

# Making Sense of SEO

The SEO industry has a credibility problem. Businesses hear wildly contradictory advice — from "SEO is dead" to "you need to spend thousands a month" — and most of it is self-serving. This guide won't teach you to do SEO. It will help you understand enough about how it works to make smart decisions about it.

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## The Advice Problem

Search for "how to improve SEO" and you'll find thousands of articles, most written by people selling SEO services, each offering slightly different advice with absolute certainty. One says content is king. Another says backlinks are all that matter. A third promises page-one rankings in thirty days for a fixed monthly fee. A fourth says SEO is dead and you should focus entirely on social media.

The contradiction exists because SEO is genuinely complex, context-dependent, and constantly evolving — which makes it easy to present partial truths as universal rules. What works for a national ecommerce brand is different from what works for a local solicitor. What worked two years ago may not work today. And what an SEO agency tells you is important often happens to be the thing they're best at selling.

We sell SEO services too, so take this with appropriate scepticism. But the point of this guide is not to convince you to buy anything. It's to give you enough understanding of how search actually works that you can evaluate advice — ours or anyone else's — on its merits rather than on how confidently it's delivered.

## How Search Engines Decide What to Show

Google's job is straightforward in principle: when someone searches for something, show them the most useful, trustworthy results as quickly as possible. When someone types "accountant near me" or "emergency plumber Headington", Google needs to figure out which businesses are relevant, which are credible, and which are closest to the person searching.

The process works in three stages. First, Google **crawls** the web by following links from page to page, reading content, and trying to understand what each page is about. Second, it **indexes** that information — essentially filing it away in a vast, organised database. Third, when someone

searches, Google **ranks** the indexed pages by how well they match the search query and how trustworthy the source appears.

For local businesses, three factors dominate the ranking decision: **relevance** (does your page match what someone searched for?), **proximity** (how close is your business to the person searching?), and **prominence** (how well-known and trusted is your business online?).

Understanding these three factors is more useful than memorising a list of two hundred ranking signals, because almost everything in SEO maps back to one of them.

Relevance is largely about content — do you clearly communicate what you do and where you do it? Proximity is mostly outside your control unless you open new locations. Prominence is the slow game — built through reviews, links from other websites, consistent online presence, and the gradual accumulation of trust signals over time.

## What Actually Moves the Needle

Not everything matters equally, and what matters most depends on your type of business. This is the part most SEO advice gets wrong — it presents a universal list of priorities that applies to no one in particular.

### Local Service Businesses

If you're a solicitor, accountant, plumber, dentist, or any business serving customers in a specific area, two things matter more than everything else combined: your **Google Business Profile** and your **reviews**.

Your Google Business Profile controls whether you appear in the map pack — the prominent box of three businesses that appears above regular search results for local queries. A complete, accurate, regularly updated profile with genuine photos and consistent business information is the foundation of local visibility. Everything else is secondary until this is right.

Reviews influence both where you appear and whether people click through to contact you. A business with 150 reviews averaging 4.5 stars will typically outperform a competitor with 12 reviews, all else being equal. The quality and recency of reviews matter too — a steady stream of recent reviews signals an active, trusted business.

### B2B and Professional Services

If your clients find you through research rather than local search — management consultancies, specialist agencies, technology companies — the priorities shift. **Content that demonstrates genuine expertise** becomes the primary driver, because your prospects are evaluating

credibility before they make contact.

**Backlinks from authoritative sources** carry significant weight here because they signal to Google that other credible organisations trust your expertise enough to reference it. A single link from an industry publication or a university research page is worth more than hundreds of links from generic directories.

## Ecommerce

Online shops live and die on **technical performance** and **product page optimisation**. Page speed directly affects conversion rates — every second of delay costs a measurable percentage of sales. Product pages need unique descriptions (not manufacturer copy-paste), proper schema markup so Google can display prices and availability in results, and a logical category structure that helps both users and search engines navigate your catalogue.

The point is not that other factors don't matter. It's that spreading effort evenly across everything is less effective than concentrating on the things that matter most for your specific situation. A local plumber investing in a complex content marketing strategy before their Google Business Profile is complete is solving the wrong problem first.

## The AI Factor

The search landscape is shifting in ways that affect how businesses get found. Google now shows AI-generated summaries (called AI Overviews) at the top of many search results, providing direct answers without requiring users to click through to any website. Meanwhile, a growing number of people are bypassing Google entirely, asking ChatGPT, Perplexity, or Claude for recommendations instead.

When someone asks an AI "recommend a good accountant near Oxford," the AI draws on the information available about businesses online — websites, reviews, directory listings, articles mentioning them — and synthesises a short, confident recommendation. There are no ten blue links to choose from. No page-two results. Either your business is mentioned in the response, or it isn't. If it isn't, you weren't part of the conversation at all.

This doesn't replace traditional SEO — Google search still drives the majority of web traffic. But it adds a new dimension. The businesses that tend to be recommended by AI systems are the ones with **consistent, specific, and well-structured information** across the web: clear descriptions of what they do, genuine reviews, mentions in relevant publications, and content that demonstrates actual expertise rather than keyword-stuffed filler.

