



SENTINEL CREATIVE MARKETING

FREE GUIDE

SCM FIELD GUIDE · VOLUME 01

# Digital Marketing 101.

How to turn digital content into customers — a plain-English starting guide for owners who'd rather run their business than learn marketing jargon.

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GET SEEN. GET FOUND. GET BOOKED.

[SENTINELCREATIVEMARKETING.COM](https://sentinelcreativemarketing.com)

BEFORE YOU START

# Who this is for.

You own or run a business. You know you should be "doing more online," but every article you read assumes you have a marketing department. You don't. This guide is for you.

It covers the whole picture in one sitting: how customers actually find a business today, the handful of channels that matter, what each one is for, and a 30-day plan you can start on Monday. There's no fluff and no software pitch. Where we use a number, it comes from published research, and every source is listed at the back.

Read it start to finish once. Then keep it next to you while you work through the plan in Chapter 10.

## THE ONE IDEA TO KEEP

Marketing isn't a pile of channels. It's a path a stranger walks: they **see** you, they **find** you when they're ready, and they **book**. Every chapter here fixes one stretch of that path.

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First edition · October 2026. Statistics are drawn from the published research listed in the Sources section and were current when this edition was written. Platforms change quickly; check the source before quoting a number in your own materials.

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# Inside

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**01**      **Why this matters now**

The numbers behind where your customers spend their attention

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**02**      **Seen. Found. Booked.**

The three-stage path every customer walks

---

**03**      **Your website is the hub**

What a site has to do, and the checks most fail

---

**04**      **Search and your Google profile**

Being there at the moment someone's ready

---

**05**      **Reviews and reputation**

The proof people read before they call

---

**06**      **Social media and content**

Staying visible without burning out

---

**07**      **Email: the channel you own**

Why the oldest channel still pays the most

---

**08**      **Paid media, briefly**

When to spend, and when it's too early

---

**09**      **The five numbers to watch**

A simple scoreboard for a busy owner

---

**10**      **Your 30-day starter plan**

Four weeks, one focus per week

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**11**      **What to read next**

Going deeper on AI and AI search

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# 01

## CHAPTER 01

# Why this matters now.

Your customers already decided where they spend their attention. The only question is whether you're there when they look.

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Twenty years ago, a business could get by on a sign, a phone book listing and word of mouth. Word of mouth still matters more than anything — but it now happens on screens. A neighbor's recommendation gets checked against your reviews. A flyer gets checked against your website. A referral gets checked against what an AI assistant says about you.

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**6.12B**

people use the internet worldwide<sup>1</sup>

**5.79B**

social media user identities — about 70% of the world's population<sup>1</sup>

**2h 21m**

average time a person spends on social media every day<sup>1</sup>

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Those are global numbers, but the pattern holds on your street. The people who will buy from you this year are already online, every day. They're comparing you to your competitors before you ever know they exist.

## The check happens before the call

The single most useful fact in this guide is how many people check you out before they reach out. BrightLocal's 2026 survey of US consumers found that **97% read reviews for local businesses**, and 41% now *always* read them — up from 29% a year earlier.<sup>2</sup> The bar is rising, too: 31% say they'll only use a business rated 4.5 stars or higher, up from 17%.<sup>2</sup>



Source: BrightLocal Local Consumer Review Survey 2026, US adults.

## The way people search is shifting

Google is still the front door for most people. But the door is getting wider. In the same survey, the share of consumers who used AI tools like ChatGPT to find a local business jumped from **6% to 45% in a single year.**<sup>2</sup> And on Google itself, roughly two out of three US searches in early 2026 ended without a click to any website — people got their answer right on the results page.<sup>5</sup>

What that means for you: it's no longer enough to have a website and hope. Your information has to be correct and convincing *everywhere* someone might look — the map listing, the review sites, social, your site, and the AI tools that read all of them.

### THE GOOD NEWS

#### Most of your competitors haven't caught up.

The fundamentals in this guide aren't secret. They're just skipped. A complete Google profile, a fast site with a clear call to action, steady reviews and a simple email list will put a small business ahead of most of its local competition. You don't need to be everywhere. You need to be solid in the places that count.

