5 SMART STRATEGIES

TO IMPROVE LOCAL SEO AND GROW YOUR BUSINESS ONLINE

BY BRUCE MCDUFFEE AND TRICIA AKINS

MMG Manufacturing Marketing Group

Walker-Stanley COMMUNICATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

What is Local SEO? What's the Difference Between Local SEO and SEO?

SEO, or organic SEO, is the process of optimizing your site so it appears at the top of search engine (Google, Bing, etc.) results when visitors search for terms connected to your business.

Local SEO, on the other hand, is optimizing your online presence for searches that have a local intent such as "coffee shop near me."

So, the main difference between organic SEO and local SEO is whether or not there is a location aspect. The tactics for achieving strong organic and local SEO differ, as well!

Why Local SEO Matters?

Careful attention to local SEO can have a big impact on your business's online visibility. Most notably, companies with strong local SEO efforts typically rank higher in search engine results pages (SERP). This in turn has a huge impact on the number of people who see your business online!

According to Yelp, more than 85% of customers use the internet to find local businesses. In fact, customers consider online reviews that appear in local search results as important than what they hear from word of mouth.

Search Engine Land's recent study looked at the way buying behavior has changed since 2010. One of the key findings was that most people surveyed were just as likely to turn to the internet as they were to ask for personal recommendations to get reliable information about local businesses. For business owners, this is a good indication that now, more than ever, it's essential to have a strong and positive online presence.

What that means for your business is that you need to be competitive in those online searches. More than anything else that means having a compelling local SEO strategy.

How Can Your Business Beat the Competition?

If you own a local business, what if anything, can you do to make sure local customers find your business online when they search for businesses like yours? And, how do you ensure that what they do find puts your business in the best light?

Admittedly, getting your company on top of these searches can be a challenge. Fortunately, however, there are some best practice strategies to help you gain an advantage over your competitors, including the following 5:

OVERVIEW

⚙ 1. On Page SEO

In spite of the complexity of the Google search algorithm, there are still some foundational SEO tactics every website should employ. Surprisingly, many websites still do not employ these basics. Title tags, meta descriptions, H1 tags, images with alt tags, and internal links are all easily added to each web page. Just these basic elements can push your page to the top of the SERP. **Learn more.**

⚙ 2. Citations and Directories

A citation is your core business data on the web. Strong citations can dramatically improve the online visibility and local search engine rankings for your business. **Learn more.**

⚙ 3. Google My Business (GMB)

Google My Business (GMB) is a directory, but it's a critical one. It's a free tool you can use to make sure your business gets substantial exposure across Google, including Google Maps. To make the most of this service, go to google.com/business. Follow the verification steps listed there. Google My Business is a great tool that can help your business information to be prominently featured on the SERP. **Learn more**.
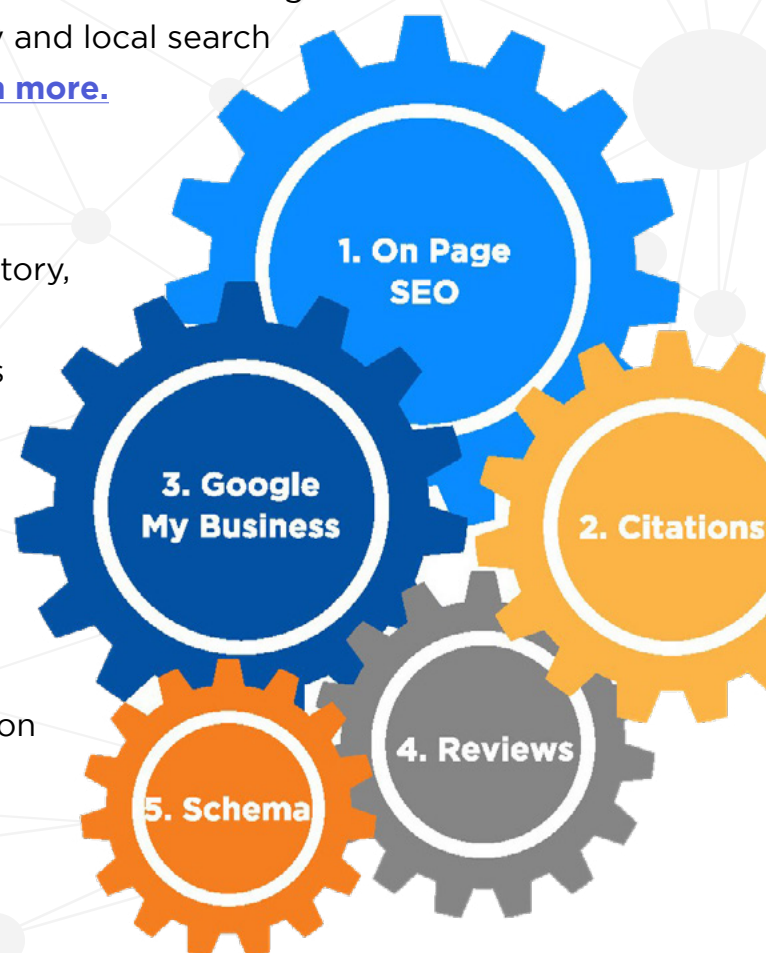
⚙ 4. Online Reviews

