



Understanding the Basics of Local Search

Optimizing Your Local Business Listings

Many studies estimate that more than 80% of today's consumers will use online search engines to find local information. At the same time, the number of people who use printed Yellow Pages or White Pages as a primary source of local business information is in steady decline, falling from 33% in 2007 to 28% in 2009. (see details here: <http://outspokenmedia.com/internet-marketing-conferences/local-search-targeting/>)



With printed Yellow Pages steadily and rapidly declining as the primary source for finding local information, small business owners are searching for new ways to market their businesses online through local search. A basic understanding of what local search is and how it works might now be necessary to keep your local business competitively thriving.

To get a better understanding of local search, we talked to Vedran Tomic, an expert in local search marketing for small businesses.

Defining Local Search

Tomic states that local search, while still considered to be in its infancy, is seeing explosive growth. He claims this can make it a little intimidating for businesses trying to clearly define what local search is, and then understand how it works.

Tomic defines local search as any activity targeted towards finding information about local businesses using a search platform. That search platform could be an Internet yellow pages (IYP) website like superpages.com, a "local" search engine like Google Maps, an Internet classified site such as Craig's List, or a more "general" search engine such as Bing.com.

Understanding Local Search

When a business wants to "go local," they will tend to find a lot of information on what to do, but Tomic offers these words of warning: "There is an overabundance of free and paid local search marketing channels. Businesses seeking inclusion into local listings must evaluate search engines, local search engines, and all kinds of local guides and IYP sites to determine where to properly channel efforts and budgets. Most of these providers will claim to be a perfect fit for your business when, in reality, most are probably not worth your time or effort."

To know where your time will be best spent in building or strengthening a local presence online, it helps to first understand how individuals use local search to find local information - right now, and also trending toward the future.

Tomic suggests the first task is to separate and identify the different kinds of sites people use to get local business information. Referring again to statistics* shared by Outspoken Media based on ComScore reports, for primary searches into local information:

- 28% of all users will use a printed Yellow or White Pages resource
- 31% of all users will use general search engines like google.com or bing.com
- 21% of all users will use IYP sites
- 12% of all users will use local search engines, like Google Maps or Yahoo Local



Tomic suggests that it is also crucial to know more about where each search platform will play its part during the normal buying cycle. He points out that there is often a direct correlation between the type of search platform used and the specific buying intentions of the user. Tomic states: "While it may vary by business type or industry, in most cases:

- People tend to use 'general' search engines the most while in the research phase of the buying cycle, such as to find or compare products or specific offers
- IYP pages are used by people ready to buy - which explains why people typically look for a phone number when using IYPs
- Internet classified sites like Craig's List or Angie's List are more often used by people trying to save money or find a unique, local bargain."

Tomic claims that knowing this information can be very valuable. "Understanding the information needed to propel the buying cycle from each of these uniquely different starting points will help you to understand the best information to include in the listing completed for each platform," he says. "Offering local searchers easy access to the optimized information they seek is the way you win in local search. It is optimized visibility."

Once you have developed a better basic understanding of the platforms used for local search and how they relate to your sales cycle, you need to determine how each platform generates or retrieves its listing information, and get your business listed.

Getting Local Listings

Some local search platforms have their own listings to be completed, while many directories will pull (or "scrape") their listings from one of the larger data providers. This means getting into the main data centers makes a great first step - a step that can be followed by completing listings in smaller directories.

At the time of this writing, Tomic and most local search experts agree that submitting your information to the following data centers will typically give you a solid footing in a variety of local search listings:

- www.infousa.com
- www.citysearch.com
- www.superpages.com
- www.yellowpages.com
- www.yelp.com
- www.localeze.com

Once these sources are checked-off your list, you can investigate other options, such as the BBB or perhaps niche/vertical directories catering more specifically to patrons of your business.

One method Tomic suggests is to study the competition. "Perform a search that you believe would be the same as one your targeted customer would do, and look at the local businesses listed in the results. See where these listings come from, and find out what it takes to get your business included."

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Benefits of Optimizing Local Search

As it grows, the local search market is becoming extremely segmented and specialized. While in the past, a single yellow pages listing might be all you needed for local traffic to find your business, today's local search success demands high visibility and optimized listings across a variety of diverse search platforms.

Despite its somewhat complicated nature, Tomic states local search offers benefits that most marketing channels can't match.

- More cost-effective than printed advertising, Yellow Page ads, or radio/TV advertising with greater measurability
- Local search allows "mom-and-pop" businesses to successfully compete (and win) against national chains and franchises with marketing budgets that seem unlimited in comparison
- Creating lasting, effective visibility in local search results does not often require a demanding or expensive ongoing effort

Tomic states that for some business types, local search visibility is also the key to remaining competitive. He suggests businesses seeking to win in local search should:

- Understand where and how to optimize listings - basing decisions in content and tone on moving the sales cycle forward.
- Ensure that all major data centers, as well as any specific niche/vertical directories, contain an appropriately optimized business listing.

He continues, "Do try bigger changes, too. While there will be a winner established in a test of two similar headlines, testing larger, more dramatic changes will yield results much more quickly. Don't be afraid to see the conversion rate drop, you can learn as much from a decrease in the rate about your visitors as you can from an increase. Just ensure that each change and its results are analyzed and acted upon."

Additional information:

Lisa Barone's summary of local search information shared at Fall 2009 conference:
<http://outspokenmedia.com/internet-marketing-conferences/local-search-targeting/>

ComScore.com, for compiled data reports, detailed marketplace analysis and products designed to improve online marketing efforts: <http://www.comscore.com/>

David Mihm, a well known US-based local search expert, offers detailed tips and tricks to "Go Local": <http://www.davidmihm.com/local-search-ranking-factors.shtml>

See where your business is listed in local search engines, and gain control of some of these high profile listings: <http://getlisted.org/>

Vedran Tomic's blog, covering many local SEO issues: <http://www.seorabbit.com>