

2026 EDITION

SEO Best Practices

How search works now, and what it takes to get found.

INSIDE

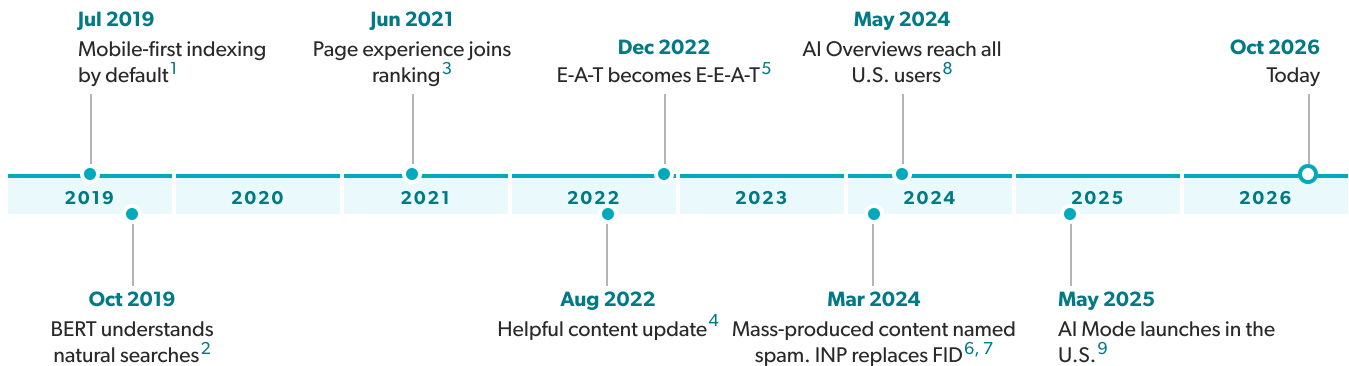
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What's changed since 2019

Google now answers many questions on the results page and looks harder for proof that a business knows its work.

Key Google changes



INP measures how quickly a page responds to a tap or click. E-E-A-T is explained [on page 3](#).

AI summaries mean fewer clicks

Share of Google search visits with a click on a regular result



Pew Research Center tracked the Google searches of 900 U.S. adults in March 2025.¹⁰ Being cited in AI answers now matters too.

- ¹ Google Search Central Blog, "Mobile-first indexing by default for new domains," May 28, 2019.
- ² Google, "Understanding searches better than ever before," October 25, 2019.
- ³ Google Search Central Blog, "More time, tools, and details on the page experience update," April 19, 2021.
- ⁴ Google Search Central Blog, "What creators should know about Google's August 2022 helpful content update," August 18, 2022.
- ⁵ Google Search Central Blog, "Our latest update to the quality rater guidelines: E-A-T gets an extra E for Experience," December 15, 2022.
- ⁶ Google Search Central Blog, "What web creators should know about our March 2024 core update and new spam policies," March 5, 2024.
- ⁷ web.dev, "Interaction to Next Paint is officially a Core Web Vital," March 12, 2024.
- ⁸ Google, "Generative AI in Search: Let Google do the searching for you," May 14, 2024.
- ⁹ Google, "AI in Search: Going beyond information to intelligence," May 20, 2025.
- ¹⁰ Pew Research Center, "Google users are less likely to click on links when an AI summary appears in the results," July 22, 2025.



How Google decides **who to trust**

E-E-A-T is not a score. Google says it isn't a specific ranking factor, but its systems reward content that shows these qualities, and weigh them even more on topics that affect health, finances or safety.¹¹

E**Experience**

First-hand knowledge.
You've done the work you
write about.

E**Expertise**

The skills and credentials
the topic calls for.

A**Authoritativeness**

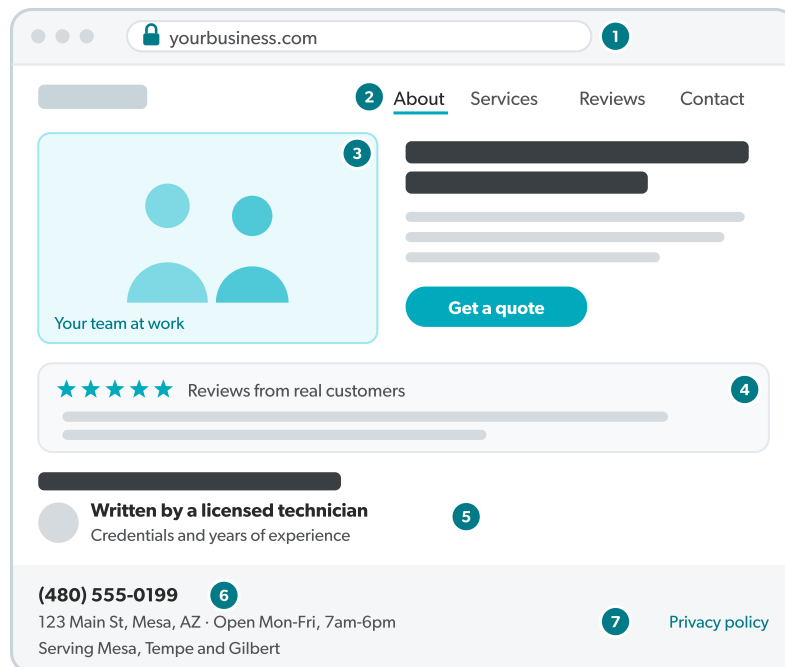
Others recognize you as a
go-to source.

T**Trustworthiness**

Accurate, honest, safe
and reliable.

