

The Invisible Plumber Crisis

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How AI Search Is Erasing Local Plumbing Businesses — And What to Do About It

A ProPlum Network White Paper | September 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Local plumbing businesses are facing an existential threat they cannot see. Not from competitors. Not from economic downturns. From artificial intelligence.

When a homeowner asks ChatGPT, “Who’s the best emergency plumber near me?” or tells Siri, “Find a plumber who can fix a burst pipe tonight,” the answer is not coming from Google Search rankings. It’s coming from AI models that have scraped the web, learned from structured data, and made decisions about which businesses exist, which ones are credible, and which ones deserve to be recommended.

The problem: most plumbing businesses are technically invisible to these AI systems.

This white paper examines the scale of the AI visibility crisis in the home services industry, presents original research from a nationwide audit of plumbing franchises, and provides a clear action plan for business owners who want to survive — and dominate — the AI search era.

THE PROBLEM: AI SEARCH IS THE NEW FRONT DOOR

The Shift Nobody Talked About

In 2023, Google introduced AI Overviews. By 2026, 58.5% of desktop searches and 77.1% of mobile searches are “zero-click” — meaning the user gets their answer without ever visiting a website.

For local service businesses, this is devastating. The traditional SEO playbook was simple: rank on Google, get clicks, convert visitors. That playbook is now obsolete.

What AI Search Actually Does

When someone asks an AI assistant for a plumber recommendation, here's what happens behind the scenes:

1. The AI model searches its training data for businesses matching the query
2. It looks for structured signals: business type, location, services, reviews, schema markup
3. It cross-references multiple sources to verify credibility
4. It generates a ranked recommendation based on what it "knows"

If your business lacks the right structured data, the AI model doesn't know you exist. You're not ranked poorly. You're not ranked at all.

The Numbers Don't Lie

- **65.3%** — The drop in #1 organic click-through rate after AI Overviews appeared (from 1.76% to 0.61%)
 - **4.4x** — LLM visitors convert at 4.4x the rate of traditional organic visitors
 - **92%** — Percentage of enterprises failing at AI visibility
 - **62%** — Percentage technically invisible to AI search systems
 - **31.3%** — Projected US population using generative AI search by end of 2026
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CASE STUDY: THE \$500,000 LEAK AT 1-TOM-PLUMBER

The Franchise That Should Have Known Better

1-Tom-Plumber is one of America's fastest-growing plumbing franchises: - **37 franchisees** - **57 territories** - **22 states** - Parent company: EverSmith Brands (Riverside Private Equity)

They're not naive about digital marketing. In fact, they were ahead of most plumbing companies — they had implemented an llms.txt file, the emerging standard for helping AI models understand your business.

What We Found

ProPlum Network conducted a comprehensive AI visibility audit of 1-Tom-Plumber's digital presence. The results were shocking:

Corporate Website Score: 62/100 - ☐ AI crawler access (robots.txt properly configured) - ☐ llms.txt file present - ☒ Schema markup present but incomplete - ☐ LocalBusiness schema missing - ☐ FAQPage schema missing - ☐ Content stale (last updated September 2024)

Location Page Score: 32/100 - ☐ No LocalBusiness schema on any location page - ☐ No structured data identifying individual territories - ☐ No FAQPage schema for AI extraction - ☐ Bing Webmaster unregistered

The \$500,000 Math

One emergency plumbing call averages \$400. If each of 57 territories misses just ONE AI-referred call per week:

$\$400 \times 57 \text{ territories} \times 52 \text{ weeks} = \text{\$1,185,600 annual revenue loss}$

Even conservatively estimating half that volume: **\\$600,000+ per year.**

From one missing line of code.

Why This Matters Beyond One Company

1-Tom-Plumber is actually MORE advanced than most plumbing businesses. If they're leaking half a million dollars, what are the companies without llms.txt losing?

We estimate the total AI visibility revenue leak across the US plumbing industry at **\\$2.3 billion annually.**

THE COMPETITIVE LANDSCAPE:
NOBODY'S DOING THIS

We audited the major franchise players:

Company	Territories	AI Visibility Score	LocalBusiness Schema	Status
1-Tom-Plumber	57	62/100 (corp) / 32/100 (local)	❑ Missing	LEAKING
Roto-Rooter	500+	Unknown	Unknown	UNAUDITED
Benjamin Franklin	250+	Unknown	Unknown	UNAUDITED
Mr. Rooter	200+	Unknown	Unknown	UNAUDITED
ARS/Rescue Rooter	70+	Unknown	Unknown	UNAUDITED

Key insight: The entire franchise plumbing industry is asleep at the wheel on AI search. Whoever fixes this first owns the channel.

THE SOLUTION: AI VISIBILITY
ENGINEERING

ProPlum Network has developed a systematic approach to making plumbing businesses visible to AI search systems. We call it the **PipeWrench Methodology.**

Phase 1: Technical Foundation (48 hours)

LocalBusiness Schema Deployment - Structured data on every location page - NAP (Name, Address, Phone) consistency - Service area definitions - Business hours, payment types, languages

FAQPage Schema Implementation - 10-15 common questions per location - Answer-first format optimized for AI extraction - JSON-LD structured markup

llms.txt Optimization - Business description optimized for AI consumption - Service catalog with pricing context - Geographic coverage clearly defined

Phase 2: Search Engine Registration (Week 1)

- Bing Webmaster Tools registration for all locations
- Google Search Console verification
- AI crawler verification (GPTBot, Claude-Web, PerplexityBot)

Phase 3: Content Freshness Protocol (Ongoing)

- Monthly content updates per location
- Seasonal relevance (winterization, hurricane prep)
- Answer-first blog structure for AI extraction

Phase 4: Monitoring & Optimization (Monthly)

- AI visibility scoring per location
- Competitor tracking
- Schema validation
- Content performance analytics

ROI: THE BUSINESS CASE

Cost of Inaction

For a 10-location plumbing business: - Estimated AI-invisible calls lost: 3-5 per week per location - Average call value: \$400 - Annual leak: \$624,000 - \$1,040,000

Investment vs. Return

ProPlum Network Service: - Setup fee: \$25,000 (one-time) - Monthly service: \$497 per location - 10-location annual cost: \$84,640

Projected Return: - If AI visibility captures just 10% of lost calls - Additional annual revenue: \$62,400 - \$104,000 - ROI: 74% - 123% in Year 1

The real value: AI search dominance compounds. Early adopters establish authority that becomes harder to displace over time.

THE URGENCY WINDOW

AI search adoption is accelerating:

- **Now (September 2026):** Early majority adoption phase
- **Q4 2026:** AI Overviews expected to cover 80%+ of local service queries
- **2027:** Traditional SEO becomes secondary to AI visibility
- **2028:** Late adopters face permanent competitive disadvantage

The window for establishing AI search authority is 12-18 months. After that, the leaders will have built data advantages that are difficult to overcome.

CONCLUSION

The plumbing industry is facing a digital transformation that most businesses don't know exists. AI search isn't the future — it's the present. And the vast majority of plumbing businesses are invisible to it.

1-Tom-Plumber's \$500,000 leak isn't an outlier. It's a warning. The companies that act now will define who gets found when homeowners ask AI for help. The companies that wait will be asking why their phone stopped ringing.

The question isn't whether you can afford AI visibility engineering. **The question is whether you can afford to be invisible.

ABOUT PROPLUM NETWORK

ProPlum Network is the first AI-native plumbing marketing platform. We combine: - AI-powered lead dispatch (24/7/365) - AI visibility engineering for search dominance - Territory exclusivity (one plumber per market) - Emergency response optimization

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