Online reviews for your company are important for several reasons. First, your company's online reviews appear in search results. Second, the number and overall score of your company's online reviews play a role in your search results ranking. Generally speaking, more reviews and a higher rating improve your search engine results ranking. And finally, according to one recent survey, about 85% of customers trust online reviews as much as a recommendation from a friend! **Learn more**.

⚙ 5. Schema Markup

Schema markup is a code you can insert into your website that helps search engines give customers relevant information about your business. For example, you can use schema markup to display upcoming events at your business, directly in the search results.

Essentially, schema markup tells search engines not only what content is on a web page, but also what that content means. This way, you can ensure that online searchers see precisely what you want them to see about your business, which will increase engagement and traffic to your website. **Learn more.**

1 ON PAGE SEO

Before you can optimize a page for search engines, you need to choose a keyword (or phrase) for which to build the page. Choosing the right keywords is a science and art which is beyond the scope of this article. There are some excellent online courses at LinkedIn learning, MOZ.com, SEMrush.com, and a few others.

Let's start with on page SEO assuming you have settled on a keyword. For local SEO, you may want to optimize a page for 'handmade donuts in Denver'. There are five basic pieces of on-page SEO that every page should include even before you begin to optimize for local search.

1. Page Title

Every webpage should include a title identified by an HTML title tag. The SERP results include the title as a clickable headline that leads back to your webpage. The title is important for SEO, social sharing, and general usability. The title should include your keyword. Check out this MOZ page for more details about the page title.

2. Meta Description

The meta description provides a summary of the webpage content and should also include your keyword. You want your meta description to be less than 160 characters. Although meta descriptions do not affect Google ranking, a well-written description can incent someone to click on your page as presented in the SERP. Check out this MOZ page for more information about meta descriptions.

3. H1 Tags

H1 is an HTML code for Heading 1. Google ranking does take into account the words enclosed by H1 tags. Including your keyword within an H1 tag can help your page rank higher.

4. Images and alt text

Every image on your web page should include alternative text or alt text. Alt text is a description of the image which should include your keyword if it is relevant to the image. To go back to our 'handmade donuts in Denver' keyword phrase, if you included a picture of a baker making donuts, it would be good on-page SEO to include the alt text to match the keyword. Not only does alt text help with on-page SEO, but it also is important for web accessibility, especially for visually impaired users.

5. Content

Most of us have given up trying to write content for high SERP page results. Google's mission is to make search results as useful as possible for the searcher. When you write the content for a page, it is best to focus on writing the content for the page visitor. Write the content so it is aligned with your keyword and useful for the reader.

