RESEARCH-BACKED OPERATING PLAYBOOK

Build first. Measure second. Cut last.

A single content lifecycle for new and established client sites, with one decision system for Google rankings and AI answer-engine visibility.

Research snapshot: September 26, 2026

The governing rule

Site age never overrides page age. A six-month-old site can contain a one-month-old page that is still too new to judge.

Principle Timeline Triage AI visibility Cadence Client use Evidence

01 / OPERATING PRINCIPLE

Build and prune are stages, not competing strategies.

New sites need enough complete, connected coverage to be understood. Established sites need discipline: improve pages with evidence, merge overlap, and remove only when every value test fails.

0–6 mo	6–18 mo	All ages
Build the map	**Improve the inventory**	**Protect hidden value**

Technical foundation, service architecture, internal links, and complete topic clusters. Do not use early silence as a deletion signal.	Use 12-month URL-level data where available. Refresh is the default; consolidation is the next move.	Check conversions, backlinks, sales-assist value, customer use, and topic-cluster coverage before changing a URL.

02 / PAGE-LEVEL TIMELINE

A page earns time before it earns judgment.

The clock begins when a page is published or materially changed. Use this timeline on every URL, even when the domain itself is older.

WEEKS 0–4

Index & connect

- Submit through Search Console.
- Add meaningful internal links.
- Confirm indexability, sitemap inclusion, and intent match.

1

MONTHS 1–3

Observe

- Watch impressions and query discovery.
- Correct technical failures only.
- Do not rewrite because traffic is still low.

2

MONTHS 3–6

Diagnose

- Compare actual queries with intended intent.
- Add internal links and missing evidence.
- Hold structural cuts unless duplication is proven.

3

MONTH 6+

Intervene

- If still outside the top 20 with no upward movement, change something.
- Rewrite for observed queries, strengthen links, or reconsider the target.
- Use a full prune decision only with mature data.

4

Timing is directional, not a promise. Practitioner sources place indexing around 1–4 weeks and meaningful new-site traffic around 6–12 months, with 1–3 months possible in lower-competition local niches. Competitive markets can take longer.

Sources: **SubscribePR**, **Tech Business News**. Practitioner estimates, not Google guarantees.

03 / URL TRIAGE

Five outcomes. Remove is the last one.

Review query-level Search Console data, analytics conversions, URL-level referring domains, intent, and strategic purpose together. Traffic alone cannot decide a page's fate.

Keep

Stable or growing, aligned to the business, and not competing with another URL.

ACTION

Light maintenance only. Avoid rewriting a page that already works.

Improve

Real impressions, usually position 5–25, but weak clicks or a sustained decline.

ACTION

Refresh the answer, evidence, title, internal links, and passage structure.

Consolidate

Two or more URLs earn impressions for the same query or serve the same intent.

ACTION

Merge into the strongest survivor, 301 the rest, then fix internal links.

Remove / noindex

No traffic, rankings, links, conversions, relevance, or user purpose.

ACTION

301 if history exists; 404/410 only when truly valueless; noindex if users still need it.

Quick triage

Check what is true for one mature page. This is a routing aid, not an automated verdict.

- [ ] Published or materially changed less than 3 months ago
- [ ] Has meaningful impressions or ranks roughly 5–25
- [ ] Another URL earns impressions for the same query or intent
- [ ] Has conversions, useful backlinks, sales/support value, or completes a topic cluster
- [ ] Topic is obsolete or no longer relevant to the business

RECOMMENDED ROUTE

Start with the evidence

Choose the signals that apply. The youngest-page rule and proven cannibalization override traffic scores.

Trend

Use quarters, not a short spike.

Relevance

Does demand and business fit remain?

Overlap

Check query → Pages in GSC.

Authority

Screen URL-level referring domains.

Purpose

Sales, support, and cluster value count.

Framework sources: **Shortlist**, **Ten Speed**, **Inoriseo**. Thresholds are practitioner conventions, not Google rules.

04 / SEARCH + ANSWER ENGINES

One source of truth, five retrieval surfaces.

Classic SEO and answer-engine visibility share crawlability, quality, and structure. They diverge in where authority comes from and what success looks like: a rank in Google versus a citation or brand mention in an answer.

G

Google / Gemini

Google index, site quality, Search Console evidence, Google Business Profile, and Maps.

C

ChatGPT

Bing-indexed pages plus third-party consumer sources; Yelp now licenses local data into relevant ChatGPT categories.

A

Claude

Web-search citations with its own retrieval and safety filters. Test real prompts instead of assuming Google rank transfers.

P

Perplexity

Passage-level retrieval that favors clean, specific, recent, and directly evidenced answers.

B

Copilot

Bing grounding and Bing Places. Verified, complete business entity data matters.

