

Everything You Must Know About...

LOCAL SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION

BY THE NATIONAL POSITIONS MARKETING TEAM



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INTRODUCTION

The Internet contains a wealth of information – more than most people would ever know what to do with in a lifetime. Although that extended reach to all four corners of the world may be great for those simply seeking information, it can present a challenge for small businesses who want to be found online.

Why? Because huge corporations may be able to reach around the globe and still gain customers, but it's unlikely that the small mom-and-pop shop on a corner in Missouri will be able to do the same thing.

Before Google algorithms and local SEO came along, this was a big problem. For the small business, a website or blog was simply a place to send customers when they wanted to look at merchandise, get store information, or possibly buy products...

...But using the Internet and their website to gain new customers? It was unheard of.
Until now.

With local SEO, the website or blog for that small business now becomes a place to attract new customers, gain new business, and drive sales and profits up. So, maybe that shop in Missouri still won't be able to deliver to a customer in China. What they will be able to do is pick up sales that are right outside their door — sales that they otherwise would never have known about without local SEO.





WHAT IS LOCAL SEO? >



SEO stands for "search engine optimization." This means that business owners and webmasters need to optimize their websites and webpages for the search engines. The goal is to make those pages the best they can possibly be, so that search engines can easily find them and drive traffic to the site.

When it comes to local SEO, the strategies and tactics used are very similar to general SEO, except that they are focused on optimizing for local search. This means utilizing search engines like Google My Business and other directories, including local keywords, and ensuring that all content has a local focus.

As a result, when customers hop online looking for a business in their area – something more and more customers are doing – they stumble on the websites of businesses that have exactly what they need. Specifically, they'll only find businesses that have taken the time to optimize their online content for local SFO.

At its core, local SEO is simply a form of advertising, and once businesses start seeing it that way, they quickly realize how important it is.

Local SEO is an extremely targeted form of advertising, because the business is actually advertising directly to potential customers, making it different from television commercials, print ads, and brochures. While these methods may reach hundreds or even thousands of people and only produce one or two new customers, local SEO isn't blanket advertising. Business owners don't just have to put their message out there and hope for the best.

By its very nature, local SEO automatically targets a specific audience. And, it's even cheaper than most of those traditional forms of advertising put together.



HOW SEARCHES (A) WORK

In order to understand SEO of any kind, including local SEO, you must first understand the basics of how Google works. Of course there are other search engines involved in search as well, but Google isn't just the biggest search engine, it's also considered the gold standard when it comes to SEO.

New information is constantly being created online every single second. A new video is being uploaded, a new blog posted, or a new webpage created, to name just a few types of online activity. Finding this information in the seconds it takes Google to pull up a search results page requires that the search engine has a way to quickly organize the pages and find the most relevant to display.

When Google first created their method for accomplishing this task, it was a complicated, nameless algorithm. People often referred to it as "Google's spiders." In 2013 however, Google overhauled and simplified that algorithm. They also gave it a name that it still uses today – Hummingbird.

The Hummingbird algorithm is made up of many different parts, very much the same way a computer is made up of different parts that all help it run and perform. Google regularly releases new parts that have been added to the algorithm including Panda, Penguin, Mobile Friendly, and Pigeon – the part of the algorithm designed to improve local results.

There are certain signals that the algorithm, and all its many parts, look for when searching for websites to display in the search results after a user has made a query. Two of the most important signals are words and links.

RankBrain is the machine learning technology that uses artificial intelligence to rank search results. RankBrain is a very important part of the Hummingbird algorithm, especially when it comes to local SEO. Why? Because it deals with all aspects of SEO including linking. Inbound linking relates to how many other webpages point to one website, or one webpage. Links are typically counted as a vote for the webpage they link to, and each vote typically increases a website's authority, helping the site to rank higher in the search engines.

Content is one of the most important signals the algorithm considers, and keywords are a crucial element within content. Keywords are entered into Google when looking for a particular product or service. So, if someone looks for a mortgage broker, they might enter the term "mortgage broker" into the search field. At the most basic level, this is how words signal to the algorithm what the webpage is about.

