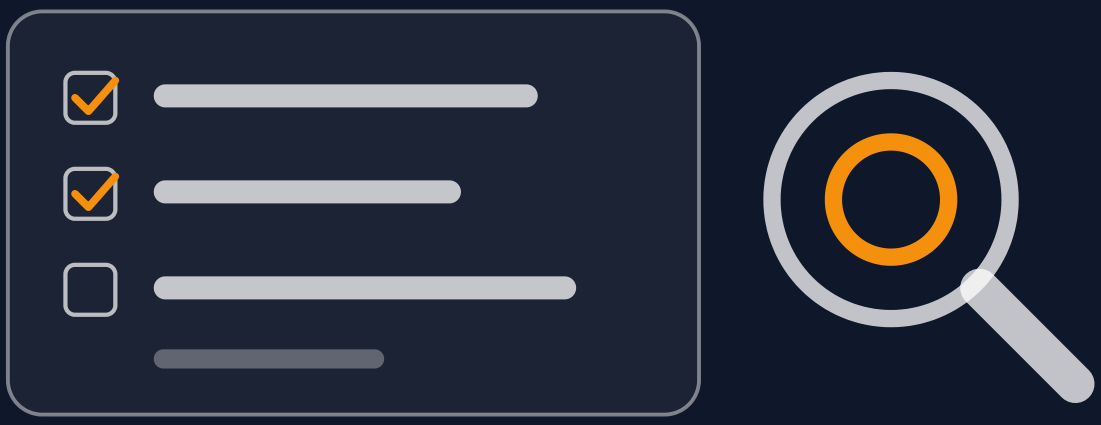
Search Boss

FREE CHECKLIST

UPDATED NOVEMBER 2026 · INCLUDES AI SEARCH

# SEO Checklist

A practical checklist for small-business websites. Work through it in order of priority, tick what's done, and come back to the monthly routine. Every item is based on official guidance from Google and other search providers.



BEFORE YOU START

# How to use this checklist

SEO (search engine optimization) means making your website easy for search engines to find, understand and show to the right people. For a small business, most of the results come from getting the basics right and keeping them right.

Each item has a short reason and two labels. Start with the “Start here” items across every section, then come back for the rest. Tick items when they are actually done, and use the notes space to record what you changed and when.

**START HERE** do these first **NEXT** once the basics are done **WHEN READY** worth doing later

**You** an owner or manager can do it **Developer** usually needs your web developer

**SET REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS**

Google says some changes can take effect in a few hours and others can take several months, and suggests waiting a few weeks before judging whether a change helped. No one can guarantee rankings; Google’s own advice is that if someone guarantees first place, you should find someone else.

## Contents


| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Set up your free tools | 3 |
| 2 | Technical foundations | 4 |
| 3 | On-page basics | 6 |
| 4 | Content that earns its place | 7 |
| 5 | Local SEO | 8 |
| 6 | Links and reputation | 9 |
| 7 | AI search: Google AI Overviews, AI Mode and ChatGPT | 10 |
| 8 | Measure what matters | 11 |
| 9 | Your monthly, quarterly and yearly routine | 12 |
| → | Notes and sources | 13 |


Last updated: November 2026. Search changes often; we checked every item against official sources in November 2026.

SECTION 1

# 1 Set up your free tools

These free tools show how search engines see your site and what visitors do there. Set them up first, so you have numbers to compare against later.

- [ ] **Verify your site in Google Search Console.** START HERE You
  Google's free tool shows which searches bring people to your site, which pages are indexed, and any problems Google finds. A "Domain" property covers every version of your address (http, https, www and other subdomains).

- [ ] **Install Google Analytics and set up key events.** START HERE You + Developer
  Key events are the actions that matter to your business, such as a quote form sent, a phone number tapped, a booking or a purchase. (Google Analytics used to call them conversions.)

- [ ] **Claim and verify your Google Business Profile.** START HERE You
  If you serve customers face to face, at your premises or theirs, your free Business Profile helps them find you on Google Search and Maps. See Section 5.

- [ ] **Write down your starting numbers.** START HERE You
  Monthly clicks from Google (Search Console), key events (Analytics), and enquiries or sales. You can't measure progress without a starting point.