On-site: make answers extractable

Off-site: make the entity corroborated

1. Lead with a direct answer under a question-mirroring heading.
2. Write self-contained passages with explicit subjects.
3. Add verifiable statistics, named sources, and attributed expert quotes.
4. Use FAQ, Article, HowTo, and LocalBusiness schema where appropriate.
5. Keep visible update dates and correct stale facts.

+30–40%

Visibility gains reported for citations, expert quotations, and verifiable statistics in secondary summaries of the 2024 Princeton/Georgia Tech GEO study. Exact method figures vary by summary.

1. Complete and reconcile Google Business Profile, Yelp, and Bing Places.
2. Keep name, address, phone, services, hours, and category descriptions consistent.
3. Earn specific recent reviews and respond consistently.
4. Seek local press, industry mentions, podcasts, and expert quotations.
5. Publish original data worth citing.

0.664 vs 0.218

Ahrefs' 75,000-brand study reported a stronger correlation between branded web mentions and AI Overview visibility than backlinks. Correlation does not prove causation.

Do not build an "LLM-only" layer. Google says normal SEO works for AI Overviews and AI Mode, and major platforms do not use `llms.txt`. Spend effort on accessible pages, evidence, structure, and corroborated entity data instead.

Sources: **Search Engine Land**; GEO study summaries at **MKT4EDU** and **ALM Corp**; mention study summary at **DEV**.

05 / OPERATING CADENCE

Turn the research into a repeatable agency rhythm.

The system works only if every change is logged, measured, and separated from the next wave long enough to read the result.

MONTHLY

Visibility pulse

- Run a fixed customer-prompt set across ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, Perplexity, and Copilot.
- Log cited sources, brand mentions, competitors, and description accuracy.
- Review GSC striking-distance queries and AI referral traffic.

QUARTERLY

Decay review

- Flag pages older than six months with two declining quarters.
- Check titles where CTR is materially weak relative to position.
- Audit citation-earning pages before any consolidation or removal.
- Refresh this research layer against platform changes.

EVERY 12–18 MONTHS

Full inventory

- Pull 12 months of URL-level GSC, GA4, conversion, and backlink data.
- Route every mature URL to keep, improve, consolidate, remove/noindex, or leave alone.
- Execute 20–30 URLs per wave, then measure for 4–8 weeks.

Measurement window. Expect normal noise in the first 30 days. Consolidation effects often appear in 60–90 days; site-quality reassessment can take several months, with no guaranteed lift. Measure each batch against its own 90-day baseline.

Sources: **Inoriseo**, **Ten Speed**, **netcontentseo**.

06 / APPLY IT NOW

Different clients enter at different stages.

A single agency process can still produce different actions. The entry point depends on the age and evidence of each page set.

YOUNG PAGES ON A MATURING SITE

ESTABLISHED CONTENT LIBRARY

RJ Sun

Current move: hold, measure, and improve foundations.

The town pages are roughly one month old, so the domain's broader age does not make those URLs mature. Preserve the planned December data check, compare 90-day GSC performance at that point, and make redirect decisions page by page. Proven cannibalization can still justify an earlier merge, but silence alone cannot.

Canadian Board Co.

Current move: audit before adding another blog wave.

Inventory the existing blog library, identify position 5–25 pages with real impressions, test query overlap, and refresh or merge the strongest opportunities first. Add new articles only for verified topic gaps that the current library cannot satisfy.

07 / EVIDENCE & LIMITS

Use the framework confidently. Use the numbers cautiously.

The strongest conclusion is the sequence: build, observe, improve, consolidate, and remove only with a full failure set. Exact thresholds and before/after lifts are mostly practitioner evidence.

What remains open

- No study isolates pruning from redirects, internal linking, and content refreshes.
- No quantified study shows whether deleting a currently AI-cited page harms future citations. Audit citations before pruning.
- Answer engines vary between repeated runs. Measure rates and direction, not a single result.
- Per-engine ranking formulas and many local recommendation thresholds remain thin or undisclosed.

▼ Working thresholds, not Google rules

Positions 5–25, fewer than 10 clicks in 12 months, position past roughly 40 for six months, 20–30 URL waves, and similar cutoffs are practitioner conventions. They seed investigation; they do not decide a URL.

▶ Why pruning can help

▶ Why mass deletion is dangerous

1. Shortlist: Content Pruning SEO — live-verified practitioner framework.
2. Search Engine Land: The data-backed case for publishing less.
3. Ten Speed: Content Pruning Framework.
4. Inoriseo: Content Pruning for Law Firm Websites.
5. GSQI: Remove vs. Improve Low-Quality Content.
6. PPC Land: SE Ranking new-domain experiment.
7. Search Engine Land: SEO vs. GEO.
8. Go Fish Digital: Yelp and ChatGPT local data.
9. PPC Land: AI Overviews CTR study coverage.
10. Seer Interactive: 2026 AI Overview CTR update.