

Clicks

The Online Marketing Guide for Small Business

ANSWER ENGINE OPTIMIZATION

THE SEO STRATEGY

NOBODY

IS TALKING
ABOUT YET

Website Traffic Is

DECLINING

Here's What's

Replacing It



How

TARIFFS AND INFLATION

Are Changing the Way Local Businesses

Need to Market

WORD OF MOUTH

Is Still the #1 Way Customers
FIND LOCAL BUSINESSES

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Welcome To Clicks Magazine

Thanks for checking out our 140th issue of Clicks, your online marketing resource guide for small business. Each month we will be covering topics that resonate with local businesses just like yours.

Our goal is simple. We want to enable you to do big things online, and it all starts by breaking down the complexities of marketing your business online.

It doesn't matter if you're just starting out, or an established business owner in your local community, you can always benefit from increasing your brand's visibility online.

To your Success,

Your Name Here

Your Title Here

CLICKS IS BROUGHT TO YOU BY

(Your Business Name) is the leading small business marketing service in the (insert area) for over (insert years). We help small businesses connect with more customers online.

If you want to build your business, you need to market, it's that simple. But you can lose thousands of dollars if you don't know what you are doing. So we urge you to take action with some of the strategies we recommend.

For a more "hands off" approach, we offer affordable solutions that can deliver results. We hope you enjoy this issue of Clicks and feel free to reach out to us anytime.



Answer Engine Optimization

The SEO STRATEGY NOBODY IS TALKING ABOUT YET

Something changed in how your customers find businesses — and most local business owners have no idea it happened.

A potential customer used to type “fence installer near me” into Google, scan through a list of results, and click on the ones that looked most promising. That’s still happening. But increasingly, something different is happening first: they’re asking ChatGPT, Google’s AI Overview, Perplexity, or Siri a question — and getting a direct answer back. No list of results. No clicking through. Just an answer.

Google’s AI Overviews now handle over 40% of discovery queries. That means nearly half of all searches never produce a traditional list of results anymore. They produce an AI-generated answer — and if your business isn’t being cited in that answer, you’re invisible to those customers before they ever had a chance to find you. Digital Coolie

This is what Answer Engine Optimization — AEO — is all about. And for local businesses that move on it now, it’s one of the biggest untapped advantages available.

SEO Gets You Found. AEO Gets You Chosen.

Traditional SEO is about ranking in search results. You optimize your website, build backlinks, collect reviews, and try to show up on page one when someone searches for your service. That still matters — and you should still be doing it.

But AEO is about something different. Answer Engine Optimization is the practice of structuring your content to appear as the direct answer to a user's query. The goal is simple: become the answer, not just a search result.

Think about how your customers actually search now. They're not typing "plumber Minneapolis" anymore. They're asking "what should I do if my water heater is making a knocking sound?" They're asking "how much does it cost to get a fence installed in [city]?" They're asking "who's the best mobile detailer near [neighborhood]?" Those are full questions — and AI answer engines are built to respond to full questions with direct, specific answers pulled from businesses and sources they trust.

Content that satisfies local intent — referencing location-specific information — has a higher chance of being cited by AI answer engines, especially when it's clearly structured and well-sourced. Which means a local business that structures its website content around the real questions its customers ask is in a genuinely strong position — often stronger than big national competitors who are optimizing for broad keywords instead of specific local questions. Diamond-group





What AEO Actually Looks Like for a Local Business

This is where most AEO articles lose local business owners — they get too technical too fast. Here's what it actually means in practice.

