A FIELD GUIDE FOR HOTEL MANAGERS AND OWNERS

Found, chosen, booked

Search, AI answers and the hotel, explained with a lemonade stand

Vikram Aditya Singh

SEO, paid search, OTAs, reviews, GEO and booking agents. What each one is, what it costs, and the order to fix them in.

BEFORE YOU START

How to read this guide

Each part starts with a lemonade poster. A small stand on a street stands in for your hotel, so the idea is clear before the jargon arrives.

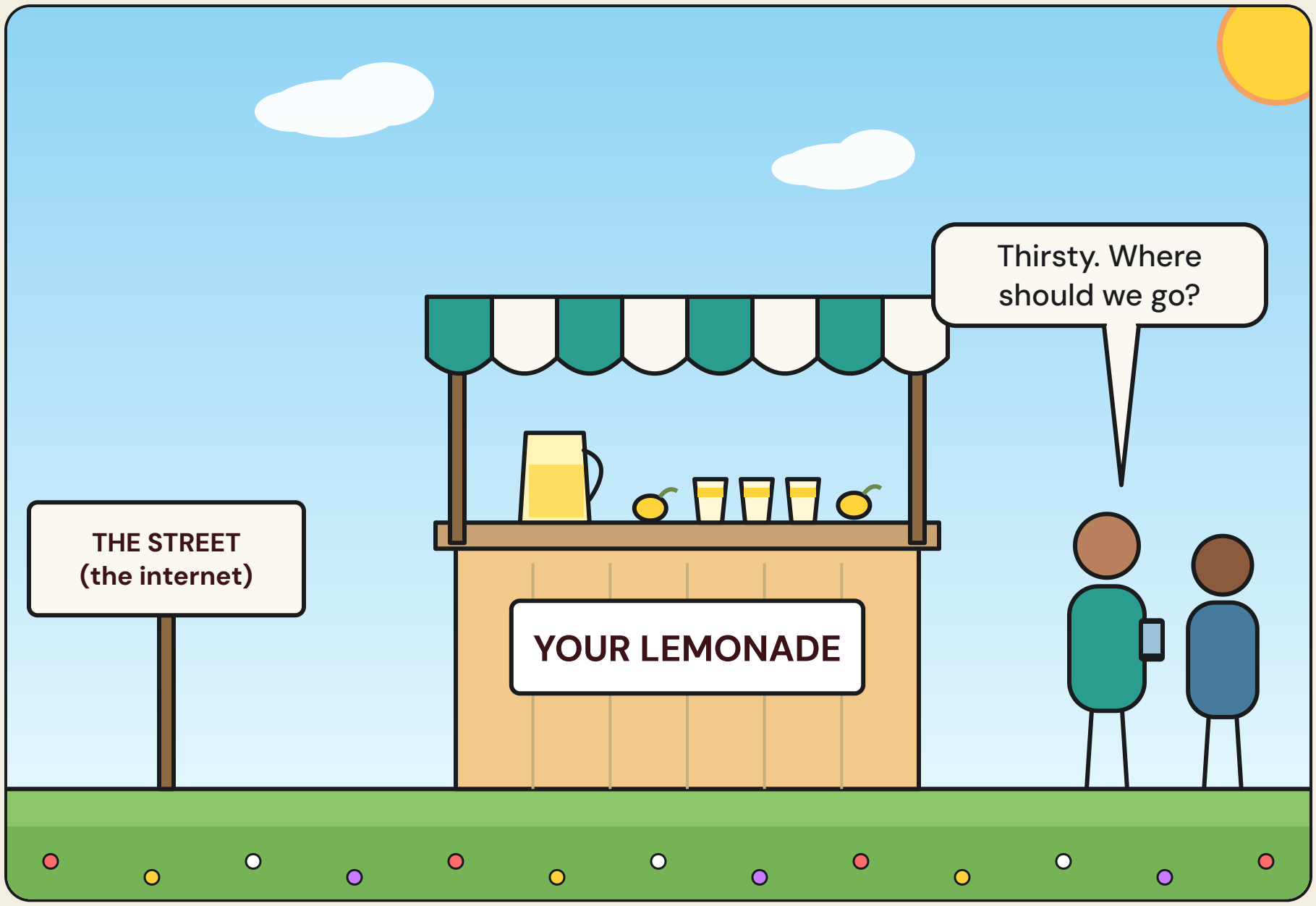
Then come the facts, the arithmetic and the questions to ask your team. Every number names its source and date in the footer. The companion workbook does the sums with your own figures.

- Parts 1 to 5 cover how guests find hotels today.
- Parts 6 and 7 cover AI answers and booking agents.
- Part 8 revisits the INSEAD Accor case.
- Part 9 is the plan, in order.

Guests now ask a machine before they look at your website.

The machine answers with a shortlist. Your job is to be on it, described correctly, and easy to book.

Your hotel is a lemonade stand



AT THE STAND

A stand on a busy street. Thirsty people walk past and decide in seconds where to go.

AT YOUR HOTEL

Your hotel on the internet. Guests decide from a search page, a price board, a list of reviews, or now an AI answer.

What is inside

PART	TOPIC	THE LEMONADE VERSION
1	What changed	The concierge arrives
2	Search engines	The surveyor and the guidebook
3	Paid search	The auction at the crossroads
4	OTAs	The big kiosk
5	Reviews	What the neighbours say
6	AI answers (GEO)	What the concierge has read
7	Booking agents	The concierge who buys
8	The Accor case	Then and now
9	Your plan	The whole town vouches

BEFORE YOU START

The short version

01 **Fix the hotel first**
Reviews reflect operations. No marketing repairs a recurring complaint.

02 **Make the facts agree**
Rooms, prices, hours and amenities must match on every site that describes you.

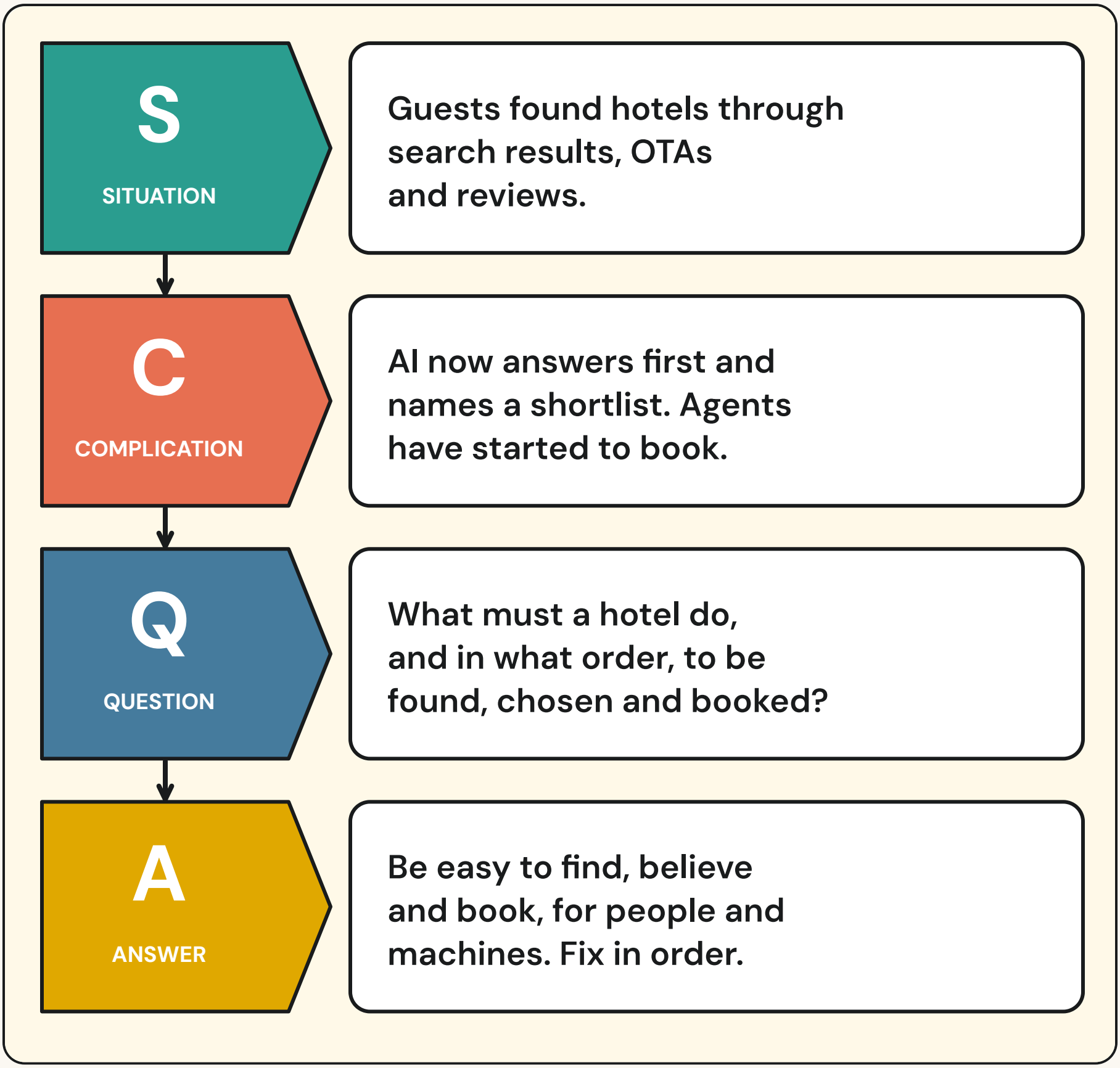
03 **Let the machines in**
A site that search and AI crawlers can reach, read and trust.

04 **Answer real questions**
Pages written in the guest's words, with facts a stranger can repeat.

05 **Be bookable by a machine**
Live rates and availability that an agent can act on.

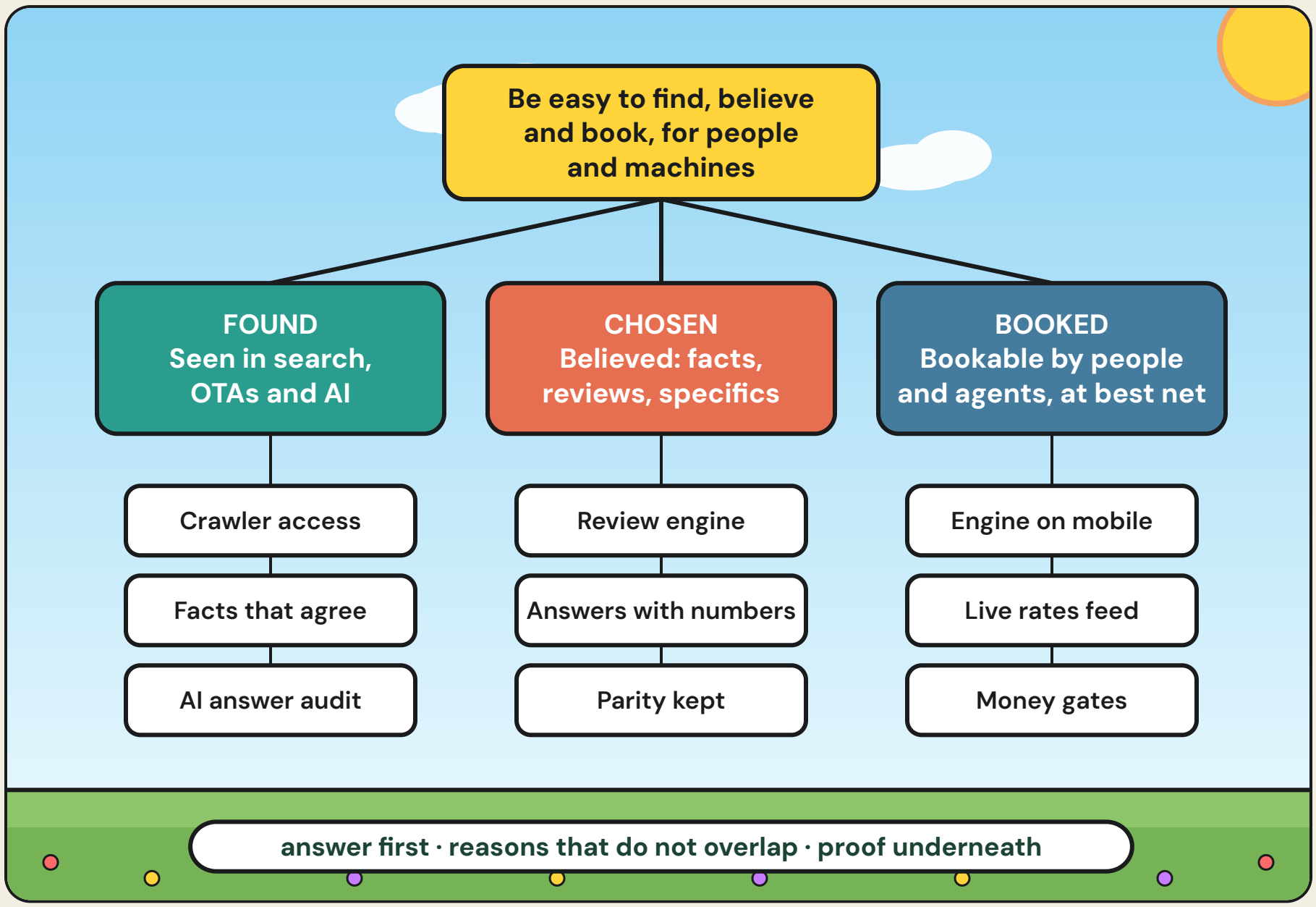
06 **Measure, then spend**
Pay for visibility only where the arithmetic says it pays back.

The question this guide answers



Barbara Minto's opening: what everyone agrees on, what changed, the question that raises, and the answer up front.

