

GEO vs SEO, Explained Without Jargon

A short guide to the terms behind AI search, written for anyone, no technical background needed.

Search engine optimization (SEO) is the process of crawling, indexing, and ranking a web page on traditional search engines like Google and Bing. Generative engine optimization (GEO) is the process of obtaining recommendations from AI models like Claude and ChatGPT. The two principles share some commonalities but operate differently. This guide unpacks important terms and definitions and provides helpful comparisons where needed.

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| 02 | From Ranking to Recommendation: How AI Finds Brands | How a page gets discovered, evaluated, and recommended by AI models. |
| 03 | Beyond Backlinks: What Informs an AI Recommendation | The evidence AI weighs: media, mentions, authority, and expertise. |
| 04 | New Metrics: From Rankings and Clicks to Citations and Recommendations | The metrics that track if AI answers point to you. |
| 05 | Freshness: Why GEO Needs More Upkeep Than SEO | Why AI mentions fade and how updates help keep a consistent presence in AI answers. |

01 SEO, GEO and the New Marketing Funnel

The buzz around GEO explained, plus how AI filters information before sharing it with users.

Search Engine Optimization SEO

Work that helps a page show up and compete in a search results list so users click through to a brand’s website. A click to your site is the successful SEO outcome.

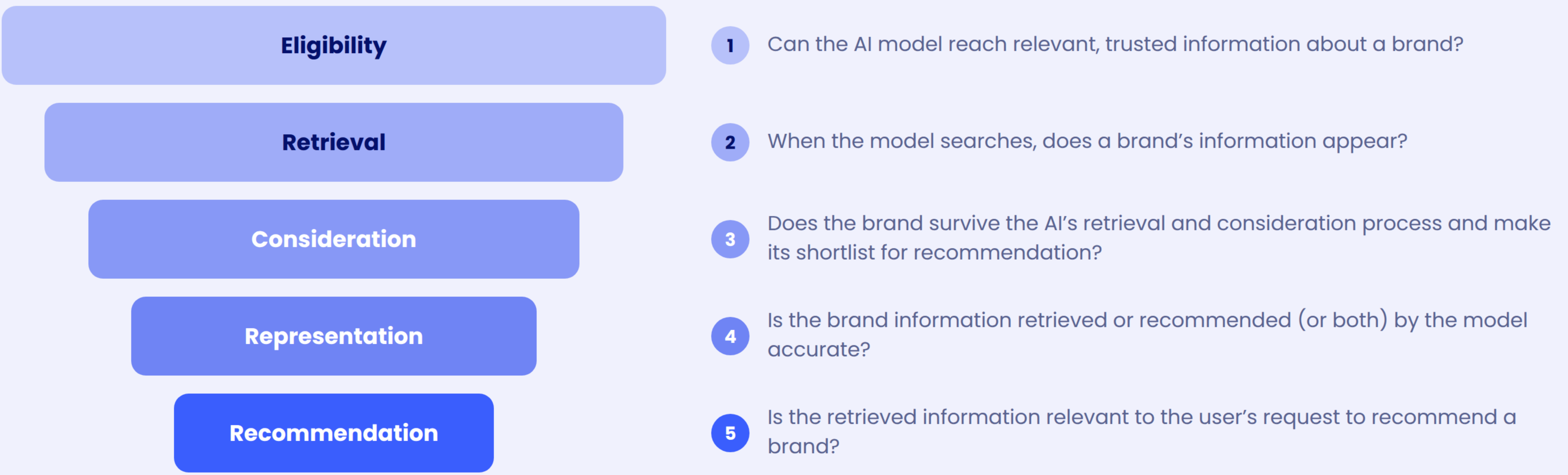
Generative Engine Optimization GEO

Work that helps your page be recommended or quoted inside AI answers on platforms like ChatGPT, Claude, and Google AI Overviews.