Understanding how Google works allows businesses to learn ways to work with it, and post content that will direct Google – and therefore, users – to their websites and even in the door to their "brick and mortar" locations.

This is local SEO in a nutshell. There are a number of best practices to follow in order to make the best use of it. We'll explain 18 of the key ones in this book. Please read on to learn more.





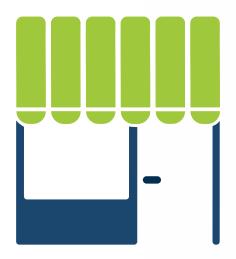
THE 18 BESI BRACTICES FOR LOCAL SEO

Once you understand how searches work in relation to local SEO, it's time to start putting that knowledge to use. As mentioned, there are a number of practices that can help to strengthen local SEO for your business.

You can choose to do as many or as few of these as you like, but to really make the most of an online presence and brand, it's best to hit all of them. The problem is that small business owners are often busy running the show, and don't have the time to do it all. This is where a **local SEO consultant** can help, and there are always a number of them available. Look for local SEO specialists with a quick Google search, and save yourself some time while growing your online presence.

Even when a consultant does the work, the business rep or owner needs a basic understanding of how local SEO works and the strategies used. This can help ensure that all local SEO work on the website will fully and accurately represent the business brand.





01 CREATE A GOOGLE MY BUSINESS LISTING

Google My Business, formerly known as Google Places, has become the starting point for all successful local SEO campaigns.

Google My Business is the foundation of local listings and without it, a business name will not show up in the local listings. These listings are becoming more and more competitive. While Google used to include a "7 pack" of local businesses at the top of a search page, they have reduced that number so that only the top three businesses are shown in full. The only way for a business to have a chance of appearing there is by creating a Google My Business listing.

Setting up a Google My Business listing isn't very difficult and will take just a couple of minutes. To get started, just visit www.google.com/business, click on the 'Start Now' button and follow the instructions.

Google gives you the option of filling out as much or as little information as you like, but it's best to provide as much information as possible. Important tips to follow when creating a Google My Business listing include:

- Choose a profile picture that is intriguing to users and is relevant to the business.
- While the picture is important, the title of the image file is also important. It should include a keyword, which could be the business' location, name, or phone number.
- Multiple images not only give users better insight into the business, they can also give Google more keywords. Several pictures should be uploaded, with each having its own relevant keywords.



- Categories are one of the fields Google will check first when users are searching for a particular type of business. Because of this, it's vital to carefully choose a category for a Google My Business listing.
- Multiple categories are an option, but Google recommends keeping it to one or two, if possible.
- Once a Google My Business listing is published, the name, address and phone number of the business needs to be written down exactly as it's shown on the listing.
 Other listings are likely to be created in the future, and it's crucial that all listings remain consistent.





02 CREATE OTHER BUSINESS LISTINGS

Google My Business might be the gold standard of local SEO, but there are other useful online directories to consider. They operate in a very similar way to Google My Business, and each one takes just a few minutes to create. Having as many listings as possible across multiple directories will create a bigger online presence and can help further promote the brand.

The top online directories where every business should be listed are:

- Yahoo! Aabaco Small Business
- Bing Places for Business
- Yelp for Business Owners
- MerchantCircle
- Superpages.com
- CitySearch
- Mapquest/Yext

- Local.com
- Foursquare
- LinkedIn
- Angie's List
- Manta
- Kudzu



03 KEYWORD RESEARCH

Once a business appears across all online directories, they will have already increased their page ranking for certain keywords. Keywords play a huge part in local SEO. These are the words users enter into search engines when they're looking for a particular service, product, or information. Google uses those words and searches across pages online to deliver the most relevant results to the user.

Businesses looking to succeed in their local SEO efforts need to do a bit of research on top keywords. While some keywords, such as 'plumber' for a plumbing business are going to be obvious, others won't be. Skipping that step of performing keyword research could mean missing out on some very valuable terms.

Google is the authoritative voice when it comes to SEO of any kind, so it makes sense to go for the gold standard in terms of keyword research tools.

