



The AEO Divide

Why strategy and execution
aren't matching up

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Answer engine optimization (AEO) is forcing marketing to rebuild from the inside.

AI-powered search is changing how buyers discover, evaluate, engage with, and understand brands. As AI systems sit squarely between companies and their audiences, they have become the gatekeeper of brand discoverability, and more concerningly for marketers, representation.

Marketing teams now recognize that controlling the core messages fed into answer engines is as important as the channels used to promote them. But the call to do so is proving easier than the execution: While 68% of marketing leaders report some level of AEO maturity — spanning defined roadmaps, operationalized programs across teams, and early-stage pilots — only 26% of practitioners consider themselves to be actively implementing AEO or experts in it.

Answer Engine Optimization (AEO) is the practice of structuring content, technical foundations, and authority signals so AI-powered answer engines can easily understand, trust, and surface a brand's content in generated answers.

400+

**U.S.-based marketing
professionals**

To better understand how marketing organizations are responding to this shift, we surveyed 400 marketing leaders and practitioners on their approach to AI-driven search and the operational changes required to support it.

Our research reveals four defining realities:

- ④ Brand narrative ownership is central to AEO success, as brands battle dilution from “AI slop” and misrepresentation.
- ④ Marketing leaders are actively reengineering teams and redefining roles in response to AI-driven search priorities.
- ④ Practitioners are being asked to execute against broader mandates, without enough clarity, enablement, or measurement.
- ④ A growing number of organizations are outsourcing AEO strategy to agencies, reflecting urgency and uncertainty about internal readiness.

These moments of instability are driving real shifts in roles and team structures as organizations try to keep up with the growing importance of AEO.

01

Patterns among high-maturity AEO teams

Our data shows a clear set of organizational patterns among teams that report higher AEO execution maturity.

PATTERN 1

Narrative control is top of mind

AI search has brands worried about how their narrative is showing up for audiences. LLMs and AI search engines interpret and summarize brand content, often synthesizing from multiple sources. Because these outputs are non-deterministic, the same query can produce different answers at different moments in time.

That variability makes it especially difficult to maintain narrative control and consistency. Without intentional optimization, even small inconsistencies in source content can lead an LLM or AI search engine to misrepresent a brand — creating experiences that feel off-message or misaligned with buyer expectations. From there, trust erodes quickly, and buyers become disengaged.

This helps explain why accuracy and consistency of brand and key messages rank among leaders' top concerns when measuring AEO success.

"Webflow exists to empower creativity, so how our story is told is something we're very intentional about. As AI increasingly influences how people discover our brand, we're investing heavily in practices to protect that narrative and ensure our story is told the way we intend!"



Marissa Kraines

VP, Brand Marketing, Webflow

How leaders are thinking about AEO success

Leaders indicated the top two ways they're measuring AEO success:

Accurate representation of our brand in LLMs

38%

Consistency of our key messages in LLM-generated answers

38%

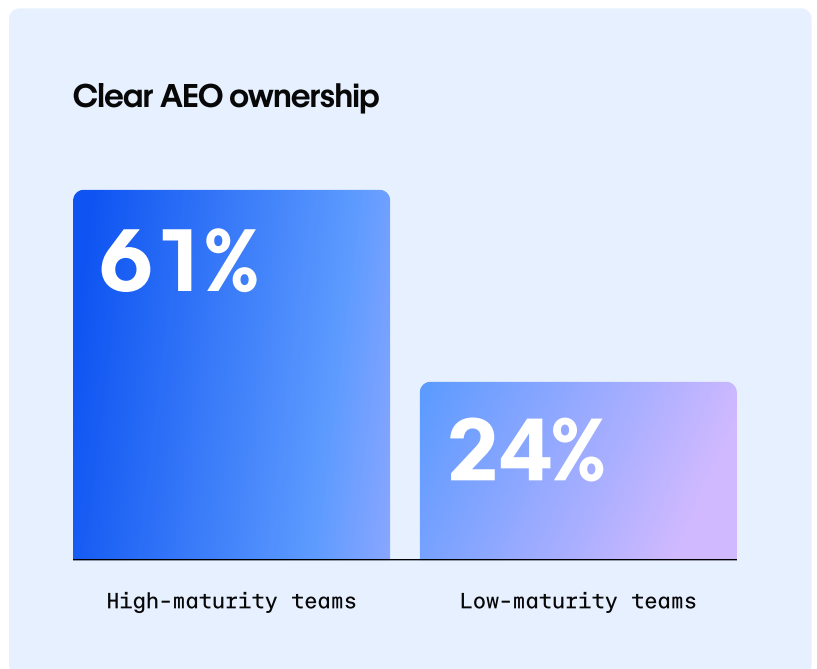
Practitioners agree at a more tactical level, reporting what they find hardest about optimizing for answer engines: writing concise, direct content that balances AI optimization with human readability. When narrative inputs are fragmented, AI systems flatten them, resulting in generic or diluted brand representation.

