

How to Use Local SEO to Dominate Search Results

A lot of digital ink is spilled over the scope, reach, and efficacy of search engine optimization, and for good reason. With nearly four million searches per minute on Google alone, the math comes out to a staggering two trillion searches per year. The thinking goes, if you can capture just a portion of that search volume, it can have a profound effect on the success of your business.

Here's the thing, though.

If you have a small business with a physical location, how many searches are actually relevant to you? A million searches a month for "car detailing near me" will mostly be for people on the other side of the country or even the other side of the globe.

But the searches for "car detailing near me" that really do come from potential customers in your area can't be allowed to just slip through your fingers. And that's where local SEO comes in as a digital marketing strategy—it captures the **search intent** of people in your area who have the potential to become your customer and are ready to make a purchase.

NOTE



Search Intent: The goal of a search engine user that can be extrapolated from the key phrase they have entered

HOW DOES GOOGLE RANK LOCAL BUSINESSES?

Google—and search engines in general—keeps under wraps the specifics of how its algorithms work. If everyone knew exactly how to shoot right up to the first spot on the search engine results pages, Google would be a mess of low-quality sites ranking highly. That being said, Google does provide guidance to help site owners climb in rankings and communicate the relevant value they provide to searchers who turn to Google to solve their problems. Even without explicit guidance from Google, the good old scientific method can help us figure out which aspects of a website Google uses as **ranking signals**.

NOTE



Ranking Signals: Also known as ranking factors, the characteristics of a website that search engines evaluate to determine where that website will appear in search results for a specific query

Armed with Google’s guidance and a pretty good idea of what Google considers ranking signals—information uncovered through testing and best-guessing—it’s possible to create a plan to elevate the search results for a given relevant search query. Here’s the good news: the SEO wizards at Moz have already done extensive testing and have shared that info with the world. See their findings below for an estimate of the most important ranking signals for local businesses and their approximate weight. The higher the weight, the more important that ranking signal is to Google.

	SIGNAL	WEIGHT	DESCRIPTION
1	Google My Business Signals	25.12%	Location proximity, business type, business keywords
2	Link Signals	16.53%	Inbound link anchor text, linking domain authority
3	Review Signals	15.44%	Review quantity, diversity, average rating
4	On-Page Signals	13.82%	Presence of keywords in titles, domain authority
5	Citation Signals	10.82%	Mentions of your business on sites you don’t own
6	Behavior Signals	9.56%	Click-through rate, clicks to call or book appointments
7	Personalization	5.88%	The user’s search history, preferences, etc.
8	Social Signals	2.82%	Overall social visibility, shares, etc.

Source: [Moz Local Search Ranking Factors](#)

That data comes with a few qualifiers. First, the study conducted by Moz differentiates between organic ranking and local pack ranking. The former is a tendency to appear in organic search results anywhere in the **SERPs**. The latter is a tendency to appear in expanded results at the top of the page. We’ll be focusing on the local pack results for the purposes of this guide.



SERPs: Search engine results pages—the pages that display the results of a search query

Second, the Moz study also drills down into one hundred specific ranking signals that loosely fall under the headings outlined above. We’re sticking to the high-level stuff for this guide, but know that if you want to get really granular with your local SEO efforts, the data does exist. This might make the process of optimizing your site for local search seem daunting, but don’t stress too much. Even if you are starting from zero, just by simply using the techniques outlined in this guide, your business site and search presences will see large gains in local search visibility. Additionally, you will have a great foundation for future efforts should you decide to go further down that path.

With that out of the way, let’s get started.

