SERPIFAI WORKED-EXAMPLE FIELD GUIDE

Build an Ecommerce Competitor Set Without Mixing Roles

A portable guide for separating direct sellers, substitutes, retailers, marketplaces, manufacturers and publishers before keyword, content, merchandising or investment decisions.

Human rule: the internet is a shopping street. Visibility tells you who is on the street; competitor-set design tells you who is fighting for which part of the shopper decision.

Canonical method

SCOPE	DISCOVER	SEGMENT	QUALIFY	MAP	REVIEW
Fix buyer + decision	Collect candidates	Assign role	Test offer comparability	Map query/surface	Refresh changed evidence

Fictional premium-cookware example. No client, ranking, revenue or performance outcome is claimed.

1. Scope the shopping decision

Do not start with domains. Start with one shopper, one need, one category, one geography, one value frame and one decision. If changing any of those would change who counts as a competitor, the scope is not locked yet.

Scope field	Worked-example answer	Why it matters
Buyer	Premium home cook	Prevents mass/budget behaviour being mixed with specialist demand.
Need	Durable induction-ready cookware	Keeps adjacent appliances outside the task.
Category	Premium cookware	Creates the comparison unit.
Geography	One UK delivery market	Removes sellers that cannot fulfil the scoped purchase.
Value frame	Premium / high consideration	Stops headline-price-only comparisons.
Decision	Choose benchmark set before content and merchandising investment	Makes the output actionable.

Stop rule: a candidate cannot be approved before the scope exists.

2. Assign the role before benchmarking

Role	Meaning	Safe benchmark
Direct commercial	Can realistically win the same scoped purchase for the same product/offer unit.	Offer, merchandising, landed price, stock, fulfilment, returns, purchase-intent content.
Indirect / substitute	Solves the same need or budget through a different product, condition or model.	Positioning, value, objections, substitution pressure.
Retail / channel	Competes through convenience, breadth or distribution.	Channel service, assortment framing, delivery proposition.
Marketplace / intermediary	Controls discovery/transaction infrastructure; seller can vary.	Listing/category mechanics, seller visibility, marketplace friction.
Manufacturer / first-party	Owns product authority and may sell direct selectively.	Specifications, variants, claims, product authority.
Publisher / information	Competes for research attention, not necessarily the sale.	Question coverage, evidence, comparisons, answer-ready explanation.
Out of scope / unresolved	Fails scope or lacks consistent evidence.	No direct benchmark until boundary/evidence changes.

Consistency rule: a publisher cannot simultaneously be “seller of record” without resolving the contradiction. A marketplace cannot silently become a direct seller. Candidate type and transaction ownership must agree before the role is ready.

3. Compare the offer unit, not the whole domain

For ecommerce, product and offer details often matter more than total domain visibility. Capture the exact unit the shopper receives.

Check	Capture	Decision question
Product identity	GTIN / SKU / model / variant	Are we comparing the same product or only the same need?
Pack / bundle	Quantity, accessories, bundle terms	Is the value proposition equivalent?
Landed price	Price + delivery + required fees	Is the buyer paying a comparable total?
Availability	In stock / backorder / restriction + date	Is it a current purchase alternative?
Fulfilment	Delivery promise, geography, cut-off	Is convenience comparable?
Returns / warranty	Window, cost, service owner	Is purchase risk comparable?
Transaction owner	Seller of record / marketplace / manufacturer	Who owns the offer and relationship?
Freshness	As-of date and previous state	Could the conclusion already be stale?

Freshness rule: STALE and NOT CHECKED evidence do not become READY. Comparability rule: an N/A-heavy record can be useful, but it is PARTIAL rather than fully COMPARABLE when core offer identity or transaction ownership is not comparable.

4. Map keyword and AI visibility by role

Keyword gaps and visibility tools are discovery systems. Use them after role classification so the response matches the competitor type.

