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Local Search: How to Turn Surfers Into Foot Traffic

Introduction

In the early days of ecommerce, buying online was heralded as the next big thing. Online stores began cropping up left and right, selling everything from gourmet food to furniture to pet supplies. But the dot-com bust proved that buying offline still has its place, and is in fact preferred by most consumers.

Local businesses breathed a collective sigh of relief when they realized that they didn't have to worry about being put out of business by companies that sold online. Many also believed that they didn't have to bother with creating an online presence for their businesses. But it's becoming more and more apparent that having your business online is imperative if you want to remain competitive, even if your target market is in close proximity.

You see, more and more people are turning to the Internet instead of the Yellow Pages to find the information they need. It's often much quicker and easier to find businesses online, and you can find out a lot more about them than you could through a Yellow Page ad. Consumers can get reviews, directions from their front door to the business site, and often listings of products and services offered. And while phone books are only updated once a year, online listings can be updated any time a business's information changes, making them more accurate. It's easy to see why searching online is the method of choice for many shoppers.

Local search takes on several different forms. In this report, you will learn about all the types of local search and how to best take advantage of them.

Searching Online, But Buying Locally

It's a common misconception that consumers go online with the intent of buying online. More often than not, they go online to research the products and services they are interested in, and then buy offline. At first glance, this might not sound like it makes much sense. But actually, it makes perfect sense. Here's why:

- Doing the research online from the comfort of one's own home is more convenient. It's also economical, because it saves gas. Instead of driving to all of the local stores to check prices and features, consumers can do so with the click of a mouse.

- Purchasing some products and services online is inconvenient, if not impossible. If you're shopping for a piano, for example, you probably don't want to pay for long-distance shipping, so it's easier to buy locally. And if you need a dentist, you can't exactly have your teeth cleaned online. So you look for information online, but you use that information to find a local provider.

- Buying locally is good for the area's economy. Money that is spent in the local area stands a good chance of remaining in the local area. So while consumers enjoy the convenience of searching for the things they need over the Internet, they often feel better about buying them from a local business, even if buying online is an option.

Consumers have been buying local for centuries. Other options have become available over the years, including mail order catalogs, TV infomercials, and shopping networks. But none of these have caused local buying to cease. And in the case of the Internet, it has added a new dimension to buying locally. It's just up to the small business owner to harness the power of the new technologies available and use them to his advantage.

How Does Local Search Work?

Online search engines have their own ways of ranking websites. They all crawl the web, indexing web pages and evaluating the factors that they consider in ranking for various keywords. But each one has its own unique algorithm that is kept as secret as possible. These algorithms change from time to time, making it difficult to game the system.

Local search is a somewhat different animal. It relies on information provided to the search engine by users, not on what the search engine finds on the business's website.

That's why it's possible to appear in local search results without even having a website.

Many Internet users who are looking for local goods and services go directly to the local search engines. This allows them to get more relevant and detailed results from the start. The most widely used local search services are components of the big search engines, such as Google, Yahoo and Ask. But there are also search engines that specialize in local results, such as YellowPages.com. And some areas have their own local search engines that are quite popular among Internet users in the vicinity.

Thanks to their inherent relevance, local search results have also begun to appear on regular search result pages when users type in terms that include local qualifiers. For example, if someone is searching for "Dallas restaurants" on Google, the first page of search results will probably include listings from Google Local that fit that description. So even if a user is unaware that the major search engines have sections specifically for local listings, he can still be exposed to information about your business.

GPS and Mobile Local Search

An increasing number of consumers are looking for business information while they're on the go. Instead of sitting down in front of the computer before they venture out to shop or eat, they prefer to be able to find the things they need from wherever they may be. And thanks to GPS systems and mobile directory assistance, they can easily do so.

GPS systems are built into many new vehicles, and they can also be purchased separately. They utilize mapping software that includes information on points of interest, and these points of interest include businesses. Getting your business listed in GPS mapping systems has great potential to bring new customers your way, especially if your business is in the category of entertainment, shopping, or travel.