In practice, what makes you visible to AI systems is largely the same thing that makes you visible to Google — being genuinely useful, credible, and clearly described. If you're curious about how AI discovery differs from traditional search and what you can do about it, our [AI visibility guide](#) goes into depth on the mechanics.

## How to Tell Good SEO Advice From Bad

This is arguably the most useful section of this guide, because the single biggest waste of money in digital marketing is paying for SEO work that doesn't move the needle — or worse, actively damages your visibility.

### Red Flags

**Guaranteed rankings.** No one can guarantee a specific position on Google. Google's algorithm considers hundreds of factors, changes constantly, and is not something any agency controls. An agency that promises "page one in 90 days" is either lying, targeting keywords so obscure that ranking is meaningless, or planning to use techniques that risk getting your site penalised.

**Obsession with keyword density.** If someone tells you to use your target keyword exactly 3% of the time, or to repeat it in every paragraph, they are operating on advice that stopped being relevant around 2012. Google understands natural language, synonyms, and context. Write for humans. If you're describing your accountancy services in Witney, the words "accountant" and "Witney" will appear naturally without forcing them in.

**Hundreds of directory submissions.** Mass-submitting your business to hundreds of low-quality directories was a common tactic fifteen years ago. Today, most of those directories carry zero authority and some can actively harm your rankings. A handful of high-quality, relevant directories (industry bodies, Chamber of Commerce, recognised review platforms) are worth more than hundreds of spam listings.

**Secrecy about methods.** Any agency doing good work should be able to explain, in plain language, exactly what they're doing and why. If the explanation is vague hand-waving about "proprietary techniques" or "algorithm manipulation," that's a warning sign.

### Green Flags

**Focus on business outcomes.** Good SEO advice starts with your business goals — more enquiries, more sales, more bookings — and works backwards to determine what will achieve them. Rankings are a means to an end, not the end itself. An agency ranking you first for a keyword nobody searches for has achieved nothing useful.

**Honest timelines.** Meaningful SEO results typically take three to six months for competitive terms, sometimes longer. Anyone who understands search will set expectations accordingly and explain why. Quick results are possible for uncompetitive terms or technical fixes, but sustainable visibility takes time.

**Clear, understandable reporting.** You should receive reports that connect SEO activity to business metrics — traffic from organic search, enquiries generated, conversion rates — not just graphs of keyword positions. If you can't understand the report, either the agency is poor at communication or they're hiding behind complexity.

**Willingness to say no.** The best advisors will tell you when something isn't worth pursuing. If an agency agrees with every suggestion you make and never pushes back, they're order-takers, not strategists.

## The Metrics That Actually Matter

There's a significant gap between the metrics that sound impressive in reports and the metrics that tell you whether SEO is actually working for your business.

**Vanity metrics** include things like domain authority scores (an invented metric from third-party tools that Google does not use), total number of keywords ranking (irrelevant if they're all keywords nobody searches for), and raw impression counts (seeing your site listed is meaningless if nobody clicks). These numbers can all go up while your business sees zero additional revenue.

**Business metrics** are what matter: how many enquiries or sales came from organic search this month compared to last? What's the conversion rate of visitors who arrive through search? Which specific pages are bringing in business, and which are dead weight? Is organic traffic replacing or supplementing paid advertising spend?

When evaluating SEO services or reviewing your own efforts, ask these questions about any report you receive: **How many enquiries came from organic search this month?** If the answer is vague or not tracked, the reporting isn't connected to business reality. **Which keywords are driving actual business, not just traffic?** Ranking for informational queries is fine for brand awareness, but your main investment should target the queries that lead to revenue. **What changed, and why?** A good report explains what actions were taken, what results followed, and what happens next — not just what the graphs show.

## When SEO Is Not the Right Investment

This might be the most important section here, and it's the one you'll almost never see in a guide written by an SEO agency. There are genuine situations where SEO is not the best use of your marketing budget.

**If you need results this month**, SEO is the wrong tool. Meaningful organic growth takes months to develop. For immediate visibility, paid advertising (Google Ads, specifically) delivers traffic from day one and can be precisely targeted. SEO is a long-term investment; if your timeline is short, spend accordingly.

**If you're at capacity**, more search visibility might not help. A tradesperson who is already booked three months ahead does not need more enquiries — they need better-qualified enquiries, or higher prices, or the ability to scale. Pouring more traffic into a business that can't handle it creates frustration for potential customers and waste for the business.

**If your website doesn't convert**, driving more traffic to it is pouring water into a leaky bucket. Fix the website first — clear messaging, credible design, functioning forms, obvious calls to action — and then invest in traffic. Sending a hundred visitors to a confusing website is worse than sending ten visitors to a clear one.

**If your business is brand new** with no reviews, no content, and no online presence, SEO needs foundations before it can deliver. Build your Google Business Profile, gather your first twenty reviews, and create a solid website with clear content about what you do and where. Then SEO can amplify what already exists. It cannot create authority from nothing.

Saying this openly is not fashionable in our industry. But recommending SEO to a business that would be better served by other investments is not helpful — it's just revenue for the agency. The honest answer is that SEO is enormously effective for businesses that are ready for it, and a poor investment for businesses that are not. Working out which category you fall into before spending money is time well spent.

For those ready to go deeper, our [comprehensive SEO guide](#) covers the technical and strategic details of implementation — the how, rather than the whether.