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Introduction

If your company has a website, chances are you know a little something about search engine optimization (SEO.) Since the early days of the internet, web designers and business owners have done whatever they can to guarantee their website is at (or near) the top of search results for chosen keywords.

As Google's search algorithms get more sophisticated, though, they began to custom-tailor results to suit the preferences of the user – and that includes geographical location. That's where local SEO comes in. It's the process of optimizing your website to get a higher "local" search ranking.

Oftentimes, Google users enter geo-targeted keywords to find local businesses - such as "best pizza in Atlanta." If you own a pizzeria in Atlanta, you want your restaurant to show up high on that results list, and that's why local SEO is important.

It differs from regular SEO in a few key ways:

- Regular SEO is about building authority for a website (which may or may not include geographical information); local SEO is about establishing reliability for a business that exists in a particular physical location.
- Regular SEO relies heavily on backlinks to build credibility for a site in the eyes of the search engines; local SEO relies on citations that verify the business is real, as well as solidify their location.

How do you know if you need local SEO?

The answer to that question is very simple. If you own a brick and mortar store that relies on local customers to stay afloat, you need local SEO.

Most consumers today go online to search engines to find local products, services, and businesses. In other words, many of your potential customers are looking for a place to buy via web search and if your company isn't ranking well, you're missing out.

Before we get into the Local SEO Checklist, let's identify some of the key benefits of local SEO:

- It helps generate traffic for both your website and your physical location
- It increases name recognition
- It helps build authority and credibility for your business
- It is easier to move up in a local search (if you do it right) than in organic search
- It can increase your return on investment (ROI) because you are spending marketing dollars where they will do the most good
- It increases conversions – companies that rank high for local search get more conversions because the people who see them on Google are a targeted audience

Now that you have a basic idea of what local SEO is and why you need it, let's get into the local SEO checklist.

Local SEO Checklist

What do you need to do in order to successfully optimize your website for local search? Local SEO has many things in common with traditional SEO, so let's run them down.

Keyword Selection

The first step in any SEO strategy is to identify the best keywords for your business to target. A keyword is a search term or phrase entered by internet users to find information about a certain topic, product, service, or business.

Once they do, the search engine goes to work to find the best web pages to match the keyword; they also prioritize the list of results based on the best match for the keyword.

The good news is... coming up with a list of good keyword terms for local business is much easier than general SEO. It all boils down to location relevance and industry topic relevance. For instance, let's say you're a divorce attorney in the Atlanta, GA area. Obviously, you want people to find your business when they go online to search for "Atlanta divorce lawyers."

So by optimizing your site – and other online properties - for this keyword term, you have a better chance of showing up higher in the results. Although you can target multiple keywords throughout your website, it's best to start with only a few. If you focus on too many different keyword phrases in the beginning, you will wear yourself thin and it will be harder to get results.

To develop a list of keywords, first come up with a list of terms and phrases you think your target audience would use to find your type of business. Based on this list, you can do further research to choose the best keyword terms.

How would people describe what your business provides?

What different products or services do you offer that could be used as search terms by consumers?

What type of problems does your business solve for consumers?

What keywords are your competitors using in their SEO?

TIP: Don't be too general or broad with your keyword selections. It's important to use the right combinations of keyword variations in order to reach the right target audience. User intent has become a major search ranking factor. So when selecting your keywords, think about what a user is REALLY looking for when typing in that phrase.

For instance, a plumber may choose "leaking faucet" as a keyword. However, this may not be a good term to target because someone could simply be looking for information about fixing a leaking faucet themselves and not necessarily looking to hire a plumber.

However, if someone puts a city and/or state after a keyword term, they're likely looking to do business.

Keep in mind that searchers are becoming more and more specific with location-based searches. So be sure to localize your keyword phrases as much as possible to target specific areas. For instance, if your business is located in a suburban area of a major city, use keywords for that suburban town instead of trying to target the major city. Also feel free to hyper-target specific neighborhoods too if it works for your business.

You can also use the free Google AdWords Planner tool, as well as other keyword tools out there (some paid, some free) to check the number of searches and competition levels for each term. Due to the fact that this tool provides data based on whether there are advertisers for the selected keywords, it does not give you exact figures and should not be your only determining factor for keyword selection.

Another good resource for choosing your keywords is Google’s suggested search terms; these are additional phrases that Google suggests in the search box as a user types in a particular keyword. They also give additional suggested terms at the bottom of the search results pages.

If you have Google Analytics on your website, this is another great resource to check to see which keyword terms are bringing in traffic currently.