The answer, as a Minto pyramid



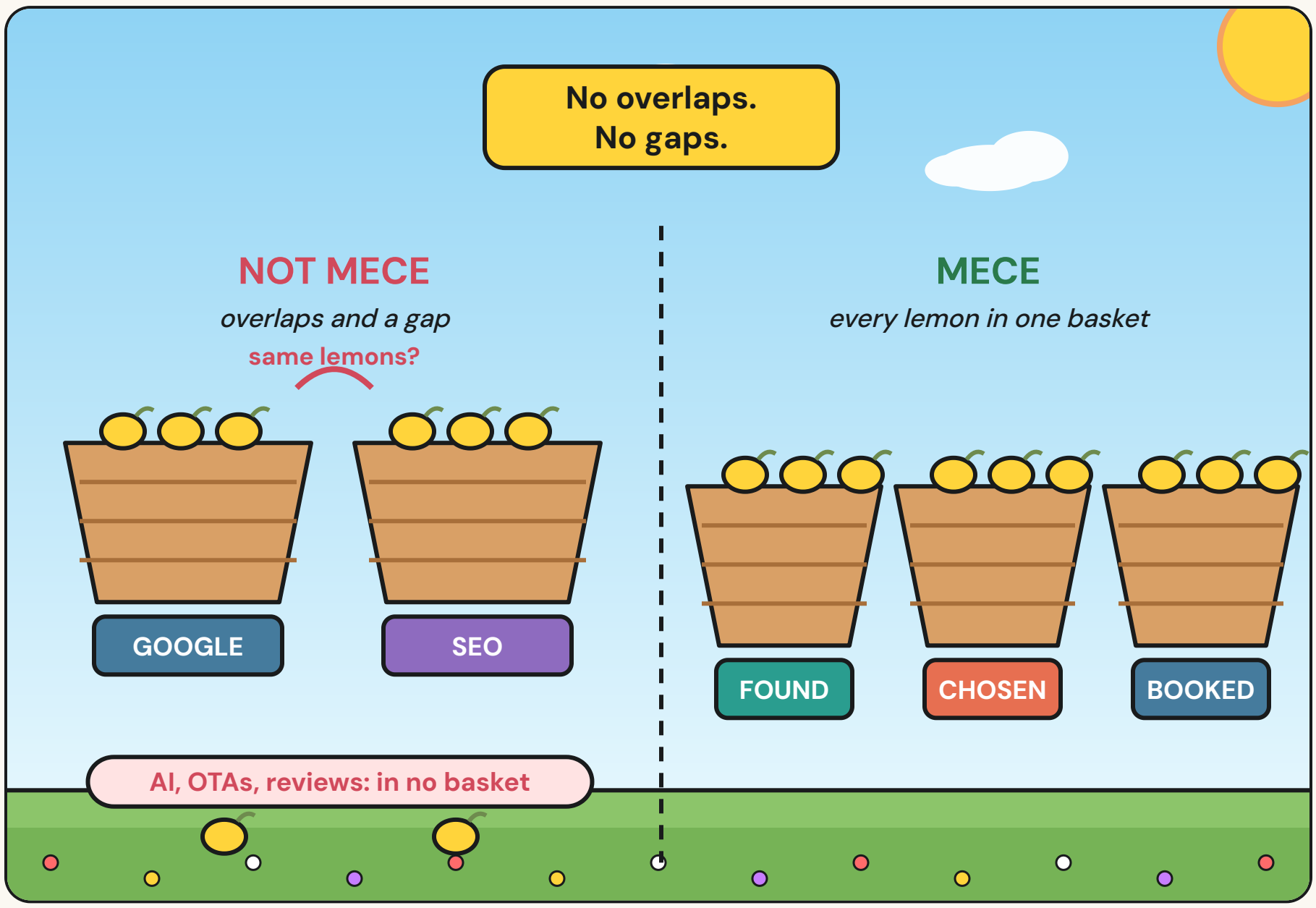
AT THE STAND

Tell the passer-by the answer first, best lemonade by the pier, then three reasons, then the proof under each.

AT YOUR HOTEL

One governing thought on top. Three reasons that do not overlap. Evidence under each. Parts 2 to 9 fill in the blocks.

MECE: no overlaps, no gaps



AT THE STAND

Sort every lemon into exactly one basket. None counted twice, none left on the grass.

AT YOUR HOTEL

"Google, SEO, AI" overlaps and leaves out OTAs and reviews. "Found, chosen, booked" covers the whole path and nothing twice.

PART 1

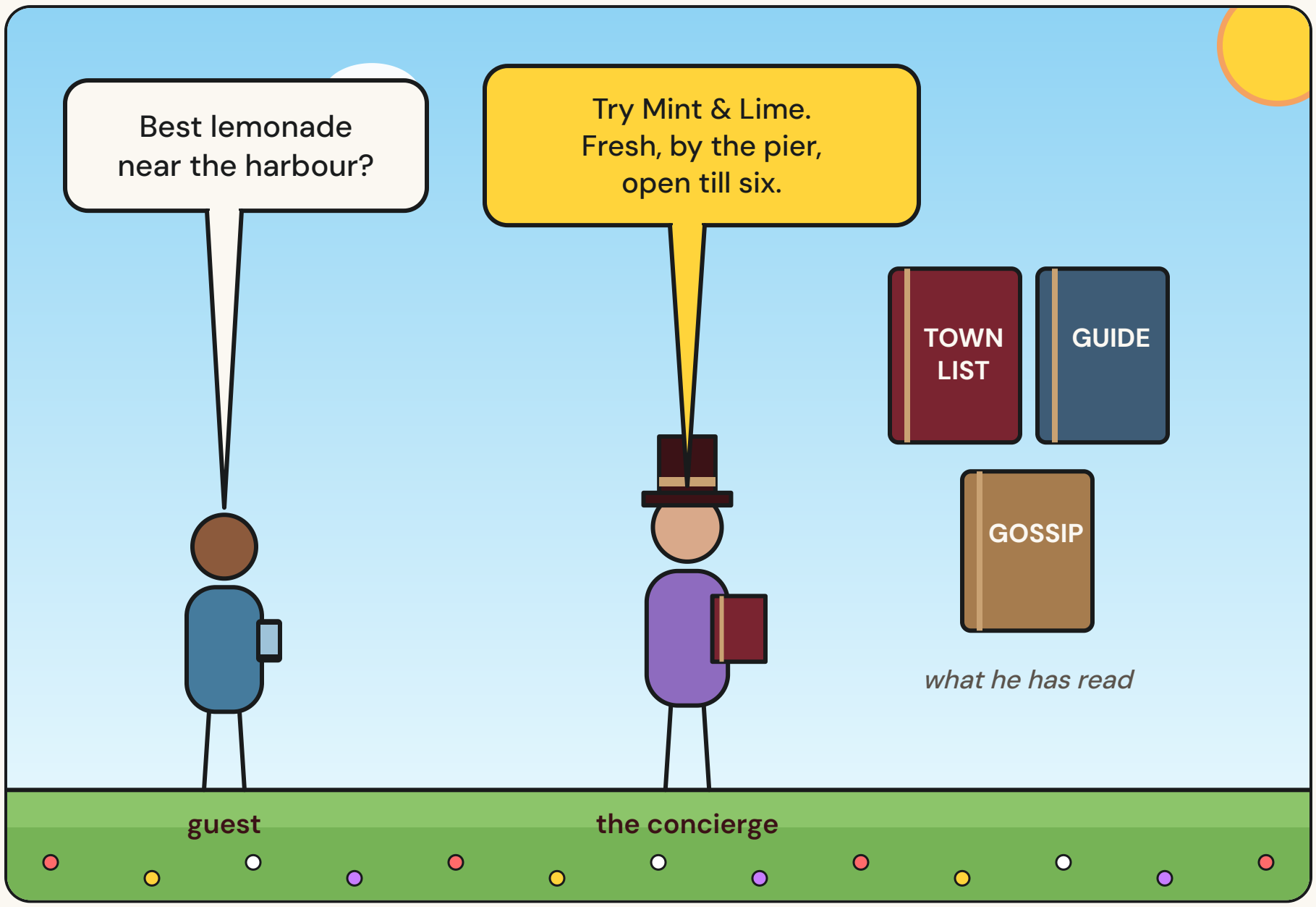
What changed

Search used to send guests to ten blue links. Now it often answers the question itself, and a growing share of trips start with an AI assistant.

- The new front door
- Fewer clicks
- How travellers use AI
- Discovery moved; booking has not, yet

1

A concierge now stands on the street



AT THE STAND

People stop asking the street and ask the town concierge. He answers from what he has read, and names one or two stands.

AT YOUR HOTEL

Google's AI answers, ChatGPT, Gemini and Perplexity answer the guest's question directly, often with a shortlist of hotels.

The size of the new front door

2.5 bn+
monthly users of Google AI Overviews, May 2026

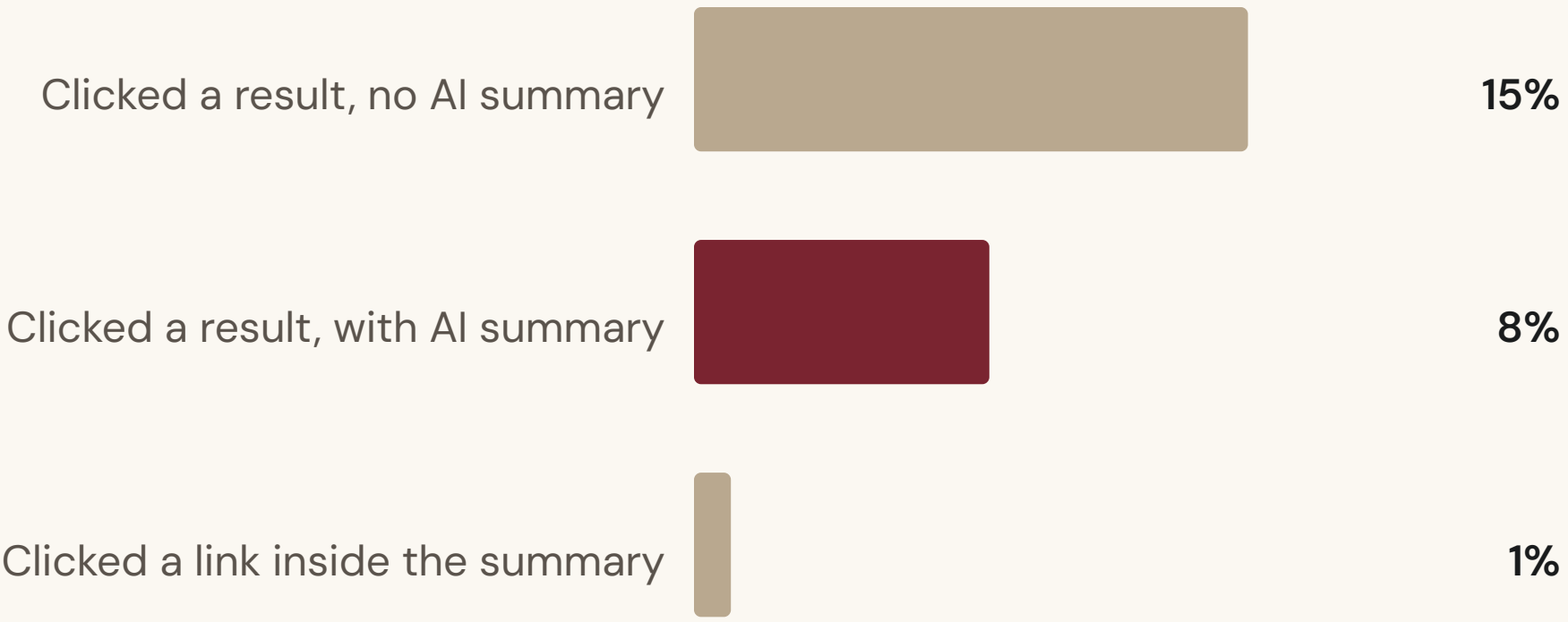
1 bn+
monthly users of Google AI Mode, May 2026

1 bn+
weekly ChatGPT users, confirmed by OpenAI in September 2026

July 2025
AI Mode opened to all users in India; Hindi followed in September

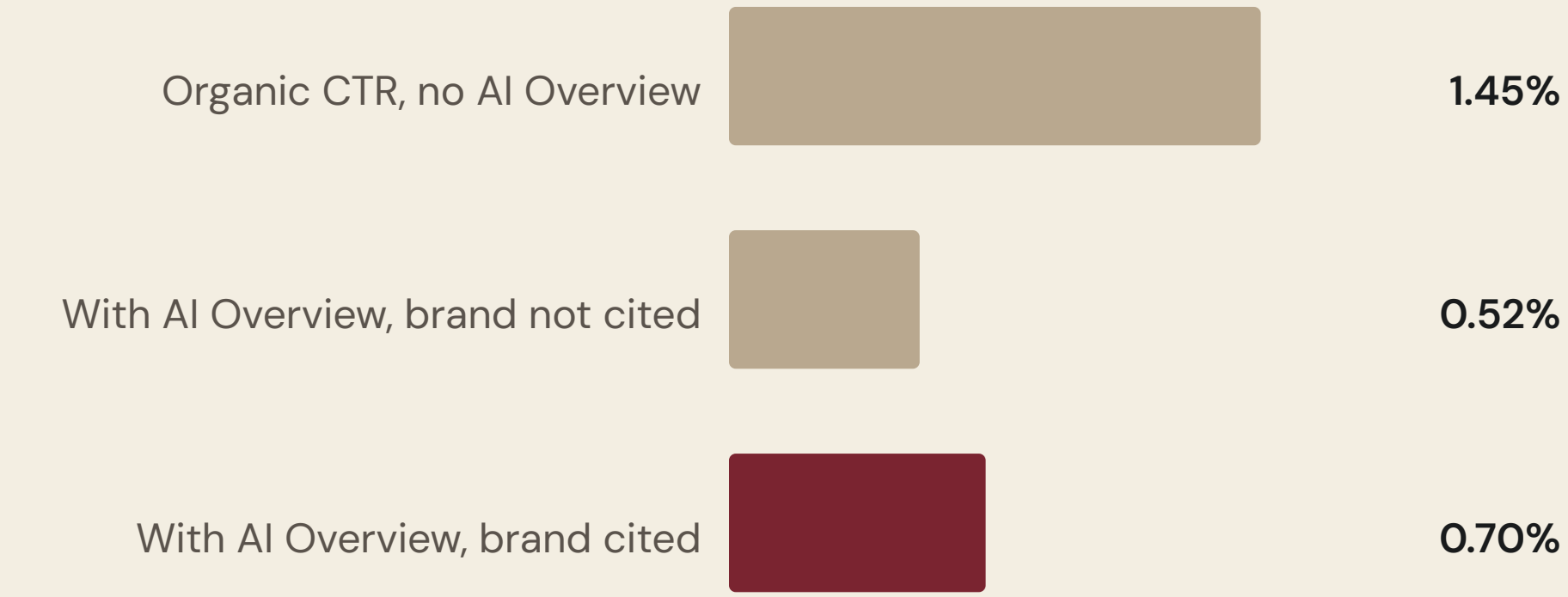
Sources: Google I/O 2026 keynote; OpenAI, September 2026; Google India announcements, 2025.

