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Local Search Optimization

*How Google New Place Search Feature Impacts Your
Business*

WSI White Paper

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Introduction

As many of us are already aware, Google is constantly in a state of flux, sometimes implementing minor changes to their algorithm, or even major changes. In addition to this, Google often makes significant revisions to their numerous services, such as Google Places and Maps.

More recently, a new change has been looming over the horizon, ushering in yet a new factor to be taken into consideration when it comes to leveraging Google for your business. This change comes in the form of revisions to Google Places, and the addition of a new service being tested currently by Google, which is known as Boost.

Changes to Google Places

Unknown to many in the Internet marketing industry, is that 82% of all searches currently performed in Google, have a local component to them. This means that most searches are being performed by individuals looking for products or services which are “close to home”. At this time, Google Places now dominates the first page of localized search queries, making it increasingly more vital that business have a Google Places listing, and that it is created in an effective fashion, which will provide the greatest result.

Listings served through Google Places are now an amalgamation of results Google’s Map Listings, as well as organic search results which have a geo-specific element to them. In previous times, there used to be what was called the “Google 7 Pack”, which consisted of a map showing 7 listings, with organic results beneath. This has now been merged, as shown in the image below. The portion highlighted in yellow comes directly from the website, which is a purely organic listing, and the section highlighted in green, is being provided through Google’s Map Listings.



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What we have discovered, is that in many cases, websites with page one positions in Google's organic listings, and who also had a Google Map Listing, are now being served on page one of Google paired with their Map Listing. This pairing allows for additional information to be provided to users who are performing search queries, giving them access to reviews as well as the Place's listing with a single click. These reviews are being pulled from sources such as Yelp, Google Reviews, InsiderPages and SuperPages, to name a few.

In addition to this, in prior times, a Map Listing may not have shown on page one of Google's organic search, but now, these elements go hand in hand. Proper SEO will play a role in having your Place's Listing appended to your organic listing.

What Do These Changes Mean To Your Business?

A Web Presence is a Must and Credibility Matters

Google's launch of their "Place Search" feature is another step toward becoming an online version of the Yellow Pages. This means an optimized web presence is a "must" for businesses if they want to attract local customers online. Experts are saying that unless businesses have engaged in long-term search optimization best practices across all fronts, including organic, local and social, they will likely be impacted by this change.

For example, the fixed-position map now located on the right-hand side of the page moves pay-per-click ad positions down the page. In addition, it hides their ads and continues to draw attention from users as they scroll their way down the page. Essentially, local search results are now much more prominent on the page, pushing general content down.

Online reviews and ratings also have more prominence on the page (appearing alongside the listing). This makes online brand credibility and brand reputation management critical for businesses that appear in a local search result.

Early testing indicates that listings from third party directories are also being pushed further down in Google's results pages, by listings of companies who have combined a solid web page, with their Places listing and customer reviews.

What Can You Do to Stay Competitive?

7 Tips to Optimizing Your Google Place Listing

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It's now more important than ever for businesses to claim their Google Place, complete their company profile and ensure they have a well-optimized site with relevant, localized content to ensure strong visibility. Here are 10 things you can do to optimize your Google Place listing.

Ensuring that your listing appears in a Google Places or Google Maps search is dependent on several key factors. As an example, a restaurant may be part of a larger chain that has multiple locations across the country, or even internationally. During a search from the city that their head office is located in, may be the only time it appears.

Similarly, a search being done from Toronto will never yield the same results as a search done in Dallas. Essentially, Google identifies the location of your ISP, and delivers results based on its location. The factors that have the most influences are for optimizing your Google Places listings are:

1. Physical Address
2. Contact Options
3. Keywords in Business Name
4. Business Category
5. Popularity
6. Google Places Review
7. And a few more

1. Physical Address

Your listing in Google Places requires a physical address, and is the most important element. This is the location of your business. Where your customers know they can find you. This also tells Google what your area of business is, so they can deliver your listing to those searching in your area. If your business has multiple branches in other locations, you should take the time to add them all in your About Us or Contact page. Additionally, be sure to add the other addresses in Google Places.

2. Contact Option

Another factor taken into account by Google is your contact options and information. A phone number where customers are able to reach you is a requirement for a Google Places listing. Business who have clear contact details tend to rank more highly in Google's local search queries. Be sure to include all contact methods possible.

3. Keywords in Business Name

As with the keywords in a title tag for your website, you want to include the most important terms as soon as possible. For example, instead of using just "WSI", using something like "Internet Marketing – WSI" will help you rank better for local searches done for "internet marketing".

