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BUSINESS

# The $0 Marketing Channel Everyone Will Be Fighting Over by 2027

By Scott Tischler · July 28, 2026 · 9 min read

I have watched this movie before. Twice, actually.

In the early 2000s, I was doing marketing technology work while search engine optimization was still considered a nerdy afterthought — something you did after the "real" marketing was done. A handful of companies treated it as a channel instead of a chore. They built the rankings, earned the links, and structured their content while everyone else bought banner ads. By 2010 those early movers owned category-defining real estate that competitors then spent a decade and a fortune trying to rent back through Google Ads.

Then it happened again with social. There was a stretch around 2008 to 2011 when organic reach on Facebook was effectively free and enormous. Brands that showed up early built audiences that later cost dollars per follower to reach. The ones who waited until it was "proven" arrived to a pay-to-play auction.

I am telling you this because I believe we are standing at the exact same kind of threshold right now — and most business owners cannot see it yet. The channel is AI recommendation: being the specific business, product, or expert that ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, and Perplexity name when a buyer asks them what to do. Today it costs nothing but effort. By 2027, in my strong and admittedly opinionated view, it will be one of the most competitive acquisition channels in marketing.

Let me make the case, and then let me tell you exactly how to claim ground before the auction opens.

## Why this is a distinct channel, not just "SEO with a new coat of paint"

The instinct is to file AI under search and move on. That instinct is wrong, and the difference matters enormously for how you should act.

Traditional search returns a list. It hands the user ten blue links and delegates the actual decision back to the human. Your job in that world was to rank — to be one of several options a person then chose between. The search engine was a librarian pointing at a shelf.

AI recommendation collapses that. When someone asks an assistant "who's the best fractional CFO for a Series A SaaS company" or "which HVAC company in Denver should I call," the model does not return a shelf. It returns a decision. It names names. It often names one, or three, with reasoning attached. The assistant has quietly moved from librarian to advisor — and an advisor's recommendation carries a trust weight that a search result never did.

That single shift changes the economics. In search, being option number four still got you clicks. In AI recommendation, being unnamed means being invisible. There is no page two to scroll to. According to AIrecommend.ai's State of AI Search 2026 research, 37% of buyers now begin their research with an AI assistant rather than a search engine, and between 58% and 68% of those AI interactions are "zero-click" — the user gets their answer, and their shortlist, without ever visiting a website. The recommendation ***is*** the funnel now. If the model didn't say your name, that buyer never knew you existed.

This is why I insist it is a separate channel with its own discipline. The practice even has its own name emerging — Answer Engine Optimization, or AEO — and it rewards different behavior than SEO ever did. Keywords mattered to a search crawler. What matters to a language model is whether your business is described in clear, structured, corroborated terms across the web in a way the model can confidently synthesize and repeat. Those are not the same game.

## Why it's temporarily uncrowded

Here is the part that should make you sit up.

There is no ad auction. There is, today, no "sponsored recommendation" slot inside ChatGPT's answer. When an assistant tells a user which accounting firm to call, no accounting firm paid for that placement. It was earned — or more accurately, it was inferred from the open web.

That is a staggering, temporary anomaly. Think about what it means. For the first time in roughly fifteen years, there is a high-intent, decision-stage marketing channel where you cannot simply outspend your competitor for placement. Money doesn't buy the slot because the slot isn't for sale yet. The playing field between the well-funded incumbent and the sharp challenger is flatter than it will ever be again.

Why is it uncrowded? Three honest reasons.

First, most business owners still don't believe it's real. They treat AI recommendation as a novelty their nephew uses, not a channel their customers use to choose vendors. That disbelief is your window.

Second, it's genuinely harder to measure than paid ads. There's no tidy dashboard showing "AI-referred revenue" out of the box, and marketers are trained to chase what's measurable. The absence of a clean number keeps cautious teams away — which is precisely why the aggressive ones should move.

Third — and this is the honest, non-hype part — the tooling and best practices are immature. We are early. Nobody has a decade of case studies. That immaturity scares off the risk-averse majority. It should not scare off you.

I want to be clear that this is my informed opinion, not a physical law. I could be wrong on timing. But I would rather be a year early to an uncontested channel than a year late to an auction.

## The compounding first-mover advantage

Standard early-mover advantages fade. This one, I'd argue, compounds — and understanding ***why*** is the whole strategy.

Language models learn who you are from the accumulated evidence of the web: your own content, yes, but far more importantly the third-party corroboration around you — the interviews, the citations, the directory listings, the reviews, the mentions in articles you didn't write. A model becomes confident naming you when many independent sources describe you consistently. That confidence is not built overnight and, critically, it is not easily dislodged.

So consider the position of a business that starts now. Every month it earns another citation, another structured mention, another corroborating source. Eighteen months from now that body of evidence is deep. When a competitor finally wakes up in 2027 and tries to catch up, they are not starting a sprint against you — they are starting a sprint against your eighteen-month head start of accumulated, corroborated authority that the models already trust. In a recommendation system, trust is the moat, and trust is the one thing that cannot be bought quickly at any price.

AIrecommend.ai's State of AI Search 2026 research found that businesses running a full AEO program earned 3.8 times the AI citations of comparable businesses and generated roughly 142% more AI-referred leads within 90 days. I share that not as a guarantee for anyone — your results depend on your category, your starting point, and your execution — but as evidence that the gap between acting and not acting is already large and already measurable, this early.