Fewer clicks when an AI summary appears



Pew Research Center, 900 US adults, browsing data from March 2025, published July 2025. Sessions also ended on the results page more often: 26% against 16%.

Being cited softens the fall



Seer Interactive, agency data, 3,119 informational queries, Q3 2025. It shows a correlation only. Paid click-through on AI Overview queries fell from 19.7% in June 2024 to 6.3% in September 2025.

How travellers use AI

56%

of US travellers used AI for at least one trip in the past year, up from 33% (Phocuswright, March 2026)

8%

are comfortable letting AI book for them (Expedia and YouGov, April 2026)

68%

prefer a trusted brand to make the booking (Expedia and YouGov)

33%

of Indian travellers already plan trips with AI (Agoda, May 2026)

The studies measure different things. Planning with AI is now common. Handing the booking to AI is not.

Discovery moved. Booking has not, yet.

< 1%

of Booking Holdings' room nights came from AI chatbot referrals, August 2026

mid-60s %

Booking.com's B2C direct mix: consumer bookings that arrive through its own channels, holding steady

The largest OTA in the world is a good thermometer. AI shapes the shortlist today. The transaction still happens on an OTA or a hotel's own site.

The journey, old and new

STAGE	UNTIL RECENTLY	NOW
Dream	Instagram, magazines, friends	The same, plus "plan me four days in Udaipur"
Shortlist	Ten blue links, OTA lists	An AI answer naming three or four hotels
Compare	Price boards, reviews	The same, often summarised by the AI
Book	OTA or hotel site	Still mostly OTA or hotel site
Share	Reviews, photos	Reviews that the next AI answer reads

The INSEAD Accor case framed the journey as before, during and after the stay. The stages still hold. The shortlist is what moved.

The shortlist is the new first page.

If the answer names four hotels and yours is not one of them, the guest never reaches your price, your photos or your booking button.

ASK YOUR TEAM

- Ask ChatGPT, Gemini and Google AI Mode for the best hotel of our kind in our city. Are we named?
- What do they say about us, and is it true?
- Which sources do they cite?

RED FLAGS

- Nobody on the team has ever asked an AI about the hotel.
- Traffic reports that still treat a ranking as the goal.
- Assuming AI is a future problem.

PART 2

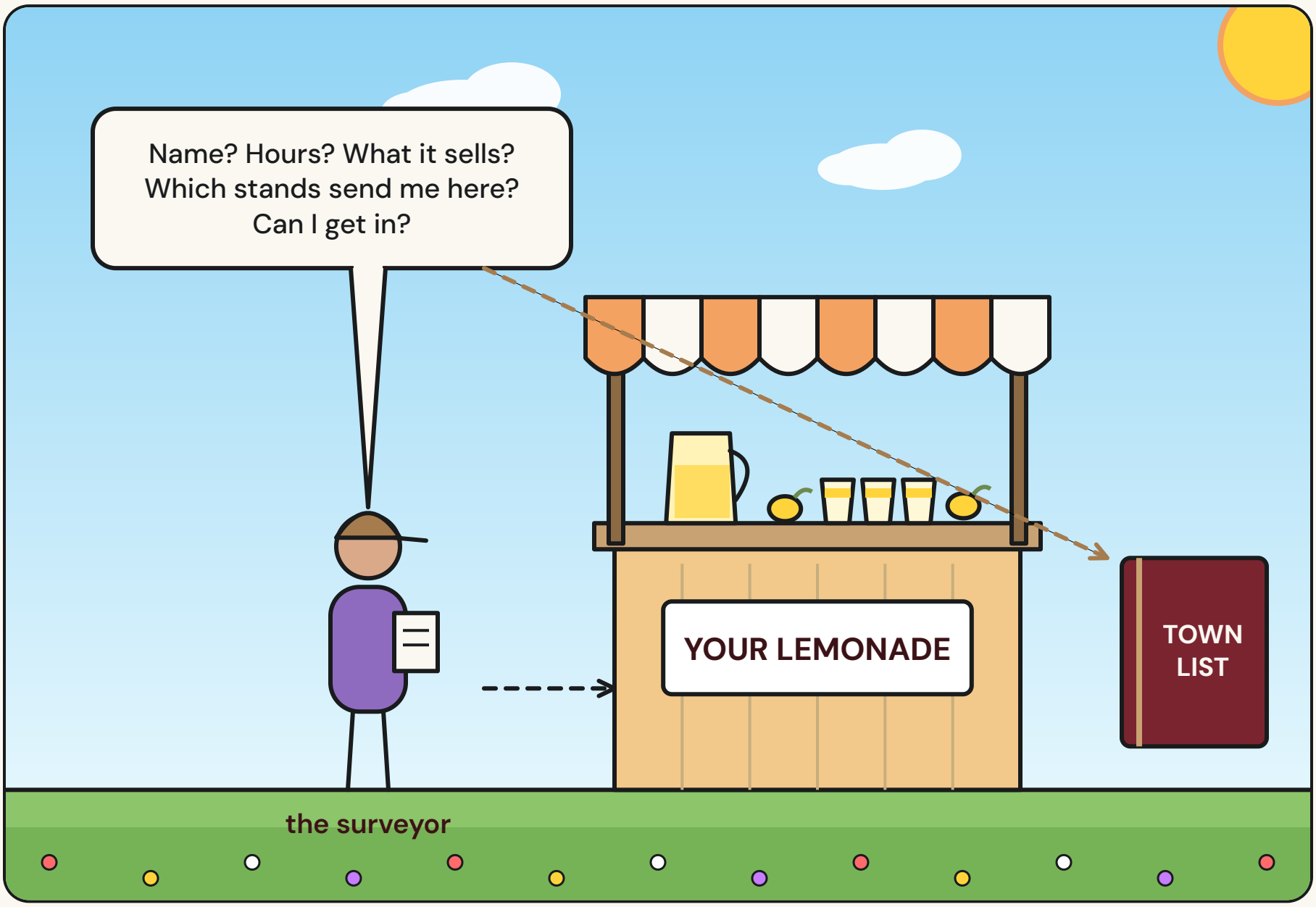
How search engines work

Search engine optimisation, without the jargon. Three jobs happen before a guest ever sees your name: a visit, a listing and a ranking.

- Crawl, index, rank
- What the site must do
- The local listing
- Questions in the guest's own words

2

Crawl: the surveyor walks the street



AT THE STAND

A surveyor walks every street, notes each stand's name, hours and what it sells, and follows the signs that point from one stand to another.

AT YOUR HOTEL

Google's crawler reads your pages and follows links to them. A page it cannot reach or read does not exist for search.

Index: the town list

THE TOWN LIST

Harbour Stand	listed
Mint & Lime	listed
Corner Cup	listed
Your Lemonade	listed

continued

Back Lane Stand
never visited

Gated Garden Stand
gate locked

If you are not in the list, nobody can recommend you.

AT THE STAND

Everything the surveyor saw goes into the town list. A stand behind a locked gate never makes it in.

AT YOUR HOTEL

The index is Google's list of pages it can show. Search Console tells you which of your pages are in it and which are not.

Rank: the guidebook order



AT THE STAND

The guide writer orders the list. Relevance, a clear sign, who vouches for the stand and how close it is all count.

AT YOUR HOTEL

Ranking weighs how well a page answers the query, how trusted the site is, the links pointing to it and how fast it works on a phone.

The two words, defined

SEO is "the process of increasing the amount and quality of traffic to a website from unpaid search results."

SEM is paid. Firms "bid for placement and enhanced visibility on search engine results pages", expecting some users to click the advertised listing.

- Organic results are earned and slow to move.
- Paid results are bought and stop the day the money stops.
- Most hotels need both, in that order of patience.

Three pillars of SEO

PILLAR	WHAT IT COVERS	THE TEST
Technical	Speed, mobile, crawl access, clean addresses, sitemap	Can the crawler reach and read every page?
Content	Rooms, dining, events, the area, questions answered	Does a page answer what guests actually search?
Authority	Links and mentions from trusted sites, reviews, press	Do others vouch for you?

Fix them in that order. Content on a site the crawler cannot read is wasted, and authority cannot rescue thin pages.

The brand site is the mothership.

"The destination toward which other media points." Professor Robert Kwortnik, Cornell. Every channel in this guide should send the guest home to it.

Eleven things the site must do

	ELEMENT (KWORTNIK)
1	Immersive visuals
2	Current content
3	FAQs, which also help search
4	Social integration
5	Clear user experience
6	Fast load
7	Mobile-first design
8	Deep links to each offer
9	Clear calls to action
10	Easy booking
11	Measurement and testing

His rule: "before creativity, we focus on functionality." The booking button should never be more than one click away.

Why the basics pay

1.5–2.5%
typical hotel website conversion

about 4%
travel sites overall

42%
of travel-site visitors leave after one page

3 years
a site's useful life now, down from 4 to 5

Course figures, Cornell SHA872 (2025 edition, older underlying studies). On a 2% site, lifting conversion by one point does more than a bigger ad budget.

Speed, honestly

The course quotes Google studies: more than half of mobile visitors leave if a page takes over three seconds, and each second of delay costs conversion.

Those studies date from 2017 to 2020. Treat the exact percentages as old. The direction has not changed.

- Test your room page on a mid-range phone on mobile data.
- Compress images; most hotel pages are heavy with photos.
- Load the booking widget fast, or the click is wasted.

The local listing: your pin on the map



AT THE STAND

A pin on the town map, with opening hours, photos and a phone number, sends people straight to the stand.

AT YOUR HOTEL

Your Google Business Profile shows in Maps and beside search. Keep hours, photos, phone, address and amenities complete and current.

Write the way guests ask

Kwortnik's voice-search lesson carries straight into the AI era. A spoken query returns a single answer. The page that supplies it has "won position zero".

Guests ask in full questions. They say "gorgeous pool" and "awesome bar", never "leisure facilities".

- Build an FAQ from the questions your reservations team hears every day.
- Answer each in the first sentence, then add detail.
- Use the guest's words, and keep marketing language for the brochure.

A one-hour SEO health check

01 **Search your hotel's name**
Who appears above you? Your site, an OTA, Wikipedia?

02 **Open Search Console**
Are the key pages indexed? Any crawl errors?

03 **Test the room page on a phone**
Load time, booking button, photos.

04 **Read your Business Profile**
Hours, phone, amenities and photos current?

05 **Search three guest questions**
Does your site answer any of them?

ASK YOUR TEAM

- Which of our pages are indexed, and which are not?
- Who outranks us for our own name?
- When did we last update the Business Profile?

RED FLAGS

- A new website launched without redirects from the old addresses.
- The booking button hidden below the fold on mobile.
- No FAQ page, or one written by marketing.

PART 3

Paid search and metasearch

Buying visibility. When it pays, when it burns money, and the arithmetic that tells the two apart.

› The auction

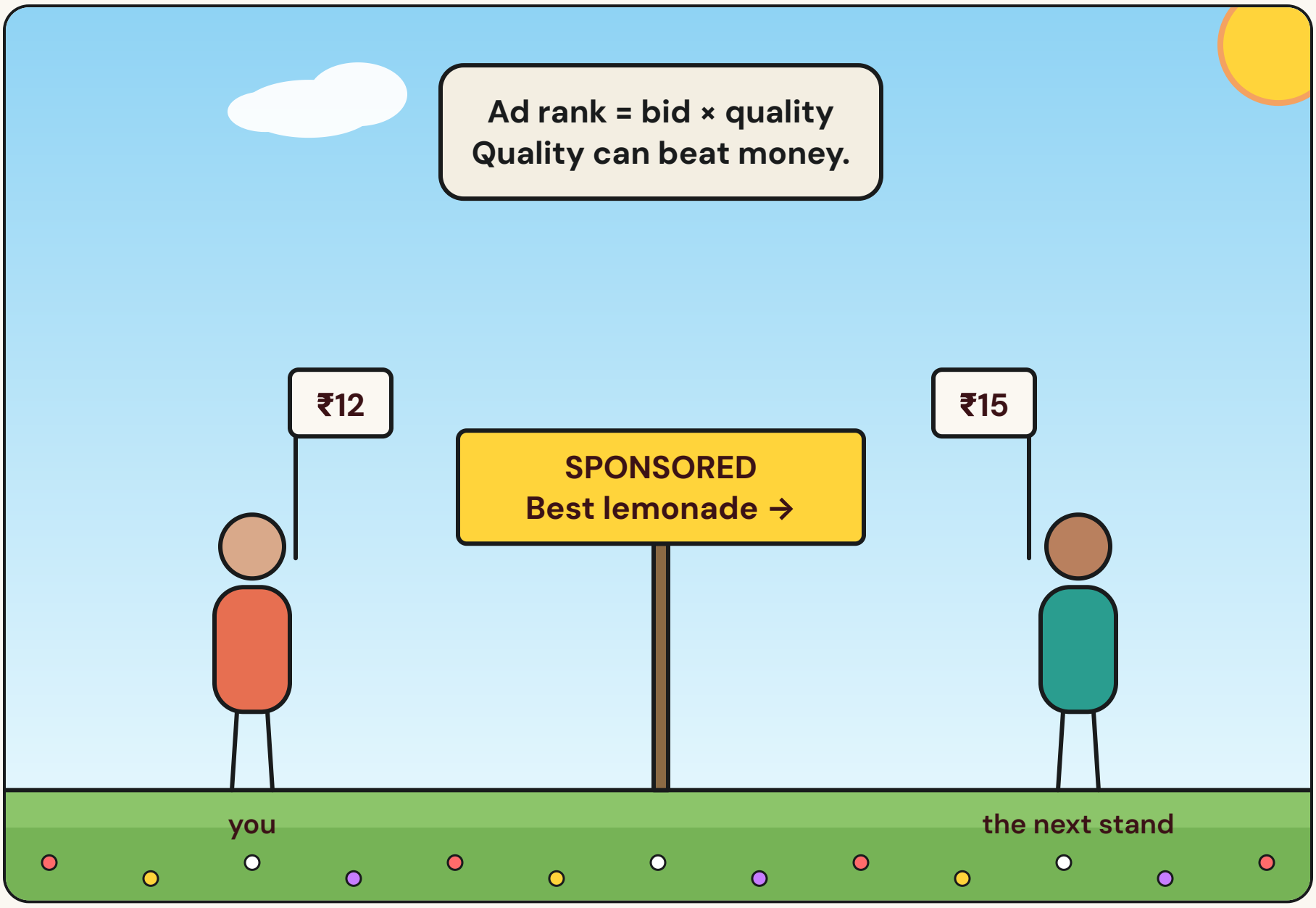
› Value per click

› Defend your own name

› The price board

3

The auction at the crossroads



AT THE STAND

Two stands bid for the sign at the crossroads. The better-run stand can win it with the smaller bid.