Your Google Business Profile is your most important AEO asset. For local businesses, answer engines pull from structured sources like Google Business Profile, Yelp, and Apple Maps when responding to local queries. A complete, optimized, regularly updated GBP isn't just a local SEO move anymore — it's directly feeding the AI systems that are giving your potential customers answers. Every field filled out. Every service listed. Every review responded to. Fresh photos uploaded consistently. This is your foundation. Clicks Geek

Your FAQ page is now a direct pipeline into AI answers. Every question your customers ask you on the phone, in person, or via text is a potential AI citation waiting to happen. A pool service company that publishes a clear, specific FAQ — "How often should I have my pool professionally cleaned in Phoenix?" with a direct, well-written answer — is giving Google's AI Overview exactly what it needs to cite that business when someone asks that ques-

tion. Answer-first content formats — where you lead with a direct, clear answer before elaborating — are one of the six most important AEO strategies in 2026. Digital Coolie

Your website copy needs to speak in questions and answers. Go look at your homepage and services pages right now. Are they written in keywords — "professional fence installation services" — or are they written in the language your customers actually use when they have a problem? Rewriting your service pages around the real questions your customers ask, with clear direct answers, is one of the fastest AEO wins available to any local business.

Schema markup tells AI exactly what you are. Using LocalBusiness schema markup on your website gives answer engines precise, structured information they can extract — what your business does, where you operate, what you offer, and why you're relevant for users in your geographic area. Most local businesses don't have this. Adding it puts you ahead of the majority of your competition overnight. Digital Coolie

The Local Advantage Nobody Is Using

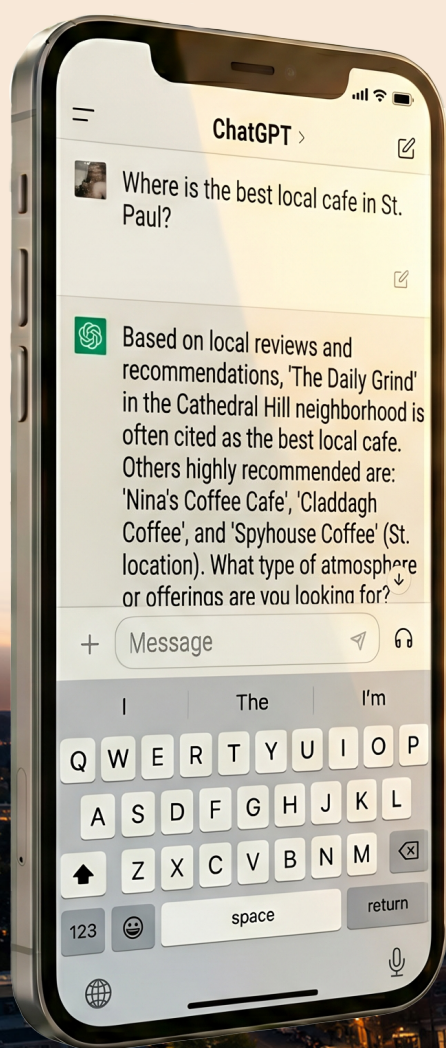
Here's the part that should genuinely excite you: Google's AI Mode automatically provides geographically relevant results even when users don't specify a location in their queries — making local optimization essential for maintaining visibility. Reporting Ninja

This means when someone in your city asks an AI assistant about a service you provide — without even saying what city they're in — the AI is already trying to surface local results.

Your job is simply to make sure your business is clearly, specifically, and credibly associated with your service and your location across every platform that AI systems pull from.

A window tinting shop in Denver that has a complete GBP, a well-structured FAQ answering real customer questions, schema markup on their website, and consistent listings across Google, Yelp, and Apple Maps is going to start showing up in AI-generated answers in their market. Their competitor who set up their website in 2019 and never touched it since is not.

The gap between those two businesses is growing right now — quietly, invisibly, and fast.





Where to Start This Week

You don't need to understand every technical detail of AEO to get moving. Start here:

Go to your Google Business Profile and fill out every single field that isn't complete — especially services, business description, and Q&A. Then open your website and write one new FAQ page with 8–10 real questions your customers ask, answered directly and specifically. Then search for your own service in your city on ChatGPT and Google — and see what comes up. That audit alone will show you exactly where the gaps are.

SEO gets you found. AEO gets you chosen. The businesses that figure this out in 2026 are going to look back at this as the moment they got ahead of a shift that most of their competitors still haven't noticed.

WORD OF MOUTH

IS STILL THE #1 WAY CUSTOMERS FIND

LOCAL BUSINESSES



**HERE'S HOW TO
ENGINEER IT**

Every local business owner knows word of mouth is powerful. Most of them are also completely leaving it to chance.