That risk is one reason high-maturity teams work to remove the ambiguity around who is responsible for AEO. While few organizations reported having formalized narrative ownership, attention to consistent narrative inputs tends to appear alongside stronger AEO execution.

PATTERN 2

Ownership is clear

High-maturity teams are significantly more likely to report having internal alignment on who owns AEO across the organization.



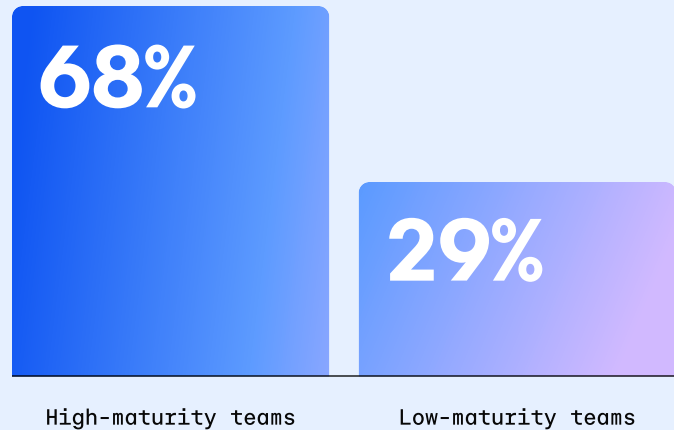
In practice, this usually looks like a specific person or team being responsible for AEO strategy and coordination — even if AEO is only part of their remit. These organizations have moved past the ambiguity of who is thinking about AEO and driving it forward, which helps reduce friction as AEO work spans SEO, content, brand, and web.

PATTERN 3

Workflows are scalable

High-maturity teams are significantly more likely to operate with repeatable content workflows that scale, enabling consistency, faster iteration, and easier maintenance as content volume grows.

Structured, systematized content workflows



In practice, these teams:

- ➔ **Standardize content structures** (e.g., FAQs, answer sections, author attribution, freshness indicators) so updates can be applied across many pages
- ➔ **Embed AEO into core content workflows**, rather than treating it as a one-off optimization after publishing
- ➔ **Employ strong technical foundations** (e.g., schema, internal linking, sitemaps, AI-readable metadata, accessibility metadata) to ensure content is consistently structured and easily discoverable

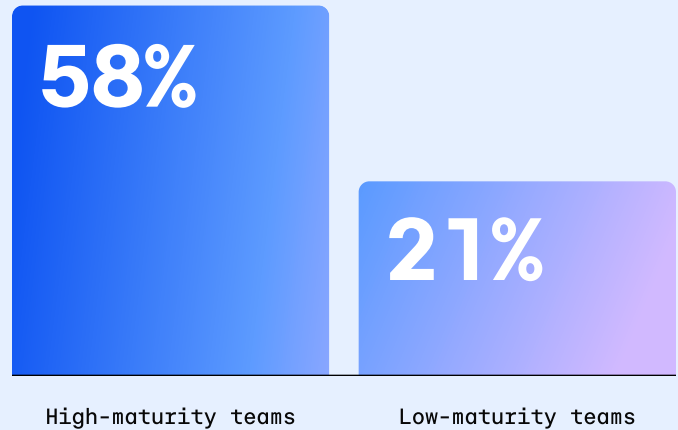
Instead of optimizing content one page at a time, high-maturity teams rely on **workflow- and system-level processes** that create consistency, align teams, and provide guardrails to protect brand accuracy and reputation as content scales.

PATTERN 4

AI visibility tracking is prioritized

High-maturity teams are more likely to report early adoption of AI visibility and answer-level tracking.

Early adoption of AI visibility and answer-level tracking



While standards for AEO measurement are still forming, these teams are building early benchmarks that support learning, alignment, and faster course correction. This enthusiasm is echoed in the data, with leaders pointing to a focused set of KPIs they prioritize when measuring AEO success.