- [ ] **Add your site to Bing Webmaster Tools.** NEXT You
  Shows how your site performs in Bing search and flags problems. Also useful for IndexNow (see Section 7).

- [ ] **Give access, don't share logins.** NEXT You
  Keep your business as the owner of every account and add your developer or marketer as a user. Turn on two-step login.

**NOTES**

SECTION 2

# 2 Technical foundations

If search engines can't reach, read or index a page, nothing else matters. Most of these are one-time fixes for your developer, and worth checking after every big change.

## Can Google find and index your pages?

- [ ] **Your important pages are indexed.** START HERE You
  Check the Page indexing report in Search Console. Use the URL Inspection tool on your home page and main service pages.
- [ ] **Nothing important is accidentally blocked.** START HERE Developer
  No "noindex" on pages you want found, and robots.txt doesn't block them. Note that robots.txt isn't a way to keep pages out of Google; to do that, use noindex or a password.
- [ ] **Test and staging sites are password-protected.** NEXT Developer
  So unfinished copies don't appear in search results.
- [ ] **An XML sitemap is submitted in Search Console.** NEXT Developer
  A file listing the pages you want indexed. Most platforms create one automatically.
- [ ] **Links are real HTML links.** NEXT Developer
  Google can generally only follow links built as standard <a href> links, so menus and buttons should use them.
- [ ] **Content built with JavaScript is visible to Google.** WHEN READY Developer
  Check the rendered HTML in the URL Inspection tool or the Rich Results Test.

## Is there one clean, secure version of your site?

- [ ] **HTTPS works on every page, and http redirects to https.** START HERE Developer
- [ ] **One version of your address is used everywhere.** START HERE Developer
  Either with or without "www"; the other redirects to it. Google says duplicate content isn't a spam violation, but it can be a poor experience and waste crawling.
- [ ] **Moved pages use permanent (301) redirects, and broken links are fixed.** NEXT Developer
  After a redesign, Google advises keeping redirects for as long as possible, generally at least a year.

## Does it work well on phones, and is it fast?

- [ ] **The site works well on a phone, with the same important content as on desktop.** START HERE You + Developer
  Google uses the mobile version of your content for indexing and ranking. Test on a real phone. Google retired its Mobile-Friendly Test in December 2023; Lighthouse in Chrome can audit a page instead.

- [ ] **Core Web Vitals are in the “good” range.** NEXT Developer
  Google’s ranking systems use these three measures of real visitors’ experience. Check the Core Web Vitals report in Search Console and PageSpeed Insights.

| Core Web Vital | What it measures | “Good” is |
|---|---|---|
| **Largest Contentful Paint (LCP)** | How quickly the main content appears | 2.5 seconds or less |
| **Interaction to Next Paint (INP)** | How quickly the page responds to taps and clicks | 200 milliseconds or less |
| **Cumulative Layout Shift (CLS)** | How much the layout jumps around while loading | 0.1 or less |

Measured at the 75th percentile of real page loads, on mobile and desktop. INP replaced First Input Delay as a Core Web Vital in March 2024. PageSpeed Insights shows real-visitor data when there is enough of it, plus lab test results from Lighthouse.

## Structured data

- [ ] **Add structured data that matches your business.** WHEN READY Developer
  For example Organization (with your logo) or LocalBusiness. Test it with the Rich Results Test or the Schema Markup Validator. It can make pages eligible for rich results, but doesn’t guarantee them.

- [ ] **Skip markup that won’t help.** WHEN READY Developer
  Google shows FAQ rich results only for well-known, authoritative government and health websites. Reviews of your own business that you mark up yourself (“self-serving” reviews) aren’t eligible for review stars.

NOTES

SECTION 3

# 3 On-page basics

On-page SEO is about making each page clear: what it's about, who it's for, and what to do next. What helps people here generally helps search engines too.