The selection funnel a new / second marketing funnel

AI search adds a machine-driven step to the traditional marketing funnel (awareness, consideration, and decision). Before a user sees an AI answer, the model filters information to determine which brands (or products and services) are most relevant to the user’s request. 5W calls this process a **selection funnel**, and it sits before the traditional path from awareness to purchase.

WHERE BRANDS GET CUT, STAGE BY STAGE



Most brands are eliminated from AI answers at one of these five stages. A brand can pass one stage and disappear at the next for many reasons.

02 From Ranking to Recommendation: How AI Finds Brands

Before an AI model can recommend a brand, its pages have to be accessible, relevant, and credible.

AI crawlers

The automated bots that fetch and read web pages so search engines and AI models can access them.

Crawler access `robots.txt` & CDN

Settings that decide whether those bots can reach a page. A `robots.txt` file tells bots where to go; a CDN (content delivery network) is the delivery system a site sits behind. Verifying these settings and overall accessibility is an important first step in a GEO program.

Site performance and user experience

How fast a page loads, especially on a phone. A slow mobile page underperforms in SEO and GEO.

Content structure `headings`

Organizing a page with clear headings, a main title (H1) and labeled sections (H2, H3), so each section covers one topic.

Digital PR and third-party mentions

Coverage and mentions of a brand on other trusted sites, like media and industry publications, earned through public relations (PR) and third-party reviews rather than paid for. AI models draw on what independent, authoritative sources say about a brand and often weigh mentions without links.

03 Beyond Backlinks: What Informs an AI Recommendation

The information an AI model weighs before recommending a brand, and where it comes from.

Earned and owned media

Two popular kinds of content that AI models draw on when summarizing an answer. Owned media is what brands publish and control, like websites and product pages. Earned media is coverage from third parties like press articles and reviews. AI models rely more on these sources than on a brand's own claims.

Unlinked brand mentions

Other sites naming your brand without linking to you. AI engines appear to weigh these nearly as much as links.

Domain authority domain rating

A score estimating a website's authority. AI models weigh this factor less than traditional search engines.

E-E-A-T

Google's shorthand for Experience, Expertise, Authoritativeness, and Trust, the qualities that mark content as reliable. E-E-A-T is a good framework to follow for SEO and GEO.

Primary sources

Original, first-hand sources of facts, such as Wikipedia, academic papers, and original research. AI models consistently draw information from these types of sources.

04 New Metrics: From Rankings and Clicks to Citations and Recommendations

SEO has decades of measurement tools. GEO's metrics are still being defined.

Citation frequency

How often AI answers cite your content as a source. One of the three core GEO metrics.

Share of model

How often your brand shows up across a set of AI answers, compared to competitors. Also a core GEO metric.

AI-referred traffic

Users who reach a website by clicking through a link inside an AI answer. The third core GEO metric.

GA4 referrer setup Google Analytics 4

GA4 is a Google tool that logs where users came from and includes some analytics from AI models. Google Search Console (GSC) recently launched AI analytics for some brands, and its rollout should be universally available soon.

Zero-click search

Searches that end without anyone clicking a link, because the answer appears in the search box. Similarweb's 2024 analysis found that most searches now end this way.

05 Freshness: Why GEO Needs More Upkeep Than SEO

This is a notable difference between SEO and GEO: like SEO, AI visibility requires maintenance.

AI mentions fade over time

AI answers often stop sharing pages more than 6 months old, even when the information remains relevant and factual.

Update on a regular schedule

How often you revisit and refresh a page. AI visibility appears to need quarterly updates versus annual or bi-annual for traditional SEO.

Show a “last updated” date

A visible date or short note telling readers and AI models that a page was refreshed recently. A short “last updated” works fine.

THE BOTTOM LINE

A GEO team often spends more time maintaining content than an equivalent SEO team.

WORK WITH 5W

Is AI recommending your brand?

5W evaluates your current AI visibility and PR strategy, then strengthens the information that gets your brand recommended by AI models and chosen by customers.

Start a conversation with 5W today at 5wpr.com