

2026 BENCHMARK REPORT

What's Working for the Businesses Winning in Highlands County

The state of local search, AI search, reviews and the most common mistakes — for small businesses in Sebring, Avon Park, Lake Placid and across Highlands County.

How to Use This Report

This isn't a sales brochure. It's a straight look at how local customers in Highlands County actually find businesses in 2026 — and what the companies winning those customers are doing differently.

Over nearly two decades helping local businesses here grow, we've watched the way people choose a plumber, a dentist, a roofer or a restaurant change completely. Word of mouth still matters, but the first move is almost always the same now: pull out a phone and search. Increasingly, it's to [ask](#) an AI assistant.

Read it front to back, or jump to the part you need:

- The State of Local Search in 2026** — where your customers actually are.
- What Top-Ranking Businesses Do Differently** — the three habits that separate them.
- AI Search & AEO** — the shift that's catching most local businesses off guard.
- The 5 Most Common Mistakes** — quick wins hiding in plain sight.
- Your 10-Minute Self-Audit** — score your own business today.

A note on the numbers. Where you see a [DATA POINT] marker, that's a spot for a current, verified local statistic. We'd rather leave it clearly blank than print a number we can't stand behind. Ask us for the latest figures for your category.

The State of Local Search in Highlands County, 2026

When someone near you needs what you sell, three things now decide whether they find you first.

Type "plumber near me," "AC repair Sebring" or "best lunch Avon Park" into a phone and you'll see the same layout: a map with three businesses pinned to the top — the **Local Pack** — and below it, the AI-generated answer Google now writes for many searches. Most people never scroll past those. For a local business, that small block of screen is the whole game.

[DATA POINT]

share of local clicks that go to the top 3 map results

[DATA POINT]

of "near me" searches that lead to a call or visit within 24 hours

[DATA POINT]

of Highlands County adults searching on mobile first

Three forces shaping local search here

1. A seasonal, search-first population. Highlands County's snowbirds, retirees and race-week visitors often have no local referral to lean on. They choose a business purely on what they find online — which rewards the companies that show up clearly and look trustworthy.

2. Mobile and voice everywhere. The search that matters most happens on a phone, often one-handed, often spoken. If your site is slow or your phone number isn't one tap away, you lose the customer before they ever reach you.

3. AI answers on top. Google's AI Overviews and assistants like ChatGPT increasingly answer "who should I call?" directly. Being the business they name is the new front page.

What the Top-Ranking Businesses Do Differently

We looked at the local businesses consistently winning the Map Pack across Highlands County. Three habits show up again and again.

1. A genuinely complete Google Business Profile

The winners treat their Google Business Profile like a storefront, not a phone-book listing. Every field filled, the right primary and secondary categories, real photos added regularly, services and service areas spelled out, and questions answered. Google rewards completeness and activity — a half-filled profile simply can't compete with a fully built one.

2. Review velocity, not just review count

It's not only how many reviews you have — it's how **recently** and **steadily** they arrive. A business earning a few honest reviews every week signals to both Google and customers that it's active and trusted. The top performers ask for a review after every job, as a habit, and respond to every one.

Rule of thumb: a steady trickle of fresh reviews beats a big pile of old ones.

[DATA POINT] reviews per month is a healthy pace for most local categories here.

3. A consistent posting cadence

Winners post to their Google profile regularly — offers, updates, photos of recent work. It keeps the listing active in Google's eyes and gives searchers a reason to choose them. Most local competitors post nothing at all, which makes this one of the easiest edges to claim.

AI Search & AEO: The Shift Most Local Businesses Are Missing

Your customers are starting to ask ChatGPT, Google's AI Overviews, Gemini and Perplexity for a recommendation — and the AI names a business. Will it be yours?

For twenty years, the goal was to rank on a page of links. That's changing fast. More people now ask a question and get a single, conversational answer that recommends specific businesses. The discipline of making sure that answer includes you has a name: **Answer Engine Optimization (AEO)**, sometimes called **Generative Engine Optimization (GEO)**.

Why this matters locally — sooner than you think

AI assistants build their recommendations from the same signals that power local search: a complete, consistent Google Business Profile; clear, well-structured information on your website; matching details everywhere you appear online; and real reviews. The businesses already doing local SEO well have a head start. The ones that ignore it risk being invisible in the exact moment a customer asks for help.

What "getting found in AI search" looks like

- Structured, answer-ready content** — pages that clearly state what you do, where, and for whom.
- Consistent business information** — the same name, address area and phone everywhere.
- Authoritative local signals** — reviews, mentions and a profile AI tools can trust.

The opportunity: in a market the size of Highlands County, very few competitors are optimizing for AI search yet. The businesses that start now will be the names these tools recommend for years.

The 5 Most Common Local-Marketing Mistakes

Every one of these is fixable this week — and each is quietly costing local businesses calls right now.

1 A call button that doesn't actually call

The single most expensive bug we find: a phone number that isn't a tappable link, points to the wrong number, or (worse) links to a social page. On mobile, every tap that doesn't dial is a lost customer.

2 A Google Business Profile that's never posted to

Claiming the profile isn't enough. A listing with no recent posts, no new photos and unanswered questions looks abandoned to both Google and customers.

3 Inconsistent NAP (name, address, phone)

When your business details don't match across Google, your website, Facebook and directories, it confuses search engines and erodes trust. Consistency is one of the cheapest ranking signals you control.

4 A slow, clunky mobile site

If your site takes more than a few seconds to load on a phone, most visitors leave before they ever see it. Speed and a clear "call now" path matter more than a fancy design.

5 Ignoring AI search entirely

The newest and fastest-growing blind spot. Businesses optimizing only for the old "ten blue links" are missing the AI answers customers increasingly rely on. (See Chapter 3.)

Your 10-Minute Self-Audit Checklist

Grab your phone and go down the list. Every box you can't check is a customer you're probably losing.

- Tap your own phone number** on your website from a phone. Does it actually start a call to the right number?
- Search your main service + your town.** Are you in the top 3 map results? If not, who is?
- Open your Google Business Profile.** Is every field complete, with the right categories and recent photos?
- Check your last Google post.** Was it in the last 30 days? The last year?
- Count your reviews from the last month.** Are new ones arriving steadily — and are you replying?
- Compare your name, address and phone** across Google, your website and Facebook. Do they match exactly?
- Time your website on a phone.** Is it usable and fast within a few seconds?
- Ask ChatGPT or Google's AI** "who's a good [your service] in [your town]?" Are you mentioned?

How did you score? Most local businesses miss three or more. The good news: every one of these is fixable — usually faster and for less than owners expect.

Want Us to Run This Audit **On Your Business** — Free?

You've seen what the businesses winning in Highlands County do differently. The fastest way to know exactly where you stand is to have someone do the audit for you.

We'll check your Google Business Profile, your map rankings, your reviews, your website speed and your AI-search visibility — then walk you through what we find on a quick, no-pressure call. No jargon, no obligation, and no fixed packages: just a clear picture of your biggest opportunities and a custom plan if you want one.

We're a small, local team based right here in Sebring. We've been doing this since 2007, and we don't do long-term contracts — we earn the work every month.

Get Your Free Local Audit

Book a 15-minute call or request your audit online.

sebringseo.com · (863) 777-9213

We commit to the work and report the results. We don't promise specific rankings or revenue — anyone who does isn't being straight with you.