The four qualities Google's search quality raters look for.⁵

Where trust shows up on your site



- 1 Secure connection (HTTPS)
- 2 An About page that names real people
- 3 Real photos of your team and work
- 4 Reviews from real customers
- 5 Who wrote it, and why they're qualified
- 6 Phone, address, hours and service area
- 7 A privacy policy

Google asks whether it's clear who created a page and why they're qualified.¹¹ Visitors ask the same thing. What customers and other sites say about you counts more than what you say about yourself.

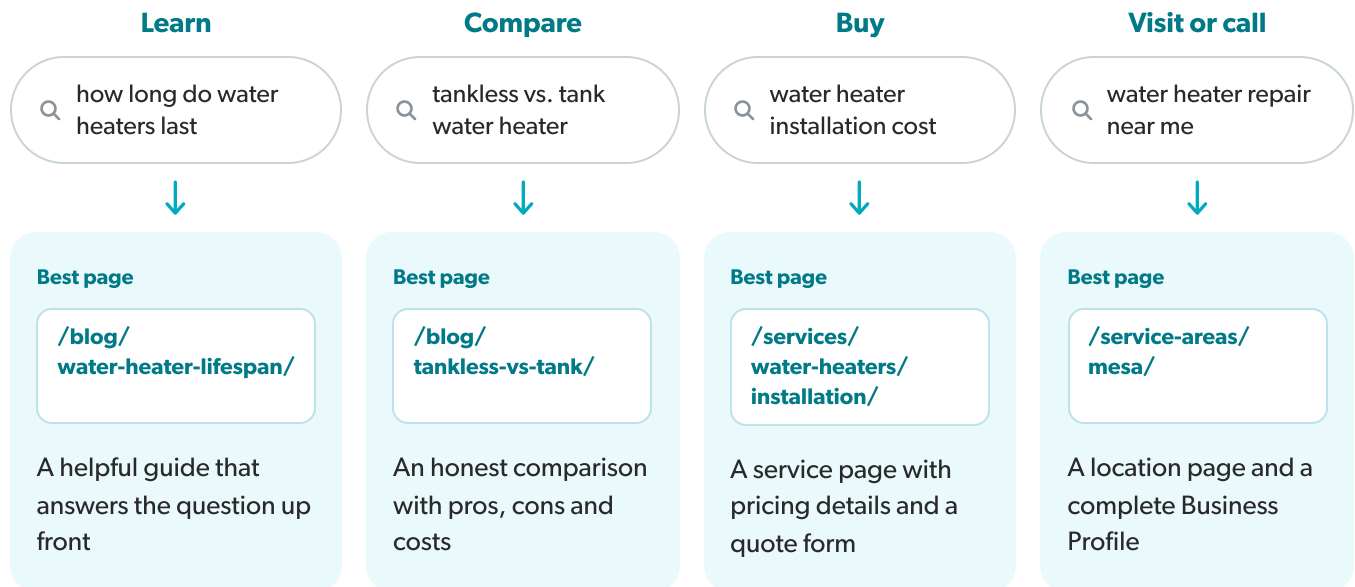
⁵ Google Search Central Blog, "Our latest update to the quality rater guidelines: E-A-T gets an extra E for Experience," December 15, 2022.

¹¹ Google Search Central, "Creating helpful, reliable, people-first content."



Match each /page/ to the searcher's goal

Every search has a goal behind it, called search intent. A page that answers the wrong question rarely ranks, no matter how well it's written.



One topic, four different goals. Give each searcher the answer early, then add depth.

Every year, revisit older pages





Make pages **easy to scan**

What a well-written page includes

yourbusiness.com/services/water-heaters/tankless/

Tankless Water Heater Installation in Mesa

Licensed technicians install tankless water heaters in Mesa and nearby cities. Get upfront pricing and a same-week install date.

What affects the price

- Gas or electric model
- Gas line or venting upgrades
- Removing your old tank

Not sure tankless is right for you?

[Compare tankless and tank water heaters](#)



alt: Technician connecting copper piping

Tankless units have a 20-year life expectancy.
Source: [ENERGY STAR](#)

[Book an install](#) or call (480) 555-0199

Honest, specific headline
Say exactly what the page covers. No hype.

The answer comes first
Lead with the most important information.

Descriptive subheadings
Each one says what its section covers.

Short paragraphs and lists
Easy to scan on a phone.

Descriptive link text
Words that describe the page, not “click here.”

Original photo with alt text
Real work, described in words for screen readers.

Cited sources
Link to the original source for facts and numbers.

A clear next step
Call, book or request a quote.

Google asks whether headings describe the content and titles avoid exaggeration,¹¹ and recommends link text that tells people what they’ll find.¹² Photo: AZP Services.

¹¹ Google Search Central, “Creating helpful, reliable, people-first content.”

¹² Google Search Central, “SEO link best practices for Google.”



Write titles and meta descriptions

Your title is often the main thing people use to decide which result to click.¹³

How to write each part of your search result

**Your Business**
yourbusiness.com › services › water-heaters › tankless

Tankless Water Heater Installation in Mesa | Your Business

Licensed technicians install tankless water heaters in Mesa and nearby cities. Get upfront pricing and a same-week install date.

1 Site name and URL
Use your real business name. Keep URLs short, with words that describe the page.

2 Title tag `<title>`
Lead with the service and place, then your brand. About 60 characters, different on every page.¹³

3 Meta description
`<meta name="description">`
Sum up the page in a sentence or two with specific facts. About 155 characters. Google may show other page text instead.¹⁴



Where to set them. On WordPress, use an SEO plugin like Rank Math or Yoast. On a site built with AI (vibe coded), ask the AI to hardcode each page's title and meta description in the source code.

