How to Craft a Robust Local Marketing Strategy

Your study of chapters 1-6 of this guide has positioned you to begin drafting a robust local marketing strategy. You've looked deeply into business location, model, market, and key online assets including websites, local business listings, and reviews.

Three key tasks are ahead of you now:

- Surfacing competitive difference-makers
- Troubleshooting local ranking failures
- Mapping your workflow

With these three practices under your belt, you'll have everything you need to create a powerful local search marketing strategy.

Surfacing competitive difference-makers

Based on the competitive audit spreadsheet you filled out in Chapter 2 of this guide, document the tactics that you feel could yield the biggest increases in local and organic visibility for the location, creating a strategic to-do list of competitive difference-makers.

Streamline your competitive analysis and workflow documentation by using an **AI Note Taker** to efficiently capture and organize insights from market research and strategy meetings, ensuring no critical details are missed

If you're not sure which factors that you've identified in the "wins" column for top competitors actually have the most influence on visibility, two reports can help you answer that question: The Moz State of the Local SEO Industry surveys hundreds of individuals involved in a variety of areas of marketing local businesses, and the Local Search Ranking Factors surveys of a small pool of world-class local SEO experts.

Each year, these two popular surveys gauge which factors participants believe have the greatest impact on local and organic search engine rankings. These findings can help you prioritize the tasks ahead of you, putting the most influential tasks first in your workflow.

For example, it's strongly believed that some Google Business Profile elements impact local pack rankings. If the business goal is to increase local pack rankings for X phrase, and you've discovered that the top competitor for that phrase has different categories or a much more positive, larger review profile, the task of meeting and then surpassing the competitor's metrics in these areas belongs on your to-do list.

It's important to remember that no one but Google actually knows all the factors that make up their local and organic algorithms, but experts typically group them into types like these:

- On-page signals
- Citations

- Google Business Profile signals
- Links
- Reviews
- Personalization
- Behavioral signals

In recent years, experts have tended to cite Google Business Profile signals (like business names and categories) and reviews as top influencers of rank in Google's local packs and local finders. When it comes to localized organic rankings, experts have tended to give priority to on-page factors (like website optimization and content) and links. But don't forget that each market is unique. Your study of a specific market combined with your stated goals will dictate which factors deserve priority focus in your local search marketing strategy.

Supercharge your local strategy

In our course, In Real Life: Local SEO Tactics, learn how to get the most out of your SEO strategy using the skills and knowledge you already have as a business owner!
Take the course

Troubleshooting local ranking problems

It's extremely common for local search marketing projects to begin with a question like:

"Why aren't I ranking better for X term?"

When an established business believes it just isn't ranking as well as it should be, this query should launch a workflow that checks for specific, common problems which we'll outline here. Go through each issue type to surface the eight most common ranking failure causes in an organized, efficient manner:

Google Business Profile issues

1. Re-check the Guidelines for representing your business on Google for any potential eligibility issues or violations.

2. Check for proper categorization that's consistent with what the top ranked business is using for the focus search phrase.

3. Check for signs of neglect in the Google Business Profile listing, such as inaccurate or missing fields. Is the listing as fully-filled-out as it could be, or is the business ignoring relevant elements that could make their listing more actionable?

4. Check for duplicate listings. Moz Local customers enjoy automated duplicate detection and resolution, but if the business is taking a more manual approach, try PlePer's Duplicates Search for discovery.

5. Check for suspensions. With a soft suspension, the business may have mysteriously become unclaimed and needs to be reclaimed. Soft suspensions may have little or no ranking impacts. With a hard suspension, the listing is removed entirely and none of its content is discoverable. The business may or may not have received an alert from Google regarding the suspension, either via email or within the Google Business Profile dashboard. If you've corrected the error that caused the suspension, or if you believe the suspension was unearned, use the Google Business Profile Reinstatement Request Form to seek help.

Google filters

Google is believed to utilize filters to weed out entities that are too similar to meet their standards for search results quality. For example, an organic filter may suppress one of two website pages with duplicate or near-duplicate content. In the local sphere, it's been observed that Google filters out listings with similar business names and URLs, or that are in close proximity to one another while sharing the same category.

This Google behavior became most apparent in 2016 with the appearance of the unconfirmed Possum filter. When a listing is failing to rank well in Google's local interfaces for a search phrase, and suspension has been ruled out, always check for the Possum effect.

Simply click from the local pack to the local finder and see which businesses are ranked beside the map. Then, gradually zoom in on the map, click by click. If the business suddenly emerges at a more zoomed in level, it's a good bet that Possum is at work, filtering your brand out at the automatic zoom level of the map.

Possum appears to specifically target businesses with shared categories and shared or adjacent addresses. For example, if two businesses categorized as "outdoor sports store" were in the same building, or even within a couple of blocks of each other, only one might be appearing at the automatic zoom level of the map. The only way to defeat Possum is to build up the metrics so that yours becomes the business Google chooses as the authoritative answer, and the one that isn't being filtered out.