Mobile local search is a concept that is growing in leaps and bounds. Cell phone and PDA users have shown great interest in having local information at their fingertips, and providers have finally started to listen. They have made information available in several forms.

Many directory assistance providers have begun to offer services beyond phone numbers for specific people or businesses. Some allow users to inquire about certain types of businesses in their area, or one they are traveling to. For example, a user could ask for listings of bars in Los Angeles and be provided with multiple options to choose from. He may also have the option to have directions texted to his phone.

Most popular search providers offer search pages for those accessing the Internet from

cell phones. Mobile carriers have also gotten in on the act, offering various local search services to their customers. Some form of local search is available to anyone with a cell phone.

Offering Coupons Through Local Search

Although the Internet has yet to become the primary destination of coupon seekers, offering coupons to customers can certainly help boost your business. Some local search engines, such as Google Local, and mobile applications, such as Cellfire, make it easy for small businesses to offer coupons to current customers as well as prospects.

Offering a coupon could give an undecided consumer the push he needs to visit your business. But you've got to make the offer a good one. A percent- or dollar amount- off coupon is often best for getting new customers in the door, because they can put it toward anything they want to buy. But if you're promoting a popular new product, offering a coupon for it might prove to be a good strategy. It will probably take some experimentation to figure out which coupons work best, but it's well worth the effort.

Once you've found a coupon that works for you, however, don't get too comfortable with it. By changing your promotional offers every now and then, you give yourself another chance with prospects who may not have been interested in one they saw previously. And for those who have already purchased from your business, a new offer gives them a special incentive to come back.

The popularity of online coupons has increased somewhat since they have been in existence. One of the biggest obstacles in their widespread use is the unwillingness of some larger businesses to accept them. Many consumers are more willing to use online coupons that are presented by the business itself than manufacturer's coupons, especially when dealing with a small local business. Using this tendency to your advantage could prove to be quite lucrative.

Getting Listed in Local Search

Depending on which local search engine is used, searchers may be able to access photos, videos, reviews, and more upon selecting a listing. The more of these options a business takes advantage of, the better. Here is an in-depth look at some of the most popular local search destinations online, including how to submit your listing.

Google Local/Google Maps

Google is presently at the top of the search engine food chain, and its local search offering is doing nicely as well. Getting listed with Google Local makes your business information available through Google Maps, and relevant listings also appear in regular Google search results.

Google Local listings can include much more than the standard business description. For example, you can specify what types of payment your business accepts, and you can provide a listing of your products and services. You can include printable coupons with your listing as well. And it's also possible to add YouTube videos to your listing. This allows businesses to make commercials, footage of events, and other promotional videos available to potential customers.

Adding your listing to Google Maps is free and easy. Just go to http://www.google.com/local/add to get started. Google requires manual verification of your business address, so you will have wait until you receive a postcard and enter the confirmation code online before your listing appears. This could take up to 6 weeks. But after that, you can edit your listing freely. Since all listings are free, support is limited to a Google Group (http://groups.google.com/group/Google-Maps-For-Business-Owners/topics).

Yahoo Local

Yahoo Local works in a manner similar to Google Local. Local listings are displayed both through Yahoo Local and in regular Yahoo search results that include geographical qualifiers. While Yahoo doesn't have quite as large a market share as Google, getting listed with them is certainly worthwhile.

There are a few differences between Yahoo Local and Google Local. Here are the details:

- Manual verification of your address is not required. This means that your listing goes live shortly after it is submitted.

- A basic Yahoo Local listing includes your business name, address, phone number, website URL, up to five category listings, hours of operation, and the capability to list your products, services, and brands.

- If you want to add photos, a logo, or a detailed description of your business, you'll have to pay for an enhanced listing. There is also a featured listing option that offers guaranteed placement and availability of your listing to a larger geographical area.

