

Seven Secrets To Dominating Google's Local Search Results



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Introduction

As a business person in the 21st Century, having a website is almost a no-brainer. It has never been easier to create a website for your business. Gone are the days of heavy coding and ftp interface. Many WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get) programs exist for website creation and the world-wide market has allowed small businesses to hire designers at a fraction of the cost commanded 15 years ago. However, whereas building a website has never been easier, driving traffic to your website has never been more complex. So, how do you bring the (virtual) world to your (cyber) door?

You have a business website. So, what now?

The best way to boost traffic to your website is not necessarily the easiest. There's a reason why "google" is a verb: Getting to the top of Google's local search results is paramount if you want your business to succeed online. The good news is that while there are a lot of steps to taking your website to the top of Google's rankings, the cost is relatively low or even free. It's just a matter of time and not being overwhelmed by the technology required.

Seven Secrets To Dominating Google's Local Search Results will be your guide to taking your static webpage and making it a dynamic business portal. These seven steps range in complexity, but some are incredibly simple and can be incorporated into your business website in a matter of minutes! This means that after reading this manual, you will be well on your way to being at the top of a Google search.

Of course, you need a URL (your website address) and access to the design. If you have hired a web developer to create your website for you, hopefully he or she has already incorporated some of these strategies. Otherwise, you will want to work with your developer to make sure that you are setting up your site for success on Google. If you can get to the top of their charts, everything else will be smooth sailing.

Step 1: Keywords Are The Key... To Your Success

You probably are already aware of what a “keyword” is. In short, these are general terms that might go into a search engine. For example, you need to find a podiatrist to treat your ingrown toenail. You type in, “Chicago podiatrist ingrown toenail” Of course, you could also type in, “foot doctors in Chicago bad toes.” Each of these offer a series of keywords, and they can be as varied as the vocabulary of the person typing them into the search engine.

Brainstorming your business.

One of the biggest mistakes new online businesses make is not being broad enough with keywords. Since “podiatrist” and “foot doctor” are both accurate descriptions, both options—along with many others—need to be incorporated into a keyword list. Thus, **Step One** in dominating Google’s local search results is to get a comprehensive keyword list. The best way to do this is to sit with pen and paper (or keyboard and word processor) and brainstorm.

It’s important that at this point you don’t worry about your location. Just think about the nature of your business and the services you provide. Let’s say you are a nutritionist. Keywords could include: diet, exercise, nutrition, nutritionist, good food, better eating, vitamins and supplements, losing weight, improving health... the list could go on. It is always better to have more keywords than fewer, and it’s okay to have phrases (usually up to three words) among your keywords.

If you get “stuck” on this, don’t rush. You can always type in a few of these words yourself to see what businesses come up. You can also look at your competition’s website; read websites and look for repetition, especially closely related words. You don’t necessarily want to use the same word multiple times, so “accounting,” “accountant,” and “accounting services,” would be three different keywords despite being so similar.

You can go no further with your search optimization without an extensive keyword list, so take the time to exhaust all the possibilities. Don’t forget to include key services, as well, in your keyword list. What you do is just as important as the title you use.

Step 2: Simple Searches For SEO

If you don't know what "SEO" stands for, it means search engine optimization. There is an entire science behind SEO and many professionals claim to know how to maximize your search result status through SEO. While there are some ways to boost your rankings on Google through SEO, most of these search engines are constantly updating the matrices they use to gauge SEO. Don't waste your time, money and efforts on this because, chances are, the "rules" will change in six months and you'll be starting over from scratch.

Local v. global results.

What you can pay attention to is your "local" keywords versus your "global" ones. For example, words about your business are global. Someone searching for a "portrait photographer" may be in Sydney, Australia, while you are in San Francisco. Local keywords pertain to your location.

Local keywords are not as simple as "city, state, country." Depending on where you live, you will either start small and expand or start big and retract. For example, your business is in Grinnell, Iowa, population 9,105. Let's say you sell sporting goods. If you focus only on your local population, you probably won't be in business for long. However, if you start with local keywords, Grinnell and Iowa, you can add others, such as "Rock Creek State Park" (nearby Grinnell, where people may need hiking or camping gear), "Newton Municipal Airport," (for travelers coming into the local airport), "Des Moines," (the next largest city), and even "I-80," for the highway that

passes nearby. Your local keywords will not drive business to you exclusively, but when paired with your global keywords, they can help people find you when they are in your neck of the woods.

Alternatively, if your business is in New York City, your neck of the woods is as thick as an NFL defenseman's! You have to narrow your search results by using local keywords such as "Manhattan," "Greenwich Village," "West 12th Street," and "Christopher Street Subway." Someone looking for a pastry shop in New York has too many options and you do not want to compete with the bakery 60 blocks away. Local keywords can be used to focus or hone in on your business, as well.