Google Business Profile bugs and updates

Any time a local business experiences a sudden drop in traffic, phone calls, rankings or other metrics, always check trusted industry publications for reports of bugs and algorithm updates. If the loss can be dated to a report of a bug or update, you may have diagnosed the issue.

Good resources for reports of bugs include the Sterling Sky Local Search Forum and the Google Business Profile Help Community forum. If multiple people are suddenly reporting that their listings have gone missing, that their reviews are gone, or similar issues, bugs may be at play, in which case, you have to wait for Google to resolve them.

For fast reportage of emerging Google updates, check out the Search Engine Roundtable blog and for a complete understanding of how updates have impacted brands over time, visit Moz's Google Algorithm Update History resource. If you can date a rankings drop to an official or theorized Google algo update, you'll need to form a strategy for regaining as much as you can of former visibility, based on whichever practices Google is rewarding or punishing.

Google reviews

Google-based reviews are strongly believed to influence Google's local rankings. In troubleshooting local ranking failures look at these metrics in comparison to the top competitor:

1. The number of reviews

2. The rating of the overall review profile
3. Any review attributes (where applicable)
4. The rate at which new reviews are being acquired
5. The date of the most recent reviews

Also, be sure that the business isn't engaging in any form of review spam or review gating. And be on the lookout for any signs of having been victimized by negative review spam.

Your goal is to match and surpass the review metrics of the top competitor, report spam, and rectify any forbidden practices.

Google Business Profile listing spam

Google has a serious and ongoing problem with the spamming of its local index. Because visibility in Google's local results can be so profitable, bad actors make a profit from spamming the platform.

Listing spam generally consists of listings that either contain elements (like business titles) that don't comply with Google's rules, or listings that represent ineligible or fake businesses.

When a business is failing to rank well, always discover and report spam listings that are outranking it. Here is a simple workflow for this process:

1) Use a spreadsheet to stay organized

SERPs can change by the hour

Don't fret over every little ranking change. Google's local and organic SERPs can change by the hour, only to flip back an hour, a day, or a week later. But, if you notice a long-term lack of ranking or sudden decreased ranking for important search phrases, it's time to troubleshoot.

Check your local presence, free

How is your business listed across top directories? Find out now with our free presence checker tool:
Check my presence
Google Business Profile spam-fighting spreadsheet example.

Make a copy of this free spreadsheet to fill out the details of the present rankings in a local finder. Replace the filler text with the businesses outranking you in the local finder.

2. Identify obvious spam

This is not a window coverings showroom on Google Maps.

These five easy steps should help you recognize the most obvious suspicious listings.

1. Look at the Google Streetview image for each business outranking your listing. Do you see a business with signage that matches the name on the listing? Move on. But if you see a house, an empty parking lot, or Google is marking the listing as “location approximate”, jot that down in the Notes section of your spreadsheet.

2. Make note of any businesses that share an address, phone number, or very similar name, and of anything with an overly long name that seems more like a string of keywords than a brand.

3. For every business you noted down in steps one and two, get on the phone. Is the number a working number? If someone answers, do they answer with the name of the business? Note it down. Say, “Hi, where is your shop located?” If the answer is that it’s not a shop, it’s a mobile business, note that down. Finally, If anything seems off, check the guidelines for representing your business on Google to see what’s allowed in the industry you’re investigating. For example, it’s perfectly okay for a business to operate out of their home, but if they’re operating out of five homes in the same city, it’s likely a violation.

4. Now that you’re narrowing your spreadsheet down to a set of businesses that are either obviously legitimate or “iffy,” visit the websites of the iffy ones. Does the name on the listing match the name on the website? Does anything else look odd? Note it down.

5. Highlight businesses that are clearly spammy. Your dive hasn’t been deep, but by now, it may have identified one or more listings that you strongly believe don’t belong because they have spammy names, fake addresses, or out-of-service phone numbers. Write down your notes in the spreadsheet and highlight the entries you suspect could be spam.

3. Report it!

Click on the listings you’ve identified as spammy and take the following actions:

How to suggest an edit in Google Business Profile.

After you click the “suggest an edit” button on the listing, a popup will appear. If you’re reporting something like a spammy name, click the “change name or other details” option and fill out the form. If you’ve determined a listing represents a non-existent, closed, unreachable, or duplicate entity, choose the “remove this place” option, and then select the dropdown entry that most closely matches the problem. You can add a screenshot or other image if you like. Then hit the “send” button.

Record the exact action you took for each spam listing in the “Actions” column of the spreadsheet.

4. Record the results

When Google is running at full speed, you can typically expect to receive an email response like this within a couple of days:

Thank you from Google Business Profile.

