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PLAYBOOK

The Alternatives Query: Showing Up When Someone Searches Your Competitor

By Scott Tischler · September 9, 2026 · 7 min read

When someone asks an AI for "[competitor] alternatives," they are as close to buying as a person gets. They already know the category, they're already unhappy or curious enough to look elsewhere, and they're asking to be handed options. Being named in that answer is one of the highest-value placements in AI search — and most businesses do nothing deliberate to earn it.

Think about the intent behind the query. This isn't someone learning what a product category is. It's someone who's used or seriously considered a specific competitor and is now actively shopping for a switch. The AI's answer to "alternatives to X" is a shortlist of who to consider instead. If you're on that list, you've been handed a warm, in-market prospect. If you're not, you don't exist for that moment — no matter how good you are.

How AI builds an "alternatives" answer

To be named, it helps to understand where the model gets its list. When AI answers "alternatives to X," it draws on sources that have established, in a way it can verify, that you're a credible option in the same category as X. That comes from a few places: content that positions you within the category, third-party listicles and roundups that group you with the competitor, comparison content that pairs you with them, and general corroboration that you operate in that space and are worth considering.

The key insight is that being an alternative is a *relational* position — you have to be connected, in the model's understanding, to the competitor and the category. A great product that exists in isolation, never mentioned alongside the competitor anywhere, is hard for the model to surface as an alternative, because nothing established the relationship. Your job is to make that relationship legible and corroborated.

The playbook

- **Create honest comparison content pairing you with the competitor.** A fair "us vs them" page establishes, in your own credible voice, that you're a real alternative — and it's content the model can draw the relationship from.
- **Earn placement in third-party roundups.** Listicles and "best X alternatives" articles are exactly what AI pulls from. Being genuinely included in those (by being a real, credible option worth listing) is high-value corroboration you don't control but can earn.
- **Position clearly within the category.** Make it unambiguous what category you're in and who you compete with, so the model can place you. Vague positioning makes you hard to surface as anyone's alternative.
- **Be specific about your differentiation.** "Alternatives" answers often note why you'd choose each. Give a clear, honest reason someone would switch to you — the specific thing you do differently or better.
- **Build category corroboration.** The more credible sources establish that you operate in the category and are worth considering, the more confidently the model includes you.

The honesty line, again

There's a tempting dark version of this: flood the internet with thin "alternatives to [competitor]" pages stuffed with their brand name, hoping to get surfaced. Don't. Thin, keyword-stuffed content that exists only to hijack a competitor's name is low-quality, increasingly discounted, and it makes you look like exactly the kind of source a model shouldn't trust. The durable play is to be a genuine, clearly-positioned alternative that credible sources actually group with the competitor — because that's what the model is looking for when it builds the list.

The "alternatives" query is a gift: it's a customer raising their hand to switch, asking to be shown options. The businesses that show up for it are the ones who deliberately made themselves a legible, corroborated, honestly-differentiated alternative to the specific competitors their customers already know. Figure out which competitors your prospects are searching alternatives to, and make sure the internet — and the model — knows you're one of the answers.

Key takeaways

✦ '[Competitor] alternatives' is a near-purchase query — the person already knows the category and is actively shopping to switch.

✦ Being named in that answer hands you a warm, in-market prospect; being absent means you don't exist for that moment regardless of quality.

- ✦ Being an alternative is relational: the model must connect you to the competitor and category, so an isolated product is hard to surface.
- ✦ The playbook: honest comparison content pairing you with the competitor, placement in third-party roundups, clear category positioning, and specific differentiation.
- ✦ Give a clear, honest reason someone would switch to you — 'alternatives' answers often note why you'd choose each.
- ✦ Avoid thin, keyword-stuffed 'alternatives' pages that hijack a competitor's name — they're discounted and make you look untrustworthy.

Frequently asked questions

Why is the 'alternatives' query so valuable?

Because the person asking it is nearly ready to buy. They already understand the category and are actively looking to switch away from a specific competitor — they're asking AI to hand them a shortlist. Being on that list means being handed an in-market prospect at the moment of decision, which is far higher intent than general awareness queries.

How does AI decide who counts as an alternative to a competitor?

It draws on sources that establish you as a credible option in the same category — your own comparison content pairing you with the competitor, third-party roundups and 'best alternatives' listicles that group you together, clear category positioning, and general corroboration that you operate in that space. Being an alternative is relational, so you have to make that connection legible and corroborated.

Can I just make pages targeting my competitor's name?

Not thin ones. Keyword-stuffed pages that exist only to hijack a competitor's brand name are low-quality, increasingly discounted, and make you look like an untrustworthy source. The durable approach is to be a genuinely well-positioned, honestly-differentiated alternative that credible third parties actually group with the competitor — that's what the model looks for when building the list.

About the author. Scott Tischler is the Founder & Chairman of AIrecommend.ai and a practitioner-authority on AI search and Answer Engine Optimization. With 20+ years in marketing technology — including American Express, MetLife, and UBS — and executive and professional study at Wharton, Harvard, and Oxford, he helps businesses become the ones AI recommends.