Mistakes to avoid

Title	✗ Home	Too vague to earn a click ¹³
Title	✗ Water Heater, Water Heaters, Water Heater Repair Mesa	Repeated keywords look spammy ¹³
Description	✗ water heaters, tankless, Mesa, plumber, install, cheap	Less likely to be shown ¹⁴
Description	✗ Welcome to Your Business, your trusted home services company.	Repeated on every page ¹⁴

Google sets no length limit. It shortens titles and snippets to fit the screen, so put the key words first.^{13, 14} It doesn't use the meta keywords tag.¹⁵

¹³ Google Search Central, "Influencing title links in Google Search."

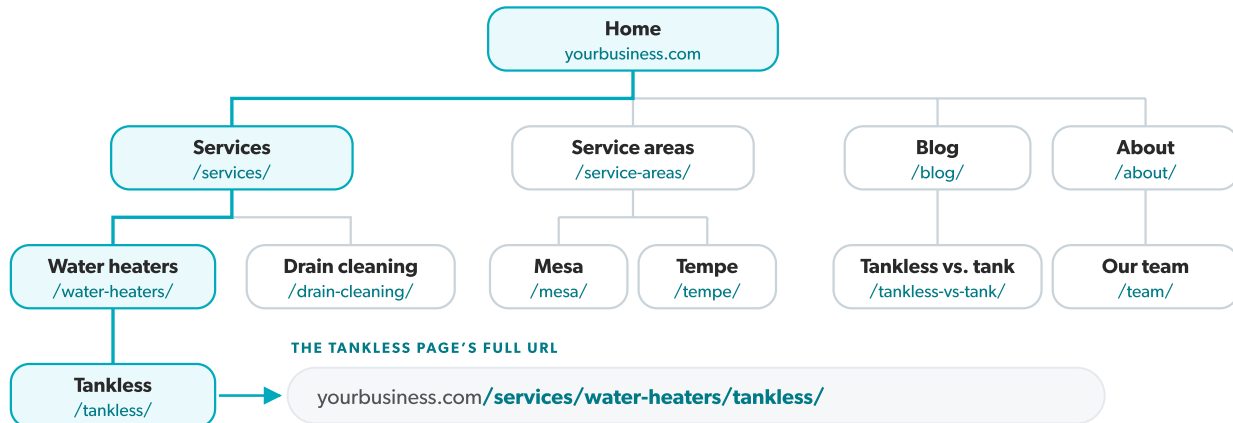
¹⁴ Google Search Central, "How to write meta descriptions."

¹⁵ Google Search Central, "Meta tags and attributes that Google supports."



Plan your URLs and headings

URLs that mirror your navigation



Each folder in the URL matches a level of the navigation. Keep key pages a few clicks from the home page, use one pattern for every location page, and keep URLs stable once pages are live.

Heads/H-Structure

yourbusiness.com/services/water-heaters/tankless/

H1 Tankless Water Heater Installation in Mesa

Licensed technicians install tankless water heaters in Mesa and nearby cities.

H2 How tankless water heaters work

They heat water only when you turn on a tap, so there's no tank to keep hot.

H2 What installation costs

H3 What affects the price

The model, gas line or venting upgrades, and removing your old tank.

H3 Financing options

H2 Frequently asked questions

- ✓ One H1 that names the page's topic
- ✓ H2s for main sections, H3s inside them
- ✗ Headings used just to make text bigger

A clear structure helps visitors find their way and shows Google how your pages relate.

Google says heading order doesn't affect Search rankings and there's no ideal number of headings. Logical order still helps readers and screen readers.¹⁶ If a URL ever has to change, redirect the old one.