Choose the words you use in your meta tags carefully to ensure they put your business in the best light as compared to your closest competitors. Your title and description should accurately describe what your business does, and they should be unique and compelling. These two simple activities will increase traffic to your website. Make sure every word counts and no space is wasted. To help reach local customers, be sure to include your business location and the geographical areas you serve.

2 LOCAL CITATIONS EXPLAINED

Citations are very important to the online visibility of local businesses because they help the search engines find your business.

A citation is used to describe your primary business data on the web. Strong citations can dramatically improve the online visibility and local SERP for your business. When your business data appears correctly and consistently across the web, your SERP, reputation, and revenue are positively impacted. The opposite is true when your business information is not consistent on the web.

Your local business citation consists of your company name, address, and phone number (NAP). Your citation can also include:

- Business hours
- Directions to your business
- Your business description
- Images and videos
- Payment forms you accept
- Your online reviews
- Links to your social media pages

Managing Your Business Listings Matters. A lot.

Local businesses need to manage their citations to ensure they are consistent and accurate. Inconsistent results confuse the search engines, not to mention potential customers, and this negatively impacts how your company shows up in search results.

How does this happen? Well, your local business citation appears all over the web thanks in part to data aggregators like Acxiom, Localeze/Neustar, Factual and Infogroup.

Take a look at this diagram to understand how your business contact data is collected and distributed across the web.

The Local Search Ecosystem (United States)
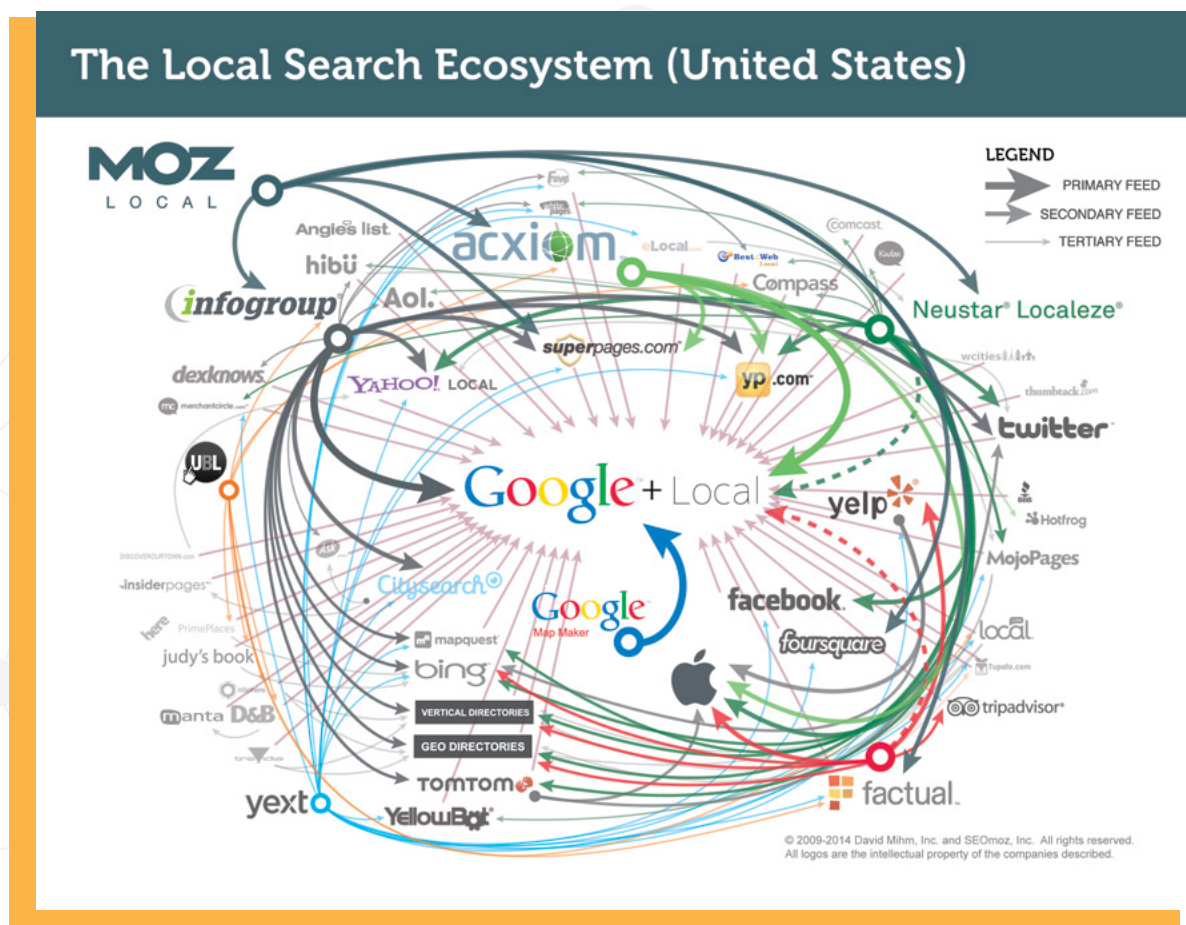
These sites gather and distribute your business info across the web supplementing what you might be manually adding. These manual additions happen when you create a business Facebook page or a Google My Business account, and the like.