They do good work, hope customers tell their friends, and wait. Sometimes it happens. Sometimes it doesn't. And when business slows down they wonder why the phone isn't ringing — not realizing that their single biggest marketing channel has been running on autopilot with zero intention behind it.

Here's the reality: word of mouth drives \$6 trillion in annual global consumer spending, accounting for roughly 13% of all purchases worldwide. And 92% of consumers trust word-of-mouth referrals more than any other form of advertising. Not a little more. More than any other form. Including the expensive stuff. Marketer MilkMarketer Milk

The businesses that are winning right now aren't just doing good work and hoping people talk. They've built a system that makes word of mouth happen consistently — every week, every month, without relying on luck or timing. Here's exactly how they do it.



The Moment You've Been Missing

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Reviews Are Digital Word of Mouth — Treat Them That Way

Before word of mouth meant someone telling their neighbor over a fence. In 2026 it means someone posting a photo to Instagram, leaving a Google review, or tagging a business in a Facebook Group recommendation thread. Social media has amplified word-of-mouth reach by 3.5x compared to offline-only conversations. LocaliQ

Your Google reviews are the most visible form of word of mouth you have. 72% of consumers say positive reviews make them trust a local business more. And online reviews convince 94% of people to avoid a business when those reviews are negative or non-existent. That's not a reputation management stat — that's a revenue stat. LocaliQAgent Hi5 Marketing



The system is simple. After every completed job, send a text — not an email — with your direct Google review link. Keep it personal: "Hey [Name] — really glad you're happy with how it turned out. If you have 60 seconds, a Google review would mean the world to us: [link]." That's it. No automated blast. No generic message. A real text from a real person.

Do this after every single job. Not just the big ones. Not just when you remember. Every single job. In 90 days your review count will look completely different — and so will your phone.