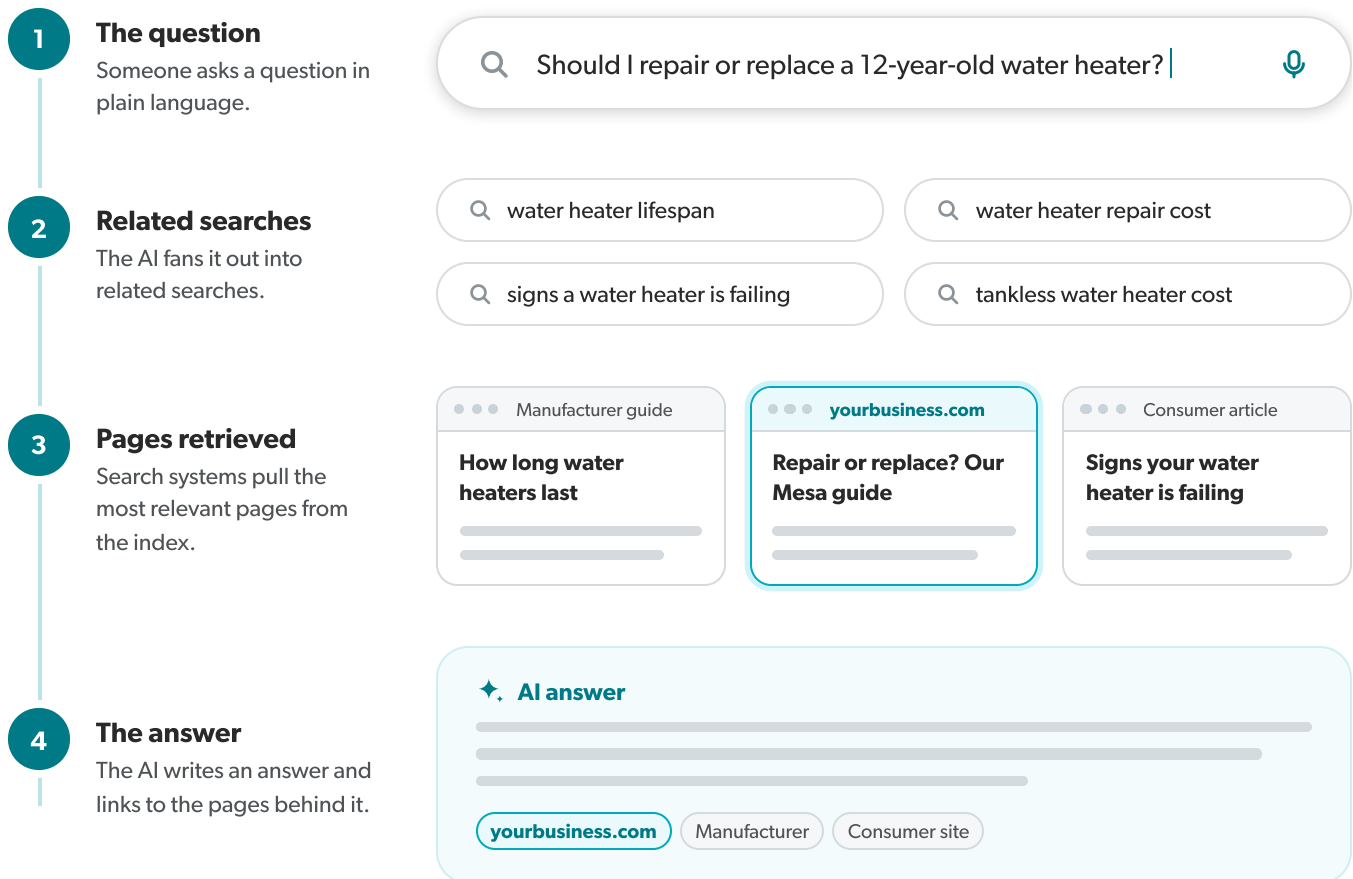
¹⁶ Google Search Central, "SEO Starter Guide: The basics."



How AI search works

Google's AI Overviews and AI Mode, along with assistants like ChatGPT, Gemini, Copilot and Perplexity, answer many questions directly and link to their sources.

How an AI answer gets built



Google's AI features run on its core search ranking systems, using related "fan-out" searches and pages retrieved from the search index. Google treats "AEO" and "GEO" as ordinary SEO.¹⁷

¹⁷ Google Search Central, "Google's guide to optimizing for generative AI features on Google Search."



How to show up in AI answers

Google says its AI features have no extra requirements. A page must be indexed and eligible to show a snippet in regular search.¹⁸

✓ Do

- ✓ Write original, first-hand content¹⁷
- ✓ Use clear headings and direct answers
- ✓ Share details only you know, like prices and timelines
- ✓ Keep your Business Profile complete¹⁷
- ✓ Earn reviews, videos and forum mentions¹⁷
- ✓ Let search crawlers in. ChatGPT search has its own.¹⁹

✗ Don't

Google says its search doesn't need any of these.¹⁷

- ✗ Make LLMS.txt or other "AI files"
- ✗ Chop content into small chunks
- ✗ Rewrite pages just for AI
- ✗ Add special schema for AI
- ✗ Chase fake "mentions"

¹⁷ Google Search Central, "[Google's guide to optimizing for generative AI features on Google Search.](#)"

¹⁸ Google Search Central, "[AI features and your website.](#)"

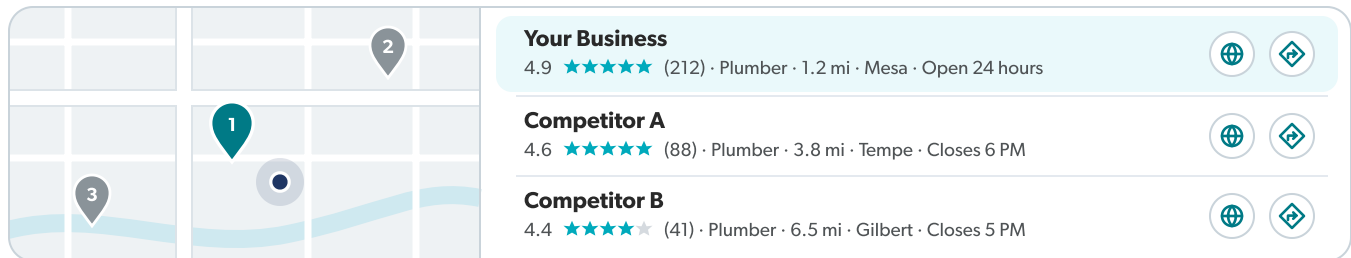
¹⁹ OpenAI, "[Overview of OpenAI crawlers.](#)"



How to rank in local search

For businesses that serve a local area, the map results and Google Business Profile are often the first impression, ahead of the website.

The map pack: local results with a map



How Google ranks local results



Relevance

How well your profile matches what someone searched for.

What you can do

- Pick the most specific category
- Use as few categories as you can²⁰
- List every service you offer
- Write a clear business description
- Fill in attributes, like parking
- Keep hours current, holidays too²¹
- Add real photos and videos



Distance

How far your business is from the person searching.

What you can do

- Verify your business²¹
- Use your precise address
- Check your map pin
- Work at customers' homes? Hide your address²⁰
- Set the cities you serve
- No PO boxes or virtual offices
- No duplicate profiles

You can't move the searcher.



Prominence

How well-known you are, including how many sites link to you and how many reviews you have.

