



THE LOCAL GROWTH PLAYBOOK • 2026

Get found. Get chosen. **Get booked.**

How local businesses become the name everyone already knows, and turn that attention into booked customers.

By Preston Durnford

Operator for 12+ years. Built, scaled, and sold real companies, with more than \$16M in assets sold.

START HERE

Your business is where it's at for exactly two reasons.

Not luck. Not the economy. Not the algorithm being against you. Every local business sits exactly where these two numbers put it:

- 1. How many of the right people know you exist

If the people already searching for what you do never see you, you do not exist to them. Awareness is not billboards. It is showing up where your buyers actually look: their feed, their search results, and now their AI answers.

- 2. The systems behind you when they find you

What happens in the first 30 seconds on your website, and the first 5 minutes after they reach out, decides whether attention becomes revenue. Most businesses lose the customer after the click, not before it.

Awareness × Systems = Growth

Multiply, not add. A ten out of ten ad budget with broken follow up still equals almost nothing. Fix both sides and growth stops being a mystery. The rest of this playbook shows you how, side by side.

PART ONE

Creative is the whole game.

80%

of your ad performance comes down to the creative itself once your campaign is dialed in. Not the targeting. Not the budget. The video someone actually stops for.

3 sec

is how long you have before a thumb scrolls past. The first line on screen is the ad. Lead with the outcome, the transformation, or the story, never your logo.

What actually stops the scroll in 2026:

- **Founder story ads**

You, on camera, telling the truth about why you do this. People buy people.

- **Real testimonial interviews**

A real customer, filmed like a documentary, not a script.

- **Before + after proof**

The transformation is the pitch. Show it.

- **UGC style phone footage**

Polished ads look like ads. Real footage looks like truth.

Rule that saves you thousands: shoot real footage first, then multiply it. One honest filming day becomes weeks of ads. AI can help you multiply, but the trust comes from the real thing.

PART TWO

Feed the algorithm or pay it rent.

Meta and Google ads run on a learning phase. Until the platform sees roughly 50 conversions in a week, it is still guessing who your buyer is, and your cost per lead is unstable. Most owners quit right here, one week before it clicks.

50

conversion events in about a week is what exits the learning phase. That is why your page needs more than one way to convert: bookings, lead forms, and taps to text all teach the algorithm.

7 days

minimum before you touch a new campaign. Every edit restarts the learning. Set it, feed it, leave it alone.

How to set your target cost per lead, the operator way:

- 1. **What is one new customer worth?**

Example: a \$5,000 client at 30 percent margin makes you \$1,500.

- 2. **What would you happily pay for that?**

Most service businesses can spend 30 to 50 percent of profit to acquire a customer.

- 3. **That is your target. Judge nothing else.**

Clicks and likes do not pay rent. Cost per booked customer does.

PART THREE

Never let them get bored. Be everywhere.

Every ad dies. After enough views, your audience stops seeing it and your cost per lead creeps up. That is ad fatigue, and the only cure is a steady supply of fresh creative: new hooks, new formats, new angles, tested every single week.

Then go omnichannel. The same real footage, cut for every platform your community scrolls:



Something happens when a community sees the same trustworthy face in their feed, their search results, and their neighborhood app: you stop being a business they compare and start being the name they already know. Owners tell us it feels like becoming the local celebrity. That is the point. Familiarity is the highest converting force in local marketing.

You cannot buy that with one ad. You build it with volume, consistency, and a face people recognize.

PART FOUR

Win the 30 seconds and the 5 minutes.

Awareness fills the funnel. Systems decide what you keep. Two windows matter more than everything else combined:

- **The 30 seconds on your website**

People decide fast. They need to see who you are, proof it is real, and one obvious next step. If your site loads slow, looks dated, or buries the button, the click you paid for is gone.

- **The 5 minutes after they reach out**

Speed to lead is the cheapest revenue you will ever find. A lead answered in minutes converts several times better than one answered the next morning. Automate the first text so it goes out in under a minute, every time.

The systems stack every local business needs:

- ☐ A website that earns trust in seconds and books in two taps
- ☐ An instant text back to every new lead, automatic
- ☐ Follow up sequences that run for days, not hours
- ☐ A CRM so no lead ever slips through a crack
- ☐ Booking tied to your real calendar, no phone tag

PART FIVE

Reviews and the new search.

Before anyone books, they check you. Two places decide what they find:

- **Google reviews, and the speed they arrive**

A 5.0 with recent reviews beats a 4.9 from last year. Velocity matters: a steady drip of fresh reviews signals a business that is alive. Ask at the moment of delight, reply to every single one, and never buy or fake a review. One faked review can cost you the profile.

- **AI answers, the search nobody optimized for yet**

People now ask ChatGPT and Google AI who to hire. Those engines cite businesses with consistent details everywhere, question and answer content, and real reviews. This is AEO and GEO, and almost none of your competitors have touched it. Early movers own the answer box.

Quick wins this month:

- ☐ Text your 5 happiest customers a direct review link today
- ☐ Reply to every review you have, even the old ones
- ☐ Make your name, phone, and address identical everywhere online
- ☐ Add a real FAQ to your site that answers what buyers actually ask

THE 10 POINT SELF AUDIT

Check every box that is true today.

- ☐ A stranger can find you on Google in under 10 seconds
- ☐ Your website looks like you charge what you charge
- ☐ There is real video of you or your team online
- ☐ You collected a new review in the last 30 days
- ☐ You show up when someone asks AI who to hire
- ☐ You are running ads with fresh creative monthly
- ☐ Every new lead gets a text back within 5 minutes
- ☐ A lead can book you without calling
- ☐ You follow up more than twice before giving up
- ☐ You know your cost per new customer, exactly

8 to 10 checked: you are compounding. Protect it.

5 to 7 checked: you are leaking paid attention every day.

Under 5: you are invisible to people trying to give you money.

FROM ONE OPERATOR TO ANOTHER

I have sat in your seat.

I am Preston Durnford. I am not a marketer who read about business. I spent 12 years building companies: co-founded and scaled behavioral health treatment centers, built Fresh Start of California Detox and sold it in 2025, helped raise \$15M for SoCal Mental Health, and wrote The Epic Journal, with more than 20,000 copies out in the world. All in, more than \$16M in assets built and sold.

Today I run PELORA in Newport Beach, and I still operate Epic Journey Recovery. Everything in this playbook is what I used on my own companies before any client ever paid me for it.

Want this done for you?

Book a free call and we will hand you your 48 hour Growth Audit, a \$2,500 value, free, whether or not we ever work together.

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See the real work and the real interviews: @prestondurnford and @_epicjourney on Instagram.