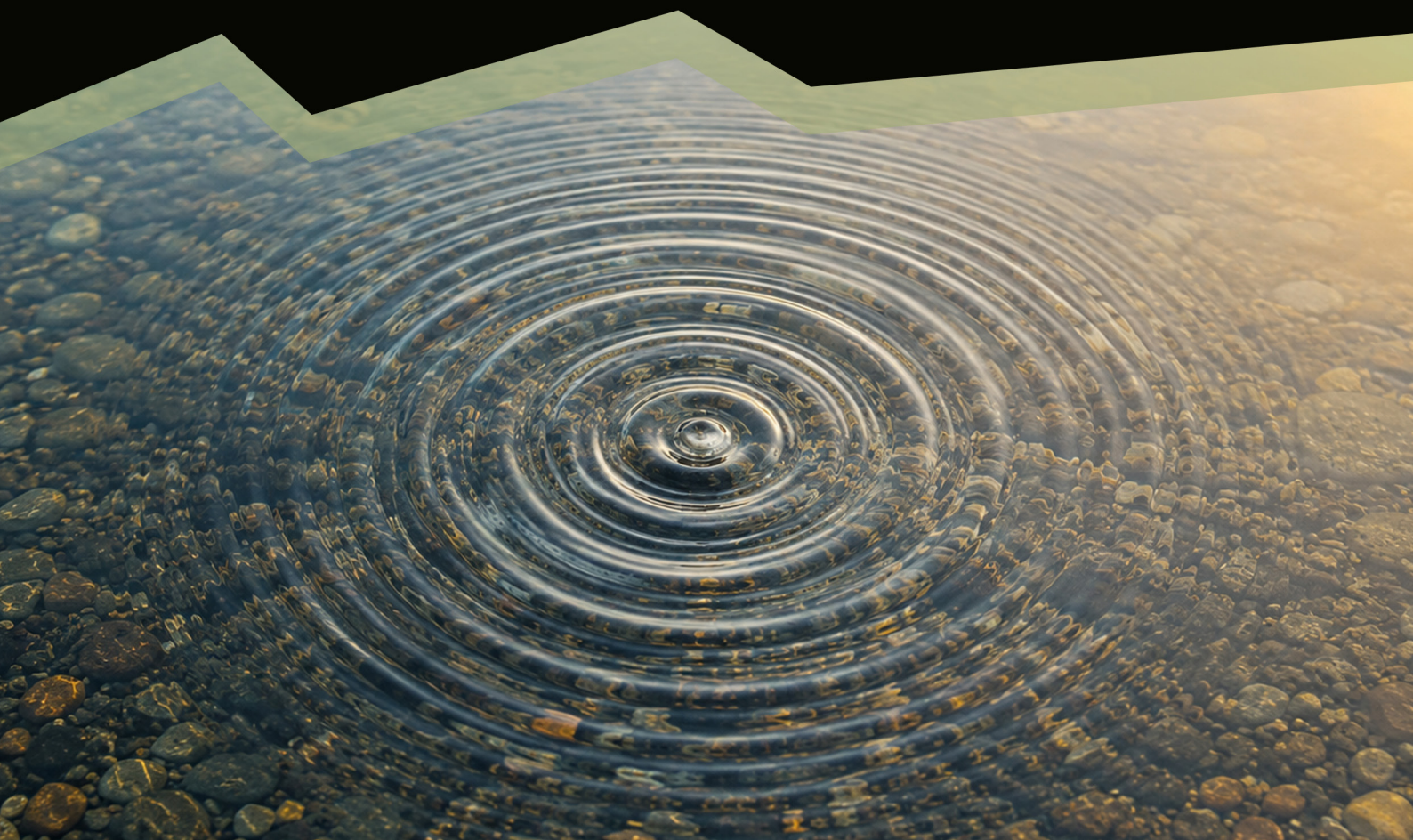
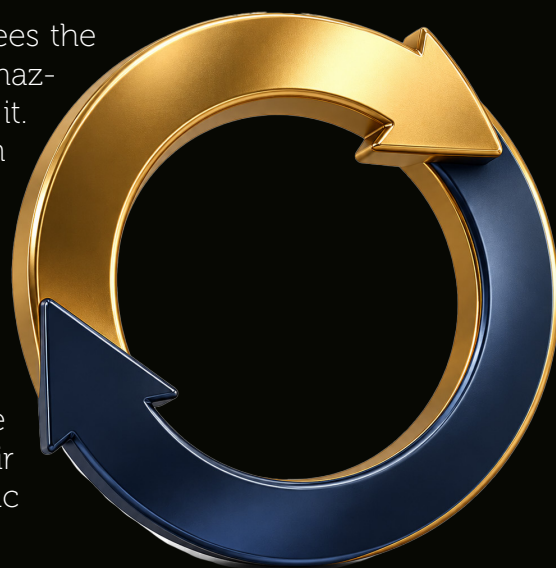
Build a Referral System That Doesn't Feel Like One

Most referral programs fail because they feel transactional. A discount card. A “refer a friend” email. A coupon nobody asked for. Customers don’t share businesses because of a discount — they share businesses because they genuinely want to help someone they care about.

Your job is to make that sharing easy and give them a reason to do it at the right moment. 82% of consumers proactively seek referrals from peers before making a purchase. Your next customer is almost certainly asking someone they trust for a recommendation right now. The question is whether your name is the one that comes up. VitalStorm

Here’s the referral ask that works: right after a customer sees the finished result and says something like “wow, this looks amazing” — that’s your moment. You say: “I’m really glad you love it. I only take on a limited number of new clients each month and I always prefer to work with people referred by customers I already know. Is there anyone in your circle who might need something like this?” Then stop talking. Let the silence sit. You’ll get a name the majority of the time.

The key is specificity. “Do you know anyone who needs this?” is too vague. “Do you know any homeowners in the neighborhood who’ve been talking about redoing their floors?” gives their brain something to search for. Specific questions get specific answers.





Turn Your Customers Into an Unpaid Marketing Team

User-generated content is 35% more memorable than other media and 50% more trusted. Every time a happy customer posts about your business — a photo, a video, a tagged recommendation — they're doing marketing you couldn't buy. LocaliQ

Make it easy for them. When a job looks great, ask the customer if you can take a photo together in front of it — or film a 30-second video of them reacting to the finished work. Post it to your social media and tag them. When they see themselves on your page, most people reshare it — which puts your business in front of their entire network for free.