Top 3 KPIs leaders are looking to improve through AEO:

- ➔ Traffic from AI engines (ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, Perplexity)
- ➔ Google AI Overviews presence
- ➔ Brand visibility score from AI tracking tool

02

How AEO exposes deeper organizational gaps

As AI systems interpret, summarize, and reframe brand information on behalf of buyers, long-standing assumptions about ownership, skills, and execution are being challenged.

What used to look like a channel-level optimization problem is now exposing deeper organizational constraints. The shift to answer-first discovery is revealing gaps in how quickly teams can adapt to changing AI systems and answer logic, often because of limited training and enablement that make it harder to pivot smoothly as AI-driven search evolves.

Together, these changes are forcing marketing leaders to rethink not just what their teams do, but how they are designed to do it.

The skills marketing teams are missing

High-maturity teams are significantly more likely to report having internal alignment on who owns AEO across the organization.

Many marketing practitioners report feeling underprepared to execute AEO strategies with confidence.

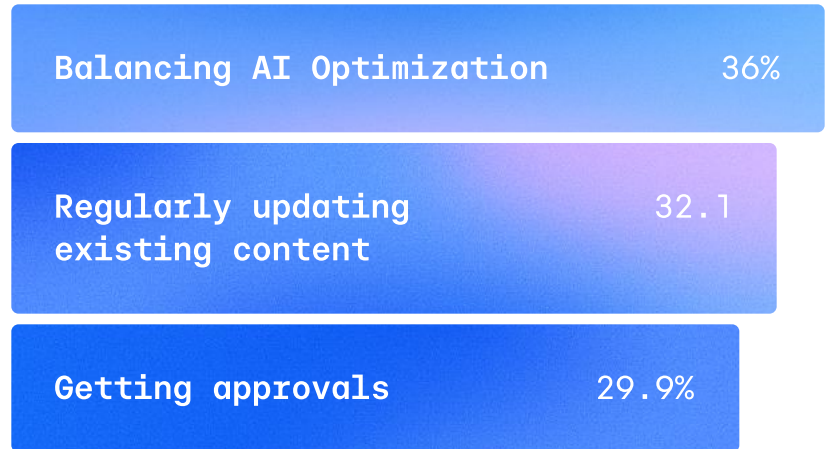
34.8%

of practitioners report that they haven't yet changed their workflows for AEO

When practitioners were asked what they find hardest about optimizing for answer engines, the most common challenges were clustered around areas that require applied judgment — including measurement and benchmarking, adapting to frequently changing requirements, balancing AI optimization with human readability, and writing clear, concise content.

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Top 3 practitioner-reported areas of difficulty when optimizing for answer engines:



These challenges reflect the difficulty of translating strategy into repeatable workflows in an environment where rules are still forming and feedback loops are limited.

Training and enablement have yet to catch up to this shift. While most practitioners claim to have completed some form of AEO training (or plan to), only 23% report receiving hands-on instruction. This gap between execution complexity and training depth explains why AEO work often feels experimental rather than operationalized.

These findings reinforce a central theme:

How brands are perceived is no longer in their full control, so teams need to be able to confidently take action to optimize for answer engines. But AEO is presenting a skills depth and operational fluency challenge. And marketing leaders are responding with organizational change.

How leaders are reengineering teams for AEO

48%

of marketing leaders report working with external agencies to support AEO strategy or planning

49%

say they plan to increase agency involvement in AEO-related work over the next 12 months

Marketing leaders report taking active steps to adapt their organizations for answer-first search, reflecting a growing acknowledgement that AEO requires both new capabilities and formalized support.

Leaders point to investing in several actions for AEO success, including:

- ➔ Defining AEO strategies and roadmaps
- ➔ Expanding responsibilities and setting higher expectations for SEO and content teams
- ➔ Enabling greater cross-functional collaboration across SEO, content, brand, and web teams

Alongside these internal changes, many leaders are augmenting their teams with agency support to accelerate AEO strategy development and execution.

Agency support is helping teams make progress, though most practitioners view it as a helpful boost rather than a complete solution. In practice, agencies are playing an important role as accelerants — helping teams learn faster, shape strategy, and test approaches. The teams seeing the most value are pairing that expertise with clear internal ownership, driving repeatable execution over time.

Despite skill gaps, shifting resource allocation, and organizational changes, AEO is only increasing in importance, so teams need to push forward.

From the research, four clear moves emerged that enable teams for AEO success.

03

Four moves to drive AEO success

MOVE 1

Establish ownership & success metrics

Clarify who owns AEO and what success looks like.