What you can do

- Ask every customer for a review
- Reply to every review
- Earn links from local sites²¹
- Keep NAP consistent everywhere
- Join local business groups
- Sponsor local teams and events
- Get covered in local news

Google says local results are based mainly on relevance, distance and prominence.²¹ You can influence two of them directly.

²⁰ Google Business Profile Help, "Guidelines for representing your business on Google."

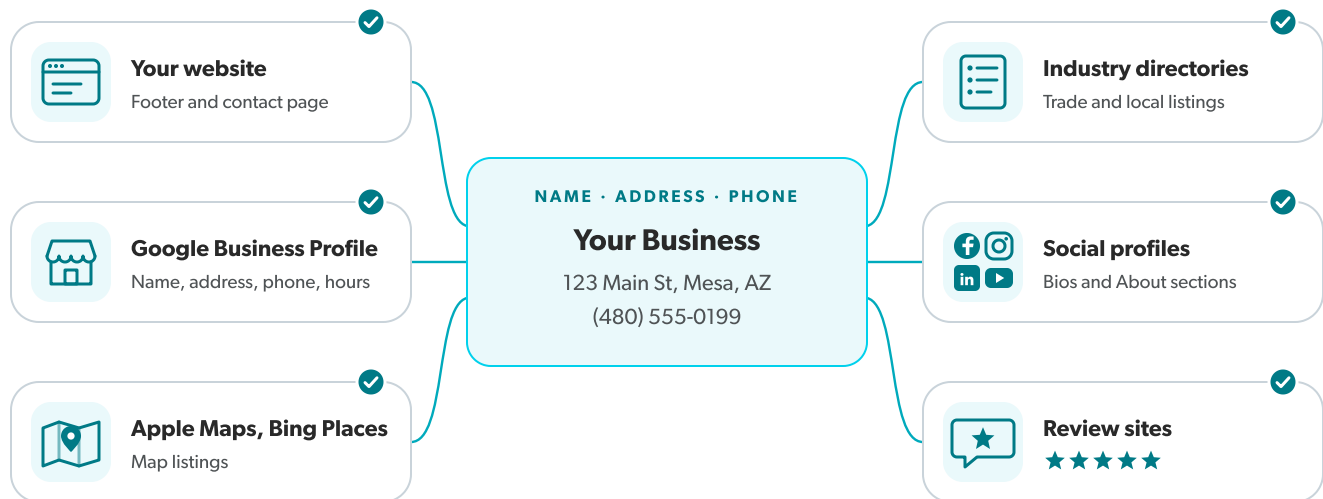
²¹ Google Business Profile Help, "Tips to improve your local ranking on Google."



Keep your details **the same everywhere**

Your business name, address and phone number should match everywhere they appear online, down to the suite number and phone format.

NAP (name, address, phone number) consistency



Use your real-world business name, the one on your storefront and website. Adding keywords or other unnecessary information to a Business Profile name isn't permitted and can get the profile suspended.²⁰

²⁰ Google Business Profile Help, "[Guidelines for representing your business on Google.](#)"



Make every page **unique**

A page for each city you serve can help, as long as each one is useful to people there. Copying one page and swapping the city name doesn't count.

✓ A real local page

[Placeholder for a real local page header]

- ✓ Photos of projects in Mesa
- ✓ The team that serves Mesa
- ✓ Local details, permits and service area
- ✓ Reviews from Mesa customers

✗ Doorway pages

Plumber in
Mesa

Plumber in
Tempe

Plumber in
Gilbert

Same text, city swapped, all funneling to one page

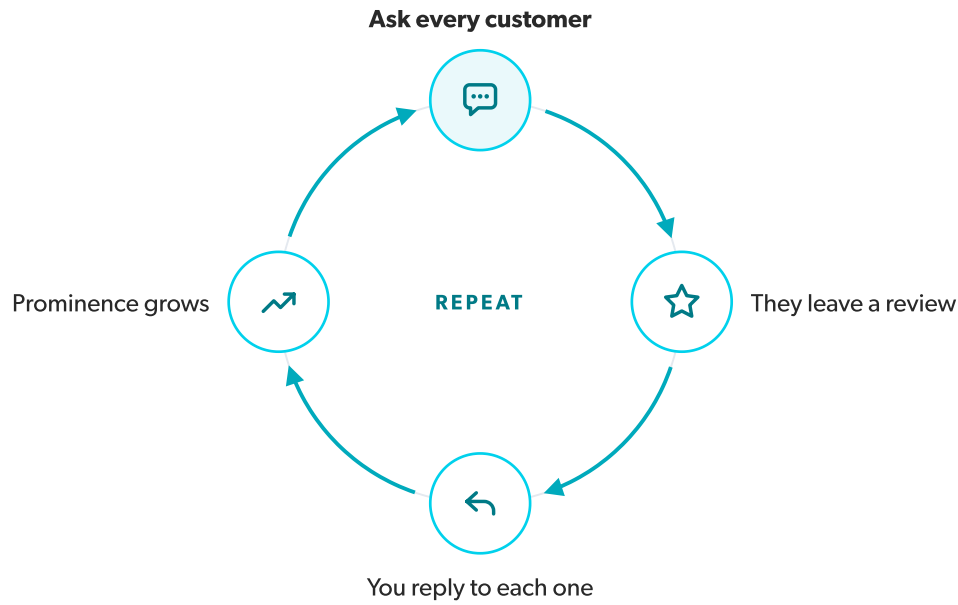
Pages aimed at specific cities that funnel visitors to one page can count as doorway abuse under Google's spam policies.²²

²² Google Search Central, "[Spam policies for Google web search](#)."