# 02

## CHAPTER 02

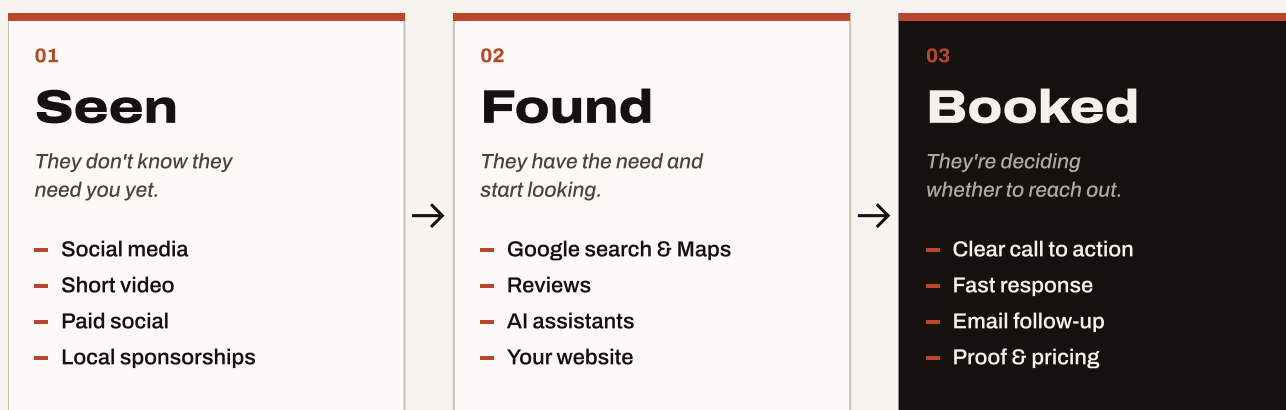
# Seen. Found. Booked.

Every customer walks the same three-stage path. Knowing which stage is broken tells you where to spend your time.

Marketing advice usually comes as a list of channels: do Instagram, do SEO, do email. That's why it feels endless. It's easier to think about the **job** each channel does on the path from stranger to customer.

### The customer path

FRAMEWORK



Each stage has different channels. A business can be great at one stage and invisible at another.

### Stage one: Seen

This is about awareness. Most people aren't shopping for you today. Social media, short video, community sponsorships and paid social put your name in front of people *before* they need you, so that when they do, you're familiar. Success here is measured in reach and recognition, not sales.

### Stage two: Found

Now the need is real. The furnace broke, the event is booked, the lease is signed. They search. This stage is won by search (Google and the map pack), reviews, AI assistants and your website. It's the highest-intent moment in all of marketing, and it's where most small businesses leak the most money.

## Stage three: Booked

They've found you and two competitors. Who gets the call? The one who makes it easy and feels safe: a clear button, visible proof, honest pricing or ranges, and — this matters more than people think — a fast reply. In one 2026 survey of marketers, only 3% said their team responds to a new lead within five minutes, and 31% take a day or more.<sup>4</sup> Speed alone wins deals.

### DIAGNOSE BEFORE YOU SPEND

Ask three questions. Do people in my area know we exist? (Seen.) When they search for what we do, do we show up and look good? (Found.) When they land on our site or call, do they book? (Booked.) The weakest answer is your first project.

| IF THIS IS TRUE...                                      | THE BROKEN STAGE | START WITH                                         |
|---------------------------------------------------------|------------------|----------------------------------------------------|
| Nobody's heard of you, but people who find you love you | Seen             | Chapter 6 — social and content                     |
| People say they couldn't find you online                | Found            | Chapters 4 and 5 — search, Google profile, reviews |
| Plenty of site visits, few calls or forms               | Booked           | Chapter 3 — your website                           |
| Leads come in, but go quiet after the first contact     | Booked           | Chapter 7 — email and follow-up                    |

# 03

## CHAPTER 03

# Your website is the hub.

Every other channel sends people somewhere. Make sure that somewhere does its job.

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Social posts, ads, Google listings, reviews, AI answers — almost all of them point back to your website. If the site is slow, confusing or doesn't ask for the next step, every other dollar you spend leaks out of the bottom. That's why we look at the site before anything else.