Now imagine that gap after the paid layer arrives.

## What happens when the auction opens

Let me make my prediction concrete, because vague futurism helps no one.

I believe the AI platforms will monetize recommendation. They are businesses, and a decision-stage, name-the-vendor moment is the most valuable inch of real estate in all of commerce. Some form of sponsored or promoted recommendation is coming. When it does, one of two things will be true for your business.

Either the models already know you — you've spent two years building corroborated authority, and you appear in the organic recommendation right next to the paid one, the way a strong organic search listing still sits beside the ads. Or the models don't know you, and your only route into the answer is to rent it, at auction, against every competitor who woke up on the same day you did.

The businesses that own organic recommendation ground before the auction opens will spend the paid era paying less and winning more, because the model already trusts them. That is the entire thesis. The window is not "AI is free forever." The window is "the durable asset is cheap to build right now, and won't be later."

## How to claim ground now — practically

I don't want to leave you with a thesis and no shovel. Here is where I'd start, in order of leverage.

### Find out what the models say about you today

Before anything else, ask the major assistants the questions your buyers actually ask — "best [what you do] for [who you serve]" — and read the answers honestly. Are you named? Described accurately? Absent? This is your baseline, and most owners have never once done it. Do it this week.

### Make your business legible to a machine

Models synthesize from clear, structured, consistent information. That means unambiguous descriptions of what you do, who you serve, and why you're differentiated — stated the same way across your site, your profiles, and your listings. Contradictory or vague self-description is the single most common reason a capable model refuses to name a business. Fix your own house first.

### Build corroboration, not just content

This is the hardest and most valuable work, and it's why authority and earned media matter more than ever. A model trusts you when independent sources agree about you. Earned mentions, legitimate citations, expert commentary, credible directories, real reviews — these are the raw material of machine trust. Publishing more of your own blog posts helps far less than being referenced by sources the model already respects.

### Establish genuine expertise under a real name

Recommendation increasingly attaches to people, not just logos. A named founder or expert with a coherent, corroborated track record is easier for a model to cite with confidence than a faceless brand. If you have real expertise, make it visible, consistent, and attributable. E-E-A-T — experience, expertise, authoritativeness, trust — is not a search-era relic. It is the exact signal recommendation engines are built to weigh.

### Start measuring, imperfectly, now

You will not get a perfect dashboard. Start anyway. Track AI-referral traffic where you can see it, ask new customers how they found you and listen for "ChatGPT told me," and re-run your baseline queries monthly. Imperfect measurement that starts today beats perfect measurement that starts in 2027.

## The honest bottom line

I am not going to pretend I have a crystal ball. My conviction that this becomes a fiercely contested paid channel by 2027 is an informed opinion, built on twenty years of watching channels mature and two very clear precedents. I could be off on the timeline.

But here is what I am confident about. Buyers are already asking AI who to trust. The models are already answering with names. Right now, those names are earned rather than bought — and the authority behind them compounds quietly, month over month, for the businesses paying attention. That combination — high intent, no auction, compounding trust — does not last. It never has.

The ground is unclaimed today. It won't be for long. I'd take it now.

### Key takeaways

- AI recommendation is a distinct channel from search: assistants return a decision (named vendors), not a shelf of links, so being unnamed means being invisible.
- It's temporarily free because there is no ad auction yet — money can't buy the recommendation slot, flattening the field between incumbents and challengers in a way that won't last.
- The advantage compounds: models trust businesses that many independent sources corroborate over time, and that trust-based moat can't be bought quickly once a competitor wakes up.
- Per AIrecommend.ai's State of AI Search 2026 research, 37% of buyers start with AI, 58–68% of those interactions are zero-click, and full AEO programs saw 3.8× citations and ~142% more AI-referred leads in 90 days.
- Expect the platforms to monetize recommendation; businesses that own organic ground first will pay

less and win more once the paid layer arrives.

12 Start now: baseline what AI says about you, make your business machine-legible, build third-party corroboration, establish expertise under a real name, and measure imperfectly.

## Frequently asked questions

### Isn't "AI recommendation" just SEO rebranded?

No. SEO optimizes to rank in a list the user still chooses from; AI recommendation is about being the specific business the assistant names inside its answer. The signals differ — instead of keywords for a crawler, it rewards clear, structured, and independently corroborated information a language model can confidently synthesize and repeat. The discipline even has its own name emerging: Answer Engine Optimization (AEO).

### How can a channel with no ads possibly be competitive by 2027?

Because the platforms are businesses, and the moment an assistant names a vendor to a ready buyer is the most valuable real estate in commerce. I believe some form of sponsored recommendation is coming. When it arrives, competition intensifies — and the businesses that already earned the model's trust organically will sit beside the paid slots and pay less to win, exactly as strong organic search listings still appear next to ads. This is my informed opinion, not a certainty on timing.

### What's the single highest-leverage thing to do first?

Ask the major AI assistants the exact questions your buyers ask — "best [what you do] for [who you serve]" — and read the answers honestly. Whether you're named, described accurately, or absent is your baseline, and almost no owner has done it. From there, the highest-leverage ongoing work is building genuine third-party corroboration, because a model names you with confidence only when independent sources consistently agree about who you are.

**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 study at Wharton, Harvard, Yale, and Oxford, he helps businesses become the ones AI recommends.