Earn reviews **within the rules**

How to keep reviews coming



✗ **Never**

- ✗ **Buy, sell or fake reviews**
The FTC's rule, in effect since October 2024, lets the agency seek civil penalties.²³

- ✗ **Ask only your happy customers**
Google prohibits selectively asking for positive reviews.²⁴

- ✗ **Discourage negative reviews**
Also prohibited by Google.²⁴

More reviews and positive ratings can help local ranking, and replying shows customers you value their feedback.²¹

²¹ Google Business Profile Help, "[Tips to improve your local ranking on Google](#)."

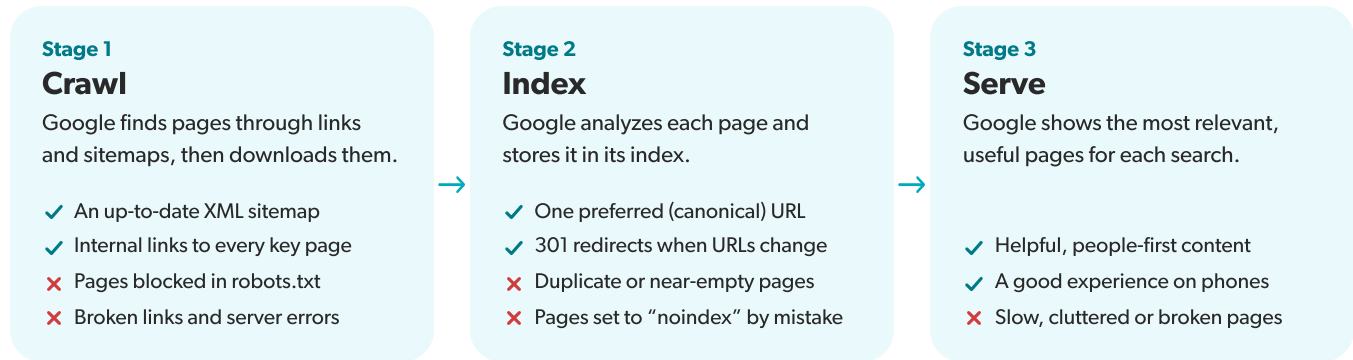
²³ Federal Trade Commission, "[Federal Trade Commission announces final rule banning fake reviews and testimonials](#)," August 14, 2024.

²⁴ Maps User Generated Content Policy Help, "[Prohibited & restricted content](#)."



Get the technical basics right

How a page gets into Google



Core Web Vitals

Google's measures of real-world loading, responsiveness and stability

✓ Good ! Needs improvement ✗ Poor

Loading

Largest Contentful Paint (LCP)



Responsiveness

Interaction to Next Paint (INP)



Visual stability

Cumulative Layout Shift (CLS)



Aim for Good on all three.^{25, 26} Scores come from real visits, so test on a typical phone, not just an office computer.

Mobile first

Google uses the mobile version of a site for indexing and ranking.²⁷

Secure

HTTPS on every page,²⁸ updated software and backups stored off the server.

Accessible

Alt text, clear headings, readable contrast and keyboard navigation. The standard is WCAG 2.2.²⁹

Google Search works in three stages, and not every page makes it through each one.³⁰ Search Console's indexing reports show where pages drop out.

²⁵ Google Search Central, "Understanding Core Web Vitals and Google search results."

²⁶ web.dev, "Largest Contentful Paint (LCP), Interaction to Next Paint (INP) and Cumulative Layout Shift (CLS)."

²⁷ Google Search Central, "Mobile site and mobile-first indexing best practices."

²⁸ Google Search Central, "Understanding Google page experience."

²⁹ W3C, "Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.2."

³⁰ Google Search Central, "In-depth guide to how Google Search works."



Label your pages with schema

Schema markup, also called structured data, is code that labels what a page is about, like a business, product, article or event. Google uses it to understand the page.³¹

Example: a local business

```
<script type="application/ld+json">
{
  "@context": "https://schema.org",
  "@type": "Plumber",
  "name": "Your Business",
  "url": "https://yourbusiness.com/",
  "telephone": "+1-480-555-0199",
  "address": {
    "@type": "PostalAddress",
    "streetAddress": "123 Main St",
    "addressLocality": "Mesa",
    "addressRegion": "AZ",
    "postalCode": "85201"
  },
  "openingHoursSpecification": [{
    "@type": "OpeningHoursSpecification",
    "dayOfWeek": ["Monday", "Tuesday", "Wednesday",
    "Thursday", "Friday", "Saturday", "Sunday"],
    "opens": "00:00", "closes": "23:59"
  }]
}
</script>
```

1 Where it goes

In the HTML of the page it describes. Google recommends JSON-LD, the format shown here.³¹

2 Type

The most specific one that fits, like Plumber instead of LocalBusiness.³²

3 Name, address and phone

Match your Business Profile exactly. Each location gets its own markup.³²

4 Hours

Keep them current. Open 24 hours? Use 00:00 to 23:59.³²

! Only what visitors can see

Markup must describe content that's on the page.³³

No stars for your own reviews



Your Business
yourbusiness.com

Water Heater Repair | Your Business

★★★★★ Rating: 4.9 - 212 reviews X Not shown

Google won't show stars for reviews a business shows about itself, even in a Google or Facebook reviews widget.³⁴ Focus on Business Profile reviews, covered on [page 13](#).

Check it before and after launch



Before: Rich Results Test

Shows which rich results it found on the page and any errors.³⁵



After: Search Console reports

Flag pages whose markup breaks after launch, which can happen when templates change.³¹

Schema makes a page eligible for search features but doesn't guarantee them.³³

³¹ Google Search Central, "Intro to how structured data markup works."