And often company pages are created for you without your knowledge or consent. If you've ever Google'd your business and find your business listed on a site like, say Yelp, that includes a "claim your listing" or "Is this your business?" That's what's happening here.

Do Local Citations Rreally Matter?

Local citations play a big role in the online visibility of local businesses in a couple of ways:

1. Local citations help customers find your business.

If your business information is inconsistent or inaccurate, customers could easily get confused and view your business as being poorly managed. Think of a scenario where search engine results deliver old addresses, broken website links, dated product photos, etc. Strong, accurate citations help customers find your local business which leads to new business.

2. Strong citations enhance credibility, thus enhancing your search engine ranking.

Search engines like Google pride themselves on being able to deliver accurate, relevant information on your search. No surprise here, but they collect and analyze a tremendous amount of data on users and businesses to accomplish this goal.

When businesses spend time to build lots of strong, accurate citations on reputable platforms, it builds trust and credibility with the search engines and enhances rankings. When citations are inconsistent or lacking, the opposite is true.

Learn more about their importance in this blog post: Reputation, Rankings, and Revenue: Navigating Local for Non-Technical People.

Do I Have to Actively Manage My Company's Citations Over Time?

No, but you should. Here's why.

Just like all digital marketing, citations fare better when actively managed. If you ignore your citations, over time you may experience:

- Inaccurate citations.
- Duplicate local business listings.
- Inconsistent business name in the event of mergers/acquisitions, rebranding.
- Online reviews that were never addressed.
- Diminished reputation due to inconsistent business data, mismanaged reviews.

Conversely, actively managing citations can help you leverage the power of the internet to attract customers. Actively managing your local business citations:

- Can build trust and credibility with the search engines.
- Enable you to spot and fixed inaccurate data on your business.
- Allow you to permanently close duplicate local business listings.
- If your company moves, re-brands or merges with another business, you can clean up old data much faster.
- Respond to online reviews is a systematic manner.
- Increase control over how your company is listed on the Internet.

Now you see why active citation management should be a focus for your business!

3 GOOGLE MY BUSINESS

Google My Business is the foundation for your local SEO efforts.

Google My Business (GMB) is a Google tool that uses the information you provide about your business to display relevant information for local searches. This is the first step to optimizing your business for local SEO.