AT YOUR HOTEL

Google ranks ads on bid and quality: how relevant the ad is, how good the landing page is, how often people click. Quality lowers your price per click.

Ad rank

THE FORMULA

```
Rank ≈ bid × quality

Quality = relevance of ad
        + landing-page experience
        + expected click-through
```

A simplified form. Google adds other signals, but the logic holds: relevance beats budget.

What a click is worth

THE FORMULA

```
VPC = (ADR − variable cost)
      × length of stay
      × conversion rate

(₹11,500 − ₹1,900) × 1.4 × 2.2%
  = ₹296 a click
```

Below ₹296 a click pays for itself. Above it, you are giving money away.

Judge the next click, never the average

BID ₹	CLICKS A DAY	EXTRA CLICKS	COST OF EACH EXTRA ₹
60	40		
90	58	+18	117
120	72	+14	184
150	**82**	**+10**	**282**
180	88	+6	490

At ₹150 the extra clicks cost ₹282, still under the ₹296 a click is worth. At ₹180 they cost ₹490. Stop at ₹150.

Defend your own name

₹2,070

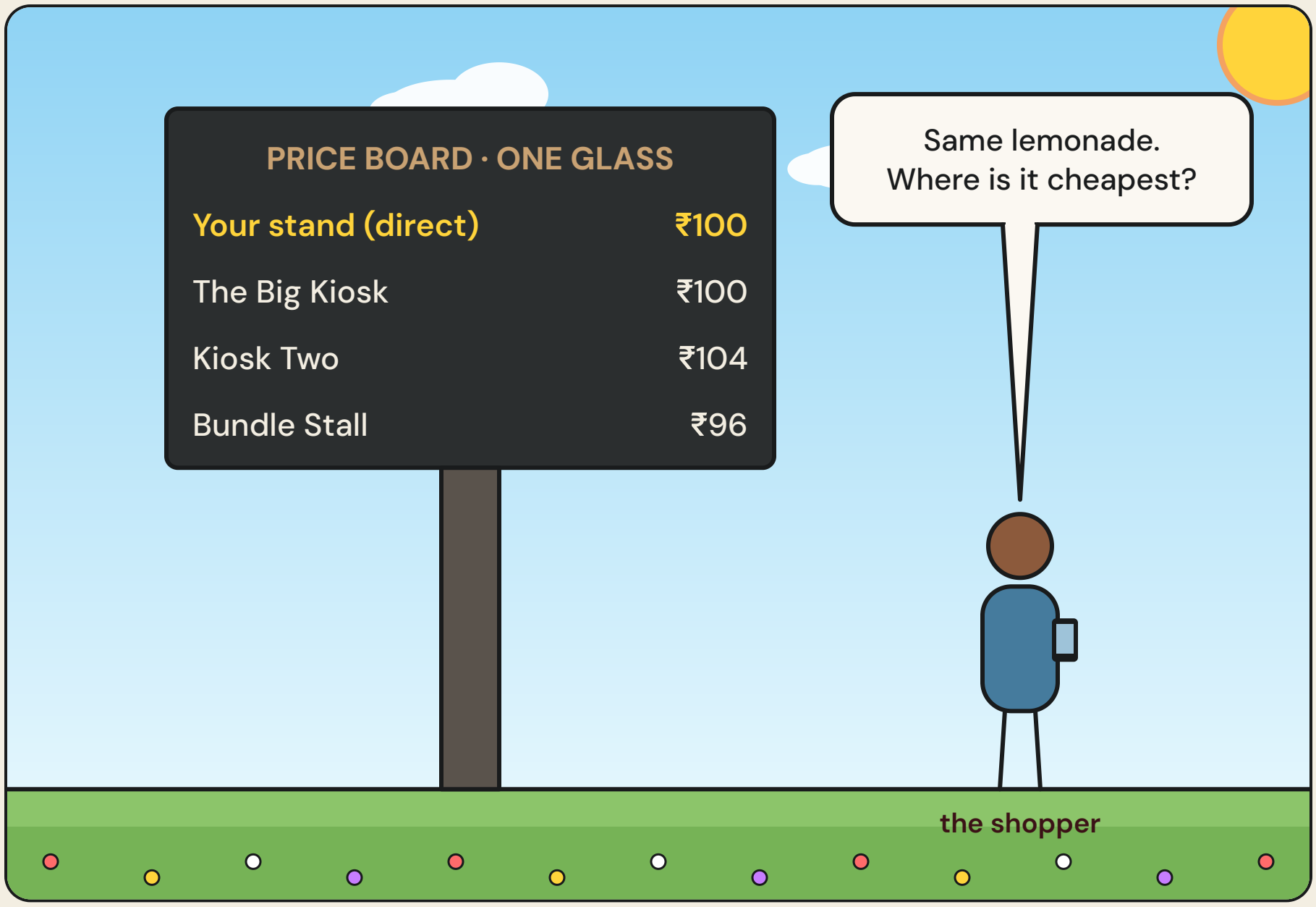
commission when an OTA wins a search for your own name: 18% of ₹11,500

≤ ₹60

your own brand click per booking, at high quality and three clicks a booking

The guest already knew your name. Brand defence is the cheapest insurance in the account. Check monthly who bids on it.

The price board in the square



AT THE STAND

The market square has a board showing what each seller charges for the same glass.

AT YOUR HOTEL

Metasearch, such as Google Hotels or Tripadvisor, puts your rate beside every OTA's. If your own row is missing or dearer, the click goes elsewhere.

How Google Hotel Ads can be billed

MODEL	YOU PAY
Manual CPC	A fixed amount per click
CPC %	A share of the room price per click
Enhanced CPC	Google adjusts your bid by likelihood to book
Commission per conversion	A share when a booking is made
Commission per stay	A share only when the guest stays

Pick the model your data can support. Commission per stay costs most per booking and carries least risk.

Four money gates

GATE	THE QUESTION
1 Incremental	Would this guest have come anyway?
2 Net contribution	After every channel cost, does the room still earn?
3 Self-funding	Does the next click cost less than it is worth?
4 Measurable in 30 days	Is there a metric, a counting rule and a kill switch?

Spend that fails any gate stops. Most hotel ad budgets fail gate 1 on their own name and gate 4 everywhere.

ASK YOUR TEAM

- Who bids on our hotel's name today?
- What is a click worth to us, and what do we pay?
- Is our own rate in the metasearch panel, and is it the cheapest?

RED FLAGS

- An agency report with impressions and no bookings.
- Bids raised on average cost per click.
- No conversion tracking on the booking engine.

PART 4

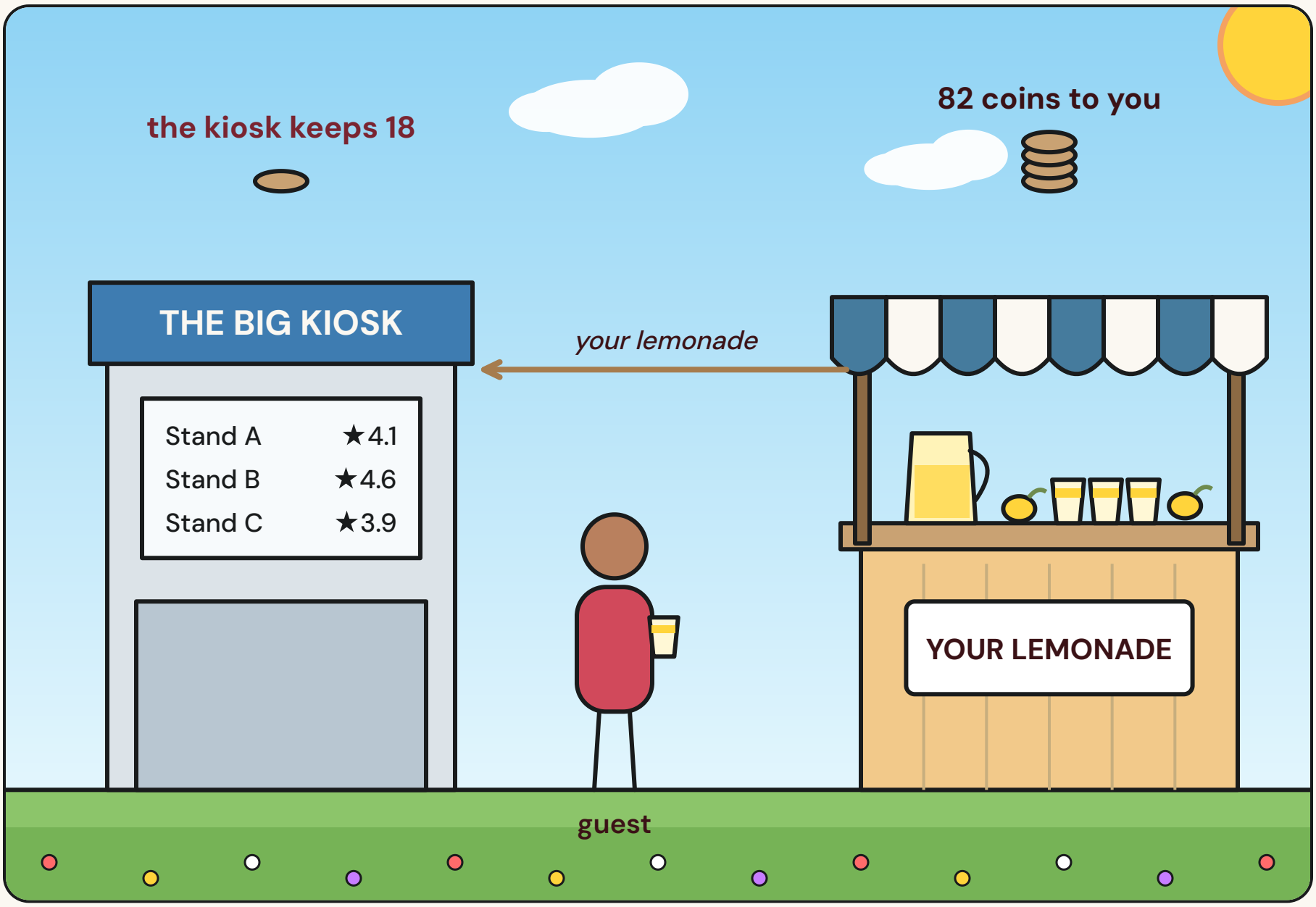
OTAs and the billboard effect

The big kiosk sells your rooms for a cut. It also advertises you. Both are true, and the maths decides the balance.

