

BROWN BEAR DIGITAL

AI Search for Plastic Surgeons

How ChatGPT, Perplexity, and Google decide which surgeon to name, and how to become that name.

A practice owner's guide | 2026 edition

By Bryan Passanisi, Founder, Brown Bear Digital

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The short answer

01

For a growing share of patients, the front door to a plastic surgery practice is now a conversation with an AI. The AI hands them a short list of names before they click anything. If your practice is not one of those names, you are invisible at the exact moment a nervous patient decides who feels safe. AI search is not magic and not random. It sits on top of your local foundation, and it follows patterns you can influence.

What to do about it:

1

Audit your RealSelf presence first.

It is the single most important third-party source engines lean on for aesthetic providers.

2

Clear the review bar.

Aim for an average above 4.3 stars, a steady stream of recent reviews, and a habit of responding.

3

Make your site readable to machines.

Crawlable pages, plus schema that labels your practice, procedures, reviews, and surgeons.

4

Run the four-prompt self-audit.

About 10 minutes across ChatGPT, Perplexity, and Google, before you spend a dollar.

WHAT THE DATA SHOWS

AI recommendations are roughly 30 times more selective than a standard Google search, and ChatGPT recommends on the order of 1% of locations for a query. In medical aesthetics, the top 15 brands captured roughly 62% of all AI citation share. Visibility is concentrated because most practices do nothing deliberate about it. The lane is wide open for the ones who move first.

Who this guide is for

The surgeon squeezing this in between cases. The office manager who got handed "the marketing." Owners who rank on Google but show up nowhere in AI answers, and practices opening in a saturated metro looking for the opening nobody else has taken.

The new front door

02

Patients still choose a surgeon close to home, read reviews, study galleries, and check board certification. What changed is the first step. More of them open ChatGPT or Perplexity, ask a direct question, and get a curated short list. That list is built from the same raw materials that drive local search: your reviews, directory profiles, website, and what the rest of the web says about you. The honest framing is not GEO versus SEO. Your local foundation is the fuel. AI search is the second story built on top of it.

48 of 50

"[procedure] before and after" searches returned an AI Overview. People Also Ask appeared on all 50.

Source: Brown Bear Digital 50-procedure gallery study. Even a search for photographs now opens with a generated answer.

What patients actually ask AI

A Google search is a fragment. An AI prompt is a full sentence, often a nervous one, that carries the real decision.

The shortlist request

"Who are the best board certified plastic surgeons for a mommy makeover in Charlotte?"
The AI will give 3 to 5 names.

The reassurance check

"Is Dr. Smith a good rhinoplasty surgeon?" The patient has a name and wants it confirmed or flagged.

The comparison

"How do I choose between two plastic surgeons who both have good reviews?" Most practice content ignores it.

Education, then provider

"What is recovery like for a deep plane facelift, and who specializes in it near me?"

Visitors coming from an AI are far more likely to take action. The model already did the research for them.

How AI engines decide who to name

03

Every major engine does a version of the same thing: pull from sources it trusts, weigh signals of credibility, and synthesize a confident answer. The AI does not invent its answer. It names the practices that show up consistently across those sources with strong signals attached. A thin RealSelf profile, few recent reviews, and no clear procedure page take you out of the running, however skilled you are in the operating room.

Engine	What it leans on	How selective
ChatGPT	→ Long-form editorial and provider-authored content. Closely tied to Bing's index.	Very. On the order of 1% of locations for a query
Perplexity	→ The widest net: niche specialty outlets and community sources. Reddit shows up in nearly half of top citations.	Closer to 7% of locations
Google AI Overviews	→ Traditional SEO signals blended with generative summarization. Existing rankings still carry weight.	Friendliest to practices with classic SEO
Gemini	→ Accurate, complete business profile data.	The most generous with recommendations

30x

more selective: AI recommendations compared with a standard Google search, per one 2026 local visibility analysis.

87%

of ChatGPT citations align with Bing's top results, per one widely cited study. Your Bing visibility now matters.

DO NOT GAME ONE ENGINE

Build the underlying signals all of them look for. The brands that led the medical aesthetics visibility index did so across all four engines at once.