START BY TELLING GOOGLE YOU'RE A LOCAL BUSINESS

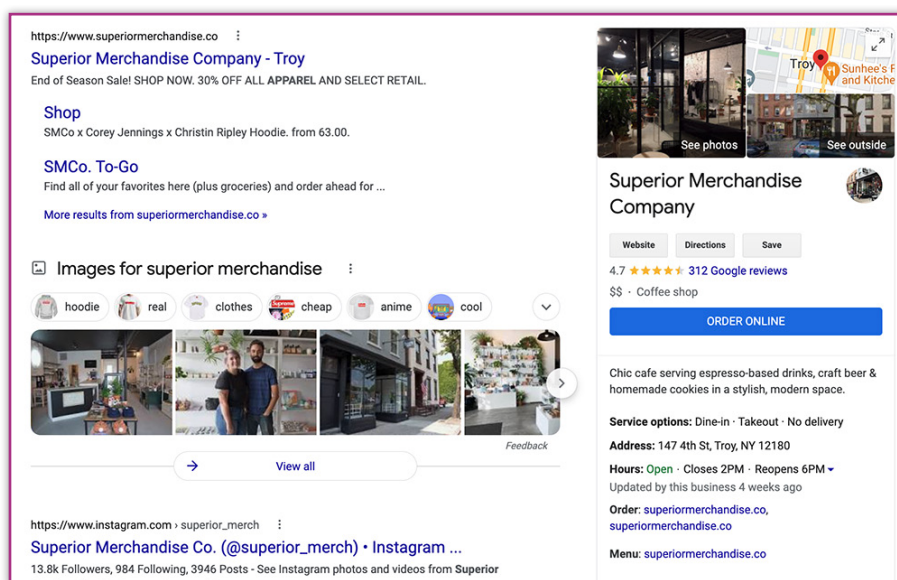
If you want to connect with potential customers who are making searches on Google (or other search engines) in your area, the first step is to make sure search engines *know* you're in the area. There are a couple of ways you can accomplish this, and we'll start with the easiest: creating your Google My Business profile. Incidentally, this is also the aspect of your digital presence that feeds the ranking signals that have the highest weight, and therefore the highest impact on your search visibility.

Creating Your Google My Business Profile

A Google My Business profile not only tells Google what your business is and that you are ready to serve customers, but also acts as a way for you to manage the info you share with Google users. This includes the ability to control how your business is displayed across Google's products like Search and Maps. The account creation process is straightforward—[head here to get started](#).

You will be asked to sign in to your Google account and enter some details about your business. Once you have filled in the required information, you will be prompted to verify that you are the owner of the business, with either a phone call or a text.

Once you're verified, explore your profile and fill in any missing information. Be sure to search for your own business on Google to see how info and images are displayed, and tweak as needed to ensure that you're happy with the way everything is showing up. This setup process only needs to be done once, but keep in mind that customer-facing details on your profile need to be kept up to date. A change in business hours, contact information, service offerings, business location, etc., needs to be updated as soon as possible in your Google profile. There is nothing more frustrating for a customer than looking up your business, seeing that you're open, and heading to your establishment, only to find that you are closed and the entry on Google was incorrect.



The expanded information to the right of the organic search results is drawn straight from the establishment's Google My Business profile

Here are some other things to keep in mind about your Google My Business profile:

- Your GMB profile is a representation of your business on Google Search and Google Maps. Use the best photos and/or videos you have and leverage every opportunity to put your best foot forward.
- Google *wants* you to create a GMB profile to improve their search results. They also want you to create a profile because it is a launch pad for their efforts to get your business to pay for advertising. This isn't a sinister move on Google's part; digital advertising is an effective way to reach more customers. Keep in mind that if you are feeling overwhelmed by digital advertising for your local business, a GMB profile will ease those first steps.
- Reviews on Google will help boost the visibility of your business, so once your account is created and verified, it's worth your time to ask customers to review you on Google. Unless your reviews are all frustrated one-star complaints, a diverse range of ratings and reviews is actually given more weight in Google's eyes than a streak of perfect reviews. So do what you do best and don't sweat the occasional less-than-glowing review.
- Anyone (and that really does mean *anyone*) can suggest changes to your GMB profile. Not all of these suggestions will be useful or helpful. As with all aspects of your business, however, pay attention to what your customers are saying. Any and all feedback should be welcome, even if not every suggestion is a good idea to put into practice.