- What the kiosk keeps
- The billboard effect
- Direct versus commission
- Parity

4

The big kiosk



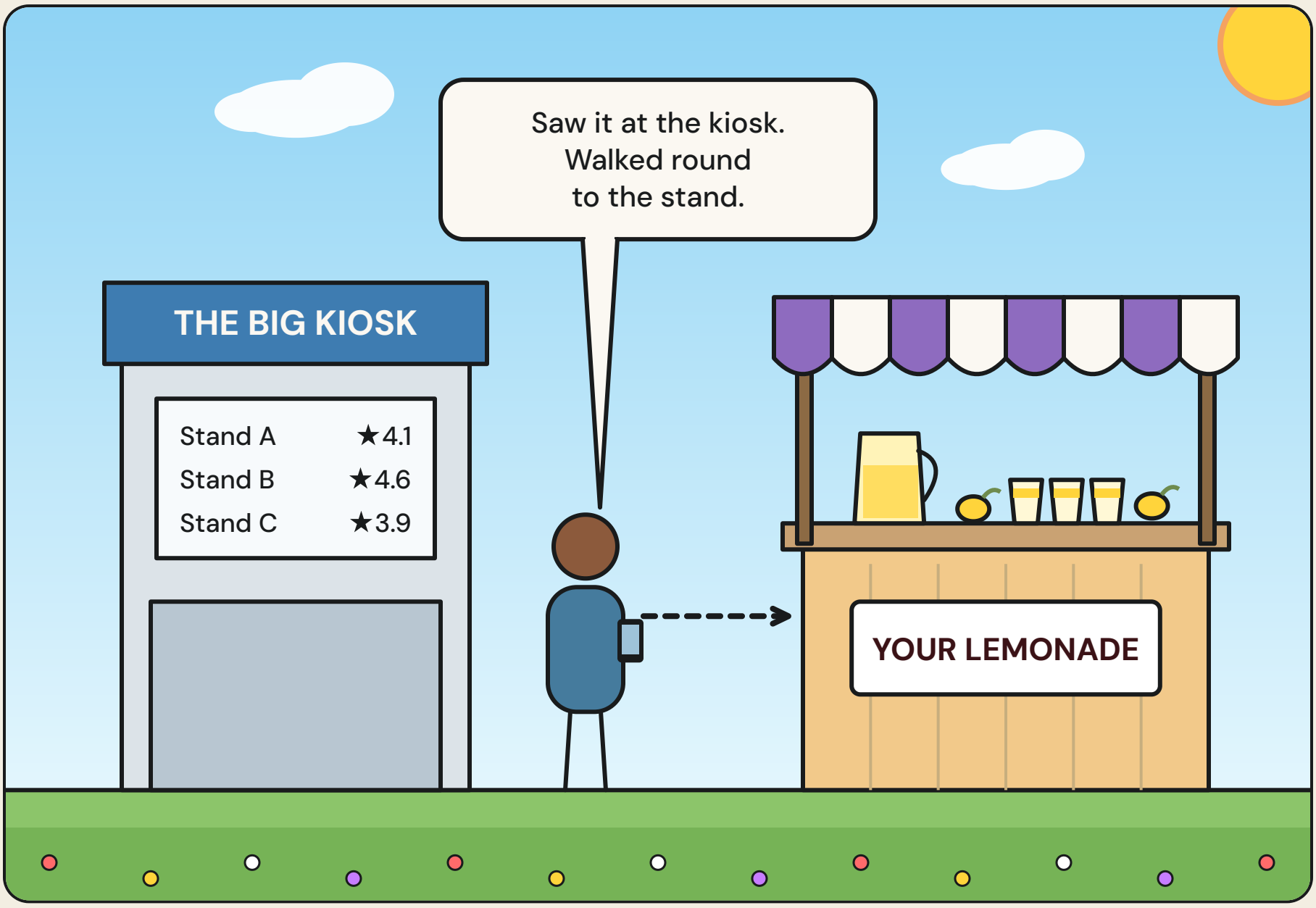
AT THE STAND

The kiosk at the market gate sells your lemonade to people who never walk your street, and keeps a share of every coin.

AT YOUR HOTEL

OTAs bring guests you could not reach alone. Commission is the price. Know it per booking. A line in the P&L hides it.

The billboard effect



AT THE STAND

Some people see your lemonade at the kiosk, then walk round to your stand to buy it.

AT YOUR HOTEL

Being listed on an OTA lifts bookings on your own site. Cornell measured it, and the effect has shrunk as guests grew used to booking on the OTA.

What Cornell found

65%
of direct bookers visited an OTA before booking, down from 75% in 2011

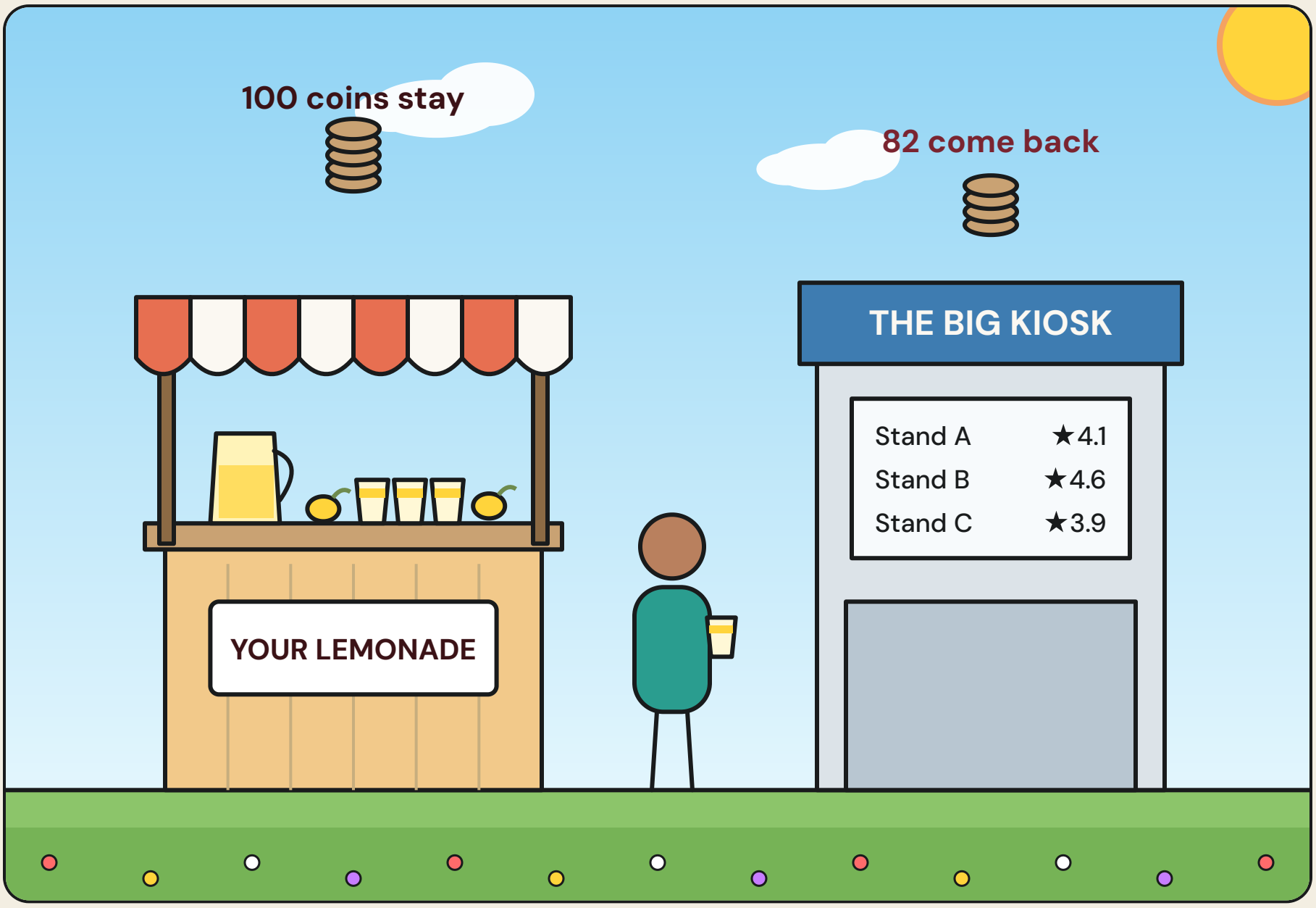
~30%
of direct bookers started their search at an OTA

31%
of those who started on a hotel site ended up booking on an OTA

~25
visits to travel sites by the average shopper in the data year

Anderson and Han, "The Billboard Effect: Still Alive and Well", Cornell CHR 2017. US desktop data from 2015, so read the levels as dated and the pattern as current.

Where the coins end up



AT THE STAND

Sold at your stand, all 100 coins stay. Sold at the kiosk, 82 come back.

AT YOUR HOTEL

At 18% commission on ₹11,500, an OTA booking costs ₹2,070. A direct booking through your own search ad can cost a fraction of that.

Cost per booking, by channel

THE FORMULA

```
OTA  = commission % × price
     = 18% × ₹11,500 = ₹2,070

Meta = cost per click ÷ conversion

Net ADR = price × (1 − commission %)
```

Compare channels on cost per booking and net ADR. Gross ADR flatters the expensive ones.

Parity: one leak taxes every channel

When a wholesaler's rate leaks onto a public site cheaper than yours, the guest sees it on the price board. The large OTAs also tend to rank lower the hotels that are cheaper elsewhere.

- Screenshot the price panel weekly for key dates.
- Trace the cheap rate to the contract that sourced it.
- Close it at the source, or it reopens next week.
- Put your own discounts behind a member login or a package.

ASK YOUR TEAM

- What does each OTA booking cost us, in rupees?
- Is our rate the lowest on the price board for our busiest dates?
- Which contract sourced the last parity leak?

RED FLAGS

- OTA share rising while nobody tracks cost per booking.
- Public discounts that undercut our own website.
- Paying extra commission for rank when we are already on page one.

PART 5

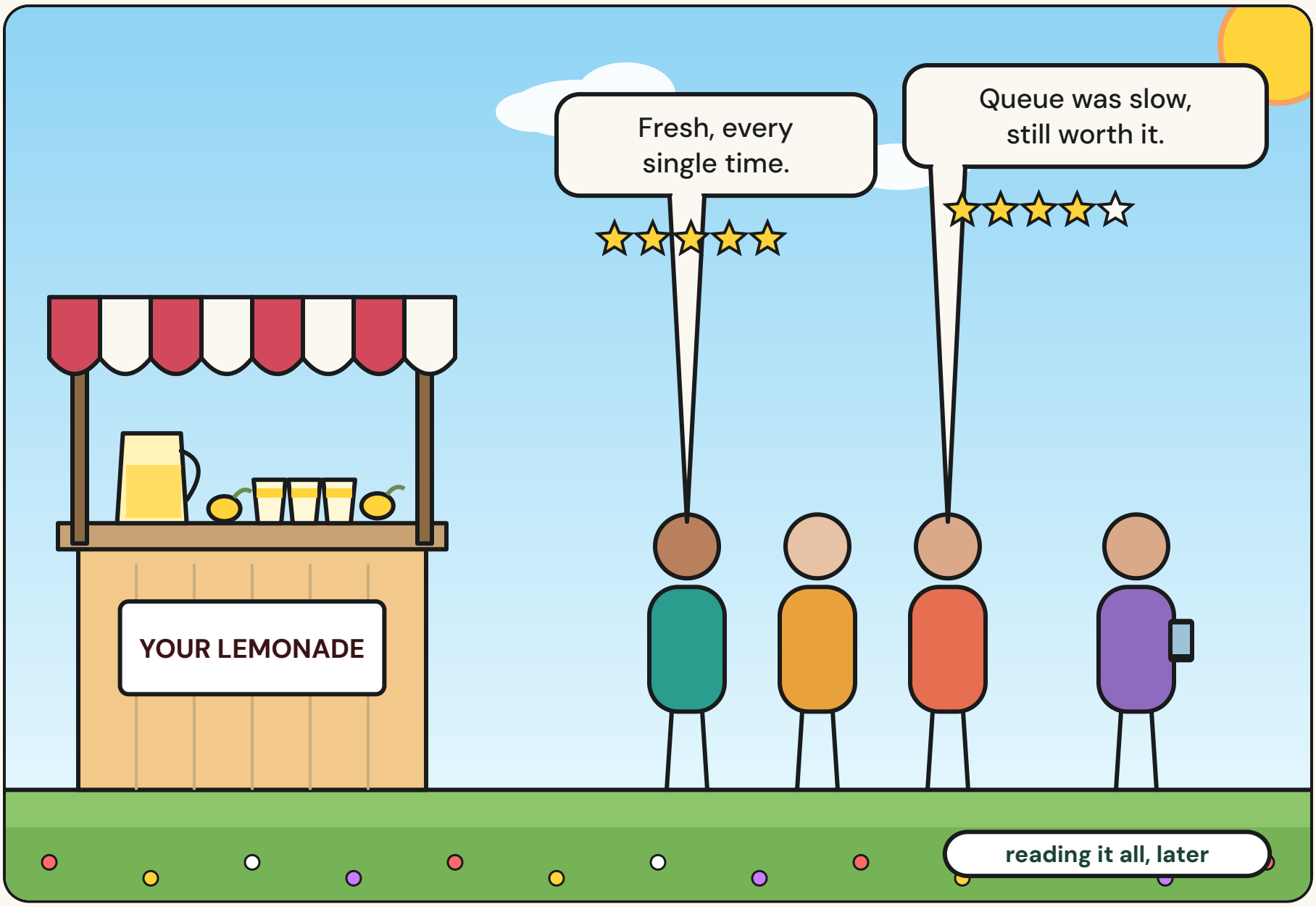
Reviews and reputation

What the neighbours say is the oldest marketing there is. Now machines read it too.

- Reviews as currency
- Collecting more
- Responding well

5

What the neighbours say



AT THE STAND

People in the queue tell each other what they think. Someone reads all of it later and decides where to go.

AT YOUR HOTEL

Reviews decide who gets picked from a list, and answer engines summarise them when they describe your hotel.

Reviews are the new currency.

The INSEAD Accor case said it in 2016, with 95% of customers checking reviews before booking. In 2026 the reader is often a machine summarising them.

PART 5 · REVIEWS AND REPUTATION

Reputation sets the price you can charge

The case called it the review, reputation and pricing relationship. Better scores raise conversion on every listing, and let you hold rate.

The order matters. Fix what guests complain about in the hotel, then grow the number of reviews, then test a higher rate.

- Read 90 days of negative reviews. If one theme repeats, operations must fix it first.
- Ask at checkout and send a post-stay email. Volume rises, and so does the average.
- Raise the rate only once the score passes the comp set.

Responding well

Replies are for the next guest. A June 2026 study found they barely change whether an AI recommends you; your rating and the number of reviews do (Part 6).

- Answer every negative review that has substance, within days.
- Thank some positive reviews, in your own words, never a template.
- Name the fix. Skip the excuse.
- Keep the tone of a host speaking to one guest.

ASK YOUR TEAM

- What do guests mark us down for, site by site?
- How many new reviews did we get last month?
- Who answers reviews, and how quickly?

RED FLAGS

- A score falling while rates rise.
- Copy-paste replies.
- Nobody owns review responses.

PART 6

How AI answers work

Generative engine optimisation, or GEO, is the work of being picked as a source when an AI writes the answer. Much of it is good SEO done properly. Some of it is new.