For example, if you search for "pizza near me" or just "pizza," Google will automatically use information available based on your IP location or any localized terms in the search to find you the best answer based on your location. Google is all about providing you with the best result for your search and using localized information, when appropriate, will give you what you want and need. The Google algorithm is set up to determine if your search is about a local, regional, or global result. Pizza will be determined to be a local result. If, for example, you searched for "how to make a pepperoni pizza" location probably doesn't matter.

To optimize your position in your local SERP, you have some work to do (like all SEO) to make sure your business shows up. Let's go back to the search for pizza. If you were to search from your current location for pizza, you'd get a couple of different results.

First, you'll see a local 3 pack which looks like this:
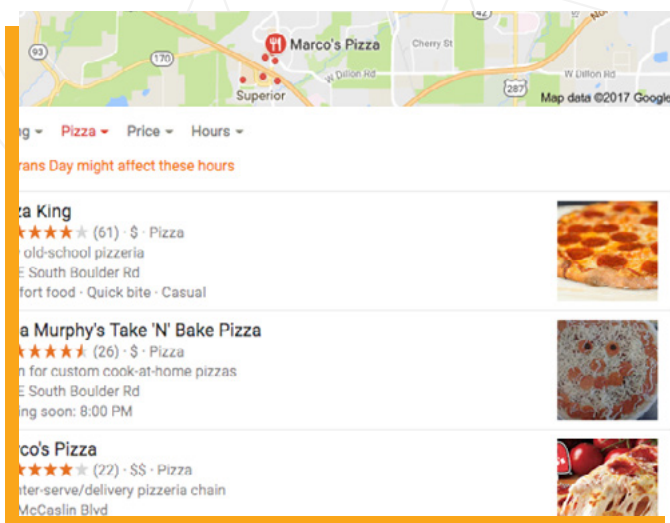
"Google is all about providing you with the best result for your search and using localized information…"
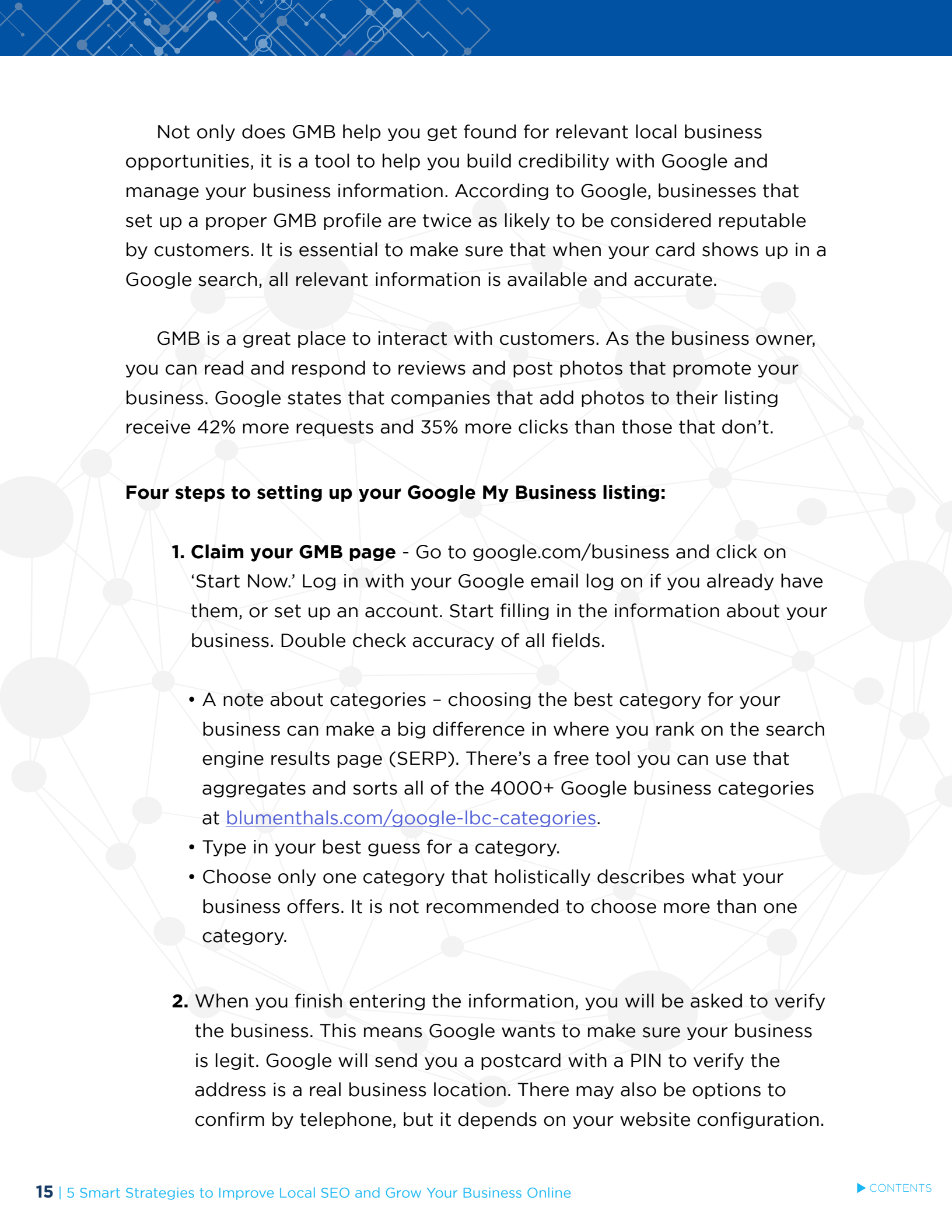
Whether you show up or not in the 3 pack depends on how well you set up local SEO on your website.