4. Business Category

Ensure that your business is listed in the proper category in Google Places. If you sell computers, and you are listed under real estate, your business isn't going to appear for local searches. Always aim for

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accurate details and information. These are the listings that rank best. Additionally, you can only list your business under 5 categories, so make them count! Pick the ones most relevant to the services you may offer.

5. Popularity

How popular is your business? Do people know who you are? Google is going to take this into account. Popular businesses often have an easier time making it into the top placements for related keyword searches. Go ahead and search for “real estate” in your city if you live in North America. If you can tell me that RE/MAX doesn’t show up in the top listings, then you are lying to me. Build your brand online. Being popular matters when it comes to search, but that doesn’t mean you can’t get to the top as the new guy. You just need to be smarter than your competitors.

6. Reviews in Google Places

Google Places captures reviews of your business from online sources like Yelp, Google Reviews/Hotspot, InsiderPages and SuperPages. The more positive reviews you have, the better your chances of grabbing some prime exposure in Google. Be sure that you encourage your customers to write reviews. Customer Lobby offers a great service to encourage people to write reviews, and often times, a satisfied customer is willing to take a few minutes to write a good review.

7. A few others

There are numerous other factors which come together in determining your position in local searches with Google, such as distance from the search location, mentions of your business name, reviews on websites and blogs, etc. Brand awareness is an important factor online, and it is becoming even more important each and every day. Building a strong brand reputation both online and offline, will help your business succeed, and not just in Google.

Looking into the Future with Google Boost

Local customers already search Google for the products and services that you offer. By creating a free business Places listing, you can make sure they’ll be able to find you. With Google Boost, we are seeing a new online advertising solution to help local businesses connect with potential customers in their area and manage this directly within you Google Places account.

When you add Google Boost to your listing, you can advertise your business on Google and Google Maps and attract more visitors to your website or Place page. With Google Boost, you simply set up a monthly budget for your ad, and Google will determine what search keywords trigger your ad based on the categories that you select. You’ll only pay for the clicks that your ad actually receives, the same as with Google AdWords, or many other various Pay-Per-Click platforms.

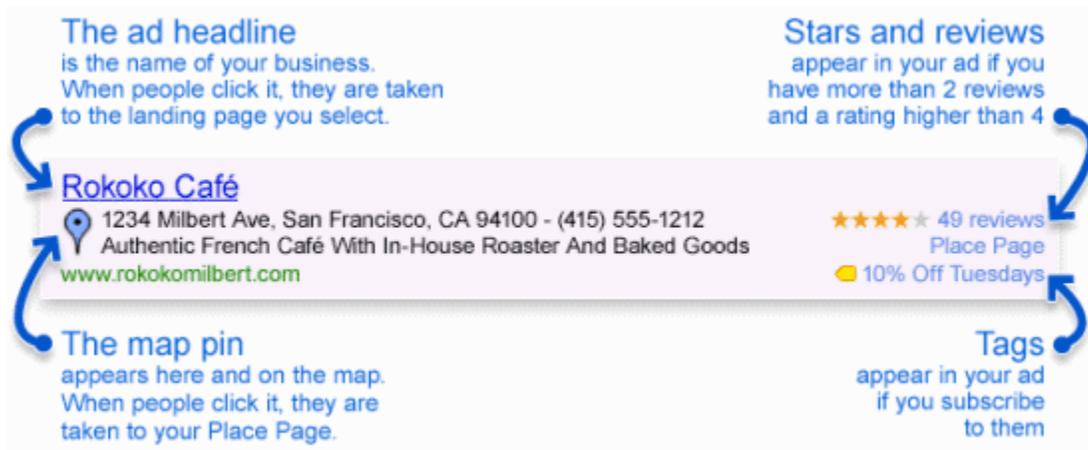
The content of a Boost ad includes:

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- Name of your business
- Address and phone number of your business as specified in your Google Places account
- Short description of your business (Google will automatically generate an editable description based on your Google Places listing description)
- Snippet from the Place Page detailing the average star rating and the number of reviews
- Link to your business' Place Page

Here is an example of a Boost ad, show below:



Boost does not affect the ranking of free, organic business listings in any way, this is simply a new advertising method provided by Google that will allow businesses to reach their local market in a more effective way.

As of this moment, Google Boost is currently available for select categories in Chicago, San Francisco, and Houston but will be launching out to more cities in the near future.

Conclusion

So, just when we were getting comfortable with local search, Google has flipped everything on its head with the launch of their Place Search feature. This new feature is not something to take lightly and can dramatically alter the way you optimize for your local business.

If you would like more information on how you can take advantage of these changes please be sure to contact your local WSI Consultant.