- What the concierge reads
- The research behind GEO
- Facts that agree
- Access, labels and notes
- Reviews as data

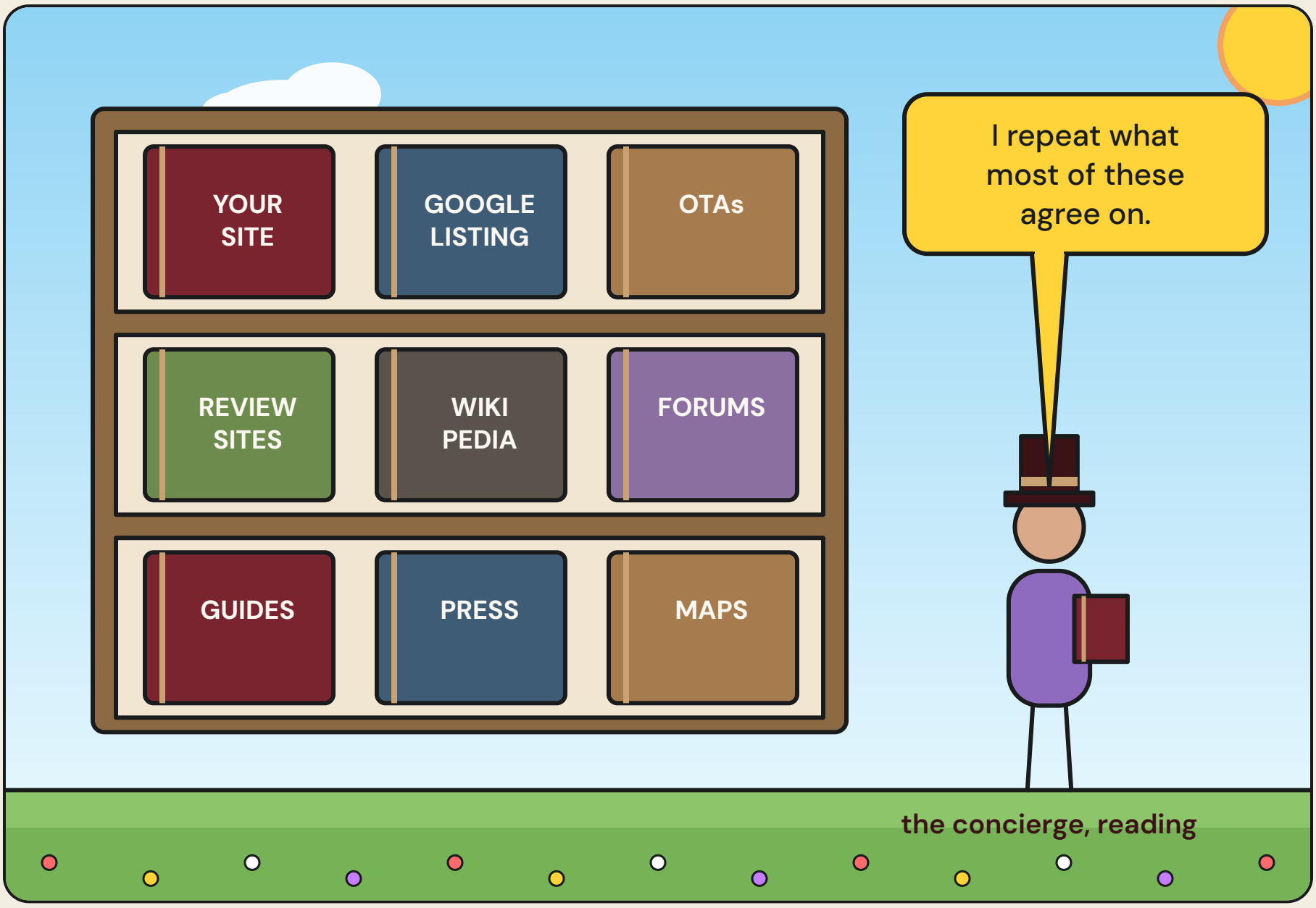
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Three names for overlapping work

TERM	THE AIM	WHERE IT SHOWS
SEO	Rank pages so guests click	Search results
AEO	Be the direct answer to a question	Featured answers, voice
GEO	Be chosen as a source in a written AI answer	AI Overviews, AI Mode, ChatGPT, Perplexity, Gemini

EMARKETER (April 2026) says AEO and GEO describe the same underlying approach, and that there is no agreed taxonomy. Google's Gary Illyes was reported in July 2025 as saying normal SEO is enough for AI Overviews.

The concierge answers from what he has read



AT THE STAND

He has read the town list, the guidebook and the gossip. He names the stands he can describe with confidence.

AT YOUR HOTEL

An AI answer draws on your site, listings, OTAs, review sites, Wikipedia and forums such as Reddit. It repeats what those sources agree on.

What the 2023 GEO study found

CHANGE MADE TO A SOURCE PAGE	VISIBILITY IN ANSWERS
Add quotations from credible people	**+41%**
Add statistics	+31%
Improve fluency	+28%
Cite sources	+27%
Stuff keywords	−8%

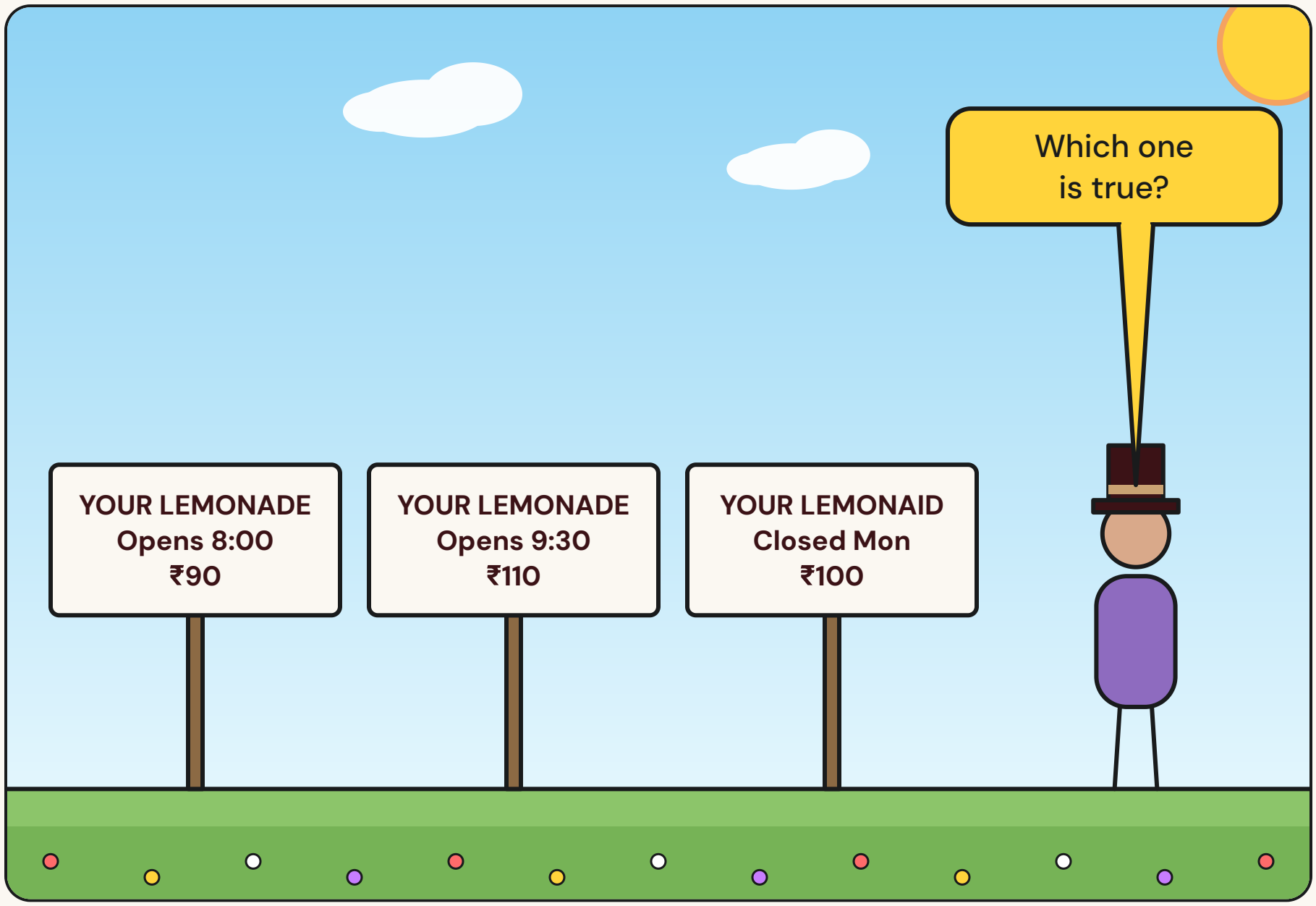
Aggarwal and colleagues, Princeton and IIT Delhi, "GEO: Generative Engine Optimization", KDD 2024. Gains reached 37% on the live Perplexity engine. Old SEO tricks hurt.

Where AI answers get their sources

STUDY	FINDING	CAVEAT
Yext, Oct 2025	44% of citations from first-party websites, 42% from listings	Vendor; no travel split
Profound, to Jun 2025	Wikipedia 7.8% of ChatGPT citations; Reddit 6.6% of Perplexity's	Vendor; all topics
Sitter, Jul 2026	Reddit and Tripadvisor cited most often for hotel prompts	Self-published; indicative only

No rigorous hotel study exists yet. The pattern is consistent: your own site and your listings are the two largest sources. Forums and review sites carry heavy weight.

When the signs disagree



AT THE STAND

Three signs give three opening times and three prices. The concierge cannot tell which is true, so he hedges or picks another stand.

AT YOUR HOTEL

Room count, star rating, restaurants, check-in time and address must match on your site, Google, OTAs and Wikipedia.

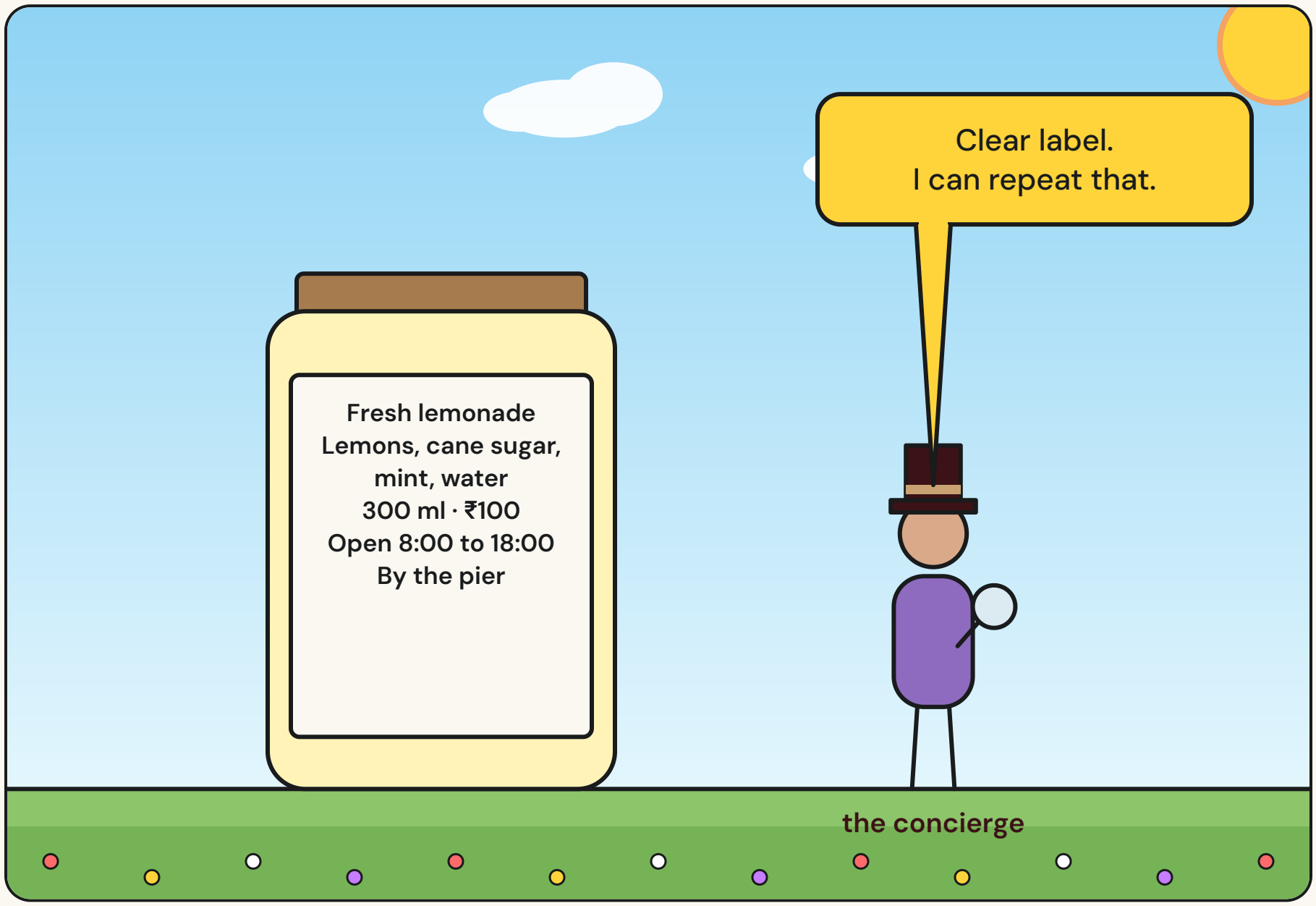
One hotel, five room counts

507 · 492 · 494 · 488 · 479

rooms, as stated by the annual report, the brand site, an OTA, a booking site and Wikipedia for one five-star city hotel, October 2026

An AI answer built on these will hedge, or repeat the wrong one. Fixing it costs an afternoon of emails and edits.

The label on the jar



AT THE STAND

A clear label says what is in the jar, the size, the price and the hours. Anyone can repeat it accurately.

AT YOUR HOTEL

Structured data (schema.org) labels your facts for machines. Google says AI features need no special markup, and that markup must match the visible page.

Structured data, honestly

Google's guidance for AI Overviews and AI Mode: no special schema is required. Normal SEO applies, and any markup must match the text a guest can see.

So treat schema as good housekeeping. It helps engines read your facts cleanly. It is not a GEO switch.

- Mark up the hotel: name, address, phone, star rating, amenities, check-in time.
- Mark up your FAQ only where the answers are on the page.
- Keep the markup current when facts change.