- [ ] **Each page has one main topic.** START HERE You
  Give each service its own page rather than listing everything on one.
- [ ] **Every page has a unique, descriptive title.** START HERE You + Developer
  Say what the page is about, concisely. Avoid vague titles like "Home" and don't stuff in keywords. There's no fixed character limit; Google shortens long titles to fit the screen.
- [ ] **Every page has a helpful meta description.** NEXT You + Developer
  A short, unique summary of the page. Google mainly builds snippets from your page content, but may use the description when it describes the page well.
- [ ] **Headings describe the sections below them.** NEXT You
  Use them to make pages easy to scan. A logical heading order helps screen-reader users; Google says the order itself doesn't matter for Search.
- [ ] **Clear contact details and a next step on every page.** START HERE You
  For example a "Request a quote" button, a phone number, and your service area.
- [ ] **Pages link to related pages, with descriptive link text.** NEXT You
  "See our kitchen remodeling service" tells people and Google where a link goes; "click here" doesn't.
- [ ] **Images have alt text and descriptive file names.** NEXT You + Developer
  Alt text describes a meaningful image for people who can't see it. Google recommends descriptive file names, titles and alt text.
- [ ] **Images are compressed and sized for the web.** NEXT Developer
  Google says WebP files are smaller than comparable JPEG and PNG files. Setting each image's width and height stops the layout jumping while it loads.
- [ ] **New pages get short, readable web addresses.** WHEN READY Developer
  Readable words separated by hyphens, such as /services/roof-repair. Don't change existing addresses without redirects.
- [ ] **It's clear who is behind the site.** NEXT You
  An About page with real names, experience and credentials, and authors on articles. Google suggests asking "Who, How, and Why" about your content.

SECTION 4

# 4 Content that earns its place

Google's guidance is to create helpful, reliable content made for people, not to manipulate search rankings. For a small business, the best content usually answers the questions customers already ask you.

- [ ] **Your main pages answer customers' real questions.** START HERE You
  Price ranges, process, timing, service area, guarantees you actually offer. Use the words customers use.
- [ ] **Content shows first-hand experience.** NEXT You
  Real projects, photos, lessons learned, and your own point of view. Google's guide to AI search features calls this "non-commodity" content: it goes beyond what anyone could repeat.
- [ ] **Pages are written for people, not keyword counts.** START HERE You
  Repeating keywords over and over is keyword stuffing, which is against Google's spam policies.
- [ ] **AI-assisted content is checked and genuinely useful.** START HERE You
  Google's guidance on AI-generated content focuses on accuracy, quality and relevance. Generating many pages mainly to manipulate rankings is "scaled content abuse." Check every fact.
- [ ] **No near-identical pages for every town.** NEXT You
  Pages targeted at different cities that funnel visitors to one place are an example of "doorway abuse" in Google's spam policies. Create location pages only when you have something specific to say.
- [ ] **Outdated or thin pages are updated, merged or removed.** NEXT You
  If you remove a page that had visitors or links, redirect it to the closest relevant page.
- [ ] **Each service page includes proof.** NEXT You
  Reviews (with permission), photos of real work, qualifications and memberships you actually hold.
- [ ] **You keep a list of content ideas from real customer questions.** WHEN READY You
  Note questions from calls, emails and reviews, and turn the common ones into pages or FAQ answers.

**SEARCH BOSS TIP**

One excellent page per service usually beats many thin ones. Before writing a new page, ask: "Would a customer be glad they found this?"

SECTION 5

# 5 Local SEO

If you serve customers in a particular area, local results on Google Search and Maps can matter as much as your website. Skip this section if you only sell online.

- [ ] **Your Google Business Profile is claimed, verified and complete.** START HERE You
  Name, category, hours, phone, website, photos and services. It's free.
- [ ] **Your profile represents your business as it is in the real world.** START HERE You
  Google's guidelines: use the name customers see on your signage and stationery, an accurate address or service area, and the fewest categories that describe your core business.
- [ ] **Your name, address and phone match everywhere.** NEXT You
  On your website, Business Profile, social profiles and the directories your customers actually use.
- [ ] **You ask every happy customer for a review.** START HERE You
  Make it easy with a direct link. Ask all customers, not only the ones you expect to be positive.
- [ ] **You reply to reviews, good and bad.** NEXT You
  Thank people, and respond calmly and helpfully to complaints.
- [ ] **Your contact page shows your area clearly.** NEXT You
  Address and map if customers visit you; a list of areas served if you travel to them.
- [ ] **LocalBusiness structured data is added and tested.** WHEN READY Developer
  Validate it with the Rich Results Test.