GEO and AEO without the jargon

04

Two acronyms dominate this conversation, and they get used loosely. Here is the plain-language version.

GEO: Generative Engine Optimization

Making your business visible and recommended inside AI-generated answers. The broad discipline: everything you do so ChatGPT, Perplexity, Gemini, and Google's AI name your practice when a patient asks.

AEO: Answer Engine Optimization

Structuring your content so an engine can lift a clean, direct answer from it. Clear answer blocks near headings, real FAQ sections that match how patients ask, and pages that resolve a question in a sentence or two before elaborating.

How they fit together

	AEO	GEO
Scope	One tool inside the larger toolbox	→ The whole toolbox
Where the work happens	On your own pages	→ Reviews, directories, and third-party authority
What it earns	Pages that are quotable	→ Engines that trust you enough to quote you

AEO makes your pages quotable. GEO makes the engines want to quote you.

BOTH HALVES HAVE TO BE TRUE

A page can be perfectly structured and still never get cited, because the practice behind it has not earned the credibility.

The five signals engines weigh

05

Across every engine and every study, the same five signals decide whether a practice gets named. They are listed roughly in order of impact, because plastic surgery carries a trust burden most industries do not.

1

Third-party authority

Engines trust what credible sources say about you far more than what you say. For surgeons the key source is RealSelf. Most practices claim it once and forget it.

2

Reviews as a confidence threshold

ChatGPT-recommended locations averaged 4.3 stars. Practices near 3.4 stars with low response rates were effectively invisible.

3

E-E-A-T and the YMYL bar

Plastic surgery is Your Money or Your Life content. Engines favor real author credentials, clinical transparency, and outside confirmation.

4

A site LLMs can read

Crawlable pages that render, plus schema: MedicalBusiness or LocalBusiness, Physician markup for surgeons, and FAQ markup on procedure pages.

5

Freshness and consistency

Content updated within the last 30 days earned 3.2 times more AI citations in one analysis. Your name, address, and phone should match everywhere.

94%

of #1-ranking procedure pages carried JSON-LD. Only 17% used MedicalProcedure and 31% marked up FAQs.

1 in 101

linked its surgeon Person schema to external profiles. The full stack beats 90%+ of current winners.

Source: Brown Bear Digital 101-city procedure page study.

Check where you stand, then track it

06

Open ChatGPT, Perplexity, and Google and run these checks as if you were a patient. Use a logged-out or private window so your own history does not skew the answer.

- 1 The shortlist test.** Ask, "Who are the best board certified plastic surgeons for [your top procedure] in [your city]?" Note whether you appear, where, and how you are described.
- 2 The name test.** Ask, "Tell me about [your practice name] in [your city]." Wrong hours or a wrong specialty is a data problem you can fix.
- 3 The source test.** In Perplexity, which shows its sources, see which pages it cites in your specialty. If RealSelf, a directory, or a competitor keeps appearing and you do not, that is the gap.
- 4 The procedure test.** Ask an education-then-provider question, such as recovery for a deep plane facelift and who does it well near you. It shows whether your procedure pages are strong enough.

Measure it like a real channel

Repeat the four prompts monthly at first and log what you find. AI visibility tools can track a set of patient prompts at scale and watch three things move over time.

Visibility

Whether you appear at all.

Sentiment

How you are described when you do.

Citation share

Which sources the engines pull you from.

THE METRIC THAT MATTERS MOST

Share of recommendation: how often you are on the list, and where, when a patient asks AI for a surgeon in your area for the procedures you care about. Tie it back to consults booked. Answers shift day to day, so judge the trend month over month.

Mistakes, and when to bring in help

07

Practices missing from AI results are usually making several small errors that compound. The most common is a practice that invested in classic SEO years ago and assumed the same setup would carry it into the AI era. The infrastructure that makes a site readable to a human is not the one that makes it parseable by a machine. The other trap is treating AI visibility as a content problem. More blog posts do little if your RealSelf profile is dormant, your reviews are stale, and your site has no structured data.

If you paid for SEO for years and you are nowhere in ChatGPT, the work was not wasted. It stopped one layer short of where patients now start.