Yahoo Local offers toll-free phone support to those with both paid and free listings. Billing for paid services is month to month with no setup fee. To learn more and sign up, visit http://listings.local.yahoo.com.

MSN Local

MSN Live Search is often forgotten by webmasters in favor of the two more prominent search engines, but having your business appear in their local listings is important. Since MSN is owned by Microsoft, it is the default search engine on many computers. It is also accessible from many of Microsoft's other online properties, including Hotmail, and a number of other websites.

MSN Local listings are free, and they may include a substantial amount of information. Photos and URLs are allowed, and you can place your listing in as many categories as are applicable. Like Google, MSN requires verification by postal mail before your listing is posted. But once you are verified, you can update your listing as needed.

You can add your listing to MSN Local by visiting http://llc.local.live.com. Once you've entered your information, you'll get a chance to review it and your business's position on Microsoft Virtual Earth. If it's mapped incorrectly, you can simply click and drag to move it to the correct location. When everything looks good, you can submit and wait for your confirmation mailing.

The Open Directory Project

The Open Directory Project is different from most of today's search engines. It has more in common with Yahoo's original model than Google. It is a human-edited directory of the Web that claims to only include the best of the websites submitted.

Some might argue that the fact that your listing may or may not be included makes submitting to the Open Directory pointless, but most SEO experts tend to disagree. That's because the Open Directory provides results to hundreds of search engines, including Google, Lycos, and AOL Search. While there's no guarantee that your listing will appear within a certain amount of time (or even appear at all) due to the nature of the directory, you have nothing to lose by trying. All listings are free, because the Open Directory is edited by volunteers.

Submissions to the Open Directory cannot be promotional in nature. Their descriptions must be subjective, and you can't add a great deal of detail. They also must be submitted to the specific category where they belong. In the case of a local business, the Regional category is a good place to start. Keep narrowing down the area until it accurately represents your target market, then select the category that represents your business. For complete submission instructions, go to http://www.dmoz.org/add.html.

YellowPages.com

When someone looks for information on local businesses offline, the first place he usually goes is to - you guessed it - the Yellow Pages. YellowPages.com isn't quite so universal, but the site does provide results for over 140 million searches each month. Sites in their distribution network include AnyWho, AreaGuides.net, and 411.com.

Basic listings on YellowPages.com are free, but they are just that- basic. You can only include your business name, phone number, and address. But they do have paid options that allow business owners to create more detailed listings with premium placement, video and more. To get started, visit http://listings.yellowpages.com/Services/ServiceClaimSearch.aspx.

Other Local Search Result Providers

There are several sites that may not offer search services of their own, but they provide local results to other search engines. Here are some of the most widely used information providers that offer free submission, along with their submission pages:

- InfoUSA - http://dbupdate.infousa.com/dbupdate/startupdate?bas_request=A

- Localeze - http://www.localeze.com/manage-business/index.asp

Many of the larger information providers do not allow small businesses to submit their own listings. In order to get listed with them, you'll have to pay a third party provider that does submissions for small businesses. Here's a couple to consider:

- Dex Search Marketing - http://www.dexsearchmarketing.com/

- Universal Business Listing - http://www.universalbusinesslisting.org/

- Your online marketing company may also be able to provide this service. If not, they should be able to recommend someone who can.

These companies provide local business listings to many of the aforementioned search engines, so submitting to both may seem redundant. But it's actually not a bad idea if you're looking for maximum exposure. The larger providers may not offer all of the features that are available from the actual search engines, so it's good to make sure that you're taking full advantage of what each individual one has to offer. These larger companies will also provide your listing to smaller search engines that you may have never even heard of, reaching potential customers you might not have otherwise reached. If budget is a priority, however, getting your listing into the major local search engines is free and will certainly boost your business.

Finding Geo-Targeted Directories

In addition to the search engines that provide local results for different cities in an entire country (or in multiple countries), there are search engines and directories that serve smaller areas. Some are geared toward specific cities, others toward states, and still others toward regions such as New England or the southwest United States. These sites have smaller audiences, but the people who visit them are sure to be interested in finding businesses in the areas they serve.