**⚠ WATCH OUT: REVIEW RULES**

Google's policies prohibit offering incentives such as discounts or free services in exchange for reviews, and discouraging negative reviews or asking only happy customers. In the US, the FTC's rule on consumer reviews, in effect since October 21, 2024, prohibits fake reviews and review suppression.

**NOTES**

SECTION 6

# 6 Links and reputation

Links from other websites help people and search engines discover you and can signal trust. For a small business, the best links come from real relationships, not from link-building schemes.

- [ ] **You're listed where your customers look.** NEXT You
  Trade associations, your chamber of commerce, supplier or manufacturer "find an installer" pages, and industry directories people actually use.
- [ ] **You earn links through real activity.** WHEN READY You
  Local sponsorships, partners, community events, useful guides, and news worth sharing with local press.
- [ ] **You don't buy links for rankings.** START HERE You
  Buying or selling links for ranking purposes is link spam under Google's policies. Paid placements should be marked with rel="sponsored".
- [ ] **You don't chase fake "mentions."** START HERE You
  Google's guide to AI search says seeking inauthentic mentions across the web isn't as helpful as it might seem.
- [ ] **You leave the disavow tool alone unless you have a real problem.** WHEN READY You + Developer
  Google says most sites will not need it; it can usually work out which links to trust.

⚠ **WATCH OUT**

Be wary of anyone selling packages of links, "guaranteed" rankings, or secret access to Google. Google says no third-party tool has access to its internal ranking or AI systems.

**LINK OPPORTUNITIES**

SECTION 7

# 7 AI search: Google AI Overviews, AI Mode and ChatGPT

Google says its AI features are rooted in its core Search ranking and quality systems: they retrieve pages from the Search index and link to the pages that support each answer. So good SEO is still the foundation.

- [ ] **Your pages can appear in Google's AI features.** START HERE You + Developer
  To be shown as a supporting link in AI Overviews or AI Mode, a page must be indexed and eligible to be shown in Google Search with a snippet. There are no additional technical requirements.

- [ ] **Your site is included in Search Console's "Search generative AI" setting.** NEXT You
  Sites are included by default; this control (available to all sites since August 31, 2026) lets you opt out. It isn't a ranking signal, and it doesn't cover AI training; that's the separate Google-Extended setting.

- [ ] **You check the Generative AI performance report.** NEXT You
  If it appears in your Search Console, it shows impressions in AI Overviews and AI Mode.

- [ ] **You're not blocking ChatGPT search, unless you mean to.** NEXT Developer
  OpenAI uses OAI-SearchBot for ChatGPT search and GPTBot for training, set separately in robots.txt. Sites that block OAI-SearchBot won't be shown in ChatGPT search answers (they can still appear as navigational links).

- [ ] **Your content is original and specific.** START HERE You
  Google's guide says unique, useful "non-commodity" content will likely influence your presence in AI search more than any other suggestion.

- [ ] **Your Business Profile is complete.** START HERE You
  Google notes AI responses can include local business information, and Business Profiles help.

- [ ] **Bing knows about new and changed pages.** WHEN READY Developer
  IndexNow lets you notify participating search engines, including Microsoft Bing, Naver, Seznam.cz, Yandex and Yep, when pages change. Google isn't on the participant list.

**WHAT YOU CAN IGNORE FOR GOOGLE**

According to Google's guide: you don't need llms.txt or other special AI files (Google Search doesn't use them), you don't need to break content into tiny "chunks," you don't need to rewrite pages for AI, and no special schema markup is required. Google also says "AEO" and "GEO" are still SEO.