A commercial cleaning company that posts a before-and-after video with a tagged business owner gets seen by that business owner's vendors, colleagues, and network. An irrigation installer who posts a time-lapse of a full system installation and tags the homeowner gets seen by every neighbor who's been thinking about the same project. The content does the work. Your job is to create the moment worth sharing.





The System in Summary

Word of mouth isn't magic. It's a sequence: deliver work worth talking about, capture the moment at peak satisfaction, ask for the review and the referral before you leave, make it easy for customers to share, and stay visible in the communities where your ideal customers already gather.

Word of mouth marketing has a 37% higher customer retention rate compared to other marketing strategies. The customers who find you through a referral already trust you before they call. They're easier to close, more loyal when they hire you, and more likely to refer someone else when the job is done. Hibu

That's not a marketing channel. That's a flywheel. Build it deliberately and it runs itself.



Website Traffic Is DECLINING

Here's What's Replacing It

If your website traffic has been quietly dropping over the last year or two and you can't figure out why — you're not being penalized, you're not doing anything wrong, and your SEO isn't broken. You're just experiencing a structural shift that's affecting almost every local business online right now.

In 2026, over 65% of Google searches end without a single click to any website. When Google's AI Overviews are triggered, that figure reaches 83%. And in Google's AI Mode, 93% of sessions end without the user leaving the search results page at all. Wiserreview

Read that again. The majority of searches never result in a website visit anymore. Google answers the question directly — and the user moves on without ever clicking through to anyone's site.

Research firm Gartner forecasts that traditional search engine volume will drop 25% by 2026. That's not a minor dip. That's a fundamental shift in how people find service businesses online. Markterior

Here's the good news that most of the doom-and-gloom coverage misses: Google does not generally put AI overviews on local searches. If you're a local business, you get most of your web traffic from local searches — and that is fairly safe from AI overviews at the moment. Digital SEO Land

So your traffic decline probably isn't coming from AI eating your local search clicks. It's coming from somewhere else — and understanding where is the first step to knowing what to do about it.



Where the Traffic Actually Went

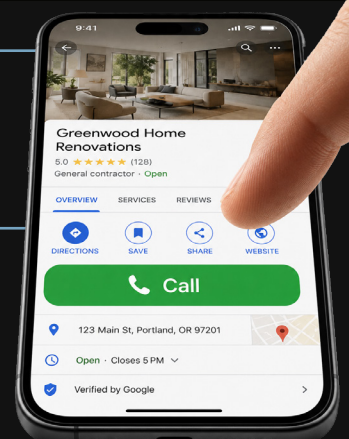
The traffic didn't disappear. It moved. Here's where it went and why it matters for your business:

To social platforms acting as search engines. As we covered in this issue, nearly half of Americans now use TikTok as a search engine. Instagram's search function is increasingly how younger consumers find local services. YouTube has been a search engine for years and is only getting more powerful for local discovery. People aren't Googling "best mobile detailer in [city]" the way they used to — they're searching for it on TikTok and watching a video instead.

To AI assistants answering questions directly. When someone asks ChatGPT to recommend a service business in their city, there's no link to click — the answer just appears. The traffic never existed in the first place. But the business being recommended still got the call. This is why showing up in AI answers — which we covered in our AEO article this issue — matters more than it ever has. Markterior

To Google Business Profile clicks instead of website clicks. The traffic decline is more specific to mobile, where phone icons show up and click-to-call is the primary action. People searching on their phone aren't clicking through to websites the way desktop users do — they're tapping the call button directly from the search results. Which means your GBP is generating business even when your website analytics show declining visits. Local Dominator

To direct searches and word of mouth discovery. More people are finding businesses through tagged social posts, Facebook Group recommendations, and direct referrals than through Google searches — and none of that shows up in your website analytics.





The Metric That Actually Matters Now

Here's a mindset shift that will change how you think about all of this: website traffic was never the goal. Customers were the goal. And the businesses that are thriving right now have stopped optimizing for traffic and started optimizing for what actually matters — calls, bookings, and leads — regardless of where they come from.