Google Keyword Planner is free to use, and it's also one of the best tools available. It tells website owners how many people are searching for keywords that are relevant to their business. The tool will also break this amount down into a monthly account, which can really help with seasonal businesses that may vary product or service offerings at different times of the year.

The Planner can be accessed through any Google AdWords account. Any business that has a website or blog likely has a Google AdWords account. If not, create one by going to http://adwords.google.com. Once an account is created, the Google Keyword Planner tool can be accessed by logging into http://adwords.google.com/KeywordPlanner.

Once logged into the Keyword Planner, keywords can be found by entering the website's landing page, business category, and product or service the business offers under 'Find new keywords'. This is the place to enter obvious keywords for the business (such as 'plumber' or 'florist'), and other relevant terms.



SEO consultants follow this process with general SEO, but with local SEO there are some additional steps. Google defaults the country targeting field to 'Anywhere.' But for a local SEO focus, that field should be changed to a specific geographical location, such as 'plumbers New York City.' After entering these terms and clicking 'Get Ideas,' a list of keywords will be generated.

The Google Keyword Planner is just one tool that's available to help generate keywords. There are many more out there, and while some do have a small fee attached, it can be worthwhile when quality keywords are delivered.

Some of the best keyword research tools available are:

- SEMrush
- SECockpit
- Long Tail Pro
- Wordtracker





04 CREATING KEYWORDS

With a list of generated keywords in hand, any business owner will be well on the way to improving SEO efforts. However, the keywords provided by the research tools aren't enough if they don't include local keywords and long-tail keywords.

Many people think that using local keywords is simply attaching the name of the city or state at the end of a keyword. That's partly true, but just like the keyword 'plumber' can generate dozens of keywords, so can locations.

For instance, local keywords for the term 'plumber' could include 'New York plumber', 'Plumber in New York', 'Plumber near New York', and more.

Using local keywords makes it much easier for local people to actually find their business, and use it. These keywords aren't typically used so much for the search engines, as they are the people that are using them.

The opposite is true for long-tail keywords. Long-tail keywords are keywords that make up a phrase of about 5 or more words. Google and the other search engines love long-tail keywords because they best reflect the user's intent; they tell the search engine exactly what the user is looking for. Like local keywords, long-tail keywords have a lower search volume, but they do have a much higher conversion rate than head, or standard, keywords.

In addition to local and long-tail keywords, keyword modifiers can also be used. These come in the form of adjectives or secondary products and services.

Adjectives used as keyword modifiers can include anything from 'best' to 'cheap' or 'affordable'. These terms are commonly used search terms because shoppers expect to spend money on a product or service, and they want to ensure they're considering the best sources to get the most value for their investment.

Secondary services are also considered to be keyword modifiers. In the case of a plumber, this might include keywords such as 'plumbing repair' or 'commercial plumbers.'

Using keyword modifiers won't just broaden the list of keywords available. Combining them with the primary local keywords creates very targeted long-tail keywords.





.05 ANALYZE KEYWORDS

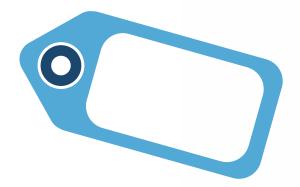
Once a list of keywords has been generated, each one should be analyzed. This isn't something that all businesses do, but taking that extra step will show which keywords are still quite relevant, and which are starting to fall in popularity.

Google, once again, is on top of this. Use Google Trends, found at https://www.google.com/trends/, to enter keywords and see which ones are searched most often. Even more, Google Trends will break down the volume into specific areas, making it a huge asset to those focused on local SEO.

Although Google might be the go-to starting point for many webmasters, there are others out there to try, and just like Google, they're largely free. They include:

- SEO Book
- Web SEO Analytics
- Internet Marketing Ninjas





06 CREATE GREAT TITLE TAGS

Once all the research has been done, the next steps to improve local SEO happen on the website page, and it all starts with the title tag.

