



The State of AEO & GEO in 2026.

What South African CMOs Need to Know.

Global data. Local implications. A practical guide to

AI search visibility for brands competing in the

South African market.

Data sourced from Conductor's 2026 AEO/GEO CMO Investment Report

(250+ enterprise executives surveyed globally).

Prepared by Algorithm Agency · March 2026

Executive Summary

AI is rewriting the rules of brand discovery. The shift from traditional search to AI-driven answers is accelerating globally, and it is already reshaping how South African consumers find and trust brands.

A global survey of 250+ enterprise leaders reveals that 94% plan to increase AEO/GEO investment in 2026. Enterprises already dedicate an average of 12% of digital budgets to AI search optimisation. For SA brands competing against global players with deeper pockets, the window to establish AI visibility is narrowing fast.

AEO/GEO is not just gaining traction. It is now the **#1 strategic priority for 2026**, outpacing paid channels. Forward-thinking executives are leaning in because **AI-driven visitors convert at higher rates and in fewer sessions**, validating its impact on revenue.

94%

of global enterprises plan to increase AEO/GEO spend in

12%

average share of digital budgets now allocated to

97%

report a positive impact on their overall marketing funnel

Four Signals Every SA CMO Should Act On

Budgets Are Moving Fast. Global enterprises allocated 12% of digital budgets to AEO/GEO in 2025, and 56% reported high or significant investment. SA brands spending less than this risk ceding AI visibility to competitors willing to invest.

Upskilling Beats Outsourcing. 64% of enterprises plan to upskill existing marketing teams rather than outsource. For SA businesses, this means your current SEO team needs AI search skills now, or a specialist partner like Algorithm to bridge the gap.

Data Quality Is the Top Pain Point. Scraping-based AEO tools are failing. Leaders are shifting to API-based monitoring for reliable AI visibility data. SA brands need trustworthy measurement before they can optimise effectively.

Content at Scale Is Not Enough. High-maturity organisations prioritise original research and first-party data over volume. In a market like SA where local expertise matters, this creates a powerful advantage for brands producing unique, locally relevant insights.

About the Study

Conductor surveyed over **250 executives, digital marketing, AEO/GEO/SEO, and content leaders** who manage or oversee AEO/SEO efforts at enterprise-level organisations (500+ employees) across 12+ industries in the U.S.

Respondent Profile

Segment	Breakdown
C-suite	48% of respondents
Marketing / Digital Leaders	45% of respondents
AEO/SEO/GEO Specialists	6% of respondents
Content Leaders	1% of respondents

Top Industries Represented

Industry	Share
Financial Services	20%
Retail & eCommerce	20%
Technology	18%
Manufacturing	13%
Healthcare	9%

Why This Matters for SA

While the survey is US-focused, AI search is borderless. South African consumers use ChatGPT, Gemini, and Copilot daily. Global brands appearing in AI answers compete directly with SA businesses for local customers. The insights in this report apply to any brand that wants to be visible where AI is sending traffic.

AEO/GEO Maturity Breakdown

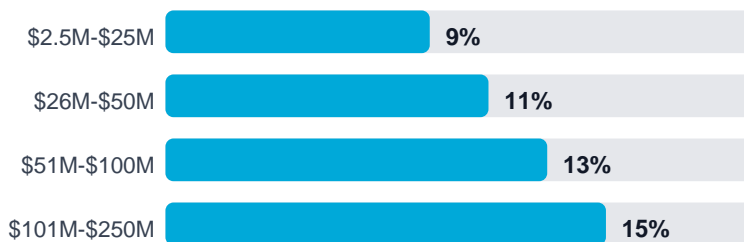


Most respondents fall into medium maturity (40%), with a third at high maturity. We estimate most SA organisations would currently sit in the low-maturity bracket, presenting a significant first-mover opportunity.

AEO/GEO Investment Trends

Investment in AI search optimisation has moved from experimental to essential. In 2025, **56% of enterprises reported high or significant AEO investment**, with the average organisation dedicating 12% of its total digital marketing budget to AEO/GEO efforts.

Budget Allocation by Marketing Spend



Even organisations with smaller marketing budgets are allocating nearly 10% to AEO/GEO. If you are allotting less than 12-15% of your overall budget to AEO/GEO, you risk falling behind competitors who are committed to securing market share in the new search landscape.