AI search traffic converts at 14.2%, compared to 2.8% for traditional Google organic traffic. Traffic arriving from AI platforms is not just different in origin — it's five times more valuable per visitor in terms of conversion likelihood. [Wiserreview](#)

Less traffic, better customers. That's not a crisis — that's an opportunity if you position for it correctly.

The businesses losing sleep over declining website traffic are the ones still measuring the wrong thing. The businesses winning are asking a different question: are more people calling us than last year? Are more people booking? Are more people finding us through multiple channels instead of just one?



What Smart Local Businesses Are Doing Instead

The playbook has shifted. Here's what the businesses adapting fastest are doing:

They're treating their Google Business Profile like a storefront, not a listing. Clicks on business profiles are not declining the way website traffic is. Your GBP is increasingly where the transaction happens — the call button, the booking link, the review section, the Q&A. Businesses investing time in their GBP are seeing direct returns even as their website analytics look flat. Local Dominator

They're building social search presence. Showing up on TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube for local search queries is no longer optional for businesses that want to reach customers under 40. The content doesn't need to be elaborate — it needs to exist, be tagged to a location, and answer questions people are actually asking.

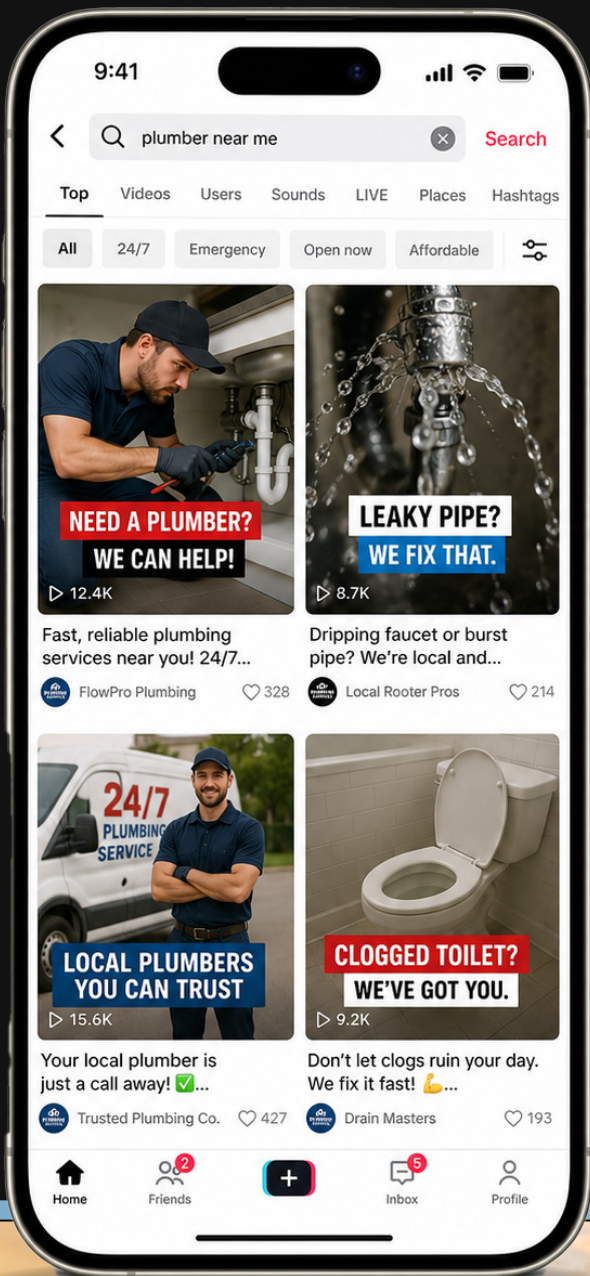
They're optimizing for AI citations. Getting

your business mentioned in ChatGPT, Google AI Overview, and Perplexity responses when someone asks about your service in your city is the new page one. It starts with a complete GBP, a well-structured FAQ page, and consistent business information across every platform.

They're investing in email and direct communication. Complete value should be shared on social platforms — not just links. The businesses building email lists and communicating directly with past customers aren't dependent on any algorithm to reach the people who already trust them. Digital SEO Land

They're measuring what they can control. Calls generated. Bookings made. Form submissions received. Revenue per marketing channel. Not pageviews. Not session duration.