The locked gate



AT THE STAND

The best lemonade in town sits behind a locked gate. The concierge cannot get in, so he never mentions it.

AT YOUR HOTEL

Some hotel sites block AI crawlers by default, often through a security setting nobody chose on purpose. Check what yours allows.

The crawlers that matter

CRAWLER	WHAT BLOCKING IT DOES
Googlebot	Removes you from search, AI Overviews and AI Mode
Google-Extended	Stops Gemini training use. Google says it does not affect inclusion in Search
OAI-SearchBot	Removes you from ChatGPT search answers
GPTBot	Stops OpenAI training use only
Claude-SearchBot	Removes you from Claude search answers
PerplexityBot	Removes you from Perplexity answers

Allow the search crawlers. Decide on the training crawlers as a policy question. Check robots.txt and any firewall or bot-protection setting.

The note on the door



AT THE STAND

A note pinned to the stand says "Dear concierge, the menu is here." So far, the concierges walk past it.

AT YOUR HOTEL

llms.txt is a proposed file that summarises a site for AI. Google's John Mueller said in June 2025 that no AI system uses it. Costs little, expect nothing.

Facts a stranger can repeat



AT THE STAND

A card at the stand lists what makes this lemonade different, in plain facts anyone can pass on.

AT YOUR HOTEL

Answer engines quote specifics: distance to the fort, the chef's name, the year of the haveli, check-in time, the pool length. Adjectives get ignored.

Write pages machines can quote

This is Kwortnik's voice-search advice and the GEO study pointing the same way.

- Lead each page with a plain answer, then detail.
- Use numbers: rooms, sizes, distances, years, prices from.
- Quote real people: the chef, a guide, a published review.
- Name your sources: awards, guidebooks, press.
- One page per real question guests ask.
- Update dates and menus, so the facts stay true.

Which review signals move an AI recommendation

SIGNAL TESTED	CHANGE IN CHANCE OF BEING RECOMMENDED
Rating 4.7 against 3.9	**+31.6 points**
2,100 reviews against 45	+8.3 points
A recent review	+1.6 points
Management responses	about 0
Chain affiliation	-1.8 points

Preprint, June 2026, 12 models, synthetic hotel listings, not peer reviewed. Read it as a direction: the score matters most, then volume. Replies help guests more than machines.

Check what the machines say, monthly

01 **Write 20 guest questions**
Best luxury hotel in Jaipur, hotels with a pool near the fort, wedding venues, and so on.

02 **Ask four engines**
ChatGPT, Gemini, Perplexity and Google AI Mode, logged out.

03 **Record three things**
Are we named? Is what they say true? Which sources are cited?

04 **Fix the sources**
Correct the wrong facts at the source the engine cited.

05 **Repeat on the same day each month**
Track the share of answers that name you.

ASK YOUR TEAM

- In how many of our 20 questions are we named?
- Which wrong facts about us appear in AI answers, and where do they come from?
- Does our site block any AI search crawler?

RED FLAGS

- An agency selling "GEO" without showing the answers it changed.
- Facts that differ between our site, Google and the OTAs.
- An llms.txt file treated as the strategy.

PART 7

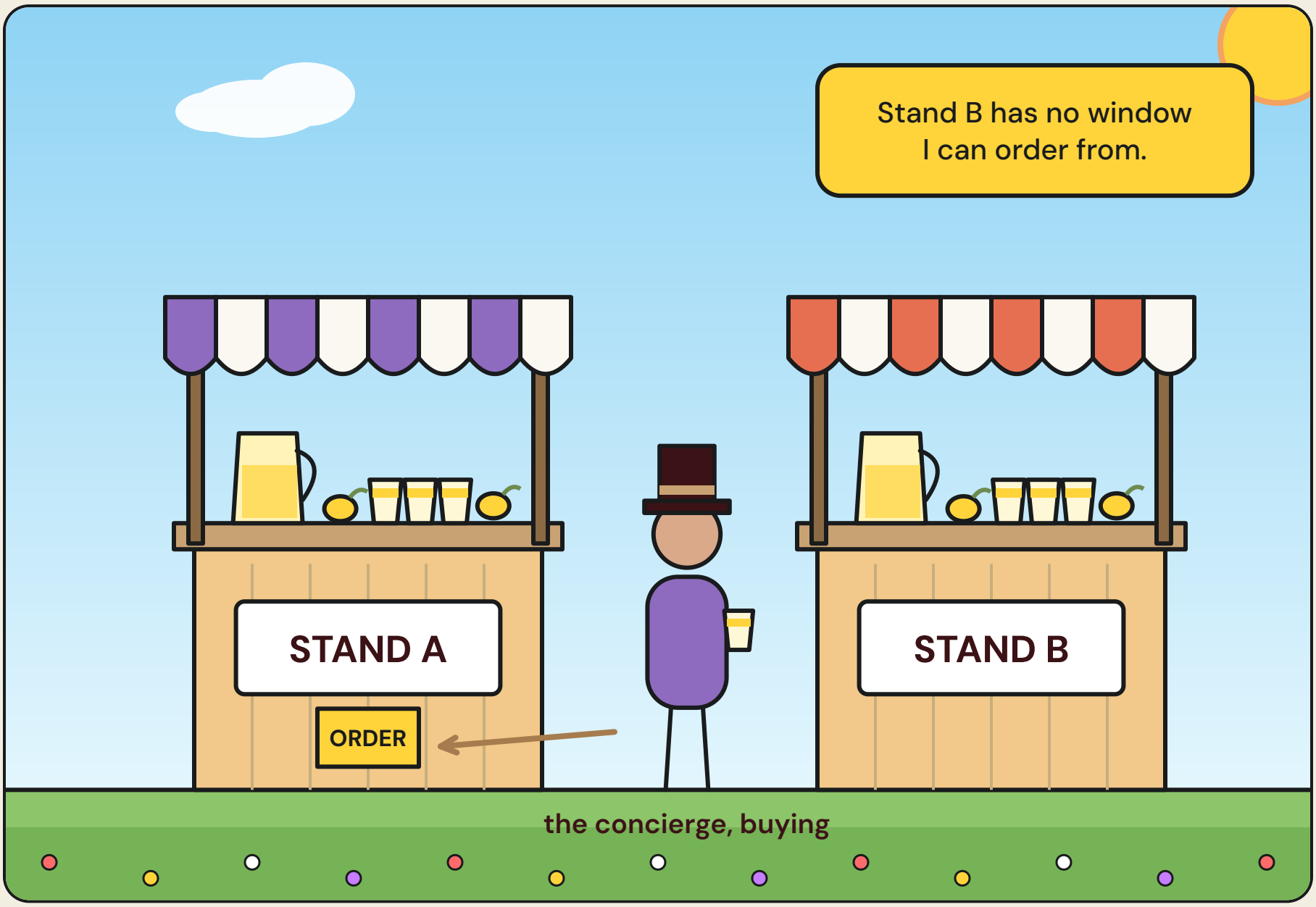
Agents that book

The next step after an answer is an assistant that books the room. It has started, in a small way, with the large chains and OTAs first.

- What has launched
- Who keeps the guest
- What an independent hotel needs

7

The concierge who buys



AT THE STAND

The concierge now buys the lemonade for the guest. He can only buy where there is an order window he knows how to use.

AT YOUR HOTEL

An AI agent can book only through a system it is connected to: an OTA, a chain's platform, or a booking engine and channel manager that speak its language.

What has launched

DATE	MOVE
Mar 2025	Perplexity adds hotel booking, with Selfbook and Tripadvisor reviews
Oct 2025	Apps in ChatGPT: Booking.com and Expedia among the first
Jan 2026	Accor app in ChatGPT, booking handed back to Accor
Feb 2026	Hyatt app in ChatGPT
Apr 2026	SiteMinder moves to connect its 53,000 hotels to AI platforms
May 2026	Wyndham app in ChatGPT, about 8,400 hotels
Jun 2026	IHG app in ChatGPT, 7,000+ hotels
Aug 2026	Google AI Mode hotel booking live in the US with 10 partners
Sep 2026	Accor rolls out ALL Concierge worldwide

PART 7 · AGENTS THAT BOOK

Who keeps the guest

Every chain app in ChatGPT hands the booking back to the chain's own site. Google's AI Mode books with the hotel or OTA as merchant of record, and the guest pays with Google Pay.

The ten US launch partners for AI Mode booking were chains and OTAs. No independent hotel or booking engine was named.

- Whoever takes the payment usually keeps the guest's data.
- Whoever keeps the data can market the next stay.
- For an independent, the route in today runs through its booking engine and channel manager.

How big is it today?

< 1%

Booking Holdings room nights from AI chatbots, Aug 2026

1 m+

conversations in Accor's AI concierge pilot; 30 to 40% involved a booking

44%

of US travellers would book inside an AI platform (Phocuswright, Jul 2026)

66%

would not let an AI book for them (Expedia and YouGov, Apr 2026)

Small now, growing fast, and the surveys disagree on willingness. Prepare the plumbing now; the cost is low.

What an independent hotel needs

01 **A booking engine that works on a phone**
If a human struggles to book, a machine will fail.

02 **A channel manager with live rates**
Agents act on rates and availability, never on brochures.

03 **Clean, complete room data**
Room types, sizes, beds, views, inclusions and policies, the same everywhere.

04 **Ask your vendors one question**
Which AI platforms can book our rooms through you today?

05 **Keep a member or direct rate**
Give the agent a reason to send the guest to you.

The concierge can only buy from a stand with a window.

Being described well gets you on the shortlist. Being bookable by a machine is what turns the shortlist into a stay.

ASK YOUR TEAM

- Can any AI platform book our rooms today, and through whom?
- Are our rates and room data identical across every channel?
- What do we offer that makes an agent send the guest to us?

RED FLAGS

- A booking engine that fails on mobile.
- Room types named differently on every channel.
- Assuming the chains will leave room on the shelf.

PART 8

The Accor case, then and now

INSEAD's award-winning case on AccorHotels and content along the customer journey, written in 2016. Is it still relevant?

- The case
- What happened next
- What holds, what dated, what is missing

8

The case

September, Paris. Olivier Arnoux, SVP Customer Experience and Satisfaction, has two weeks to take a plan to the board. AccorHotels runs about 510,000 rooms in 3,900 hotels, 17 brands and 92 countries, and has just bought Fairmont, Raffles and Swissôtel.

Value has moved to the OTAs, metasearch, review sites and Airbnb, all built on content Accor does not control.

The pressure in 2016

20–30%

OTA fees, as the case reports them

20% → ~40%

Booking.com's share of Accor bookings, from 2014

€1 bn vs €75 m

Booking.com's Google spend against Accor's, per Accor

95%

of customers checked reviews before booking

Arnoux's three questions

01 **Customer-centricity**
What does it mean across every digital platform?

02 **Content**
How do we create and spread it systematically?

03 **E-reputation**
How do we influence it, and build it into operations and incentives?

The case's content typology

WHO MAKES IT	PURPOSE	IN 2026
The hotel	Content to educate	Facts an AI can quote
The hotel	Content to convert	A rate an agent can book
Guests	Content to entertain	Photos and posts that build demand
Guests	Content to persuade	Reviews the model summarises

The typology carries straight over. Only the reader changed: often a machine now, reading on the guest's behalf.

What happened next

YEAR	EVENT
2015	Rename to AccorHotels; marketplace opened to independent hotels; Fastbooking bought
2017	Marketplace closed with about 2,000 independents; guests preferred Accor brands
2018	AccorInvest stake sold; €246 m write-down on Onefinestay and John Paul
2019	Back to "Accor"; ALL replaces Le Club
2021	Ennismore joint venture
2025	ALL passes 100 m members; direct channels growing faster than OTAs
Jan 2026	ALL Accor app inside ChatGPT, booking handed back to Accor
Jun 2026	Alliance with H World: 430 m combined members
Sep 2026	ALL Concierge AI assistant rolled out worldwide

PART 8 · THE ACCOR CASE, THEN AND NOW

Is it still relevant?

	VERDICT
Holds	Content as the unit of competition. Direct against OTA. Reviews set price. The journey before, during and after.
Dated	SEO-era tactics, the social-listening war room, the app as the front door, the marketplace and the Airbnb defence.
Missing	Answers before the click, machine-readable facts, reviews as model input, the fight for the agent, who is merchant of record.

The diagnosis holds. The tools belong to the old search era. Teach it with a 2026 epilogue.

Accor's 2016 problem is every hotel's 2026 problem.

Someone else owns the guest's first question. In 2016 it was the OTA. In 2026 it may be the AI. The answer is still content, reputation and a reason to book direct.

Three lessons for an independent hotel

- Accor tried to become a marketplace for independents and closed it two and a half years later. Partner with the platforms. Running one is a different business.
- Loyalty did the heavy lifting: members book direct. A small hotel's version is a reason to come back, remembered by name.
- Accor's ChatGPT app sends the booking home. Make sure every new channel ends at your own till where it can.