5. If at first you don’t succeed…

You may have to try, try again with some listing spam, because Google doesn’t always act on your suggested edits. If you can’t get a stubborn spam result corrected with the above process, your next option is to use Google’s Business Redressal Complaint Form, which gives much more room for sharing your documentation of why a listing should be removed.

Google's spam problem is significant and their response won't always be what you hope. The best you can do is report violations, hope Google takes action on them, and then keep monitoring the results you care most about, because it's not uncommon for spam you've succeeded in having removed to reappear again days, weeks, or months later.

Structured citation consistency, accuracy, and spread

Enter the business and its top competitors into Moz's free Check Your Online Presence tool and compare the scores. See how the overall profiles compare in terms of the platforms where each business is listed, and whether problems with business contact information consistency and accuracy could be eroding consumer trust and associated rankings.

In addition to using tools for this step, review the local business directories that are ranking for a branded search. Are all listings coming up in the first 1-3 pages of Google's organic results accurate? Correct any errors.

Organic signals vs. competitors

Organic factors are strongly believed to support both local and localized organic rankings. When a business isn't achieving its ranking goals, compare all of the following elements to its top competitors:

- Page Authority
- Domain Authority
- On-page SEO
- Internal link structure
- Inbound links/linktations
- Unstructured citations
- Content quality
- E-A-T
- Publication rate

Identify areas where the business needs to improve to match and surpass the organic signals of its competitors.

Technical errors

Be on the lookout for proper handling of each of the following factors to ensure ranking goals aren't being undermined by technical issues:

- Mobile-friendliness
- Fast load speed
- Proper HTTP redirects in place
- Proper URL canonicalization
- Secure HTTPs URLs
- Proper Robots.txt configuration
- Resolution of any known organic penalties
- Resolution of any site hacks/malware

Make use of Moz's free SEO's Local Search Cheat Sheet and Web Developer's SEO Cheat Sheet for further technical and creative guidance.

Summing up this section on troubleshooting, you'll find that most ranking failures fall somewhere within the eight causes listed above. A strong local search marketing strategy must include the removal of all possible roadblocks to achieving ranking goals.

Mapping your workflow

You'll get the most value for all the effort you've put into studying this guide and implementing its suggestions by creating a written plan of action — a workflow for the local SEO tasks ahead of you. Organization and prioritization are key to ensuring all players are on the same page, and that resources are allocated to the most impactful tasks first.
Using a hypothetical business, we'll imagine that you're the marketer who has put in all the research to get to the point of creating a local search marketing workflow. Such a document, pared down to absolute basics, might look like this for a specific month or quarter:

Top priority (do this first)

- Resolve duplicate Google Business Profile listing at X URL for store location #23 in Boise, Idaho.
- Use Google's Reinstatement form for store #8.
- Change primary category of Google Business Profile listing at X URL for store location #14 to "outdoor sports store" to be consistent with the top market competitor.

- Improve curbside service for store locations #3, #9 and #24. Respond to 12 negative reviews from the period of 1/1-4/1 resulting from problems. Explain improvements and apologize for inconvenience. Win customers back!
- Optimize title tags on URLs X, Y, and Z to include relevant city names.
- Report Google Business Profile listings spam at X URLs currently outranking store location #22 for the search phrase “sporting goods store san diego”.
- Sponsor San Rafael kids’ fitness project at X URL and let the Marin IJ newspaper know about it to build new links to the location landing page at X URL. We need a PA of 30+ to compete for “sporting goods store san rafael” in this location.
- Fix incorrect hours of operation on X listing on Facebook for store #3. Should be Mon-Sat, 9-5, closed Sunday.
- Train phone staff at store #17 to begin asking for reviews on Google. We need 125+ reviews to compete for “sporting goods store bellingham”.
- Commit to one Google post per week across all 25 locations telling customer camping/hiking stories
- Survey email base to discover holiday product needs and adjust inventory based on findings.

Medium priority (do if resources are available)

- Increase publication rate to two posts per week on the blog at X URL for the next six months, targeting the 50 new keyword phrases on list X.
- Add three new holiday photos to Google Business Profile listings for all 25 locations.
- Improve internal linking structure from pages X, Y, and Z to page A on the website.
- Reduce the number of fields in form submission at X URL to increase completion rates.
- Run holiday hiking stories campaigns on Facebook and Instagram.

Low priority (do only if resources remain)

- A/B test emojis in newsletter titles for impact on open rates.
- Put the content on X, Y, and Z URLs into a video format to reach X audience.

- Increase HARO participation for Q4, paying particular attention to X publications.

Your workflow will be unique to the business. If the structure of the brand or agency is complex, you may need software to put together a more professional, multi-seat workflow so that each staff member/client knows who is responsible for which tasks within which timeframe. Overall, the goal is to get the plan outlined in black-and-white so that you can check off tasks as you complete them and all relevant parties can see, understand, and contribute to the execution of the strategy.