Illustrative query	Intent	Likely visible roles	Decision use
premium induction cookware set	Comparison	Direct sellers, retailers, marketplaces	Commercial/category benchmark after qualification.
best cookware set for induction	Research	Publishers, manufacturers, retailers, marketplaces	Separate information from transaction benchmark.
5 piece cookware set price	Price/value	Sellers, retailers, marketplace listings	Compare exact pack and landed price.
brand A vs brand B cookware	Brand comparison	Publishers, manufacturers, retailers	Entity/comparison coverage; role still matters.
cookware delivery tomorrow	Fulfilment	Retailers, marketplaces, local channels	Delivery becomes a competitive dimension.

AI-shopping boundary: Google says AI performance insights is currently a limited Merchant Center pilot in the US, with broader rollout planned. Treat AI-surface discovery as visibility evidence, not proof of direct commercial substitution.

Primary context: support.google.com/merchants/answer/17200695?hl=en

5. Worked premium-cookware set

Candidate archetype	Role	Why	Primary strategic use
Specialist cookware retailer	Direct commercial	Same buyer/task/product/transaction/geography.	Pricing, category UX, offer, fulfilment, purchase content.
Premium department store	Retail / channel	Same transaction, broader operating model.	Convenience, service, assortment framing.
Large marketplace	Marketplace / intermediary	Platform can own discovery while seller varies.	Listing mechanics, seller visibility, channel friction.
Cookware manufacturer	First-party reference	Owns product authority; direct sales may vary.	Specs, variants, claims, authority.
Recipe/review publisher	Information competitor	Research influence without transaction ownership.	Question coverage, comparison and evidence.
Second-hand marketplace	Indirect / substitute	Competes for budget through used goods.	Substitution and value pressure.
Out-of-market seller	Out of scope	Cannot fulfil scoped geography.	Reference only.

Worked conclusion: keep the direct set small. Use broader reference sets for different questions instead of pretending every useful comparison is direct competition.

6. Diagnose the failure before adding more data

Symptom	Root cause	Smallest correction
List keeps growing	Discovery and approval are the same step.	Force scope + role qualification.
Marketplace dominates benchmark	Whole-domain comparison.	Move to listing/category offer unit.
Keyword gap looks huge	Publishers/manufacturers mixed into direct set.	Tag intent and role first.
Price comparison misleads	Pack/shipping/promotion differs.	Compare landed price + offer composition.
Stock snapshot becomes capability	No freshness control.	Capture date; STALE blocks READY.
Ghost Candidate ID appears downstream	No referential integrity.	Link operating/query/decision rows to one READY candidate.
Publisher is INCLUDE DIRECT	Role and decision-set logic conflict.	Role-check final dispositions.
Handoff field is wrong	Off-by-one or manual summary drift.	Bind summary fields to governed scope/decision records.

Strategic value comes from narrowing the response: direct rivals inform offer decisions; substitutes inform positioning; marketplaces inform channel mechanics; manufacturers inform product authority; publishers inform research and answer coverage.

7. Release checklist and portable handoff

Check	Pass condition
Scope	Buyer, need, category, geography, value frame and decision are explicit.
Candidates	Every row has valid tokens, current evidence, consistent type/transaction evidence and a defensible role.
Operating comparison	Every row links to one READY Candidate ID; core N/A fields cannot create false full comparability.
Query map	Every observation links to one READY Candidate ID and visibility is tagged by intent/surface.
Decision set	Every row links to one READY candidate; INCLUDE DIRECT / INCLUDE INDIRECT must match the governed role.
Evidence boundary	Unknowns and stale evidence remain visible and block readiness where material.
Review trigger	Material product, stock, price, fulfilment, channel, buyer or visibility change can reopen the set.
Handoff	Scope mapping is correct and set summaries come from governed READY decision rows.

Portable note:
Decision: [what the set is for]
Direct set: [same scoped purchase]
Indirect set: [substitutes]
Reference set: [marketplaces / manufacturers / publishers]
Exclusions: [what failed scope]
Evidence gap: [what remains unresolved]
Next action / owner: [smallest justified step]
Review trigger: [what would change the decision]

Use the accompanying workbook for governed evidence rows and the browser diagnostic for one-candidate triage.