

AEO vs SEO: Which Should Your Startup Focus on in the First 90 Days?

When I started my first company, I spent weeks obsessing over keywords and backlinks. I thought that if I could just crack the SEO code, the traffic would follow. And honestly, it did help. But something subtle had changed by the time I launched my second business. People weren't just typing queries into Google anymore. They were asking full questions to voice assistants, chatting with AI tools, and expecting direct answers rather than a list of blue links. That shift forced me to reconsider the entire playbook. Now, when I talk to founders in their first quarter, the question isn't just about SEO. It's about AEO vs SEO, and which one deserves the limited time and budget a startup has.

What AEO and SEO Actually Are

Search engine optimization, or SEO, is the practice of helping your web pages rank higher in traditional search results. It involves keyword research, meta tags, backlinks, site speed, and content structure. It has been the backbone of organic growth for two decades. Answer engine optimization, or AEO, is the newer sibling. It focuses on getting your content featured as a direct answer in voice search results, featured snippets, and generative AI summaries. Instead of driving someone to click your link, AEO tries to make your content the answer itself. Think of it as optimizing for the moment a user asks "How do I validate a startup idea?" and the search engine reads your answer out loud.

For a startup in its first 90 days, the difference matters a lot. You do not have the authority or domain history to compete on broad keywords. But you might have the clarity and specificity to win a featured answer. That tension is what makes the [AEO vs SEO](#) decision so critical for early-stage companies.

Why the First 90 Days Are Different

In the early days, you are fighting for traction. You have a product, a small team, and a ticking clock. Every hour you spend on marketing is an hour not spent on product development or customer conversations. Traditional SEO is a long game. It can take six to twelve months to see meaningful results from a new domain. If you pour all your energy into SEO from day one, you might run out of runway before the rankings arrive. AEO, on the other hand, can show quicker wins. If you answer a specific question clearly and concisely, you can land in a featured snippet or a voice search result within weeks. That does not mean AEO is easy. It means the payoff cycle is shorter, which matters when cash is tight.

I worked with a startup that made a budgeting tool for freelancers. In month one, they wrote a 300-word answer to "How much should a freelancer save for taxes?" That snippet appeared in Google's featured box within 10 days. It drove thousands of impressions and a modest stream of signups. Meanwhile, their comprehensive guide to freelance taxes, which followed every SEO best practice, did not crack the first page for three months. That contrast illustrates the practical trade-off. The AEO vs SEO decision is not about which is better in theory. It is about which delivers value sooner when you are trying to survive.

How to Decide Which to Prioritize

There is no single answer that fits every startup. But there are patterns. If your product solves a clear, definable problem that people ask about in natural language, AEO can be your fastest path to visibility. Think of tools that answer "How do I..." or "What is the best way to..." questions. Financial advice, health tips, technical how-tos, and local service queries are all ripe for AEO. If your product is more visual, experiential, or reliant on brand trust, SEO might still be the better foundation. E-commerce stores, luxury brands, and companies selling through comparison shopping often need the credibility that only organic rankings provide.

Here is a simple framework I share with founders. It is not a perfect science, but it has helped several teams avoid wasting the first quarter.

- List the five most common questions your target customers ask about your problem space. If those questions are short and direct, AEO is promising.
- Check whether any of those questions currently show a featured snippet or a voice answer. If the space is empty or poorly answered, you have an opening.
- Assess your domain authority. If your site is brand new and has no backlinks, AEO is more realistic than ranking for competitive keywords.
- Look at your competitors. If they are all playing the SEO game, a focused AEO strategy can differentiate you.
- Consider your content capacity. AEO requires concise, authoritative answers. SEO often demands longer, link-worthy pieces. Choose the format your team can execute consistently.

That last point matters more than most founders realize. I have seen startups try to do both at once and end up doing neither well. The first 90 days are about focus. Pick one primary channel and do it with intensity. You can always expand later.

How to Execute on AEO

If you decide that AEO is your best bet, the tactics are different from SEO. Start by researching the exact phrasing of questions your audience uses. Use tools like AnswerThePublic or simply mine the "People also ask" boxes on Google. Write direct, factual answers that stand alone. Structure each answer as a paragraph of 40 to 60 words, followed by a slightly deeper explanation. Use bullet points sparingly, only when a list genuinely makes the answer clearer. And include a clear, concise conclusion that restates the core answer.

One mistake I see often is trying to optimize for AEO without having any real authority on the topic. Search engines are getting better at detecting fluff. If your answer is generic, it will not get featured. You need to demonstrate genuine expertise, even in a short format. That means citing credible sources, using specific numbers, and writing with confidence. If you are not an expert on the subject, either become one or hire someone who is. The same principle applies to SEO, but the penalty for thin content is even faster in AEO because the answer is displayed directly.

How to Balance Both

Some startups can afford to work on both fronts, especially if they have a content team or a co-founder who writes. In that case, the smartest approach is to build a content pyramid. At the top are your AEO-optimized answers: short, specific, and structured for featured snippets. Below that are the longer SEO articles that expand on those answers, including internal links back to the snippet page. This way, the same piece of work feeds both strategies. Your short answer gets you quick wins, and the deeper article builds the domain authority that sustains long-term traffic.

I have used this approach myself. For a site about remote work tools, I wrote a 50-word answer to "What is the best time tracking app for freelancers?" It got featured within a week. Then I wrote a 2000-word guide comparing the top five time tracking tools, which included the short answer as a summary. Over six months, the guide accumulated backlinks and started ranking for broader terms. The short answer kept driving voice search traffic the whole time. That is the ideal scenario: the AEO vs SEO dynamic becomes complementary rather than competitive.

What GEO Adds to the Picture

You will also hear about generative engine optimization, or GEO, which is the practice of optimizing content for AI chatbots and large language models. Think of it as AEO for the ChatGPT era. Instead of optimizing for a featured snippet, you are optimizing for an AI to cite your content in a generated answer. The skills overlap heavily with AEO, but GEO puts more weight on conversational tone, structured data, and covering the full context of a question. For startups, GEO is still emerging. I would not prioritize it in the first 90 days unless your product

is specifically about AI tools or content generation. But keep it on your radar for the second quarter.

The Bottom Line for Founders

The AEO vs SEO decision comes down to timing and leverage. In the first 90 days, speed matters more than scale. AEO can give you a faster return on content investment, especially if you answer clear, high-intent questions. SEO remains the stronger long-term play for building sustainable traffic and brand authority. The best strategy is not to choose one forever. It is to choose the right starting point based on your audience, your product, and your current resources. Start with AEO if you can answer a real question better than anyone else. Start with SEO if your product needs the credibility that only organic rankings provide. And if you have the bandwidth to do both, build your content pyramid so each strategy reinforces the other.

I have seen too many startups burn their first quarter chasing rankings that will not come for months. The ones that survive are the ones that match their marketing tactics to their actual timeline. So before you write another blog post, ask yourself honestly: Am I optimizing for the search engine or for the person asking the question? Sometimes the answer is both. But in the early days, you need to know which one pays the bills first.