³² Google Search Central, "Local business (LocalBusiness) structured data."

³³ Google Search Central, "General structured data guidelines."

³⁴ Google Search Central, "Review snippet (Review, AggregateRating) structured data."

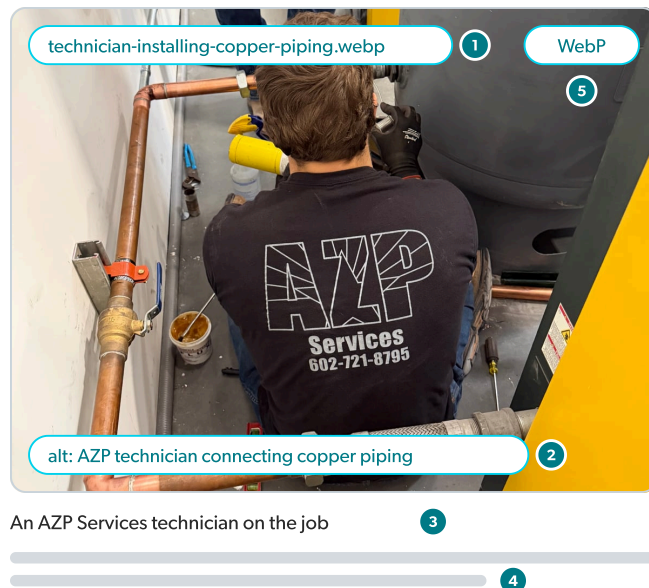
³⁵ Search Console Help, "Rich Results Test."



Get your images and videos found

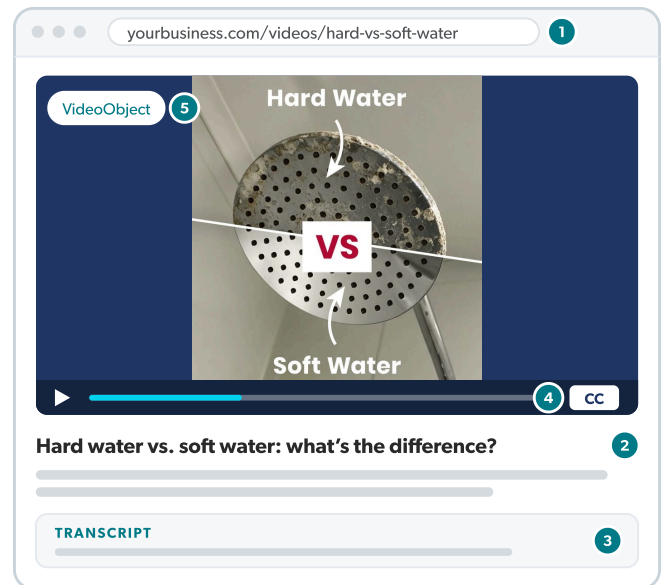
Images and video give your site more ways to be found, and Google's AI features can bring them into answers too.¹⁷ Original photos of your own work beat stock images every time.

A searchable image



- 1 File name**
Plain words, separated by hyphens
- 2 Alt text**
What the image shows, for screen readers and search
- 3 Caption**
Short and specific, right next to the image
- 4 Nearby text**
The content around it explains the image
- 5 Format and size**
Compressed and sized to fit, in WebP or AVIF

A searchable video



- 1 Its own watch page**
Embedded on an indexed page that performs well in search³⁶
- 2 Title and description**
Clear and specific, written for people
- 3 Transcript**
The words of the video, as text on the page
- 4 Captions**
For viewers watching without sound
- 5 Video structured data**
Describes the video for Google³⁶

Host videos on YouTube or a similar platform, then embed each on a relevant page. Still from an AZP Services video.

Google uses alt text, file names, captions and nearby text to understand images.³⁷ Photo: AZP Services.

¹⁷ Google Search Central, "Google's guide to optimizing for generative AI features on Google Search."

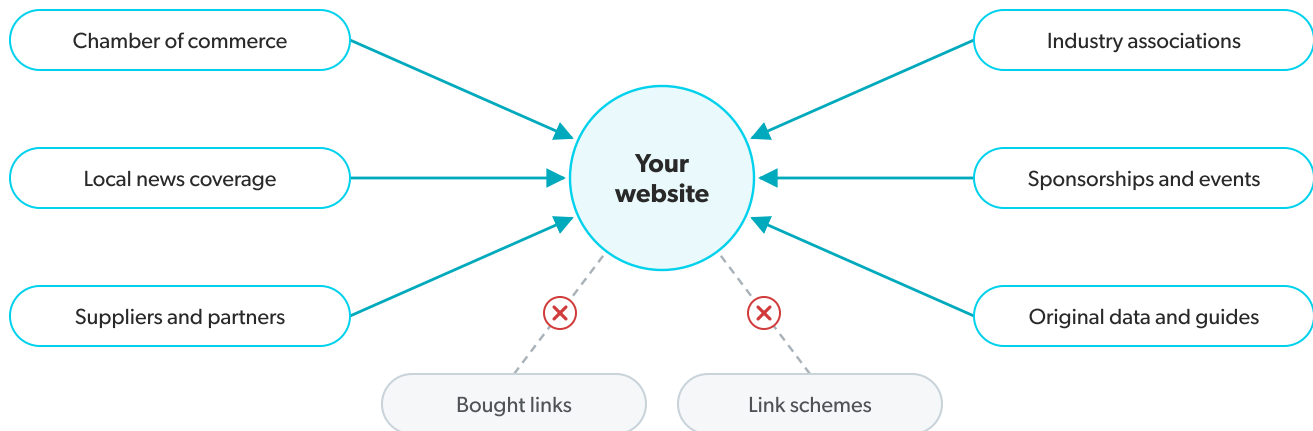
³⁶ Google Search Central, "Video SEO best practices."