Not bounce rate. The metrics that connect directly to money in the bank.



The Bottom Line

Your website isn't broken. Search has just changed — dramatically, structurally, and permanently. The businesses that understand this are already moving to where the customers are going. The ones waiting for their traffic to recover are going to be waiting a long time.

Stop optimizing for clicks. Start optimizing for calls. Show up on social search. Get cited by AI. Make your GBP work harder than your homepage. Build your email list so you own your audience outright.

The traffic model is dead. The relationship model is what's working now.





How Tariffs *and* Inflation

Are Changing the Way Local Businesses Need to Market

Nobody wants to talk about this. Most marketing publications are still pumping out articles about TikTok strategies and email open rates while ignoring the elephant in the room: the economic environment that local business owners are actually operating in right now is genuinely hard — and it's changing the rules of how you need to market.

41% of small business owners say inflation and rising costs are their top concern this year. Current tariff levels remain significantly elevated — eight to ten times higher than at the start of 2025 — contributing to ongoing inflation and supply chain pressure. For local businesses that depend on materials, supplies, or imported products, this isn't abstract economic policy. It's showing up in quotes, invoices, and conversations with customers who are also feeling squeezed. Reporting NinjaEme-marketing

Here's what changes when the economic environment gets tight — and more importantly, what the smart businesses are doing about it.



The Instinct Is Wrong – Don't Cut Your Marketing

The first thing most businesses do when costs go up and uncertainty sets in is cut marketing. It feels logical. Reduce expenses, protect margins, wait it out. It's also almost always the wrong call.

Small business owners are meeting economic uncertainty with aggression rather than retraction. 68% of small business owners expect their marketing budgets to increase in 2026, while 74% expect the time they spend on marketing to increase this year. Diamond-group

The businesses that stay visible when everyone else goes quiet are the ones that capture market share while their competitors are hiding. This has been true in every economic downturn in modern history — the businesses that maintained or increased marketing through recessions consistently came out the other side with stronger positions than the ones that pulled back.

"Retraction is not a viable strategy in a hyper-competitive market. Small businesses are choosing aggression over hesitation because they know they are in an attention war. If they pull back now, they lose ground that is incredibly expensive to regain later." Diamond-group

The goal isn't to spend more recklessly. It's to spend smarter — on the channels with the highest ROI and the lowest waste.



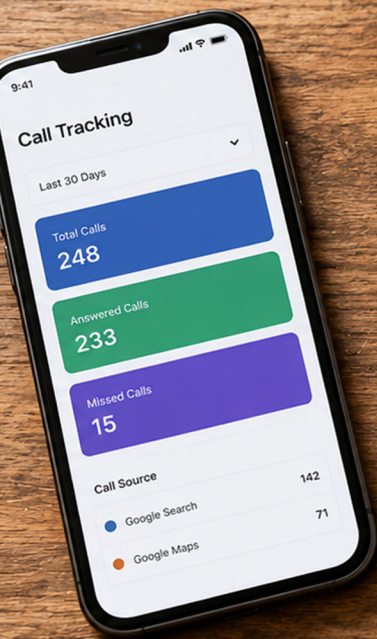
Customers Are Watching Their Wallets – Your Marketing Needs to Acknowledge That

Here's where a lot of businesses make a critical mistake in a tight economy: they keep marketing like nothing changed. Same messaging, same offers, same tone. Meanwhile their customers are quietly making different decisions — comparing prices more carefully, delaying non-urgent purchases, and choosing businesses they trust over businesses they just found.

Tariffs led to a loss of real income for the average American household of \$1,257. That's real money that isn't available for discretionary spending. Customers aren't being difficult — they're being careful. And your marketing needs to meet them where they actually are. Clicks Geek

What works right now is messaging that acknowledges value without apologizing for price. Not "we're the cheapest" — that's a race to the bottom. Not "premium quality at premium prices" — that's tone-deaf in a tight economy. Something more like: "Here's exactly what you get, here's why it's worth it, and here's how we make it easy." Transparency, specificity, and proof. Those three things build confidence in customers who are being more deliberate with their spending.