## The five-second test

Pull up your homepage on your phone. Hand it to someone who doesn't know your business. Give them five seconds, then take it back and ask:

- 01 What does this business do?**
- 02 Who is it for, and where?**
- 03 What am I supposed to do next?**

If they can't answer all three, the site is costing you customers. The fix is usually copy, not design: a plain headline that says what you do and where ("Residential electrician serving Troy and Rochester Hills"), one line on why you, and one obvious button.

## What every small-business site needs

- ☐ **A headline that names the service and the area.**  
Clever slogans go second, not first.
  - ☐ **One primary call to action, repeated.**  
Call, book, or request a quote — pick one and put it at the top, middle and bottom.
  - ☐ **Phone number tappable on mobile.**  
Most local visits are on phones.
-

- ☐ **A page for each core service.**  
One page per thing you sell. It helps people and it helps search engines.

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- ☐ **Proof near the button.**  
Reviews, photos of real work, logos of clients, years in business.

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- ☐ **Pricing or price ranges where you can.**  
"Starting at" beats "call for pricing" for most buyers.

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- ☐ **Fast load time.**  
Aim for the page to be usable in about two seconds on a phone.

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- ☐ **Analytics installed.**  
Google Analytics 4 and Google Search Console, at minimum. You can't fix what you can't see.

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- ☐ **Your name, address and phone, identical everywhere.**  
More on why in Chapter 4.

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#### A COMMON, EXPENSIVE MISTAKE

### **Paying for traffic before fixing the site.**

Ads and SEO bring people to the door. If the door is stuck, more people just means more people leaving. Fix the site first, then turn up the traffic. It's the cheapest marketing win most businesses have.

## **Mobile first, actually**

Check every page on your own phone, on cellular data, not office Wi-Fi. Look for text that's too small, buttons too close together, pop-ups that cover the screen, and forms that ask for more than you need. Every extra form field costs you leads. Name, phone or email, and a short message is usually enough to start.

# 04

## CHAPTER 04

# Search and your Google profile.

When someone's ready to buy, they search. This chapter is about being there at that moment.

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Search engine optimization (SEO) sounds technical, but for a local business most of it comes down to three things: a complete Google Business Profile, a website that clearly explains each service, and consistent business information across the web.

## Your Google Business Profile comes first

The profile is the box with your map pin, hours, photos and reviews. For "near me" and local searches, it often matters more than your website. Even though Google's share of local discovery dipped as AI tools grew, it was still the most-used channel in 2026 — 71% of consumers used it to find local businesses.<sup>2</sup>

- ☐ **Claim and verify it.**  
Search your business name; if you see "Own this business?", start there.
  - ☐ **Pick the most specific primary category.**  
"Plumber" is better than "Contractor." Add secondary categories for other real services.
  - ☐ **Fill every field.**  
Hours, holiday hours, service area, services list, description, website, booking link.
  - ☐ **Add real photos monthly.**  
Your team, your work, your space. Not stock.
  - ☐ **Post updates.**  
Offers, events and recent jobs keep the profile active.
  - ☐ **Answer every review.**  
Covered in Chapter 5.
-

## Your website's part

Google needs to understand what you do and where. Give each service its own page with a clear title ("Water Heater Repair in Troy, MI"), write in the words customers actually use, answer the questions people ask before they buy, and link the pages together. That's most of on-page SEO.

## Consistency is a ranking signal

Your business name, address and phone number (often shortened to NAP) should match exactly on your website, Google profile, Facebook, Yelp, Apple Maps, Bing and industry directories. Mismatches — an old suite number, a tracking phone number, "St." here and "Street" there — make search engines and AI tools less confident about who you are.

### A NOTE ON AI SEARCH

AI assistants like ChatGPT and Google's AI answers read the same profiles, reviews and directories when they recommend a business. A strong, consistent search foundation is also your AI foundation. We cover the AI side step by step in **Get Found in AI Search** (Volume 03).

## What SEO is not

Nobody can guarantee a #1 ranking, and anyone who promises one is telling you about their honesty, not their ability. SEO is steady work that compounds: months, not days. The upside is that once it's working, it keeps working without paying per click.