³⁷ Google Search Central, "Image SEO best practices."

How to earn **quality links**

Links from other websites help Google understand what a page is about and how useful it is. Its ranking systems include link analysis and PageRank.³⁸

Where good links come from



Quality beats quantity, and the best links come from real relationships. Buying links or trading them for rankings violates Google's spam policies.²²

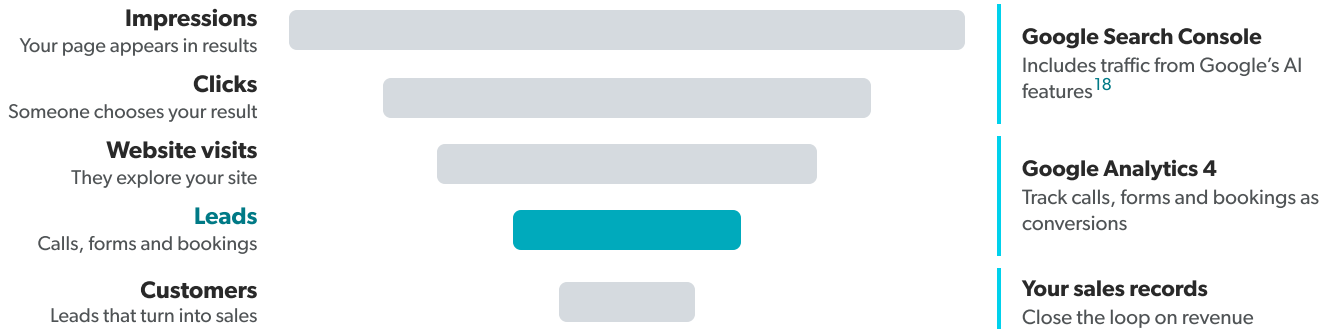
²² Google Search Central, "[Spam policies for Google web search.](#)"

³⁸ Google Search Central, "[A guide to Google Search ranking systems.](#)"



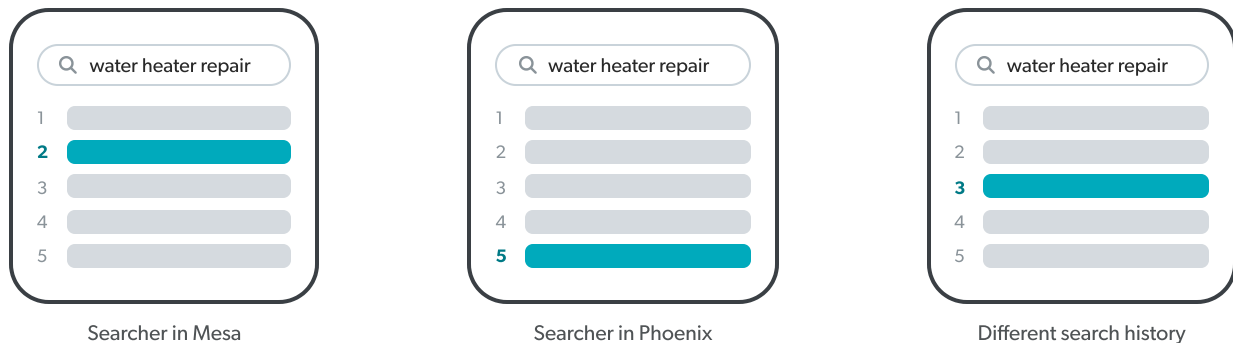
Track leads, not just rankings

From search to customer, and what measures each step



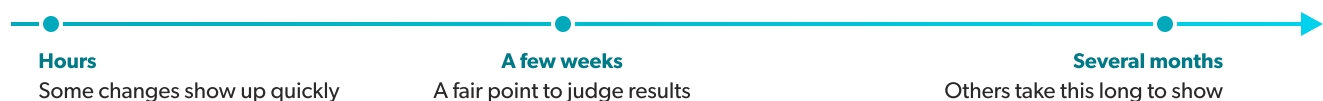
Leads are the scoreboard. As AI answers handle simple questions, impressions can rise while clicks stay flat, so judge SEO by the business it brings in. Bing Webmaster Tools covers Bing the way Search Console covers Google.

Why your rankings look different from ours



Google tailors results to each searcher, using factors like location, device type and search history.³³ A single spot check tells you little. Trends in Search Console tell you much more.

How long changes take



Timing from Google's SEO Starter Guide.¹⁶ Not every change will move results, so judge the trend over months.

¹⁶ Google Search Central, "SEO Starter Guide: The basics."

¹⁸ Google Search Central, "AI features and your website."

³³ Google Search Central, "General structured data guidelines."



Ten questions to check any website

- ☐ 01 Does each important page answer one clear search need?
- ☐ 02 Would a stranger know who runs this business and why to trust it?
- ☐ 03 Are the photos real, and do they show your own work?
- ☐ 04 Is the Google Business Profile complete, accurate and active?
- ☐ 05 Are new reviews coming in, and does each one get a reply?
- ☐ 06 Does the site load fast and work well on a phone?
- ☐ 07 Can Google crawl and index every page that matters?
- ☐ 08 Does every page offer a clear next step?
- ☐ 09 Has older content been reviewed in the past year?
- ☐ 10 Are calls and form fills tracked as conversions?

Let's put this to work.

Big Marlin Group builds, optimizes and maintains websites that turn searches into customers. Want to know where your site stands? Talk to your Big Marlin Group team.

[Get found more →](#)