Right now, only a small number of teams report having clearly defined AEO ownership, and practitioners consistently point to unclear ownership and measurement as major roadblocks in their day-to-day work. Without a named owner and shared success criteria, AEO efforts can stay stuck in experimental mode and never really scale. In practice, the most effective AEO owners often come from an SEO background, since the work builds on technical optimization, content strategy, and performance measurement.

This lines up with a bigger disconnect we're seeing in our data. While 68% of marketing leaders report having a defined, operationalized, or piloted AEO strategy, only 26% of practitioners claim to be actively implementing or are experts in AEO. That's a fundamental misalignment in how leadership and practitioners define AEO ownership and success.

Action plan:

- ➔ Select a role/team to own AEO at your org
- ➔ Align on an initial set of success indicators
- ➔ Set up regular check-ins to evaluate progress

MOVE 2

Prioritize training & set expectations

Prioritize enablement and training before raising expectations.

Only 23% of practitioners report receiving hands-on AEO training, with most training described as “high-level” or still in the planning stages.

This isn't new: SEO was also an evolving discipline shaped by frequent algorithm changes that required teams to continually refresh their internal training. AEO demands the same mindset.

Action plan:

- ➔ Require practical training on AEO fundamentals
- ➔ Share AEO resources across your team to support consistent execution
- ➔ Ensure your team has clear examples and reference content to follow

MOVE 3

Tap agencies for strategy & development

Currently, 48% of marketing leaders are working with agencies to support AEO strategy or planning, and 49% plan to increase agency involvement over the next year. That planned increase shows just how strategically important AEO has become — often expanding the scope of work with existing agency partners rather than bringing on entirely new ones.

While practitioners find agency support helpful, it's not transformative on its own — only one in four describe it as better than moderately effective. That reflects where agencies add the most value: strategy, structure, and speed, rather than end-to-end execution. The teams seeing the strongest results are pairing agency expertise with clear internal ownership, building toward repeatable execution over time.

Action plan:

- ④ Use agencies to help define AEO strategy
- ④ Leverage agencies for experimentation and ongoing education
- ④ Strengthen internal ownership alongside agency partnership to manage day-to-day execution

MOVE 4

Invest in early measurement & benchmarking

Practitioners often say the rules for measuring AEO success are unclear, and only a portion of teams are actively tracking AI-generated brand visibility or LLM-referred traffic. Meanwhile, high-maturity teams are significantly more likely to invest early in AI visibility tracking — even when the metrics aren't perfect.

The contrast here is telling: Because standards for AEO measurement are still forming, many teams hesitate to start measuring at all. But waiting for perfect standards may actually delay learning rather than reduce risk.

Metrics are only as useful as the context surrounding them. High-performing teams make sure to understand this context by tracking which sources are cited in AI answers, how their products are described, and whether those descriptions stay consistent across different questions and responses.

Action plan:

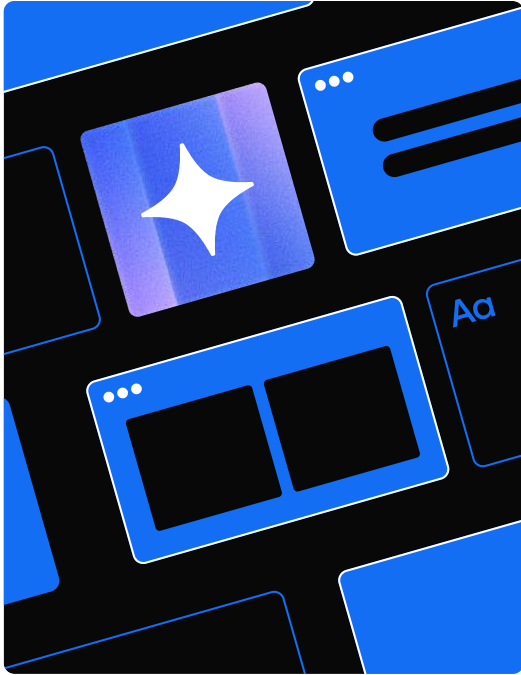
- ➔ Track LLM-referred visits and conversions as a separate channel
- ➔ Monitor brand mentions in LLMs across priority audience questions, informed by search data, sales insights, and community signals

04

Conclusion

While most teams recognize the importance of AEO, many underestimate how high the cost of getting it wrong can be.

