handling.

5 Picking Your Highest-ROI Callable Capability (by business type)

Callable capabilities create value only when they map to the *one thing* your customers most often want to do next. The quickest win is usually to implement a single primary action end-to-end (from customer input to confirmation), then improve it over time.

Below are common “highest-ROI” starting points by niche. Treat these as defaults you can test and refine based on your own data.

Niche	Single highest-ROI capability (most often)	Why it tends to win
Local services (plumber, electrician, cleaner, landscaper)	Instant quote / price-range estimator + “book” or “request callback”	Reduces back-and-forth, qualifies leads, captures job details, improves close rate.
Appointment businesses (clinics, salons, fitness, tutors)	Real-time online booking (with deposits, rescheduling, reminders)	Turns “maybe” into a booked slot, reduces no-shows, saves admin time.
Professional services (accountant, lawyer, agency, consultant)	Guided intake + “book discovery call” (with qualification)	Filters bad-fit leads, collects info upfront, speeds the sales cycle.
E-commerce	Inventory-accurate checkout + delivery ETA / shipping cost upfront	Reduces abandonment and removes “is it in stock?” friction.
B2B / SaaS	Interactive demo or ROI calculator + “start trial” / “book demo”	Increases intent and lead quality; supports AI-driven comparison.

5.1 A broadly good default for most inbound-enquiry businesses

If you’re a typical small business that relies on inbound enquiries, the most broadly high-ROI capability is often:

A guided quote/intake flow that outputs (a) an estimate or range, and (b) the next step: book, pay a deposit, or request a callback.

5.2 An actionable 30-day plan (to finish strong)

To make this practical, here is a simple one-month implementation plan:

1. **Pick one capability** from the table above (do not start with three).
2. **Define success metrics:** completion rate, time-to-complete, and the next-step conversion (booking, deposit, callback request).
3. **Design the minimum flow:** 5–8 inputs max, mobile-first, clear promise of response time, confirmation message/email.
4. **Connect it to operations:** calendar/CRM/inventory so outputs are accurate and follow-up is automatic.
5. **Publish and iterate weekly:** review drop-off points; shorten steps; add only the fields that improve fulfilment or qualification.
6. **Optional once stable:** document the inputs/outputs so it can later be exposed via OpenAPI or MCP (Anthropic 2024).

6 What to Avoid (common mistakes)

- chasing buzzwords (“AI-ready” badges) without improving real customer tasks;
- adding structured data that doesn’t match what your pages actually say (can backfire);
- building a “quote form” that creates friction (too long, confusing, no response promise);
- relying entirely on third-party platforms (you want first-party capabilities too);
- letting core facts drift (hours, address, services, pricing rules).

7 Conclusion (the takeaway a small business owner should remember)

SEO isn’t dead, but it’s no longer the whole game. In AI-driven discovery, visibility increasingly depends on whether you are:

- **Verified** (consistent identity and trust signals)
- **Understandable** (structured, accurate, current business data)
- **Usable** (callable capabilities that complete key customer tasks)

If you build those three layers into your website and systems, you make it easier for assistants—and customers—to choose you.

References

- Anthropic (2024). *Model Context Protocol*. Documentation / specification. Accessed 15 February 2026. URL: <https://docs.anthropic.com/en/docs/mcp>.
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