

You Cannot Build AIO on Top of SEO Debt

There is a lot of attention right now on AI optimization. It's exciting. New tools. New potential. New expectations about how content will surface and perform inside this emerging platform.

That excitement makes sense.

But behind every conversation about AIO, there's a bill waiting to be paid.

AI can't replace fundamentals like SEO. It has to be built on top of them.

I've spent months inside systems that were never designed with SEO in mind. CMS platforms where alt text was optional. Blogs published without metadata. Images uploaded without sizing standards. Pages launched without clear structure or intent.

None of this was careless. It reflected the priorities of leadership at the time these foundational tools were being established.

Over time, those decisions accumulate. When I worked in the technology industry, developers spoke often about technical debt. For marketers, this same pattern shows up as the accumulation of decisions not to prioritize SEO. I've started calling this SEO debt.

SEO debt doesn't announce itself loudly. It shows up as inconsistent discoverability. As reporting that feels unclear even when the work is strong. As campaigns that struggle to scale despite good strategy and solid content.

Right now, many marketing leaders are encountering this as their teams prepare to lean into AI. The interest is there. The urgency is there. Then the realization hits that the foundation, SEO, is built on something closer to sand than solid stone.

AIO works by amplifying what already exists. It can't repair what was never structured.

When SEO foundations are inconsistent or incomplete, AI has nothing stable to build on. The result isn't failure, but fragility. Performance becomes harder to predict. Insights become harder to trust. Scale feels riskier than it should.

The work required to resolve SEO debt can feel like menial busywork. Image audits.

Metadata cleanup. Shoring up structural consistency. Governance decisions that no one notices unless they're missing.

But this work is a signal of marketing leadership at its best.

Choosing to address SEO debt before chasing AIO gains is a strategic decision. It protects future campaigns. It protects trust in analytics. It protects teams from constantly recalibrating expectations based on flawed or incomplete data.

I've mentioned before that I've been using AI since its early beta phase, and I genuinely love what it's unlocking for marketers. I'm also realistic about what it requires.

New capabilities don't erase the need for strong foundations. They only make weak ones more fragile.

Note to self: The next step only works if the foundation can hold it.

I recently documented a small, practical example of what this looks like in action. If you're interested in the mechanics behind it, I shared a short case study here:

<https://lnkd.in/esysJQaV>