So how do you go about finding these search engines? For starters, you could try doing a Google search. Just type in the targeted region name plus the words "search engine" or "directory," and chances are any popular sites that meet those criteria will be listed. You could also try Craigslist.org. There you can place free classified ads for your business, and you may also find links to popular search engines in your area. Try the community section.

Your local Chamber of Commerce may offer a business directory for its members. They should also be able to point you in the direction of other local search engines. And if all else fails, you could always ask around. If there are any directories or search engines in your area that are worth their salt, someone you know is probably using them.

Getting Listed in GPS and Mobile Local Search

Mobile search offerings that are provided by Internet search engines use the same sources as their providers to get results, so if you've followed the previous suggestions, you should be covered there. But getting listed with GPS and mobile directory assistance is a bit different.

GPS devices utilize software to provide information to users. How up to date their listings are depends on how new the device is and how often the user gets upgrades. While businesses have no control over that, they can make sure they are listed in the latest versions of GPS software. The two largest providers of information for GPS systems, Map Insight (http://mapinsight.teleatlas.com/mapfeedback/index.php) and Navteq (http://mapreporter.navteq.com/dur-web-external/), both accept online submissions.

If your business is listed in the phone book, it should be available through any type of directory assistance. Directory assistance providers receive updated information very frequently, so your number should become available shortly after it is added to your telephone company's database. If you find that your information is incorrect or missing, you'll need to take it up with your phone service provider.

Currently, you shouldn't need to register or pay to be included in local category searches. The results of these are obtained either from Yellow Pages listings for the area requested, or by providing listings in the vicinity of the caller's location through the use of GPS or other location-based technology. The only items that are usually fee-based are the advertisements played during free directory assistance calls.

SEO for Organic Search Success

Listing your business with the local search engines is a great start when you're looking for online exposure. But it's also important to ensure that your website will rank well in regular search results. This will allow you to gain placement for more keywords, and it will make it possible for your site to appear in results from search engines that do not have a local component.

Search engine optimization, or SEO, is the process of tweaking your web pages so that they stand the best possible chance of ranking for the keywords that customers would use to find your business's website. Larger companies (and many small ones) pay SEO firms to do this for them. But it's entirely possible to do it yourself with some basic HTML knowledge. Following are the elements considered by the search engines.

Content

Since the search engines are looking for the websites that are the most relevant for given search terms, it stands to reason that they would place a lot of weight on a page's content. Using the keywords for which you wish to rank well on each page should come fairly easily, but it's also important to pay attention to how often you're using them.

A good rule of thumb is to write the page's content with the targeted keywords in mind, but to only use them as they come naturally. Once you're done, figure up the keyword density and see how you did. You can do this quickly online by entering the published page's URL at http://keyworddensity.com. Or if you want to know your keyword density so you can make adjustments before publishing, you can find a cut and paste keyword density checker at http://www.live-keyword-analysis.com/.

There is some debate about the ideal keyword density on a given page. If it's too low, the page won't be deemed as relevant by the search engines. If it's too high, you could be penalized for keyword stuffing. SEO experts usually recommend a density of somewhere between 2 and 6 percent.

Page Headings

A heading's primary function on a web page is to separate the content into easy-to-read sections. There are six levels of headings available in HTML coding. <h1> is the highest, and should only be used once per page (at the beginning). <h2> is a subheading of <h1>, <h3> is a subheading of <h2>, and so on.

Using your keywords in page headings is also good for search engine placement. Include them as much as possible without making the content sound unnatural.

Meta Tags

Meta tags are found at the beginning of HTML documents, inside the head tags. These were once very important to the search engines. But because it was so easy to stuff them with keywords that had nothing to do with the page's content, they have been utilized in rankings much less in recent times.