Step 3: Using Google To Be Atop Google

As noted in the introduction, many of the tools you will need to dominate Google's local search results are actually provided for free by Google itself. Using their tools is one of the quickest ways to be recognized in a Google search.

Google adwords.

The Google adwords tool (adwords.google.com) will help you determine the frequency of searches for all your keywords. The interface is really easy: Simply type your keywords (one word or phrase per line) into the box titled (you guessed it) "Word or Phrase." You do not need to put in a website (i.e. leave this blank). It's a good idea to check the box labeled, "Check this if you want to limit the results..." Then submit the security code (there to ensure you're human), and you will see how many times these keywords were typed into a Google search in the past month. You can generally disregard the numbers that do not fit a pattern (for example, if you look for a "CSA" you will get a million hits that go far beyond "community supported agriculture").

You should make note of the top ten keyword searches and add any to your list of keywords that may not already be there. Now you should add your local keywords to both the front and back of your global keywords. Thus, you will have both "Portland Oregon Pet Sitter" and "Pet Sitter Portland Oregon." Google ignores small words, such as "in," which is why you want to have both options in your keyword list. If you don't

want to put together all the permutations of these words, you can use a nifty free tool that will do it for you at keywordlizard.com.

Google analytics.

Google analytics is a free tool that allows you to track your web traffic. You can not only see how many people have visited your website but how they managed to find you (e.g. they googled you or found you through another website or typed in your URL directly). Aside from the information this provides, Google tends to boost those websites that use their analytics tool, so you definitely want to incorporate it into your business site.

Start with a Google account (a gmail account is all you need). Go to google.com/analytics and click on the "access analytics" button. Fill out the form as thoroughly as possible. Google is offering you a free service but you have to "pay" for it with your information. If Google feels that you are not a real business, they may not promote your website.

At the end of this process, you will be given your Google tracking code, which must be added to your website. Depending on how you set up your site, this could be very easy. You can save the code as a file and upload it to your site. Alternatively, you will need your web designer to add the analytics to your site (it will go on your homepage just before you close out the body; more information on coding is discussed in Step 5, below). You should be receiving updates on your site traffic within 24 hours.

Google webmaster tools.

Similar to the analytics tool, the webmaster tools add functionality to your website and will improve your ranking in Google searches. Access these tools at google.com/webmasters/tools using the same account you established above. Google webmaster tools will even verify that the code you added for the analytics is in the proper place.

Once again, go through the simple steps Google lays out to integrate the webmaster tools. Once in place, you'll be able to analyze your site for duplicate title and description tags (you'll see why this is important in the section on coding, below), along with any broken links. You will also be able to track external links to your site, which will further help you determine your traffic flow.

Unlike analytics, the coding for webmaster tools goes in the head tag of your website. The code is automatically generated, so you should be able to add it fairly easily so long as you have access to the HTML on your homepage.

Keep in mind that the main purpose for these Google tools is not their usefulness but the fact that Google favors its own. You will have added functionality, but more importantly you will see a significant boost to your local search result ranking.

Google places.

While you may question the effectiveness of boosting your business with Google analytics and webmaster tools, there is no doubt that being able to locate your place of business is a vital need. Probably you have used Google maps extensively to find a

business you want to patronize. Google is set up so that if you type in a particular business name, the very first link that pops up is a map. You click on the map and you can get directions either by car or public transit. Well, Google has a business center that you can use to integrate your business into their mapping software. While this will not boost your rankings with regards to using keywords, it will bring your business to the fore when people are seeking your services.

Google Local Business Center is also known as Google Places, and you can join at google.com/places. Follow the same steps as you have previously (you're probably an expert at filling out Google directories by now) by clicking on "Add a New Business." Remember to link to your website and fill out as much information as you can about your business. You can even add pictures of your storefront, which can be helpful as people are driving by and may not be sure of the exact address. You will be provided with a PIN to verify your account. Once you have done so, you should start showing up in Google map searches (and your overall search result ranking should improve).

Step 4: Why You Need A Privacy Policy

Google guards the secrets of its search matrix as tightly as possible, but occasionally they do reveal information that can help businesses boost their search ranking. One of the main concerns Google has these days is separating true businesses from fly-by-night outfits and scammers. Despite the breadth of their scope, Google doesn't have the resources to thoroughly vet every website that is registering with them. Thus, one shortcut they take is to check for a privacy policy. They take the chance that anyone with a privacy policy on the business website is probably legit.