# 05

## CHAPTER 05

# Reviews and reputation.

Reviews are what people read when they're deciding between you and someone else.

When someone has narrowed it down to two or three businesses, reviews break the tie. They're also one of the strongest signals for local search and for AI recommendations. And customers have opinions about how fresh and how good your reviews need to be.

**97%**

of consumers read reviews for local businesses<sup>2</sup>

**85%**

are more likely to use a business after reading positive reviews<sup>2</sup>

**77%**

are put off by negative reviews<sup>2</sup>

## How to get more reviews, honestly

- 01 Ask at the moment of happiness.** Right after the job's done well, the order arrives or the customer says thanks.
- 02 Make it one tap.** Use your Google review link (from your Business Profile) in a text or email, or as a QR code on receipts and invoices.
- 03 Ask everyone, not just the people you expect to be happy.** Picking only happy customers to ask ("review gating") breaks Google's rules and makes your profile look fake.
- 04 Make it a routine.** A steady trickle beats a burst. Consumers notice when the newest review is a year old.
- 05 Never buy reviews or offer something in exchange for a positive one.** It violates platform rules, and the FTC can fine businesses for fake reviews.

# Respond to every review

Thank people for positive reviews by name and mention what they bought. For negative reviews, reply calmly and quickly, acknowledge the problem, and offer to fix it offline. You're not writing to the upset customer — you're writing to the next fifty people who read the exchange.

## REPLY TEMPLATE — NEGATIVE REVIEW

Hi **[first name]**, thank you for telling us. You're right that **[the specific issue]** shouldn't have happened, and I'm sorry it did. I'd like to make it right — please call me directly at **[phone]** or email **[email]**. — **[your name]**, **[title]**

Avoid copy-paste replies. Readers can tell, and a templated response often looks worse than none. Use the template as a starting point and make each reply specific.

# 06

## CHAPTER 06

# Social media and content.

Social is the "Seen" stage. Its job is to keep you familiar, not to close the sale.

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Most owners quit social media because they treat it like a sales channel and expect calls the next day. Social works more like a billboard you can talk through: it keeps you in people's minds so that when the need shows up, your name comes up first.

## Pick one or two platforms

You don't need to be everywhere. Go where your customers already are, and do it consistently.

| PLATFORM  | BEST FOR                                                  | WHAT WORKS                                                       |
|-----------|-----------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Facebook  | Local services, community-driven businesses, older buyers | Local groups, events, before-and-afters, reviews shared as posts |
| Instagram | Visual businesses — food, beauty, home, retail            | Short video (Reels), behind the scenes, finished work            |
| TikTok    | Reaching younger and newer audiences fast                 | Short, raw, useful or entertaining video                         |
| LinkedIn  | B2B, professional services, recruiting                    | Founder posts, case studies, clear opinions                      |
| YouTube   | Anything people research before buying                    | How-to and explainer videos that answer real questions           |

# The content that works for small businesses

## SHOW

### The work

Before-and-afters, finished projects, product close-ups. Proof beats promises.

## TEACH

### The answers

The questions customers ask you every week. Each one is a post, a short video and a website FAQ.

## INTRODUCE

### The people

Your team, your space, your process. People buy from people they feel they know.

## PROVE

### The results

Turn reviews and customer wins into posts — with permission.

## A schedule you can keep

Consistency beats volume. Three posts a week, every week, will do more than fifteen in one week and nothing for a month. Batch it: set aside one hour on Monday to plan, shoot and schedule the week. Reuse one idea across formats — one customer question can become a short video, a carousel, an email and a website FAQ.

## REPURPOSE EVERYTHING

Write once, publish five times. A single real customer question answered on video can be clipped for Reels and TikTok, transcribed into a blog post, summarized in your email newsletter, and added to your website's FAQ — where search engines and AI tools can find it.

# 07

## CHAPTER 07

# Email: the channel you own.

Social platforms can change the rules overnight. Your email list is the one audience nobody can take away.

Every follower on Instagram or Facebook belongs to the platform. If the algorithm changes or your account gets locked, that audience is gone. An email list belongs to you. That alone makes it worth building — and it also happens to be the best-returning channel in digital marketing.

