

Local Search Revisited

[Web Smart Newsletter](#) by Eric Holter, September 2007

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This week I'm heading to St. Louis to speak at a conference for one of our clients. [Pet Sitters International](#) is an association for educating promoting, and supporting pet sitters. I'll be talking about how small local service providers, like pet sitters, can effectively market themselves online. Over two years ago I wrote a newsletter called "[Let Your Fingers Do The Clicking.](#)" I discussed the rise of local search and how it would disrupt traditional local Yellow Pages advertising. Consider it disrupted. The marketing landscape for a small local business, such as pet sitters, restaurants, doctors, and designers has changed.

So what steps should a local business take to recoup losses from Yellow Pages abandonment? And how can they take advantage of the many opportunities this disruption has created?

Step one: read on.



In March of 2005 I wrote about [local search](#) in response to the (then) new, updates to Google Maps. It was amazing to see how a search for "pizza" on a scrollable Google map would display balloons representing all the pizzerias on the map. It seems so basic now--how quickly we become accustomed to technical wonders!

My forecast, then, was for radical disruption of the Yellow Pages industry. So how has it played out? In 2006 the YP industry measured a significant decrease in the use of printed Yellow Pages. The numbers for 2007 are looking far more dim--possible drops of 30% in just one year. Of course the online Yellow Pages have picked up some of this online traffic. But the online Yellow Pages shares this traffic with Google, and Yahoo! as well as a growing list of new local-oriented social media sites and mashups.

Bottom line: for the local business or service provider, the days when a Yellow Pages ad was all that was needed are over. Since people are using printed Yellow Pages less often, Yellow Pages ads are worth less. My trip to St. Louis is primarily intended to educate small business owners on how to make sure their businesses are found in online local search. At least then, the decrease in Yellow Pages usage will be made up for with their presence in Google and Yahoo! Being listed in at least these two places is the absolute bare minimum any and every local business needs to ensure for themselves.

How to Add Your Business to Google Maps and Yahoo!

Getting Listed in Google Maps and Yahoo! Local

Getting listed in Google maps and Yahoo! local is fairly simple. In fact many local business may find that they are already listed. If not, or if an existing listing needs to be edited just follow these steps:

How to register with Google Maps: Go to maps.google.com, you'll see a link in the left hand column that says "Add or Edit your business: Learn More." Simply fill out the form and your business will appear in map searches.

If your business is already listed, but the information is out of date, you can click the "add or edit your business" link and submit changes. Google will hold these edits until it confirms you are the business owner by sending a postcard to the existing address. The postcard contains a confirmation code. When you receive it, go back to your listing in maps.google.com and return to the edit screen and enter the code.

How to register with Yahoo! Local: Go to local.yahoo.com and scroll to the bottom of the page to click "Add a Business." You'll need to set up a Yahoo! account before you can enter your business information. You can also edit your listings through a Yahoo! user account.

Registering with other map sites: The other local engines use sources like InfoUSA for their business data. These sources use telephone directories for their databases, so directly updating these sources is not possible--just make sure your phonebook listing is correct and they should correct themselves in time.

Registering is the easy part, but once you're registered you need to start thinking about what your customers want to do when they see your listing in these places. The first thing they'll likely want to do is check out your website.

Small Business Websites More Important Than Ever

In a traditional print Yellow Pages ad it's helpful to offer a website as a means for consumers to get more information--helpful, but not essential. A listing on Google Maps or Yahoo! Local, on the other hand, almost always requires a website. After all, if you were looking for a gymnastics studio online, wouldn't you check out the ones with websites before the ones without? The days when a website was an optional luxury for a small local company are over. Now it's essential.

If a small business website is essential, what kind of website should a small local business (with a small budget) have? Let's review the essentials.