One exception to this rule is the title tag (which isn't technically a meta tag, but is often discussed with them because it directly precedes them). This tag controls what is shown in the title bar of the browser when a page is displayed. Because the content is visible to visitors, most webmasters are more interested in making it attractive and relevant than stuffing it full of keywords. But by including your keywords here in a natural manner, you can increase your chances of getting good search engine rankings.

It can't hurt to include your keywords in the other meta tags, too. These are the keywords and description tags, and their names are self-explanatory. The description is still used by some search engines as the page description in search results, so it should be descriptive. The keywords tag is generally ignored nowadays, but there's no reason you can't include your targeted keywords just in case.

Inbound Links

Links from other sites to your site are very important to the search engines. All of them use link popularity in their algorithms to determine the order in which to display results. Having plenty of inbound links will put you ahead of other sites that are targeting the same keywords as you but have fewer links coming in.

While you do not have complete control over who links to your site, you can usually get links easily through link exchanges. All you have to do is find other sites that are related to yours (but not in direct competition) and contact their webmasters, asking if they would like to place your link on their sites in exchange for a link from your site to their sites. Many will be willing to do so, because this benefits them as well.

When requesting a link, be sure to include suggested link text that contains your targeted keywords. This will help you rank higher in search results for those particular keywords, as well as boosting your general link popularity.

You can also create your own inbound links. Social networking is an effective way to

accomplish this. By setting up profiles on sites such as MySpace, Facebook and LinkedIn, and adding links to your site to those profiles, you can give yourself valuable inbound links from popular sites. Blogging and microblogging are also great vehicles for obtaining inbound links.

Links from other sites to yours can be had for free, but they are invaluable from an SEO perspective. Don't overlook this important tool in getting visitors to your website.

Other Factors in SEO

There are several other factors in SEO that many webmasters do not fully utilize. The importance of these items varies among the search engines, but it's never a bad idea to keep all your bases covered. Here are some of the other places where you can use your keywords:

- File names - The file name of your page is found in its URL. You may have noticed when searching online that keywords inside the URL are highlighted in the search results, so this is a pretty good indication that the search engine finds them important. For best results, your domain name should include relevant keywords as well.

- Alt tags - These tags are used in conjunction with images. They contain the text that displays if the image fails to load. They are also used by browsers for the blind. These should first and foremost describe the image they are associated with, but if you can fit your keywords in, that's a bonus.

- Internal link text - When linking to other pages on your site, don't forget to use link text that consists of that page's targeted keywords. Search engines take this into consideration just as they do links coming in from other sites.

Optimizing every page of your site for the search engines is critical if you want to get the most traffic possible from the search engines. Many small businesses neglect to do so because they cannot find room in the budget to hire an SEO firm. Don't let that hold you back. You can learn to do it yourself.

Targeting the Right Keywords

The single most important thing in SEO is using the keywords that will bring the right kinds of visitors to your site. Your content could have the perfect keyword density, and your headings and tags could all include your keywords, but if they're not the *right* keywords, it's not going to do you any good.

The best keywords are descriptive, but they are also created with your customers in mind. Not just people who might have a passing interest in your website, perhaps for research purposes, but people who are looking for what you have to offer with the intent of purchasing. These keywords are where the money is.

So think for a minute about how someone who is interested in buying your products or services in your area would go about finding you. They would search for the specific product or service they are looking for, and they would also include some information about where they want to purchase. So instead of searching for "mortgages," they would search for "Atlanta mortgages." Or perhaps they would look for a more specific type of product in their area, such as "Atlanta reverse mortgages." The more detail your targeted keywords contain, the better the prospects of paying customers finding you will be.

If you offer a variety of products or services, you would be hard pressed to get one page about all of them to rank well for terms related to any of them. So what do you do? Create a separate page for each one, and optimize it for the detailed keyword that best describes it. So you could have one page for "Atlanta reverse mortgages," one page for "Atlanta second mortgages," one page for "Atlanta home equity line of credit," and so on.