If you've absorbed costs rather than passing them on — say so. If you've found ways to maintain quality while managing price — say so. Customers respect honesty far more than they respect polished marketing in an environment where they feel economically squeezed.



<u>Working</u>	<u>Cut</u>
✓ Google Business Profile	Print Ads
✓ Call Tracking	Billboards
✓ Customer Reviews	Radio Ads
	Door Hangers

The Efficiency Imperative

When budgets are tighter, every dollar has to work harder. 50% of SMB owners are prioritizing efficiency strategies in 2026, while 33% are testing new tools and technology. This isn't about cutting corners — it's about eliminating waste and doubling down on what actually generates revenue. Diamond-group

The first step is knowing which channels are actually driving calls and bookings. Not which ones feel active or generate the most impressions — which ones are making your phone ring. If you don't know the answer to that question right now, that's the first problem to solve. Google Analytics, call tracking through a tool like CallRail, and simply asking new customers how they found you are all free or low-cost ways to get that clarity.

Once you know what's working, cut everything that isn't. A business owner spending \$500/month on ads across four platforms, getting results from one of them, should put all \$500 into the one that works. Spread thin doesn't work in any economic environment — and it definitely doesn't work when margins are compressed.

The highest-ROI marketing activities for local businesses in a tight economy are the same ones that were highest-ROI before things got tight: Google Business Profile optimization, review generation, email to existing customers, and word of mouth systems. None of these require significant budget. All of them require consistent attention.





The “Local” Advantage Is Worth More Right Now Than It Ever Has Been

Here’s something that gets overlooked in the tariff conversation: being local is a genuine competitive advantage in an economic environment where supply chains are disrupted and consumers are increasingly skeptical of national brands.

Local sourcing booms in economic uncertainty — it’s your edge over giants. A local contractor who sources materials regionally and can guarantee pricing stability is a more attractive choice than a national company whose quotes are changing monthly because of import costs. A local retailer who knows their suppliers personally and can communicate honestly about inventory is more trustworthy than an e-commerce brand with a 6-week shipping window. Shrey-webs

Lean into the local angle harder than you ever have. “We’re from here. We work here. We’re not going anywhere.” That message resonates deeply when people are uncertain about the bigger economic picture. Community trust is not a soft metric right now — it’s a conversion driver.





Wrapping up...

The businesses that come out of this period stronger aren't the ones that cut spending and waited. They're the ones that got smarter — tightened their channel mix, doubled down on trust-building, got honest with their customers about value, and leaned hard into the local advantage that national competitors can never replicate.

The winning strategy isn't to hide out until the storm passes. It's to invest your time and money into the growth driver of your business — your marketing — to come out stronger on the other side. Reporting Ninja

The economy is uncertain. Your visibility doesn't have to be.

Your Business Deserves **More Than** a Digital Presence It Deserves Results.

While you're reading this, one of your local competitors just got found online, earned another glowing review, and landed a new lifetime customer — all because their marketing is working the way yours should be.

The difference isn't budget. It's strategy.

We help local businesses dominate their market with the tools and tactics that actually move the needle:



Google Business Profile & Local SEO

Show up at the top when customers in your area are actively searching for what you offer.



Lead Generation

Turn online visibility into a steady, predictable flow of qualified leads — not just traffic.



Social Media Marketing

Build a real presence that earns trust, drives engagement, and keeps your business top of mind.



Reputation Management

More reviews. Better ratings. A brand that customers trust before they ever pick up the phone.



Responsive Website Design

A website that works hard 24/7 — fast, mobile-ready, and built to convert visitors into calls.



Marketing Consulting

A clear, custom strategy built around your business, your market, and your goals.

Not Sure Where to Start? Let's Figure It Out Together.

We're offering a complimentary Strategy Session — valued at \$149, yours free — where we'll audit your current online presence, show you exactly where you're losing customers, and map out a clear path forward.



No obligation.



No pressure.



Just honest expert insight and a real plan.

These sessions fill up fast. Reserve yours today.



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