Essential Requirements for a Small Business Website

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Owning your domain name. Sadly, many small businesses have to settle for extremely simple, cheap, website packages that often do not allow them to use their own domain name. Instead, they get a web address like www.websitebuilder.com/mycheapsite or mycheapsite.websitebuilder.com. Problem is, the longer a company uses such a domain, the more they build up their company's identity under that domain. Any success the site may have in terms of search engine optimization or gaining external links to their site will be completely lost when they finally get their own domain name. Any and every business needs to own its domain name. It cost between \$10-\$30 per year to register a domain and usually costs a bit more for website hosting, but it's an essential, long-term, valuable asset.

Using your domain for email. When registering a domain for your business you should also use it for your primary business email address. A business email address, rather than one assigned to you by your internet service provider, reflects on the professionalism of your company. When I get business correspondence from contacts that use old [@aol.com](mailto:), [@netcom.com](mailto:), or [@comcast.net](mailto:) email address, I am tempted to think of them, accurately or not, as a very small, less-professional company.

Competitive design. For the small local business, award winning design is not critical. But professional design, especially as it compares with local competitors, is important. When someone searches in Google maps for "house painters" they get ten initial results. Of these results they will look most carefully at the ones with websites. And because it's the web, they can quickly compare these companies to each other. Those whose site's look best are most likely to get a call.

Important, but Non-Essential, Requirements for Small Business Websites

Owning your domain, a professional email address, and good design compared to your competitors are essential. Another important (though not absolutely essential) feature is content management (the ability to easily add and edit website content). Newfangled stakes its business position on the critical importance of content management. Nevertheless, content management is not absolutely essential for many local small business websites. The only reason I back away from saying content management is essential is that generally, the competition between small local business websites is still very low. A decently-designed, relatively informative static website can suffice for some at this point.

However, a site with content management capability is always extremely beneficial. And for any small local business that wants to complete aggressively, or take their Internet marketing to the next level, then content management becomes essential. Newfangled has a light-weight version of our content management system that we call SelectEdit. It's sometimes a good choice for a small business website that values content management. The cost of designing and building a SelectEdit website hovers around the \$5,000 mark, so it's still in the reach of most small businesses. However, there are also some great blog platforms available that can form the basis of a very effective small business website with content management. Wordpress, Typepad, Movabletype, and Blogger are examples of free/low cost platforms. Just remember to make sure, if you go the blog route, to choose a platform or a price plan that allows you to use your own domain name.

With the rapidly rising usage of online local search engines, local businesses will start to feel the competition heat up pretty quick. Besides, since there is a low bar right now, securing a strong local position online is much easier to attain now than it will be after everyone else jumps into the game. So while content management is not currently absolutely essential, it may soon become so, and it's always to be preferred over a static HTML website.

Building a Content Development Strategy

How a Small Local Businesses Can Take Internet Marketing to the Next Level

Every Internet marketing plan starts with two fundamental building blocks: **content** and **links**.

Internet Marketing 101 is not much more complicated than content and links. Content consists of the pages in your site and the stuff on them. Links, external links that is, make your content more valuable because they both point traffic to your site and they are counted and measured by search engines to determine when your content is more relevant than someone else's in search results.

Therefore, pushing your Internet marketing simply means building up more content and encouraging others to link to it. So, step number one is to define a **content strategy**.

Building Block One: Content

A content development strategy is a plan defining the kind of content you'll regularly add to your site. When establishing this strategy, be realistic about what you can actually do. Can you write a weekly update, a monthly newsletter, a daily blog? Don't bite off more than you can chew. Consistency can be more critical than frequency.

Content can include photographs, company background, case studies, blog posts, testimonials, stories, advice, videos, resources or just about anything else that has some relationship to who you are and what you do. In regard to photos and videos though, keep in mind that photographic and video content require the addition of [words to make them work on the web](#). This is because, at least as far as search engines are concerned, the words on a website have meaning, but pictures and videos are just blank rectangles. So write up descriptions and editorial copy to any photographic or video content, especially if imagery is your primary content strategy.

Whatever kind of content you develop, it must also be compelling. The more interesting, helpful, fun, entertaining, or informative the content, more compelling it will be.