A title tag is shown in the search engines as the title of the webpage. It also appears at the top of the browser of any webpage. Search engine algorithms place a lot of importance on title tags because they give the search robots (or "bots") an idea of the context of the webpage's content.

What makes a great title tag? It will:

- be less than 55 characters.
- have the business name clearly visible.
- include one primary keyword that has high volume and is highly relevant to the business.
- use keywords close to the beginning of the title tag, if possible.
- be unique, with each webpage having its own title tag.
- show the geographic location in the title tag (especially for local SEO).





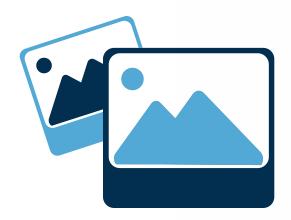
•07 CREATE GREAT META DESCRIPTIONS

After the title tag, the next aspect of any webpage the robots search for is the meta description. The meta description is made up of one or two lines that appear underneath a page's title in the search engine result pages. Like title tags, meta descriptions appeal not only to the search engine robots, but also to readers who are looking for interesting information.

Follow these key tips to make sure you're creating great meta descriptions. Each one should:

- contain important keywords relevant to the business, and that have a high search volume.
- be unique, just as title tags should.
- o optimize each page within a website for different keywords.
- make it engaging, to entice visitors to click onto that webpage.
- include the geographic location for local SEO value.





08 OPTIMIZE IMAGES

Optimizing images is important for a couple of reasons. The first is that image files are by their very nature, much larger than text files and therefore, take much longer to load. However, Google and the other search engines now consider the loading speed of a website when ranking pages, and they'll place slower-loading pages further down in the search results.

Search engines may realize that a webpage contains a file that will take longer to load. They cannot read or understand image files. As a result, when there is an image on a page, search engines only know that it's an image file--they can't tell what the image is. This is another key reason why image files need to be optimized.

Luckily, there are a few ways to optimize images so that search engines can better load and understand them.

- Resize images to the smallest file size possible without affecting image quality.
- Insert 'Alt Text' code for each image when it's uploaded to the website. This step will describe the image to the search engine, so it can identify and understand it, and then rank the page appropriately. Adding 'Alt Text' code to images is different for every blogging and website creation program and platform, but it's generally very easy to do.
- Name all images that are uploaded to the website, and be sure that their names include relevant keywords. This will help the search engines understand what the image is about.
- Give all image file names on one website a unique name.
- While it may seem odd to attach a geographic location to an image file, it's important to do so, as it will tell the search engines even more about the file.





09 **OPTIMIZE ANCHOR TEXT**

Anchor text isn't something that webmasters and business owners have complete control of, but they can optimize it to work in their favor.

Anchor text is used when one website links to another, otherwise known as backlinks. The goal is to have relevant anchor text linking to your website, using keywords such as "plumbers in New York" or "plumbers near New York."

While anchor text isn't completely within the control of a business, anchor text used by another site does offer a way to optimize, as it helps search engines understand the keywords business owners use to describe their own pages.

It might not be possible to fully control the quality or quantity of backlinks, but businesses can track and analyze them through a number of resources. The most commonly used are:

- Ahrefs
- Linkody
- Cognitive SEO
- Kerboo
- Link Research Tools





.. 10 **GO MOBILE**

Mobile, mobile – it can't be said enough. If the idea is to improve local SEO, the website must be mobile-friendly; there's just no way around it.

In one of their latest updates, Google announced a greater focus on mobility. They specified that sites that weren't 100% compliant with the new mobile requirements would be penalized. And, they added that those penalizations would come in the form of websites being placed lower down on the search engine results page—ouch.

There is really only one way to make sure that a site is 100% compliant, and that's to speak to their web host, webmaster, or website design team. Making a website fully compliant with every mobile device and smartphone on the market is a job that can only be done by experts behind the scenes.





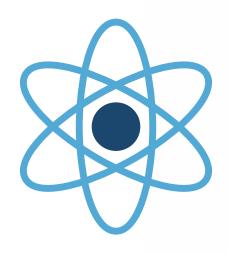
11 CREATE TAGS FOR HEADINGS AND SUB-HEADINGS

Using headings and sub-headings on a website is another great way to grab the attention of the search engines. They are another way to give search engines an indication of the webpage context. It is even more powerful if the headings and sub-headings are tagged.