On-Site SEO

Once you have identified keywords, the next step is to jump into on-site optimization – the things you can do on your website to help you rank for local searches:

- Include keywords (including geographical information) in key spots on your page: title tag, meta tags, alt image tags and even in the URL if you can.
- Create fresh and relevant content that includes your local keywords. Don’t spam keywords – include them as an organic part of your content.
- Make sure your name, address, and telephone number is embedded in the HTML code of every page.
- Include localization in blog posts and other content.
- Create a geo sitemap and KML file (keyhole markup language) that will allow your site to show up on Google Earth and Google Maps.
- Optimize logos and images with localized file names and alt tags.
- Blog about locally relevant topics.
- Embed social media sharing buttons on your website.
- Include information about your company’s history and local roots on your “About Us” page.
- Participate in (and blog about) local events.

Off-Site SEO

SEO also includes factors that aren't on your website:

- High quality backlinks from authoritative sites
- Content on video-sharing sites such as YouTube
- Content on social media

In order for these items to help you with local SEO, they have to include information like your location, as well as some of your important keyword terms.

Off-site optimization also includes several other key areas, which we will discuss in the following sections.

Local Directory Listings

Another important component of local SEO is getting your company listed in local directories.

- Sign up for Google My Business – this replaced Google Local
- Fill out your profile completely. Make sure to include:
 - Company name
 - Full address & phone number
 - Proper product & service categories
 - Photographs
 - Videos
 - Optimized description
 - Encourage customer reviews
- Sign up (or claim your business) on other directories, including Yahoo Local, Bing Local, Yelp and Angie's List

- Maintain a presence on location-specific social media, such as FourSquare, Citysearch and Mojopages
- Seek out industry-specific directories as well

Citations

Consistency does matter with local SEO, and nowhere is it more important than with listings of company name, address, and phone number – also known as NAP citations. A NAP citation is not a link – it is merely a listing of your primary business information. Having a large number of accurate NAP citations is a huge part of getting your business to rank in local search results. Here are some things to keep in mind when collecting and monitoring citations:

- Get as many citations for your business as you can. A citation may include listings in directories like the ones mentioned above. However, other sources include:
 - Better Business Bureau
 - Local chambers of commerce
 - Yellow Pages
 - Local business directories
 - Horizontal directories like Yelp
 - Region-specific sites (www.Atlanta.com/places)
 - Industry-specific directories
 - Non-structured listings, such as those in local magazines or newspapers
- Be consistent when submitting your information. Even minor difference (“Street” instead of “St.” or listings with and without a suite number) can impact your search ranking.
- Weed out duplicate listings
- Track down and correct inaccuracies

The goal is to have all of your NAP listings look exactly the same, because Google’s algorithms will not be able to aggregate them. Remember, the goal of local SEO is to give the location of your business credibility and authenticity. You can’t do that if there are 10 different versions of your address out there. As you work your way through existing citations, keep a list of every place you are listed. That way in the future, if you change locations, you will be able to easily change your address when you need to.

Delete Duplicate Listings & Citations

As mentioned earlier, consistency is extremely important with local SEO. Google your business name or phone number and:

- Update addresses if you have moved
- Request that duplicates be removed
- Keep an eye out for fraudulent entries

If keeping track of online listing and citations has not been a priority, you may find that you are listed on sites where you need to log in. If that is the case and you do not remember your password, you may have to do a little extra work to get the listing corrected. Take the time to do it, because inaccuracies will be reflected in your local search ranking.

Content Marketing

Online content has become one of the most important factors for increasing brand visibility and influence online. Since 97% of consumers search for local businesses online, creating content tailored towards your specific target audience can be powerful for helping you get more traffic.

Content marketing is the practice of publishing interesting, useful, relevant content related to your industry online. The key here is to leave “selling” out of it and let your content do the

selling for you in an indirect way. Instead, the focus should be on building relationships with your audience and establishing expert status in your industry. The overall goal is to engage your readers, which will help you convert those leads into customers.

- Define your target audience
- Choose your keywords
- Research topics for your content
 - Twitter Local Trends
 - Local News
 - Local Forums & Blogs
 - Local Events
- Create a blog and post often
- Share content on social media
- Repurpose content into visual and rich media, such as videos, presentations, podcasts, images etc.
- Rinse and repeat for the long-term

Encourage Customer Reviews

Encourage your customers to review your business on Google+, Yelp, or other review sites. The number of reviews you have has a direct impact on your Google placement. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

- Make sure to claim your business on all review sites and fill out a complete profile.
- Encourage reviews by putting logos for review sites on your page, or on your receipts.
- Make a point of responding to both positive and negative reviews.
- Suggest customers write reviews on a regular basis. It is better to have a steady stream of reviews than a huge flood of them.