Conclusion



When AI systems interpret and summarize brand information, representation becomes variable. Narratives can fragment and consistency breaks down. And when buyers encounter experiences that don't match what they expect, trust erodes.

That erosion shows up as lower website traffic, lower conversion rates, slower sales cycles, and lost revenue throughout the funnel.

High-maturity teams aren't waiting for perfect standards. They're acting now by clarifying ownership, aligning teams, creating repeatable workflows, setting benchmarks, and accelerating all of this work with agency support.

A living system like AEO requires flexibility as the rules change, and these patterns across high-maturity teams illustrate organizational readiness to support it.

Webflow is designed to support this kind of flexibility — bringing content creation, optimization, and analysis into a single, shared environment.

Every discipline on the marketing team can move faster, stay aligned, and maintain brand consistency at scale, all while giving their development counterparts the code visibility, flexibility, and control they need.

As AI becomes the main way people discover information, organizational readiness will be the difference between AEO programs that generate real business results and fragmented efforts that drain resources without returns.

05

Methodology

Audience breakdown

Webflow conducted a survey of

400+

U.S.-based marketing professionals, including:

100+ marketing leaders

300+ marketing practitioners

to understand how teams are adapting their organizations, skills, and workflows for Answer Engine Optimization (AEO).

Responses were collected across a range of industries and company sizes. All findings are based on self-reported data.

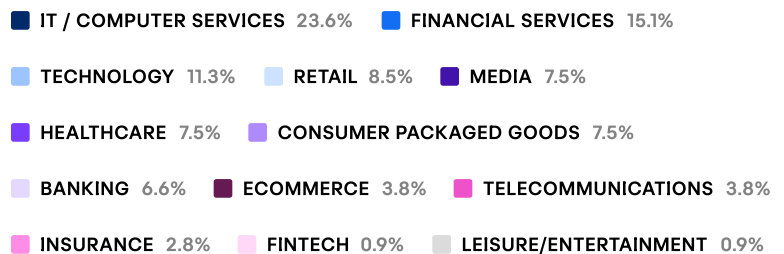
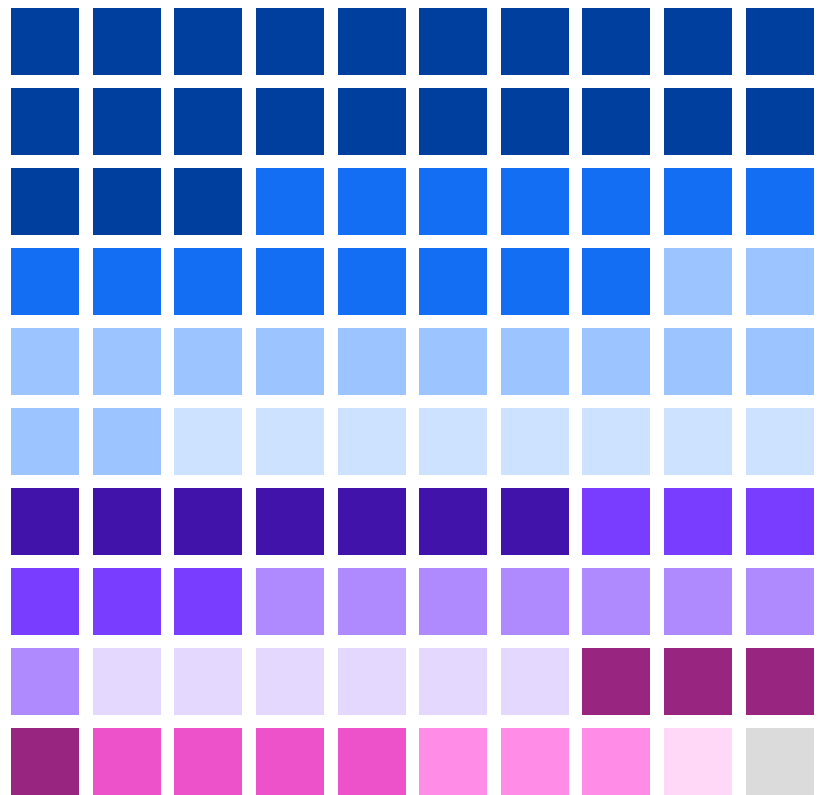
Defining AEO execution maturity

High-maturity teams were identified based on practitioner-reported execution signals, including hands-on AEO implementation, structured content workflows, early measurement practices, and intentional operational changes.

