

9/30/2026

Start With a Strong Foundation

Katie Elzer-Peters



These days managing technology updates can feel like dancing on a knife's edge. More specifically, dancing on the edge of a knife that's in the dishwasher with forks sticking up all around it. Make a wrong move and lose your Instagram account. Leave the wrong box checked and your website doesn't get indexed and therefore it doesn't get found by search engines. Forget to install recaptcha and get inundated by spam.

And then there's the constant evolution of technology. We feel like we can never keep up—with tech updates or anything else: The pace of customer tastes, the pace of pricing changes, the pace of product evolutions is ever faster every day. Plants that we sold for \$400 in 2020 go for \$40 now because they're in tissue culture production. That's technology for you.

I recently sent a newsletter talking about how the invention of paint tubes enabled the impressionists to pack up their studios and paint outside. That was a revolutionary idea at the time (pre-mixing paint and taking it outdoors, creating a big painting in one go) and the art world has never been the same. Without paint tubes there would be no Monet. Paint tubes are technology, just like a well-made glove or an RFID tag or an AI design program.

It's how we use that technology that helps us move our business forward or keeps us stuck in the past.

I've spent the summer on a creativity tour, spending more time making garden vision board collages than I have talking about websites and email. However, if you want people to show up at your garden center to make things with you, you'd better have your technology ducks in a row so that you can tell people what you have going on so that they can find you.

So often I find myself returning to basics, because even with leaps and bounds in content management systems and AI agents that will let you talk to them and will help you build a website, if you miss the basics, anything on top of it is likely to crumble. You can't build a house on a shaky foundation.

I would say that the impressionists were able to do what they did because before they packed up their paints and went outside, they spent the time to develop their foundational skills. They knew how to use paint brushes. They knew how different colors interacted with each other. They had a foundation, and when new technology came along, they were able to put it to use.

Tech Foundation Checklist

Before we chat about the new, please run through your tech and make sure these things are taken care of. Not sure? Send this list to your “web guy.” (I tell our clients I’m their web guy and Hannah Somalski actually made me a badge to wear around, ha ha!)

Email: Are there DMARC, DKIM and SPF records set up?

Website: Is your SSL certificate active? Are your address and phone number easily findable in the footer and clickable, and are your updated hours there, too?

Social media: Are your address, phone number and hours in your Instagram and Facebook (and other social) bios? If not, people are going to go crazy trying to figure out if you’re open.

Google Business Listing: Are hours, address and phone number updated? Are pictures recent?

Before anything else you have GOT TO FIX THOSE THINGS.

The Next Steps: Get Found by AI “Search”

The biggest tech update right now is how to get your business to show up in answers spit out by large language models (LLMs) like Claude (Anthropic), Gemini (Google) and ChatGPT (OpenAI).

Like it or not, billions of people are using these tools for searches—sometimes instead of traditional searches and, if they’re using Google, they get the AI summary on top of regular search results. Google has pivoted so much to AI that it doesn’t even functionally operate the way it used to.

I was on a painting retreat in France in May with eight other people. I was the youngest and I’m 47 years old. They all use ChatGPT for trip planning and restaurant recommendations and every kind of search you can imagine. It’s because, as they said to me, “ChatGPT spits out a summary for me. I don’t have to try to decide which is best. It just tells me.” That’s more or less what Search Engine Land reported in January of this year (which in human years might as well be four years ago).

Danny Goodwin wrote, “Traditional search fatigue is real. AI wins when people want speed, simplicity and relief from noise. Consumers are turning to AI to escape what traditional search has become.” He lists the top frustrations in traditional search as: too many links, too many ads, difficult to get a clear answer and low-quality information.

Do AI programs still give bogus “answers”? Yes. The accuracy of the information depends a lot on whether the answer is generated from their training (ingested content) or from what’s called a “fan out query” and the accuracy of the information found and predictions made. Fan out queries are when the model sends the agent out to the web to find answers. How does the program decide which way to go and which websites to crawl? Anyone who tells you they’ve definitely cracked the entire code is also going to try to sell you lakefront property in Death Valley.

But there are indications of actions you can take to make your website content easier for agents to read. Some are the plain old SEO activities, like backlinks from reputable sources and good information on pages that answer the types of questions that people ask. (Questions in phrases such as, “What’s the best email marketing agency for horticulture businesses?”—not just words: “best email marketing for horticulture.”)

ChatGPT uses Microsoft Bing’s search function (at press time), so making sure your website is indexed via Bing’s

webmaster tools will help. (Go to bing.com/webmasters and follow instructions to submit.)

Another way to help AI models read your website is with correct schema markup code inserted into your website. This is code that identifies your website content in ways that web crawlers can read by identifying what type of content is on the page—is the page about people? A local business? Etc. This code is inserted between <script> tags within the <head> tags on your website. You WILL need a developer to help you with that. Is it worth the investment to do this? YES, if you've already covered the basics.

You can do everything to get found by the Internet, but you still have to be accessible in real life. **GP**

Katie Elzer-Peters is the owner of The Garden of Words, LLC, a green-industry digital marketing agency. Contact her at Katie@thegardenofwords.com.