It's also smart to do some research when selecting your keywords. The ones that offer the greatest potential have a high search volume and low competition. You can find information on search volume on your proposed keywords, as well as similar ones, by using the Google Adwords Keyword Tool (https://adwords.google.com/select/KeywordToolExternal). To get an idea of how much competition there is for a given keyword, simply do a Google search for it. The number of results will be displayed at the top of the page.

Using the right keywords is crucial to any website's success, but it's especially important for local business sites. You need to find terms that not only bring traffic, but bring traffic from people who are ready to buy what you are selling in your local area. It's not the number of people who visit your site that counts, but the number of people who ultimately buy from you.

Making Your Site Visitor-Friendly

With all of this emphasis on doing what's best in the eyes of the search engines, it's easy to forget the primary purpose of your website: to be useful to your potential customers. When those who are in need of your products or services arrive at your site, it's important that you make a good impression and make it easy for them to find what they're looking for.

Good design is critical in accomplishing these goals. You don't necessarily have to spend a fortune on fancy graphics and world-famous web designers. Just make sure that your branding is reflected in the look of your site, and that your site isn't so heavy on graphics, video and other media that it's slow or impossible to load for many of your visitors.

Another important consideration is your site navigation. Your menus should be easy to find and understand. Make sure that the meanings of your link text or graphics are obvious, and they're laid out in a way that is not confusing. It's also best to make anything the visitor is looking for accessible in as few clicks as possible. One click is best, but if that's not possible, try to keep it to three at the most (and then only for pages that contain technical or highly detailed information).

It's a good idea to have an impartial person critique your website. This allows you to learn how it looks through the eyes of someone who has no stake in its success. Using the feedback provided, you can make your potential customers' experience a more pleasant and productive one.

Final Thoughts on Local Search

Local search is a relatively new concept, but it has already become immensely popular. Even though you can buy lots of products and services online, there are some things that the Internet just can't do. It can, however, help us find local businesses that are capable of giving us what we need.

While small businesses are fortunate to be able to get into local search at little or no monetary cost, it pays for them to put some effort into enhancing their listings and making sure they're easy to find. Here are some steps to keep in mind while working on your local search efforts:

- Get your listing added in as many places as possible. While the big local search engines have the most search volume, the smaller ones offer a great deal of potential as well. Even if you don't hit the minor search engines right away, make it a point to do so eventually. You never know, one of them could become the next big thing. And even if they just bring you a handful of paying customers, you'll still be coming out ahead.

- Make sure your listings are as complete and detailed as possible. Provide as much information as each service allows, and provide it in different languages if given the option to do so. Double check everything for accuracy.

- Make your listing interesting. Add photos and videos that will create buzz. Include your logo when possible to reinforce your brand. Encourage honest reviews of your business. Anything you can do to make your listing stand out from the crowd will work to your advantage. Even if there aren't a lot of listings of similar businesses in your area, that doesn't mean there won't ever be. So making sure your listing jumps out at the reader is crucial.

- Get your website ready for the search engines and your visitors. Finding the right keywords and optimizing your site for them will bring you more traffic, and making your site appealing and easy to use will make a good impression on prospects when they get there. If you don't have a website you can still enjoy some of the benefits of local search, but setting one up will greatly enhance your efforts.

Many small businesses have yet to discover the value of local search, but that doesn't mean that we can put off our own local search campaigns until they do. Getting in now will allow you to build a formidable web presence before they even get started, giving you a distinct advantage. You can go ahead and start building a portfolio of reviews, find out what your target market responds to, and get into the search results so that those who are looking for you right now can find you.

It's never too late to get into local search, either. While those in your market who were early adopters may have already made their way into the search engines, it is possible to catch up. It will take some persistence and good SEO, but it can be done. The fact that other businesses beat you to it is no excuse not to break into local search. There is always room for more choices for consumers.

So what are you waiting for? Making sure your business is easy to find through local search, traditional Internet search, and mobile search is one of the most inexpensive ways to get new leads and customers. You can start submitting your listings any time, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, so why not get started right now?