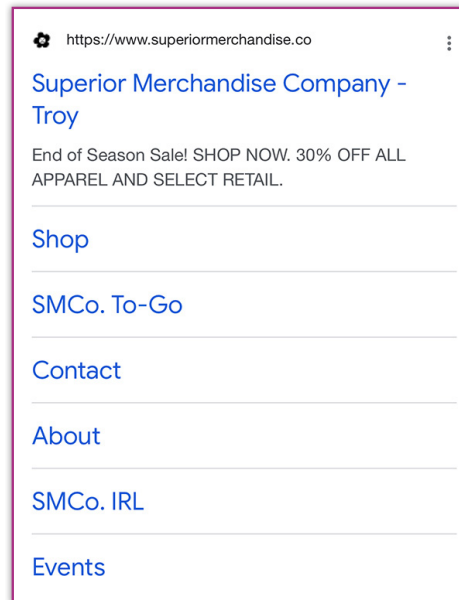
One other Google My Business profile feature to take advantage of is the ability to post to your profile. A GMB profile that has a history of regular posts is given a higher weight than a profile that posts infrequently, or even not at all. And posts are a great way to communicate additional information to customers who are interested in leaning more about your business. The power to post must be used responsibly, however. Sharing information about business milestones, new products, customer favorites, and accolades are all good candidates for GMB posts. Complaining about specific issues, targeting negative reviewers, and other unprofessional posts or PR snafus shouldn't see the light of day.

Use Structured Data Schema Markup

Another way to tell Google and other search engines that your website belongs to a local business is to use schema markup. Schema markup is a set of structured data attributes specifically designed to communicate an additional level of data to search engines. Search engines read this data to better understand the meaning of and relationship between different concepts and elements on your site as well as to serve **rich results** based on the schema attributes you define.



Rich Results: Enhanced results on search engine results pages that go beyond the standard link and description; e.g., image carousels, product information, recipe previews, and other non-textual elements



The additional links called out in the mobile search engine page shown here are communicated to Google via rich text results.

There are lots of great things that digital marketers can do with schema markup and the rich results it produces. For our purposes, however, we're just going to focus on the structured data specifically for local businesses.

Start with the LocalBusiness Schema

The LocalBusiness schema tells search engines that, yes, you are a local business, but it also includes some critical information that will populate in rich results, including the following:

- Business type
- An image that represents your business
- Telephone contact information
- Name of your company
- Logo
- Description of business and offerings
- Hours of operation
- Website URL
- sameAs attributes (a place to list other digital properties you own, like your social handles)
- Geographic location
- Point of contact
- Street address

Here's the thing about structured data—a little bit of technical know-how is required to implement it on a website. That might be bad news if you aren't a confident coder. The good news is that there are solutions out there to help you succeed in a low code/no code environment.

If you're a WordPress user, Yoast's [Local SEO Plugin](#) does the work of adding the relevant code to each page once you feed in the relevant details. If you're not a WordPress user, there are other solutions. [Schema App](#) handles everything for you from top to bottom.

If you're feeling adventurous, there is no shortage of schema documentation in the form of online guides, YouTube videos, and guidance from Google itself. As far as hand-coding goes, defining your structured data is pretty straightforward. Follow the instructions, fill in the relevant details, and use Google's rich results testing tool to see how you did.

Here's [what Google has to say about the local business structured data](#). And you can [use this tool to test the integrity of your structured data](#) along with how well Google will be able to provide rich results for your site. As mentioned earlier, there are a lot of uses for structured data that go beyond letting search engines know you are a local business. You can [see a comprehensive list of structured data types here](#).

GOOGLE KNOWS I EXIST. NOW WHAT?

You have a Google My Business profile and you're ready to add local business structured data to your website. What's the next step in becoming a highly visible local SEO master? Looking back at the results of the Moz study, we can see that links are the next ranking signal on the list. A full primer on link building for the purpose of search engine optimization is beyond the scope of this guide, but we can cover the fundamentals here.

Search engines use bots to explore the internet and report back on the contents of each site. The sum of these reports is known as an index. When someone uses Google to make a search, the engine scrubs through the index to return the most relevant results. That's how search engines work, in three sentences.

Links are the lifeblood of this system. Search engine bots (known as web crawlers) use links to travel from one site to another and to explore pages on a single site. Google and other search engines treat links as endorsements. If someone links to the content on your site, those people are saying "check out this content, I think it's pretty good." If they didn't think your site or the content on it provided value, they wouldn't link to it, so the logic goes. This means that if there are a lot of links pointing to your content, a lot of people think you have value to provide.