For any service business one of the most important things that should inform your content strategy is the goal of establishing trust. Trust is built not only by demonstrating your competence, but even more importantly by establishing a level of personal confidence. Expertise and confidence are two elements that need to be established before anyone will trust a service to do a good job, whatever the field.

How might a content strategy convey trustworthiness? Trust can be established by being open, honest, helpful and free with information. Here are a few content ideas that are trust oriented. Testimonials Open forums Personal blogs with open commenting Professional blog with open commenting Articles that demonstrate competence and passion for your business Videos

Importance of Link Building

Building Block Two: Links

Content and links are the building blocks of all Internet marketing and they're inter-related. Without content there's nothing to link to, and without links there's less opportunity for content to be found and seen. These two blocks fit together in a complementary way. Good content will find a receptive environment for links, and the more links you get, the more valuable your content becomes. External links to your content not only contribute to direct traffic, but they are also an important factor in how search engines rank your content.

Don't buy links! Don't take shortcuts in link building. There are companies that will offer to provide lots of links to your site for a fee. Search engines look down on this practice and may even punish some sites when they confirm that external links have been purchased. Better to slowly build up links by genuinely asking other website owners and bloggers to link to your site.

Generally speaking, if you've done a good job with the first building block, content, you'll have a fairly easy time asking others to link to it. After all, if the content is indeed helpful, compelling, and relevant to the other website, there is no reason for them not to link to it. If, however, the content is not very compelling, why should they bother? Quality of content will have a direct relationship with the number of links you can get, so always focus on the content first! For example, suppose you're a pet sitter and you post a video showing how to train a dog to fetch a newspaper. Pet oriented Bloggers would usually be happy to either write a blog post about such a video or add a link to the page.

Building Your Own Links: Participating in Online Forums, Social Networks, and Blog Comments

Requesting bloggers to blog about your content can lead to great traffic and strong links. But there are other ways you can build up links. You can add them to other sites yourself. Commenting ***IN AN APPROPRIATE WAY*** on blogs, adding links back to your site within your comments, is perfectly acceptable and welcome, ***as long as it is on topic and adds to the subject of the post.***

I'll give another pet sitter example since I'll be speaking to pet sitters next week and have some examples handy for them. [Dogster](#) and [Catster](#) are two online social forums that welcome community content, interaction, linking and participation. Pet owners ask lots of questions, and if you were a pet sitter that had content that answered some of these questions, posting a comment with a link to your page would be appreciated by the community. Of course there are a rapidly growing number of such social forums and social media sites for just about every area of interest. Finding appropriate venues for linking is not that hard.

The more you participate, the more your traffic will grow and the more external links you'll have.

More Local Search Link Building Opportunities

Another site almost any local business could get listed in is [Yelp](#). Yelp is recommendation engine. People add their comments and rank various local services. You might even be so bold as to ask your satisfied customers to take a few minutes to add a positive comment and rank your profile on Yelp. For a list of other online directories check out Frank Fuchs's [list of local search directories](#).

Here's another idea for building links. These days many of your customers have blogs of their own. Perhaps some of your better customers would be willing to add a blog post with a few kind words about your company. They may be happy to recommend you this way--especially if you ask them!

Online Search Advertising

Since we wrote about online advertising recently in [Online Advertising Redux](#) I won't go into details on how local companies can pursue even more aggressive online marketing. Suffice to say that in the same way that search engine AdWords can be geo-targeted, that is, only displayed when searchers are from the geographic area you assign to your ads, the same holds true for local search ads. As a result, this form of advertising is open for small local businesses to pursue.

Content and Links--simple as that

With every post, every article, every picture and video you create one more opportunity for link building and search engines traffic. The more content, the more opportunity, and the better the impression your site will make on a potential new client.

So, the bread and butter of any internet marketing plan is regularly creating compelling content on your website and building links to the content. What are you waiting for? Go write some compelling content and get it up on your site. When you do let me know, maybe I'll give you a link ;-).