You can customize a privacy policy to fit your business. One of the better templates can be found at freeprivacypolicy.com, where you can enter information about your website and they will generate the code for your privacy policy page. It's free, but make sure that you answer the questions honestly. A privacy policy is a legal document, and you could be held liable if you do not meet your own policy standards. In order to help Google "find" your privacy policy, be sure to link to it on your homepage and include it in your XML sitemap (more on this below).

Google has some way of finding the privacy policy and after it has done so, your search rankings should go up. How much you will jump remains cloaked in secrecy, but you should notice a difference once your privacy policy is online.

Step 5: Cracking The Code

Here's where things get a little messy. Depending on your confidence with working on your website, particularly in tweaking the code that underlies it, this may be the one area where you do not feel particularly confident. However, knowing exactly how to update your code to improve your search results will help you know whether or not you can take on these tasks or if you should outsource them and what you should expect with regards to turnaround and cost. Some of these steps are quite simple so, even if you do not want to handle them yourself, they shouldn't cost a lot.

Title and META tags.

Remember your keywords? Well, they need to go into the code along with your website proper. You don't want to write the same words in all their variations into your homepage, but you can put them all into your background, that is, in the HTML or XML code itself.

Start with your Title tag, which tells search engines (i.e. Google) the name of your webpage. Your Title should include your main keywords. A clever name will not drive traffic to your site. You can include the clever business name in the heading of your homepage (or, better yet, as a masthead picture; more below), but the Title tag should be all about your main keyword or keyword phrase. "Best Chicago Pediatric Dentist" is a much better Title tag than "James Martin, DDS." Keep in mind that Google only shows approximately 70 characters in their search results, so you should have a Title tag that is succinct.

META tags are where you traditionally put a description of your website. When you do a Google search, you see the Title as a hyperlink and the META description underneath. This is another place where you can put your keywords. Of course, you are also selling your website, so the keywords should be descriptive. Again, Google has a 160 character limit, so keep it simple and straightforward.

Label your images.

Google uses a program known as a spider to track websites. This program doesn't recognize images. What it recognizes is text. You always have the option to label your picture in the source code. This is more than `nameofpicture.jpg`; you can actually put an alternate text. This stems from the early days when not all browsers could detect images. The text would appear instead. Today, however, you can use that text to put in additional keywords as part of your picture's description.

This provides a dual function. For one, the Google search spider will pick up additional keywords. Second, because Google now has an outstanding image directory, your picture is more likely to be pulled out and put in that directory. Sometimes a Google search will result in images being put ahead of text links. This means that you may get a higher rank with your picture than you are getting from text alone.

XML sitemaps.

You probably know what a sitemap is: a directory that lists all the pages of your website. An XML sitemap, which can be integrated into the Google webmaster tools,

is a coded version that lists every URL for each of those pages. This helps you get multiple hits on a search result, so it is important to add to your site.

If you are using WordPress, all you have to do is select the "Google XML-Sitemaps" plugin. However, there's a great XML sitemap generator at xml-sitemaps.com. The file it creates can be saved to upload to your website. You want to create this sitemap at the end of your web development, however, since it can only track pages that are already live.

Don't forget to return to webmaster tools to submit your sitemap to Google once you've created your XML sitemap.

Backlinks and anchor text.

Once you have done all your coding, you will need to be comfortable with a new term if you want to dominate Google's local search results. This term is "backlink."

Backlinks are links to your site from other websites. You can get backlinks by networking, just as you might get a referral from a friend or colleague. Developing backlinks is key to getting SEO. You will probably spend the majority of your online efforts developing backlinks once your site is up and running.

Among the easiest ways to get backlinks is to set up user profiles on other sites. You can even purchase backlinks from sites such as angelasbacklinks.com. Of course, the easiest way to get backlinks is just to ask other people to link to you, be they friends or even the competition. Consider that if you are running a surf shop in California, you may be able to link to other California surf shops that are further up the coast in

an exchange for a link back to you. There are no limits to how to get backlinks, but it will take time establishing relationships and getting others to link to you.

These backlinks only work if they are coded properly. To code a link, you need Anchor Text. The most common anchor text is "click here." Obviously, if you can get your keywords into the anchor text, it's better for your SEO, but Google will find the code under the generic anchor text regardless.

Remember that the wider your online presence, the more "respect" you will gain from Google. This is why backlinks are so vital to your search result success. If other reputable online businesses are linking to you, Google will boost you significantly as a result.

Step 6: Improving Your Site Going Forward

Even if you are getting to the first page of Google's local search results, you have to do certain things to maintain your standing. While it's all well and good to implement all these strategies, you have to grow your online business just as you must grow your brick-and-mortar business.