2026 Investment Direction



High AEO/GEO maturity organisations are **2x as likely** as medium maturity and **3x as likely** as low maturity organisations to significantly increase AEO/GEO investments in 2026. They recognise the value of adopting more advanced and specialised technology to monitor, measure, and optimise AI performance.

Resourcing Strategy

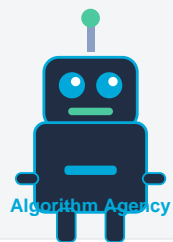
When it comes to resourcing, enterprise leaders agree that **the best strategy for 2026 is investing internally**. Nearly two-thirds (64%) plan to upskill current SEO and marketing teams. 29% plan to hire new AEO-specific roles. Only 7% plan to outsource to agencies or consultants.

For SA businesses, this signals a need for specialist capability. Whether you build it in-house or partner with an agency like Algorithm that has deep AEO/GEO expertise, the skills gap needs closing now.



The global data is clear: 94% of enterprise leaders are increasing AEO/GEO budgets. But for South African CMOs, this is not just a trend to watch. It is a competitive threat. International brands optimising for AI search will appear in answers to queries your local customers are asking right now.

SA brands that move first on AEO/GEO will own the AI answer space before global competitors figure out local context. That is your edge: deep market knowledge combined with technical execution. Do not wait for the budget cycle. Start reallocating now.



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AEO/GEO Technology Landscape

51% of organisations now use a fully integrated AEO platform for their strategy, while 42% rely on multiple siloed point solutions. Organisations with high AEO/GEO maturity are about **6x more likely** to use a fully integrated platform than low maturity organisations.

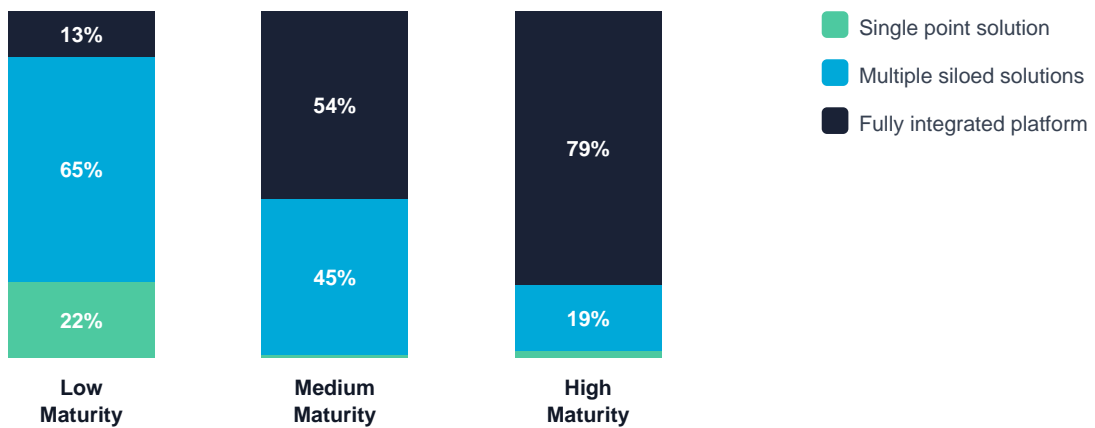
Most Valued Technology Features

- 1 AI search/AEO/GEO visibility (brand mention and domain citation tracking)
- 2 Comprehensive answer engine coverage (ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, Copilot)
- 3 Intelligent content optimisation recommendations for AI search share
- 4 Competitor benchmarking in AI results (market share, leaderboard)
- 5 AI/answer engine referral traffic measurement

Biggest Technology Pain Points

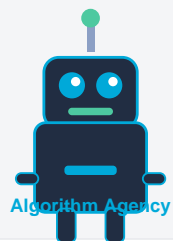
- 1 Data quality and trustworthiness of visibility insights
- 2 Siloed capabilities: need for too many tools to accomplish AEO/GEO goals
- 3 Limited ROI clarity or performance measurement
- 4 Limited coverage or depth of monitoring
- 5 Lack of customisation/brand voice alignment with generated content

Technology Use by AEO/GEO Maturity



Data quality is the number one pain point globally, and in South Africa it is even more acute. Most local tools do not track AI visibility at all, and the ones that do are often scraping-based: fragile, incomplete data that changes every time an LLM updates its interface.

At Algorithm, we use proprietary API-based monitoring to track real LLM mentions across ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, and Copilot. This gives our clients trustworthy, repeatable data that forms the foundation for every optimisation decision. If your current approach can not tell you where your brand appears in AI answers, it is time to upgrade.