**\$36–\$42**

average return for every \$1 spent on email marketing, per Litmus and DMA research<sup>3</sup>

**36%**

of companies don't measure email ROI at all — so many are leaving the gains unclaimed<sup>3</sup>

## Start the list today

- Every customer who buys, books or asks for a quote goes on the list (with permission).
- Add a simple signup to your website with a clear reason to join: seasonal reminders, member pricing, a free checklist.
- Put a QR code at the register or on invoices.
- Never buy email lists. They hurt deliverability and break anti-spam law.

# Three emails every business should have running

## 01 · AUTOMATIC

### Welcome

Sent the moment someone joins. Who you are, what to expect, one helpful thing, one next step.

## 02 · AUTOMATIC

### Follow-up

Sent after a quote or inquiry that didn't book. A friendly check-in and an answer to the most common hesitation.

## 03 · MONTHLY

### Newsletter

One useful tip, one recent job or product, one offer or reminder. Short beats long.

The first two run on their own once they're set up — that's where most of the return comes from, because they reach people at exactly the right moment without you lifting a finger.

# 08

## CHAPTER 08

# Paid media, briefly.

Ads are an accelerator. They make a working system faster; they don't fix a broken one.

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Paid media — Google Ads, Meta (Facebook and Instagram) ads, and others — lets you buy attention on demand. It's powerful, and it's also the fastest way to lose money in marketing. The rule is simple: **fix the site, the Google profile and the follow-up first**. Then pay for traffic.

### FOUND STAGE

#### Search ads

Google and Bing ads show up when someone is already searching for what you do. High intent, usually the best place for a small budget to start.

### SEEN STAGE

#### Social ads

Meta, TikTok and others reach people by location and interests before they search. Good for awareness, offers and retargeting past site visitors.

## Before you spend a dollar

- ☐ **Know what a customer is worth.**  
Average sale × how often they come back. That tells you what you can afford to pay for one.
  - ☐ **Track conversions.**  
Calls, forms and bookings must be measured, or you're guessing.
  - ☐ **Send ads to a specific page,**  
not your homepage. The page should match the ad's promise.
  - ☐ **Start small and test.**  
A modest monthly budget for 30–60 days teaches you more than a big launch.
-

# 09

## CHAPTER 09

# The five numbers to watch.

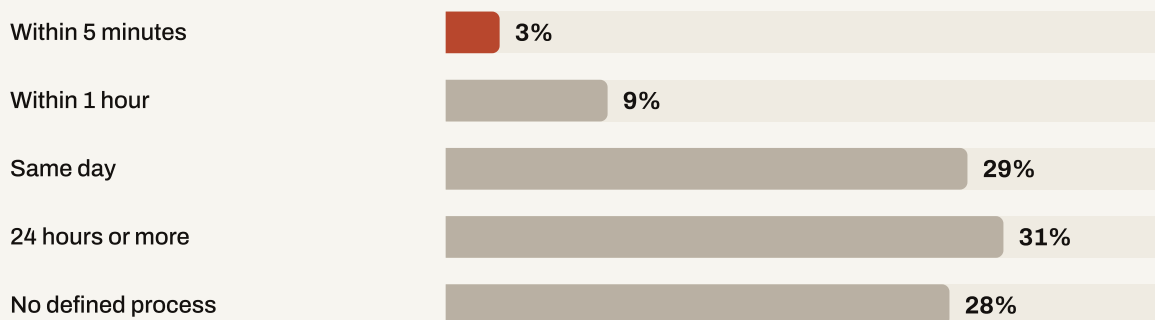
You don't need a dashboard with fifty charts. You need five numbers, checked once a month.