Headings are the most important element, typically with only one on each page. These should be given an "H1" tag, which will tell the search engines that text is for the main heading on the page. Sub-headings can be given tags as well, and these are typically "H2", "H3", and so on as needed for each subsequent sub-heading.

Of course, wherever there is text within a webpage, there are also keywords and this includes headings of all kinds. The most important, or most relevant, keyword should be included within the "H1" tag. And when it comes to local SEO, the most important keywords should include the geographic location of the business.





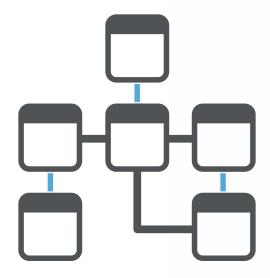
12 OPTIMIZE URL STRUCTURE

The URL is the address that can be seen in the browser, indicating the webpage that a user is visiting. URLs are often overlooked by business owners when performing SEO, but they can be very important.

For instance, the following URL: www.aaaplumbers.com will tell visitors and search engines that the webpage most likely falls under the plumbing category. However, this URL: www. aaaplumbers.com/plumbing-services/newyork tells users and search engines so much more about the page, and the company.

Like meta descriptions, optimizing URL structure is something that is done within website creation platforms and programs, so each will be slightly different. However in most cases, it's not difficult and will take just minutes to do.





13 USING SCHEMA

Schema.org has revolutionized the way search engines display websites in their results pages. Schema is a markup code that can be placed on any website to allow search engines to give more information to the user. This information can include things like online reviews, prices, sitelinks, number of hours, and even entire menus right within the search results.

Not only does Schema help the search engine robots, which will in turn increase a website's page ranking, it also helps users and thereby can increase the click-through rate.

Because Schema gives the users so much more information, they tend to click on more websites that have included Schema because they know so much more about it. This can increase a site's CTR (click-through rate), which will also increase a website's page ranking.

To include Schema markup code on a website, visit schema.org and click on 'get started!' The schema markups that local businesses tend to make the most use of are:

- Local Business Schema and Geotag
- Review
- Events
- Coupons and offers
- Videos
- Persons, individuals and employees
- Products
- City





14 INCREASE LOCAL CITATIONS

Citations in the local SEO world are any mentions of a local business on other websites. In order to be considered an actual citation however, the name, address and phone number must all be included. This is known as 'NAP'. The search engines love citations, even when there is no backlink to accompany them.

Many business owners mistakenly think that just as with anchor text, they have no control over the number of citations their businesses achieve online. The good news is—they're wrong! One of the best ways to get citations is to create profiles across all of the online directories mentioned in Best Practices 1 and 2. These will all include the NAP for the business, so each will be considered an individual citation.

The best places to get or create citations are:

- Third-party websites, such as online directories
- Local blogs
- Industry-focused directories
- Industry-focused blogs
- Citations from competitors





15 GET POSITIVE ONLINE REVIEWS

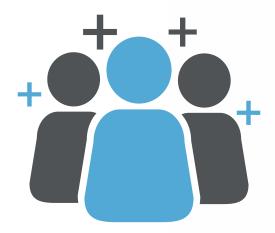
Reviews online today are the driving force behind most purchases made, both online and in-store. More than ever, people are researching products and businesses before they use them, and having no reviews online can be just as bad as having negative reviews out there.

In order to get reviews, all a business has to do is ask customers. Suggest they visit review sites such as TripAdvisor or Yelp and leave positive reviews. Also, make sure that this is a consistent effort. Having a few reviews online just isn't enough. It's important to continuously add new positive reviews all the time, both to keep them up-to-date for users, and to keep the search engines happy.