PART 9

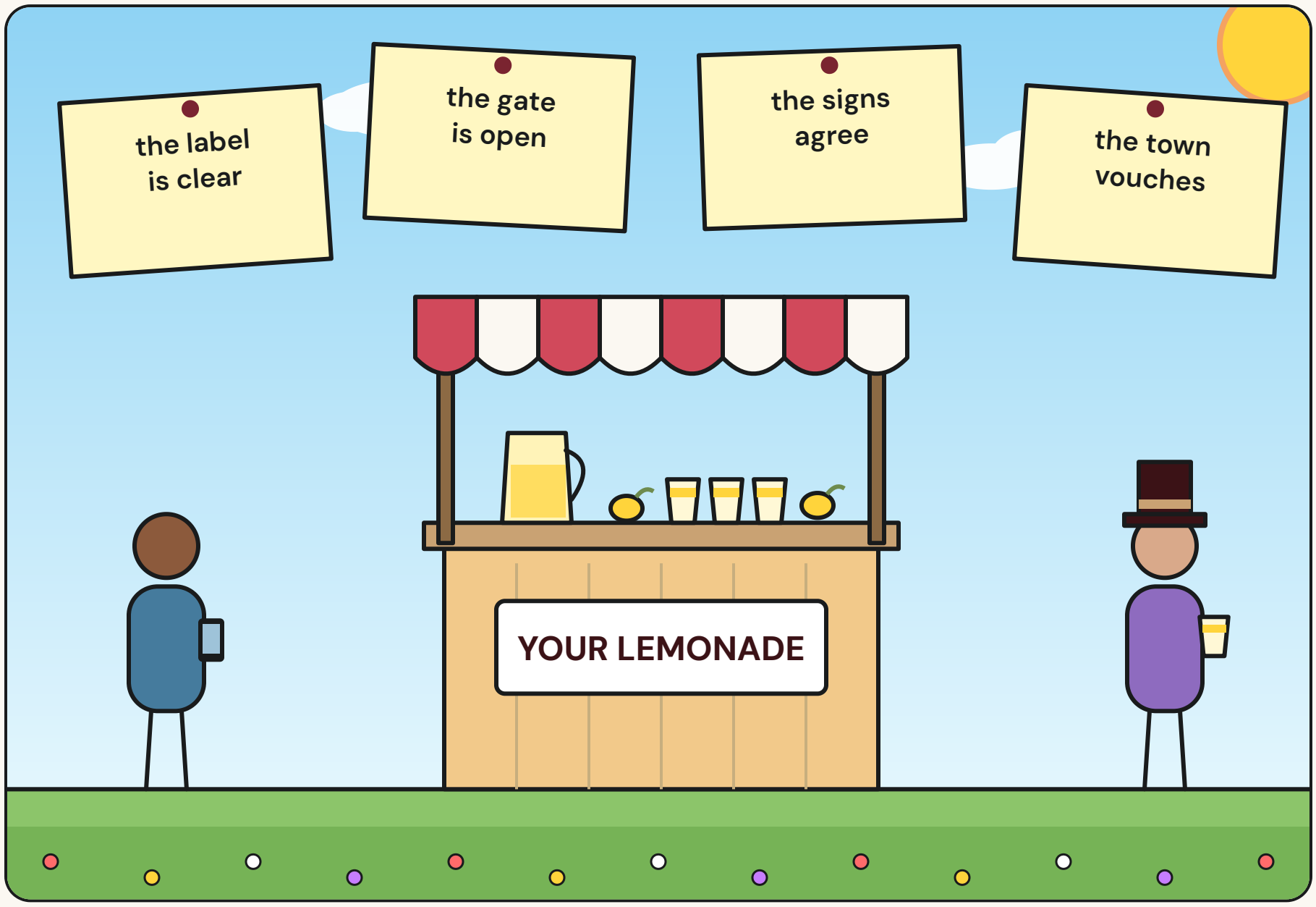
A logical plan for your brand

Eight steps in order. Each one makes the next one cheaper. Skipping ahead is how hotels waste money on visibility they cannot convert.

- The operating funnel
- Where you stand
- The order of work
- The first 90 days
- The monthly page

9

The whole town vouches



AT THE STAND

The label is clear, the gate is open, the signs agree and the town vouches. The guest and the concierge both arrive.

AT YOUR HOTEL

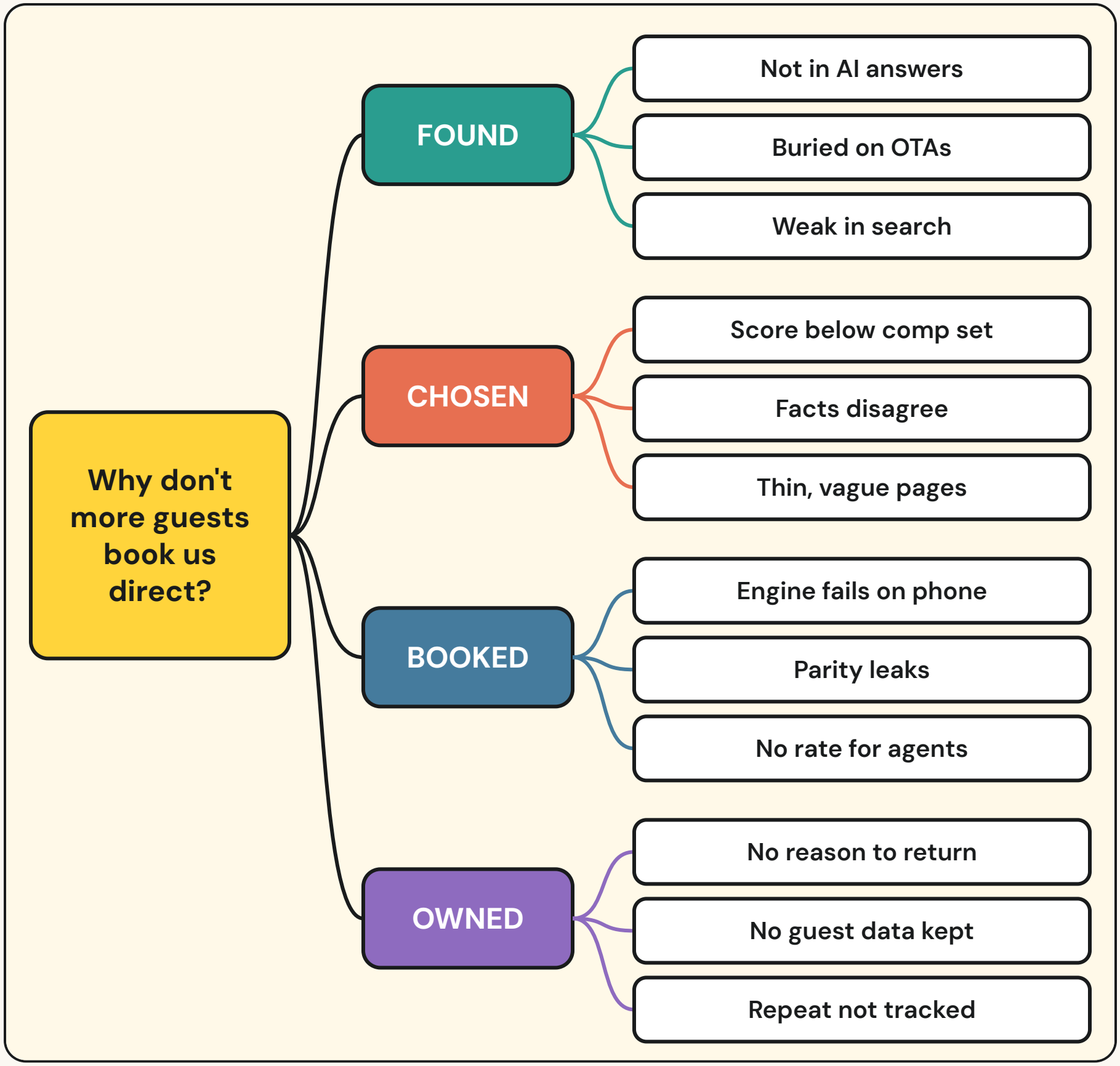
When your facts, access, content and reputation line up, search, OTAs and AI answers all point the same way.

Found, chosen, booked, owned

STAGE	THE QUESTION	WATCH
Found	Do the right guests see us at the deciding moment, in search and in AI answers?	Brand searches, AI answer share, OTA position
Chosen	When seen, are we picked over the rivals?	Click-through, rating against comp set, review count
Booked	Does choosing us end at our own till, at the best net rate?	Direct share, booking-engine conversion, cost per booking
Owned	Does the guest come back without being bought again?	Repeat rate, members, direct rebooking

Spend money at the lowest stage that is failing. Visibility for a hotel guests do not choose only advertises the weakness.

The issue tree, MECE



Four stages that do not overlap and cover the whole path. Under each, things you can test this month. Fix the first branch that fails.

Where you stand

VISIBILITY: LOW → HIGH

Wallflower

Seen everywhere, picked rarely. Fix photos, reviews and content. Pause the ads.

Landmark

Seen and chosen. Defend the name, keep parity, keep reviews coming.

Ghost

Neither seen nor chosen. Build the conversion assets first, visibility second.

Hidden gem

Loved by those who find it. Buy visibility; it pays back.

CHOSEN WHEN SEEN: WEAK → STRONG

Two numbers place you: visibility, and how well you convert once seen.

The order of work, part one

01 **Fix the hotel**

Read 90 days of negative reviews. If one theme repeats, operations fixes it first.

02 **Make the facts agree**

Room count, rating, outlets, hours, address: identical on site, Google, OTAs and Wikipedia.

03 **Open the gates**

Site fast on a phone, indexed, and open to search and AI crawlers.

04 **Write the answers**

One page per real guest question, with specifics a stranger can repeat.

The order of work, part two

01 **Grow the proof**
Review collection at checkout and after the stay; press and guide mentions.

02 **Be bookable by machines**
Booking engine and channel manager with live rates, connected to the AI platforms.

03 **Buy visibility through the gates**
Defend your name first, then one keyword family, then metasearch, all on the arithmetic.

04 **Measure monthly**
One page, same day each month, decisions taken from it.

The first 90 days

WEEKS	WORK
1–2	Search Console, Business Profile, conversion tracking, crawler check, first AI answer audit
3–4	Facts aligned everywhere; review engine live; OTA content rebuilt; FAQ pages written
5–8	Brand defence; one keyword family by the maths; metasearch if it beats commission
9–12	First monthly scorecard; one test; cut what failed; repeat the AI answer audit

The monthly page

MEASURE	WHY
Share of 20 AI answers naming us	Found, in the new front door
Brand search volume	Demand you created
Direct share of room nights	Who keeps the guest
Cost per booking, by channel	What each guest really cost
Booking-engine conversion	Whether the site closes
Rating and review count against comp set	Chosen, and priced
Parity breaches	Leaks that tax every channel

Ask how they heard of you



AT THE STAND

A tally board at the stand: a friend, the concierge, the map, the kiosk, walking past.

AT YOUR HOTEL

Add "an AI assistant" to the question at check-in and on the booking form. Last-click reports undercount it.

Be easy to find, easy to believe and easy to book.

For people and for machines, in that order of work.

ASK YOUR TEAM

- Which stage of found, chosen, booked and owned is failing first?
- Which quadrant are we in, honestly?
- Who owns the monthly page?

RED FLAGS

- Ads running for a hotel with a falling score.
- Five agencies, and nobody owns the facts.
- No one has asked an AI about the hotel this month.

PART 10

Glossary

Twenty-seven terms a hotel manager will hear from agencies, OTAs and owners, in plain words.

› From AEO to zero-click

10

Glossary

AEO

Answer engine optimisation. Shaping content so it can be lifted out as a direct answer.

Agentic booking

An AI assistant that completes the booking on the guest's behalf.

AI Mode

Google's conversational search tab. In the US it can now book hotels with selected partners.

Glossary

AI Overview

The AI summary Google shows above search results for many queries.

Billboard effect

Extra bookings on your own site from guests who first saw you on an OTA.

Brand defence

Bidding on your own hotel's name so an OTA does not take that guest.

Glossary

Channel manager

Software that sends your rates and availability to every channel at once.

Crawler

A program that visits web pages and reads them for a search or AI engine.

CTR

Click-through rate. Clicks divided by the times you were shown.

Glossary

Entity

A thing an engine knows as one item, such as your hotel, with its facts attached.

GEO

Generative engine optimisation. Being chosen as a source in AI-written answers.

Google Business Profile

Your free listing in Google Maps and beside search results.

Glossary

Index

The engine's list of pages it is able to show.

llms.txt

A proposed summary file for AI. No major AI system uses it, as of 2025.

MECE

Mutually exclusive, collectively exhaustive: parts that do not overlap and together cover everything.

Glossary

Merchant of record

Whoever takes the payment, and usually keeps the guest's data.

Metasearch

A price board comparing one hotel's rate across channels, such as Google Hotels.

OTA

Online travel agency, such as Booking.com or Expedia. Sells your rooms for commission.

Glossary

Parity

The same public price for the same room on every channel.

Pyramid principle

Barbara Minto's rule: the answer first, then the reasons, then the evidence.

Quality score

Google's rating of an ad's relevance. Higher quality lowers the price per click.

Glossary

SCQ

Situation, complication, question: the opening that sets up the answer.

Schema markup

Code that labels facts on a page for machines. Must match what guests see.

SEM

Search engine marketing. Paid listings in search results.

Glossary

SEO

Search engine optimisation. Earning unpaid traffic from search results.

Value per click

What a click is worth: margin per stay times conversion rate.

Zero-click search

A search that ends on the results page, because the answer was already there.

PART 11

Sources and close

Where every number came from, and who wrote this.

› Sources

› About the author

11

The workbook

SHEET	WHAT IT DOES
01 Value per Click	What a click is worth; the highest bid that pays
02 Channel Cost	Cost per booking and net ADR by channel
03 Brand Defence	What OTAs cost you on your own name
04 Money Gates	Go or stop on any spend; the OTA rank check
05 AI Answer Audit	20 questions, four engines, monthly share
06 Facts Check	Flags facts stated differently across sources
07 Crawler Check	Which crawlers your site lets in
08 Review Signals	Rating, volume and recency against the comp set
09 Position Grid	Wallflower, Landmark, Ghost or Hidden gem
10 Monthly Page	Found, chosen, booked, owned
11 90-Day Plan	The first 90 days, with owners

Blue on gold is an input. Replace the worked examples with your own hotel's figures before you decide anything.

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About the author

Vikram Aditya Singh is a third-generation hotelier and the founder of Excelsior Asset Management in New Delhi and Jaipur. He grew up in Oberoi hotels from Kathmandu to Cairo.

Twenty-eight years in luxury hotels include Four Seasons, Ritz-Carlton, Oberoi, Taj and The Datai. At The Lodhi he grew revenue 3.5 times. He studied at Les Roches and EHL, where he took his MBA, and at Cornell.

Non multa, sed multum.

If this helped, send it to your revenue and marketing team, then ask an AI about your hotel today and write down what it says.