SECTION 8

# 8 Measure what matters

Rankings move up and down every day. What matters is whether search brings you customers. Keep a short, regular check of a few numbers.

| Measure | What it tells you | Where to find it |
|---|---|---|
| **Clicks** | How often people clicked through to your site from Google Search | Search Console › Performance |
| **Impressions** | How often your site appeared in search results | Search Console › Performance |
| **Click-through rate (CTR)** | Clicks divided by impressions. If a page shows often but gets few clicks, try a clearer title and description | Search Console › Performance |
| **Average position** | The average of your highest position in results. Useful for trends, less so for any single search | Search Console › Performance |
| **Key events from organic search** | Enquiries, bookings or sales from people who arrived via unpaid search results | Google Analytics (Organic Search channel) |
| **Real enquiries** | Whether search brings in the customers you want | Ask: “How did you hear about us?” |

- [ ] **Compare month to month and year to year**, not day to day. START HERE You
  Many businesses are seasonal; comparing the same month last year gives a fairer picture.
- [ ] **Look at the queries and pages reports.** NEXT You
  See which searches and pages bring visitors, and which pages appear often but get few clicks.
- [ ] **Note what you changed, and when.** NEXT You
  So you can connect changes in the numbers to the work you did.

**⚠ WATCH OUT**

Third-party “authority” scores and SEO tool grades can be useful, but they are not Google measures. Google says no third-party tool has access to its internal ranking or AI systems.

SECTION 9

# 9 Your monthly, quarterly and yearly routine

An hour a month keeps most small-business sites in good shape. Copy this page and tick it off each time.

## Every month

- [ ] Search Console: check for new messages, indexing problems and Core Web Vitals issues
- [ ] Search Console: compare clicks and impressions with last month and the same month last year
- [ ] Google Analytics: review key events from organic search
- [ ] Google Business Profile: reply to new reviews, check hours and photos are current
- [ ] Send a test through every form and confirm it arrives
- [ ] Ask recent customers for reviews

## Every three months

- [ ] Improve one important page using recent customer questions
- [ ] Check main pages in PageSpeed Insights and on a real phone
- [ ] Find and fix broken links and “page not found” errors
- [ ] Check the queries report for new topics worth a page or FAQ answer
- [ ] Review who has access to your accounts

## Every year

- [ ] Work through this whole checklist again
- [ ] Update prices, services, team, photos and the “last updated” dates on key pages
- [ ] Check your business details match everywhere online
- [ ] Review whether your website still does the job you need

**NOTES: WHAT WE CHANGED, AND WHEN**

## Sources

Every item in this checklist was checked against these official sources in November 2026.


1. Google Search Central: SEO Starter Guide and Do you need an SEO?
2. Search Console Help: About Search Console, Add a website property, Page indexing report, URL Inspection tool, Impressions, position and clicks
3. Google Analytics Help: Conversions vs. key events and Default channel group
4. Google Search Central: robots.txt, noindex, sitemaps, links, JavaScript SEO
5. Google Search Central: Duplicate URLs, Redirects, Site moves, URL structure
6. Google Search Central: Mobile-first indexing, Page experience, Mobile-Friendly Test retirement, INP announcement
7. web.dev: Web Vitals · About PageSpeed Insights · Core Web Vitals report · Lighthouse
8. Google Search Central: Structured data, LocalBusiness, Review snippets, Documentation updates (FAQ rich results), Schema Markup Validator
9. Google Search Central: Title links, Meta descriptions, Image SEO, Optimize CLS, WebP
10. Google Search Central: Helpful, people-first content, Generative AI content, Spam policies, Qualify outbound links, Disavow links
11. Google: Business Profile, Business Profile guidelines, Prohibited and restricted content (reviews)
12. U.S. FTC: Consumer Reviews and Testimonials Rule: Questions and Answers
13. Google Search Central: AI features and your website, Optimizing for generative AI features · Search Console Help: Search generative AI control, Generative AI performance report
14. OpenAI: Overview of OpenAI crawlers · IndexNow · Google: Google’s common crawlers (Google-Extended)

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WANT A HAND?

# How Search Boss can help

Search Boss builds websites and does SEO for small businesses. If you'd rather hand some of this checklist to someone else, or want a second pair of eyes on your site, tell us what you need. We'll reply by email with a free quote.

**Get a Free Quote**

searchboss.co/contact · contact@searchboss.co

1. **Tell us about your business** and what you need: SEO, a new website, or both.
2. **We reply by email with a free quote,** in writing, before any work starts.
3. **You decide** whether to go ahead. No pressure.

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**About this checklist**

Last updated: November 2026. This checklist is general information, not advice for your specific situation. Search engines, tools and policies change often; we checked each item against official sources in November 2026. No one can guarantee search rankings, traffic or sales, and this checklist doesn't either.

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