These tips are a great way for businesses to increase the amount of positive online reviews they receive:

- Make it easy by including "Find us on Google/Yelp" banners on the website.
- Place direct links to review websites within different areas of the business website, and/or in email signatures.
- Send thank-you cards and ask for a review by including a link in the card.
- Offer an incentive, such as a monthly drawing for all reviewers, to entice more customers to leave reviews.
- Be sure to always thank reviewers.





16 CREATING SOCIAL MEDIA PROFILES

Social media has a huge influence on local SEO for a number of reasons. One is that it lets a business claim more of their name and brand online. There may be lots of "AAA Plumbers" or even "AAA Plumbers NY", and the first business that claims that name across Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other social media platforms will have the advantage in building that brand and image.

Social media is also a great way to get the kind of reviews and citations described above. Every time someone mentions a business on Twitter, their followers can see it and so can followers of the business mentioned. And if that mention gets a retweet or two, the number of people seeing that tweet about that business can quickly escalate into the thousands.

Social media lets businesses interact directly with their customers, providing another reason it's a great boost to local SEO. A business can tweet about their upcoming promotion, or upload photos of their newest products. This will drive in the business that's right around the corner of a local business, and that's what local SEO is all about.

The biggest social media platforms where businesses should maintain a presence are:

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Instagram
- o Tumblr
- o Google+
- LinkedIn





17 TRACK, TRACK, TRACK

Once all of the SEO and local SEO work has been done on a website, the last thing a business owner should do is leave it to run on its own and hope for the best. Algorithms for Google and the other search engines are always changing, just as some keywords trend more than others at different times. If a business fails to keep up with changes regularly, it will, eventually, have to play catch-up and do the local SEO work all over again.

Fortunately, Google has provided a way for businesses to keep up with the changes and track status, with Google Analytics.

Google Analytics, found at http://analytics.google.com, is a tool that can track every activity that happens when users visit your site – and it's completely free. Once an account is created and Google has started to track conversion rates and other aspects of the website, it takes about 24 hours for a website's stats to appear. After that it will track continually, and users can look at it any time of the day to see what their website has been doing for the past hour, day, week, or month.





18 AUDIT COMPETITORS

Every business wants know how competitors are doing, especially in relation to their own business. Analyzing the competition may include a visit to the store, inquiries among mutual customers, and generally keeping an open ear for news about their competitors. A powerful digital way to keep track of competitors is to audit their local SEO efforts. Then, it's easier to do a competitive analysis and get a clear idea of where improvement is needed, as well as where they have an edge over the competition.

Performing local SEO audits on competitors isn't difficult, although it can take time. In reality, it's just checking all the same steps and Best Practices outlined here, but tracking them for competitors. This may involve checking out their Twitter profile, or their Google My Business listing. A quick search for the competitor's name in Google will bring up relevant results, as will searching for reviews and citations.

CONCLUSION

Think of these 18 Best Practices as a website "fitness routine," and you'll soon realize the benefits with a more active, engaged website, and a growing business.

Many business owners mistakenly believe that local SEO efforts are highly technical, and that they require in-depth knowledge only held by the most well-trained IT experts.

This simply isn't true.

Implementing local SEO strategies does take time, and it certainly is a bit of effort. But it's also something that every single business can do, and it doesn't require a great deal of technical knowledge.

Still, finding the time to dedicate to implementing and monitoring those strategies can be difficult, as owners are generally very busy running the show. A **digital marketing specialist** can take care of all local SEO requirements, and help a small business realize the success they've worked so hard to achieve.

Study after study has proven it – local searches are increasing. When a business works to keep up with changing search trends, it becomes easier for local people to find them. Those searches are a way to actually increase customer base, and as a result, grow the all-important bottom line.



NEXT STEPS

NOT SURE WHERE TO START? ORDER AN AUDIT.

National Positions is pleased to bring you this useful guide to the 18 Best Practices for Local SEO. Please contact us for more great advice and to find out how our experts can put all these Local SEO strategies to work for you. We're here to help you grow your local business in new and powerful ways online.

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- Pinpoints SEO issues and explains the remedies
- Perform over 300 checks
- Look at 6 main areas of Local SEO and Maps
- Performs a competitive analysis
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