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AEO/GEO Strategy and Impact

97% of respondents reported that AEO/GEO had a positive impact on their overall marketing funnel in 2025. Only 1% reported a negative impact. Despite disruptions to traditional SEO metrics like traffic, executives and leaders are seeing the value of AEO/GEO within their strategies.

AEO/GEO is not just gaining traction. It is now the **#1 strategic priority for 2026**, outpacing paid channels. 92% of enterprises already track AEO/GEO performance, and AI-driven visitors convert at higher rates and in fewer sessions, validating its direct impact on revenue.

Top AI Referral Sources

ChatGPT contributed the largest share of AI referral traffic, followed by **Google Gemini** and **Microsoft Copilot**. Benchmarks show that 87% of all AI referral traffic across 10 analysed industries came from ChatGPT, aligning with its 500M+ weekly users.

Top Content Strategies for AEO/GEO

- 1 AI content generation at scale to increase topical authority
- 2 Structured data and Schema implementation
- 3 Authoritative long-form guides with first-party data

Importantly, **high-maturity organisations were the only group to prioritise creating original research reports based on first-party data**. Publishing exclusive statistics or data points provides users with unique insights they can not get anywhere else. This is exactly the kind of authoritative content that AI models are most likely to cite directly.

AI Search Visibility Challenges

- 1 Creating AI-search optimised content at scale
- 2 Difficulty measuring impact and ROI
- 3 Unable to monitor if content is being crawled by LLMs/AI bots

The biggest challenge among C-suite leaders is the inability to create AI search-optimised content at scale. For marketing/digital leaders, the lack of visibility into whether their content is being crawled by LLMs ranked highest. In AI search, impact can not be measured by traffic and conversions alone: visibility, mentions, and sentiment are just as critical.



The global study confirms what we have been telling SA clients: generating AI content at scale is the number one strategy, but only if it is backed by structured data and genuine expertise. Volume without quality will not get you cited. LLMs are getting smarter at filtering noise.

For South African brands, we recommend a three-layer approach: first, implement Schema and structured data across your site. Second, build authoritative long-form content around your core topics using first-party data. Third, monitor your AI visibility weekly and iterate. The brands winning AI search are not the loudest. They are the most useful.



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What This Means for SA CMOs

South African brands face the same AI search challenges as global enterprises, plus additional local factors that create both risk and opportunity.

- **Limited local AEO/GEO expertise.** SA's digital marketing talent pool has minimal AI search optimisation experience. While global enterprises are hiring dedicated AEO specialists, most SA teams have not even started the conversation. Upskilling or partnering with specialists is essential.
- **Multi-language complexity.** Content in English, Afrikaans, Zulu, and other official languages all needs AI optimisation. LLMs are increasingly multilingual, and brands that optimise across languages will capture more AI answer visibility.
- **Smaller budgets, bigger impact potential.** SA CMOs can not match global enterprise spend, but targeted AEO/GEO in niche local categories can deliver outsized results. A focused strategy on 50 high-value keywords can generate more AI visibility than a broad, unfocused approach.
- **First-mover advantage is real.** Most SA competitors have not started any AEO/GEO initiatives. Those who act now will establish AI answer visibility that compounds over time, making it significantly harder for late-movers to catch up.

Your 90-Day AEO/GEO Action Plan

Five moves SA CMOs should make right now to capture AI search visibility before competitors do.

01

Audit Your AI Visibility

Run a visibility audit across ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, and Copilot for your top 50 keywords.

NOW

02

Implement Schema and Structured Data

Deploy comprehensive Schema markup across your site to improve LLM crawlability and citation probability.

NOW

03

Build Answer-First Content

Rewrite your top 20 pages to lead with direct, factual answers that AI models can cite.

30 DAYS

04

Establish Weekly AI Monitoring

Set up tracking of brand mentions, citations, and sentiment across all major LLMs.

60 DAYS

05

Create First-Party Research Assets

Publish original data, surveys, or market reports unique to your industry in SA.

90 DAYS

Get Your Free AEO/GEO Visibility Report

See exactly where your brand appears (and does not appear) in AI search results. No cost. No commitment.

<https://algorithm-performance-geo.vercel.app>

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Or scan the QR code to access your report instantly.



Scan to get started

Data and statistics referenced throughout this report are sourced from Conductor's *The State of AEO/GEO in 2026: CMO Investment Report* (January 2026). Analysis, commentary, and South African market context provided by Algorithm Agency.