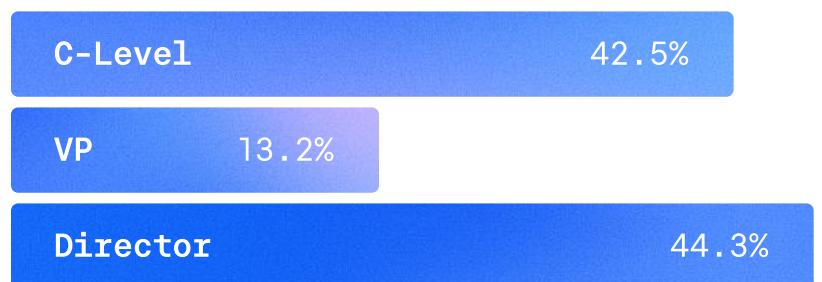
Marketing Leaders

Respondents responsible for strategy, resourcing, and organizational direction.

Industry Coverage



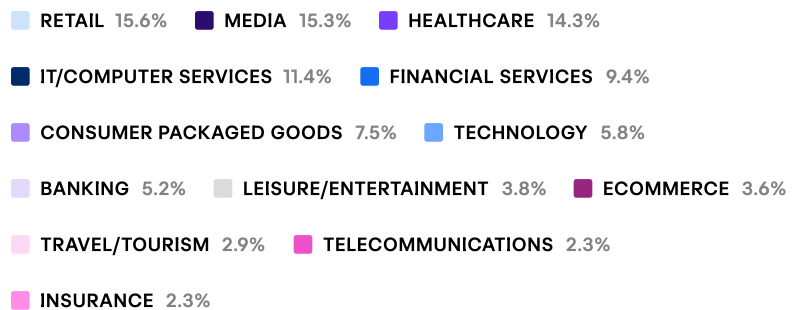
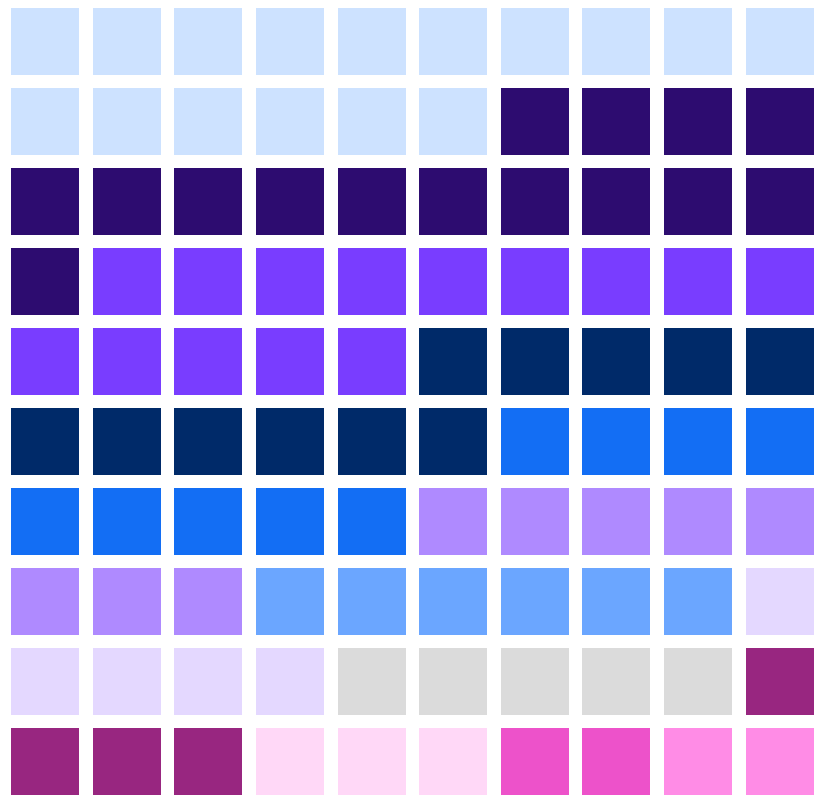
Marketing Leadership Level



Marketing Practitioners

Respondents responsible for day-to-day execution across content, SEO, web, and related functions.

Industry Coverage



Practitioner Roles

Digital Marketing

Growth Marketing

Content Marketing

Performance Marketing

Web Marketing

Assess the state of your website.

Is your site ready for AI search? Get a free AEO assessment to analyze how prepared your site is for the new era of discoverability. You'll get insights into how effectively your brand is likely to be interpreted for large language models, and what still needs attention.

[Evaluate my website →](#)