Marketing reports get bloated fast. Most of what's in them doesn't change what you'd do. These five numbers tell you whether the path from Seen to Booked is working, and where it's broken.

| NUMBER                | WHAT IT TELLS YOU                                                | WHERE TO FIND IT                                                        |
|-----------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 • Leads             | How many calls, forms, bookings and messages came in this month  | Call log, form inbox, booking tool, Google profile                      |
| 2 • Lead source       | Where each lead came from: Google, referral, social, ad, AI tool | Ask every new customer "How did you hear about us?" — and write it down |
| 3 • Response time     | How long until a new lead hears back                             | Your inbox and call log. Aim for minutes, not hours.                    |
| 4 • Close rate        | What share of leads became paying customers                      | Your sales records or CRM                                               |
| 5 • Cost per customer | Marketing spend ÷ new customers                                  | Your books                                                              |

### Where most lead-response time actually lands

SHARE OF TEAMS



Source: NP Digital, survey of 500 marketers, February 2026. Categories as reported.

Response time is the number almost nobody tracks and the one that moves fastest when you fix it. The research behind the "five-minute rule" found that reaching a lead within five minutes made it dramatically more likely to qualify than waiting even half an hour.<sup>6</sup> You don't need software to start. You need a rule: every new lead gets a real reply within the hour during business hours.

#### ASK THE QUESTION

"How did you hear about us?" is the cheapest analytics tool in the world. Put it on every form, ask it on every call, and log the answer. Within three months you'll know which channels to double down on and which to cut.

# 10

## CHAPTER 10

# Your 30-day starter plan.

Four weeks. One focus per week. About two to three hours a week.

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Don't try to do everything at once. Each week builds on the last, and by the end of the month you'll have fixed the most common leaks on the path from Seen to Booked.

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### WEEK 1

#### Fix the hub

Run the five-second test on your homepage. Rewrite the headline to say what you do and where. Make one call-to-action button and repeat it. Check every page on your phone. Install Google Analytics 4 and Search Console if they aren't there.

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### WEEK 2

#### Get found

Claim and complete your Google Business Profile — every field. Upload 10 real photos. Check that your name, address and phone match on your site, Google, Facebook, Yelp, Apple Maps and Bing.

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### WEEK 3

#### Build proof

Create your Google review link and a QR code. Ask your last 20 happy customers for a review. Reply to every existing review, good and bad. Add 3 reviews to your homepage near the button.

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### WEEK 4

#### Keep them

Add an email signup to your site. Import past customers who agreed to hear from you. Write and switch on a welcome email. Pick one social platform and schedule three posts a week for the next month.

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## Then, every month

☐ Check the five numbers from Chapter 9 and write them down.

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☐ Ask for reviews from every happy customer.

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☐ Post updates and new photos on your Google profile.

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☐ Send one useful email to your list.

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☐ Fix the single biggest leak the numbers point to.

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**IF YOU'D RATHER NOT DO IT YOURSELF**

**That's what SCM is for.**

Sentinel Creative Marketing is a small agency in Troy, Michigan. We audit the site, fix the foundation, and run search, GEO, email, social and paid media on a monthly plan with published pricing. Your first conversation is free, and you'll get an honest answer about whether you need us at all.

# 11

## CHAPTER 11

# What to read next.

Two guides that go deeper on the biggest shifts in marketing right now.

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This guide covered the foundation. The two biggest changes on top of that foundation are both about AI: how you can use it to win more leads, and how AI tools now decide which businesses to recommend.

### VOLUME 02

#### **The AI Lead Engine**

How to use AI to respond to leads in minutes instead of hours, write content that still sounds like you, automate follow-up, and run ads and reviews smarter — with a copy-paste prompt library and a 90-day rollout plan.

### VOLUME 03

#### **Get Found in AI Search**

The small-business playbook for showing up when customers ask ChatGPT, Gemini, Perplexity or Google's AI for a recommendation — with a 20-minute visibility audit, scoring sheet and 60-day plan.

Both are available at [sentinelcreativemarketing.com/resources](https://sentinelcreativemarketing.com/resources).

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# Get seen. Get found. Get booked.

SCM is a marketing agency in Troy, Michigan. We build and fix websites, and run SEO, GEO, email, social and paid media for businesses that want marketing they can trace to a customer. Published pricing. Billed monthly. No long lock-ins.

## VOLUME 02

### The AI Lead Engine

Use AI to answer faster, follow up automatically and close more of the leads you already get.

## VOLUME 03

### Get Found in AI Search

Show up when customers ask ChatGPT, Gemini and Google's AI who to call.

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