



♦ FREE FIELD GUIDE

How to show up in **AI** search.

What ChatGPT, Gemini, and Google's AI answers look for before they recommend a local business — and the nine things you can check and fix this week.



Dan Melton · Founder, Volamo · volamo.com

How to Show Up in AI Search · a Volamo field guide

volamo.com

The front door moved.

For twenty years, "getting found" meant one thing: show up on the first page. Customers searched, scanned ten links, clicked a few, and made up their own minds.

That's not how a growing share of people find a business anymore. They ask a question — in ChatGPT, in Gemini, in the AI answer that now sits on top of Google — and they get **one answer with a couple of names in it**. No list of ten. No scanning. The assistant does the shortlisting for them.

That changes the game in a way most local businesses haven't felt yet. There is no "page two" of an AI answer. You're either one of the businesses it names, or you're not in the conversation at all. And unlike a ranking, you don't slide down slowly — you're simply absent.

The new question isn't "where do I rank?" It's "when someone asks for a business like mine, does the machine know I exist, understand what I do, and trust me enough to say my name?"

The good news: the businesses being named right now are rarely the biggest or the loudest. They're the ones a machine can actually **understand**. That's a much more winnable game — and the rest of this guide is about how to win it.

How AI decides who to recommend.

An AI engine doesn't read your website the way a customer does. It builds a picture of your business — an **entity** — from every place you show up, and then checks whether those places agree.

Think of it as a file the machine keeps on you: your Google Business Profile, your website, directory listings, review sites, social profiles, mentions elsewhere. The engine's job is to turn that pile into one confident answer: *this business, this category, these services, this location, this reputation*. Three things decide whether that file earns a recommendation.

1. Clarity — can the machine parse you?

Name, primary category, services, service area, hours, phone. If any of those are vague, missing, or buried in a paragraph of marketing copy, the machine has to guess — and machines don't recommend guesses. **Structured data** (schema.org markup on your site) is how you say these things in the machine's own language instead of hoping it reads between the lines.

2. Consistency — do your sources agree?

If your Google profile says one phone number, a directory says another, and your site lists hours from two years ago, the engine's confidence drops. Not to zero — but confidence is the currency here. Every conflict between sources is a reason to name someone else.

3. Evidence — is there proof you're real and active?

Reviews (and what they say), recent photos, recent posts, mentions on other sites. A profile that hasn't changed in a year reads as "possibly closed." Evidence is what turns "this business exists" into "this business is a safe recommendation."

Structure beats volume. More blog posts and more keywords don't fix an entity a machine can't parse. A clean, connected, consistent picture of your business does — and it keeps working after you stop paying attention to it.

Put simply: **be legible, be consistent, be corroborated**. The nine checks in the next section are how that principle turns into a to-do list.

The nine things that decide it.

These are the same nine categories Volamo grades every business on. Each one comes with a 60-second check you can do right now.

01 · GOOGLE BUSINESS PROFILE

Is your profile complete and correct?

Your profile is the single most-read source about your business — by customers and by machines. Primary category, secondary categories, description, hours, service area, attributes, and the website link all feed the entity directly.

- ✓ Open your profile the way a customer sees it. Is anything blank, out of date, or a category that doesn't quite describe what you actually do?

02 · REVIEWS

Are people talking — and are you answering?

Engines read review *text*, not just the star count. Reviews that mention the specific service ("they replaced our AC in a day") teach the machine what you do. Recency matters, and so do your replies — an unanswered review reads as an unattended business.

- ✓ When was your last review? How many are unanswered? Do the reviews mention the services you most want to be known for?

03 · PHOTOS

Do your photos prove you're real?

Recent photos of your team, your work, your trucks, your storefront. Stock images signal nothing; a photo from last month signals an active business. Customers post photos too — those count as engagement.

- ✓ What's the date on your newest photo? If it's older than a few months, that's a quick fix.

04 • LISTING HEALTH

Do all your listings say the same thing?

Name, address, phone, and category across Google, Apple, Bing, Yelp, Facebook, the BBB, and the directories for your industry. Duplicates and stale listings are the most common source of conflicting signals — and the easiest to miss because you never look at them.

- ✓ Search your phone number in quotes. Do the results agree on your name, address, and category? Are there listings you didn't create?

05 • SERVICES

Have you actually said what you sell?