No local business can afford to overlook the importance of social media. That is as true of local SEO as it is of SEO in general. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

- Maintain an active presence on important social media sites, including Facebook, Google+, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Instagram, and YouTube. Note: Google+ is owned by Google. It is not as popular as Facebook, but having a presence there for your business is a must. Information and reviews on Google+ have a direct impact on your search rank.
- Fill out your profile and bio completely, and make sure to link back to your website.
- Have an editorial schedule that you stick to – having a Facebook page won't matter if you never update it. You need to keep your followers engaged.
- Use geo-specific keywords in your social media content. This will help you to optimize your social media content – and that will play a role in improving your rank in local search.
- Interact with other local businesses on social media.
- Follow relevant local organizations and events, such as your Chamber of Commerce, local farmers' markets, trade associations, and fairs. Share their content when appropriate – and try to get them to share yours.
- Embed social sharing icons on your website.

Be Mobile Ready

More and more customers are accessing information about local businesses on their mobile devices. If your site is not already mobile-friendly, it should be. Here are some things to remember:

- On April 21, 2015 Google released a new algorithm to ascertain how mobile-friendly websites are. It was expected to have a significant impact on local mobile rankings.

- You can test your website by plugging the URL into Google's [Mobile Friendly Test Tool](#)
- Make sure the mobile version of your site is optimized for geo-specific keywords, just as your regular site is.
- Put an emphasis on getting the mobile version of your site to load quickly. Sites that load slowly (anything over 3 seconds is considered slow) have a high bounce rate – and your bounce rate can have an impact on your local search placement
- Think about including rich snippets – these are pieces of additional information such as your business hours, prices, and products that can be coded to show up under your page name in a list of search results.
- Design your mobile site for fat fingers. You want quality content, but it also needs to be easy to navigate on a small screen. Mobile users will get frustrated if things are too close together or difficult to read.

Online Videos

Videos are arguably the most popular kind of online content. A huge percentage of people watch videos online, and they are some of the most frequently-shared content. Creating and posting videos is a great way to boost your local SEO. Here are some tips:

- Post videos on your website, as well as on video sharing sites such as Youtube and Vimeo
- Geotag videos with your location information. YouTube makes this easy – all you need to do is go to Advanced Settings and search your location
- Include a link to your website in the description of the video
- Include your name, address, and phone number in the frames at the end of the video – Google's algorithms will be able read the data, even when it is in video form
- Also include your NAP in the audio – Google produces a transcript of the video, so then your NAP will be included in the transcript

- Make full use of the opportunity to describe your video. In addition to a link to your website, include your NAP and a small bio or description of your business
- Associate the video with the Google+ page for your business
- Associate the video with your Google My Business page
- Embed the video on your website or blog
- Share the video on your social media pages and encourage others to share it as well

Regularly Monitor, Tweak, and Improve

Once you have completed the local optimization of your site, it is important to be vigilant. Just as you would with regular SEO, you need to make a point of monitoring:

- Your citations and directory listings
- Your backlinks
- Your online reviews
- Your social media pages

If your standing in local search is not where you want it to be, you will need to continue tweaking your page and your off-site links and social media to improve your rankings. Some things that may help you to improve include:

- Doing a user experience audit of your website – both the web and mobile versions
- Get your page to load more quickly
- Conduct ongoing keyword research
- Review traffic and tweak keywords as needed
- Do split testing of various components of your site
- Read Google's guidelines and best practices

Keeping your site optimized for local SEO is not a one-time thing. It requires an ongoing effort on your part. You can take steps now to get things started, but then it makes sense to have a regular schedule for monitoring your online presence.

Conclusion

Even if your business gets a certain number of customers who are not local to your brick-and-mortar store, making local SEO a priority is a no-brainer for every business owner who wishes to tap into their local market.

Regardless of your industry, an increasing number of your customers are using mobile and desktop devices to look for local businesses. This means you cannot afford to ignore the importance of optimizing your website for local search.

The information contained in this book is a jumping off point for you to start the work of optimizing your site. If you are not an SEO expert, don't worry. There are resources available that can help you cover the territory covered in this checklist.

The important thing to remember is that not optimizing your business for local search means that you will be missing out on opportunities to attract new customers. Businesses which rank in local searches see more conversions – and more sales – than businesses which don't.

If you would like the help of a skilled and professional Local SEO Expert to get things going down the right path, do not hesitate to contact me.

I can be reached at 404-539-6068 and would love to discuss my ideas for helping you reach more local, targeted prospects online.

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