HOW LINKS CONTRIBUTE TO LOCAL SEO

There are two dimensions to the link ranking signal: quantity *and* quality. A lot of links pointing to your site is good—but if those links come from low-quality, spammy, or even malicious sites, that isn't a great sign. To evaluate the quality of links, Google uses a system that assigns a numerical score to pages and domains in its index, known as **page rank** and **domain rank**, respectively.

NOTE



Page and Domain Rank: Numerical scores Google assigns to pages and domains to determine the quality of those sites, based on a wide range of factors

Okay, which sites and pages have a high rank? This number isn't strictly publicly posted, but there are a number of tools—many of which are free—that can be used to estimate the authority a page or domain has in the eyes of Google. [This is a link to the tool Moz has developed](#), but there are many options to choose from. Let's face it, though. You don't have time to research the potential authority of hundreds of sites. And if you did, how would you get links in the first place? Here are a couple of pointers for local businesses trying to improve their link profile.

- News outlets generally have high authority in the eyes of Google in the form of page and domain rank. They are also considered trustworthy in the eyes of their readers. Reach out to local news sites with business milestones, events, accomplishments, or other newsworthy developments in your business. In addition to being a good way to earn high authority links, it's a great source of [earned media](#).
- Local online business directories are also a great source of links. A quick Google search can often uncover local business directories either maintained by other businesses (hosting a local business directory is a great way to get people to link to your site) or maintained by a local government office, nonprofit, or business development organization.

At the end of the day, any high-authority links you can earn will contribute positively to your overall SEO position. For local SEO, however, local links have a higher weight.

REVIEWS AND ON-PAGE SIGNALS

Unsurprisingly, Google trusts reviews made on their own platform. Google reviews aren't the only source of reviews, however. Any reviews that appear on your site and have the proper schema associated with them can be understood by Google and other search engines as part of your business's overall review count. Not only are reviews a good form of **social proof** to help convert traffic, but the more reviews your business has, the more elevated your local SERP placement will be.



Social Proof: Compelling marketing messaging that revolves around the experiences, endorsements, or numbers of other customers.

There is no shortage of apps, plugins, and other services that allow you to integrate properly formatted reviews into your site with a low code/no code level of effort.

On-page signals are factors that help search engines determine the content on your site. They include keywords, images, and other aspects. A whole book could be written on the topic of on-page SEO. For our purposes, here are some steps you can take to improve your on-page ranking signals for local search.

- Add content to your site that relates to your geographic area. General on-page SEO best practices dictate that writing for a wide audience will help you reach a wide audience, but that's not our goal here. Add content about things to do in your area, local events, your business, and more.
- Set yourself apart from the competition by becoming an authority on all things local. Promote local color, find ways to make yourself a part of the conversation, get involved and record your involvement.
- Ensure that all the content—and your entire website broadly—is mobile-friendly. Google uses a mobile-first index, which means their web crawlers evaluate your site from a mobile perspective first. Not only will a website that is poorly optimized for mobile be penalized by Google, but your customers will bounce off your site if it doesn't work well on their phones.

CITATIONS AND SOCIAL SIGNALS

In the world of SEO, citations are instances of your name, address, and/or contact information appearing on sites that you don't own. The more places you can have your business listed, the better. Your Facebook page, Yelp account, Apple Maps, Foursquare, and listings on local aggregators all contribute helpful local citations. Services like [BrightLocal](#) and [Whitespark](#) can help you grow your local citation profile.

Remember the sameAs structured data schema from earlier in this guide? That's the entry that you use to point search engines to helpful citations in a language they are most fluent in.

THE BOTTOM LINE – DO I HAVE TO DO IT ALL?

The answer to that question depends on how crowded your local search scene is. Are you the only business in your area with a Google My Business profile? You're probably not struggling to appear at the very top of local search results.

Are you in a highly competitive market? It's time to roll up your sleeves and start seeking out links and citations. The bottom line is that for all SEO efforts, local SEO included, it takes time to make a big difference in the SERPs. Don't dive in and expect the number one spot across all relevant terms overnight. Take time to do your research, write valuable, high-quality, locally minded content, and stay on top of keeping your customers thrilled. These principles will guide your local SEO—and SEO efforts generally—toward success.