Do it yourself	Bring in help
Claim and complete your RealSelf and Google profiles	Structured data and technical work, which touches code and is easy to get wrong
Build a steady review habit	E-E-A-T and authority work: slow, relationship-driven, hard to fake
Keep business details consistent everywhere	When you lack the hours, since a surgeon's time between cases costs more than a good partner
Run the monthly self-audit	

If you evaluate an agency

- ◆ Ask them to show you their own AI visibility.
- ◆ Ask how they approach GEO and structured data for medical practices.
- ◆ Be wary of anyone who promises AI rankings. The model companies have not handed anyone a playbook. The honest version is test, measure, and adjust.

Is your practice ready for AI search?

08

Answer for your practice as it stands today, in-house or through an agency. Each "no" is a reason an engine might skip you. Fix third-party authority and reviews first.

Question	Yes	Partly	No
THIRD-PARTY AUTHORITY			
Is your RealSelf profile complete, active, and well reviewed, not claimed once and forgotten?	☐	☐	☐
Are your Google and directory profiles claimed and complete?	☐	☐	☐
REVIEWS			
Is your average rating above 4.3 stars?	☐	☐	☐
Do new reviews arrive steadily, and does the practice respond to them?	☐	☐	☐
CREDIBILITY			
Is a real, credentialed surgeon visibly attached to your content?	☐	☐	☐
Do independent sources corroborate the expertise you claim?	☐	☐	☐
SITE AND STRUCTURE			
Can crawlers access your pages, with content that renders rather than hiding behind scripts?	☐	☐	☐
Do you have MedicalBusiness or LocalBusiness, Physician, and FAQ schema in place?	☐	☐	☐
Do procedure pages answer the question in a sentence or two near each heading?	☐	☐	☐
FRESHNESS AND MEASUREMENT			
Do your name, address, and phone match exactly everywhere they appear?	☐	☐	☐
Are procedure pages and directory profiles kept current?	☐	☐	☐
Do you run the four self-audit prompts monthly and track share of recommendation?	☐	☐	☐

YES

PARTLY

NO

Frequently asked questions

09

Q What is GEO for plastic surgeons?

Generative Engine Optimization makes a practice visible and recommended inside AI answers from ChatGPT, Perplexity, Gemini, and Google's AI Overviews. It combines a strong local foundation with active directory and RealSelf profiles, strong recent reviews, credible third-party authority, and structured data.

Q How is AEO different from GEO?

AEO is the narrower craft of structuring content so an engine can lift a clean answer from it, using answer blocks, real FAQs, and clear headings. GEO is the broader work of earning the credibility that gets you cited at all.

Q Why does my practice rank on Google but not in ChatGPT?

AI engines are far more selective and rely on different signals. ChatGPT leans on Bing's index and on directories and reviews. Strong Google rankings with a thin RealSelf profile, stale reviews, or no structured data often get left out.

Q How do I check if AI recommends my practice?

Run four prompts in a private window across ChatGPT, Perplexity, and Google: a shortlist request, a question about your practice name, a source check in Perplexity, and an education-then-provider question. Whether you appear, and how accurately, shows where to focus.

Q How long does it take to show up in AI search?

Expect 60 to 90 days in most cases. It depends on when the work gets implemented and how good it is. Fixing the fundamentals starts the clock. Deeper third-party authority takes longer, because credibility is earned, not switched on.

Q What can my office handle without an agency?

Claiming and completing RealSelf and Google profiles, building a review habit, keeping business details consistent, and running the monthly self-audit. Those moves alone put you ahead of most local competitors.

Next steps

10

- 1 **Run the four-prompt self-audit** and the checklist. Write down what you find.
- 2 **Audit your RealSelf presence** and fix the gaps the source test revealed.
- 3 **Talk to someone who does this for plastic surgery.** The mechanism, not just a promise.

WORK WITH BROWN BEAR

Brown Bear Digital builds AI search programs for aesthetic and surgical practices, in the order that moves the needle. brownbear.digital/contact | bryan@brownbear.digital



Bryan Passanisi

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bryan Passanisi is the founder of Brown Bear Digital. He has 15 years of experience across SEO, paid search, and AI search strategy, and won a 2025 Semrush AI/GEO award. He started Brown Bear to give businesses direct access to senior search expertise without the agency overhead.

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