A category is not a service list. "Plumber" doesn't tell a machine you do tankless water heaters, repiping, or 24-hour emergency calls. Services need to be listed explicitly — on your profile and on your site — each in plain words.

- ✓ Does your profile's Services section list what you actually sell, with a sentence each? Does your website have a page for each core service?

06 • POSTS

Is there a pulse?

Google Business Profile posts are a freshness signal. They don't need to be clever — a job you finished, a seasonal reminder, a new service. The point is that the profile changes, because a profile that never changes looks abandoned.

- ✓ When was your last post? If you can't remember, the answer is "too long."

07 · LOCAL GRID RANK

Where do you show up across your service area?

Your map-pack position isn't one number — it changes block by block. You might be #1 from your own driveway and invisible three miles away, right where your best customers are. Grid rank is the honest version of "how do I rank on Maps."

- ✓ Search your main service from somewhere else in your service area (or ask a friend across town). Are you in the top three there?

08 · ORGANIC SEARCH

Does your website hold up?

A page per service, a page per area you serve, fast on a phone, with structured data that states the basics (name, address, phone, hours, links to your profiles). This is the part of your entity you fully control — and the part most small-business sites skip.

- ✓ Search "[your main service] [your city]." Are you anywhere on the first page? Does the page that shows up actually describe that service?

09 · AI VISIBILITY

Does the machine say your name?

The direct test. Ask ChatGPT or Gemini for the best [your service] near [your city]. Look at Google's AI answer for the same question. The businesses named are the ones whose entity is clear, consistent, and corroborated. Note who's there instead of you — that's your benchmark.

- ✓ Ask the question in two different assistants. Are you named? If not, what do the named businesses have that you don't?

Quick wins you can do yourself.

None of these need a developer or a budget. Together they close the most common gaps in the nine checks above.

- ☐ Fix your primary category on Google — pick the one that describes what you *mainly* do, then add secondaries.
This one change moves more than any other single field.

- ☐ Fill every field on your Google Business Profile: description, hours, service area, attributes, website, booking link.
Blank fields are unanswered questions.

- ☐ Add ten real photos — team, work, vehicles, location.
Then add a few more every month.

- ☐ Reply to every review from the last twelve months, good and bad.
Short and human beats long and corporate.

- ☐ List your services on your profile, with a one-sentence description each.
Use the words customers use, not industry jargon.

- ☐ Publish one Google post today, and put a monthly reminder on your calendar.
A finished job with a photo is a perfect post.

- ☐ Check your name, address, and phone on Apple Maps, Bing, Yelp, Facebook, and the BBB.
Fix mismatches; claim or remove duplicates.

- ☐ Add basic structured data ([schema.org LocalBusiness](https://schema.org/LocalBusiness)) to your homepage — name, address, phone, hours, and links to your profiles.
Your web person can do this in an hour; it's how you talk to the machine directly.

- ☐ Give each core service its own page on your website, written in plain words.
One page per service, not one page listing everything.

- ☐ Ask three happy customers for a review this week — and ask them to name the service.
Review text is how machines learn what you're good at.

What's harder — and where Volamo comes in.

The quick wins get you to "the machine can find me." The next level is "the machine trusts me more than the competition" — and that's structural work.

It means building the connected entity on purpose: your site, your profiles, your directory listings, and your structured data all describing the same business the same way. It means **monitoring**, because profiles change silently — Google accepts "suggested edits," photos get removed, categories drift — and nobody tells you. And it means **measuring** across the whole service area, not just from your own address.

That's what Volamo does. It's a platform I built by doing this work across millions of local businesses, and it meets you wherever you're starting:

START HERE · FREE

Free Visibility Report

Type your business at volamo.com and get a graded report card on all nine categories in seconds. No call, no card.

GO DEEPER

Expanded Audit

A live grid-rank scan across your service area, keyword tracking, competitor benchmarks, and a written plan of what to fix, in order.

HAND IT OFF

Done-for-You

We build and maintain your entity — schema, profile, listings, content, monitoring — so you keep getting recommended.

One thing to know about how I work: I'm an operator, not an agency. Everything in Volamo runs on real businesses before anyone else touches it, and when you email, you get me.

Start with the free grade at volamo.com — or write to dan.melton@volamo.com and tell me about your business.