Blogs and articles.

One of the ways that you can continue to stay atop the rankings is to have new content on a regular basis. The easiest way to do this is with a blog. Among the best blogging software is WordPress. In fact, you can build your entire website on the WordPress platform. If you have not chosen a hosting site, you may want to consider WordPress, which offers "plugins" for many of the Google tools already described in this manual. You may also create a blog on another site (e.g. blogger.com) and link to it from your main business site. Don't forget to use your keywords when you set up your blog.

So what, exactly, is a blog? A blog is a written update to your site that adds content and keeps your website "fresh." Think of it as an online journal. Even if you are not a writer, you probably have something to say about your business. Perhaps you are a lawyer and you have expertise in real estate law. You could write brief updates about the market and general issues facing homeowners. Market yourself as an expert, but don't give away that expertise. You want to keep it short and simple, remember. Most blog posts should be 500 words or less. You could blog an announcement about a public appearance you may be making, which might be only a couple hundred words.

You may be linking to another document or website that provides information to your potential customers while not driving them away.

Another way to bring in traffic to your website is to write articles for other websites. This is a double benefit because not only are you reaching out to a wider market, you are also generating backlinks to your website. You can do (surprise!) a Google search for site to which you can submit articles, but one of the most popular content markets is at ezinearticles.com. There is also a resource box that will allow you to market yourself and your business alongside your article.

These articles need to be a minimum of 250 words, and to be effective you want to remember to use your keywords that will link back to your website. Be sure to read the policies and instructions of any of these content sites. You can be permanently banned for violating their terms and conditions.

Online directories and social networking.

A bit less harrowing for the non-writer is submitting to online directories. From Yahoo! to Bing, online directories are a kind of yellow pages for the Internet era. While they do not have the cachet that they did a few years ago, you should submit your information per the directory's instructions. Keep in mind that many of these directories (including Yahoo) require a payment. Pay with caution! Often it's not worth the cost. Among the free sites are dmoz.org and yelp.com. Of course, once you are on these sites you may end up being reviewed by customers. However, you can also post reviews yourself (and get your friends and family to post) so that you have a positive ranking. You can also google "free web directories" for more resources.

Of course, pretty much everyone needs to go where the people are, and the people are on Facebook and Twitter. If you are not comfortable with these platforms, start with personal accounts and “play around” a bit. Don’t worry about finding followers or being friended. Just figure out the logistics and how the sites work. Once you have a bit of a handle on this, you can launch your professional social media sites, using that same Google account tied to your website and Google tools.

Other social networking sites include linkedin.com, dig.com, connote.org, mix.com, and any professional networking sites to which you belong. You can start with a basic (i.e. free) listing and network from each of these. Managing all these sites can be overwhelming, so you may want to hire someone to manage these for you (see more on this below).

Step 7: Seek Professional Help

You're in business to make money, and all this worrying about establishing an online presence may be getting in the way of that. If you are spending more time getting on Google's short list than you are on minding the store, it may be time to outsource some of these steps.

What to outsource and when.

The main thing you may need to outsource is coding your site. Just be sure to work with a web designer who really knows what he or she is doing. You should look for a competitive bid and go with the most reasonable rate. Remember that cheapest doesn't necessarily mean best, but use good judgment. This will probably be your largest outsourced expense, but if you are not comfortable tweaking the HTML and XML on your website, it will be money well spent.

If you have an administrator, you may be able to have your employee do a lot of the "busy work," such as filling out the Google analytics and webmaster tools, along with all the many free directory submissions. Even putting together keywords can be tedious, so if you have a trusted employee, you can concentrate on decisions about the website rather than all the administrative details.

When it comes to a blog or article submission, there are many writers working online now who will "ghost" your copy and submit it for you. Some of the shorter articles can be ordered from sites such as fiverr.com or elance.com for pennies per word. If you are not a wordsmith, again, this can be money well spent.

Finally, if you are of a certain age, you may not “get” the whole social media world. This is a great job for an intern, which will give him or her valuable experience and cost you very little. Offering a college student the opportunity to hang out and network online all day is not a tough sell!

Look to where you are an expert and where you are struggling or—worse yet—wasting time. You should be building your business and focusing on money making strategies. While you don't want to spend more than is necessary to keep an online presence, you do want to maximize your resources and spend wisely on professionals who know about SEO, profile backlinking, social networking, and source coding.

Knowing when to do it yourself and when to hire someone else to do it for you is a simple business decision. Just because a part of your business is now online, you still need to run your organization to be profitable. As your ranking grows in Google's local search results, you can divert more of the proceeds generated from online marketing back into your website and Internet presence.