If you click on one of the three top results, you'll get more specific information, called a card, about that pizza shop such as a summary, address, hours open, links to the menu, phone number and even a graph about how busy they are at certain hours of the day. The result may also include customer reviews. A majority of this information is pulled from the information you added to your Google My Business profile and other structured content, like schema embedded in your website.

Example of a business card:
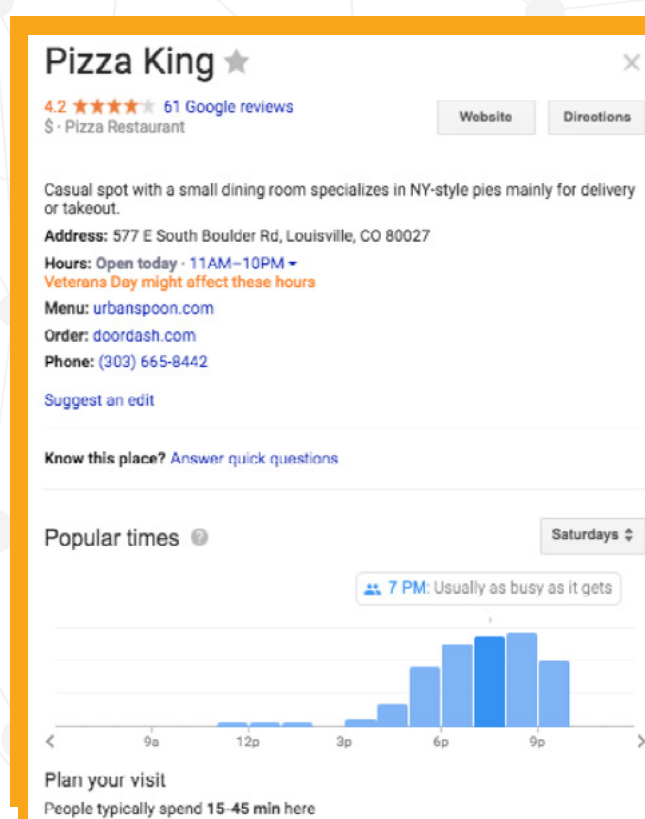
"Google states that companies that add photos to their listing receive 42% more requests and 35% more clicks than those that don't."
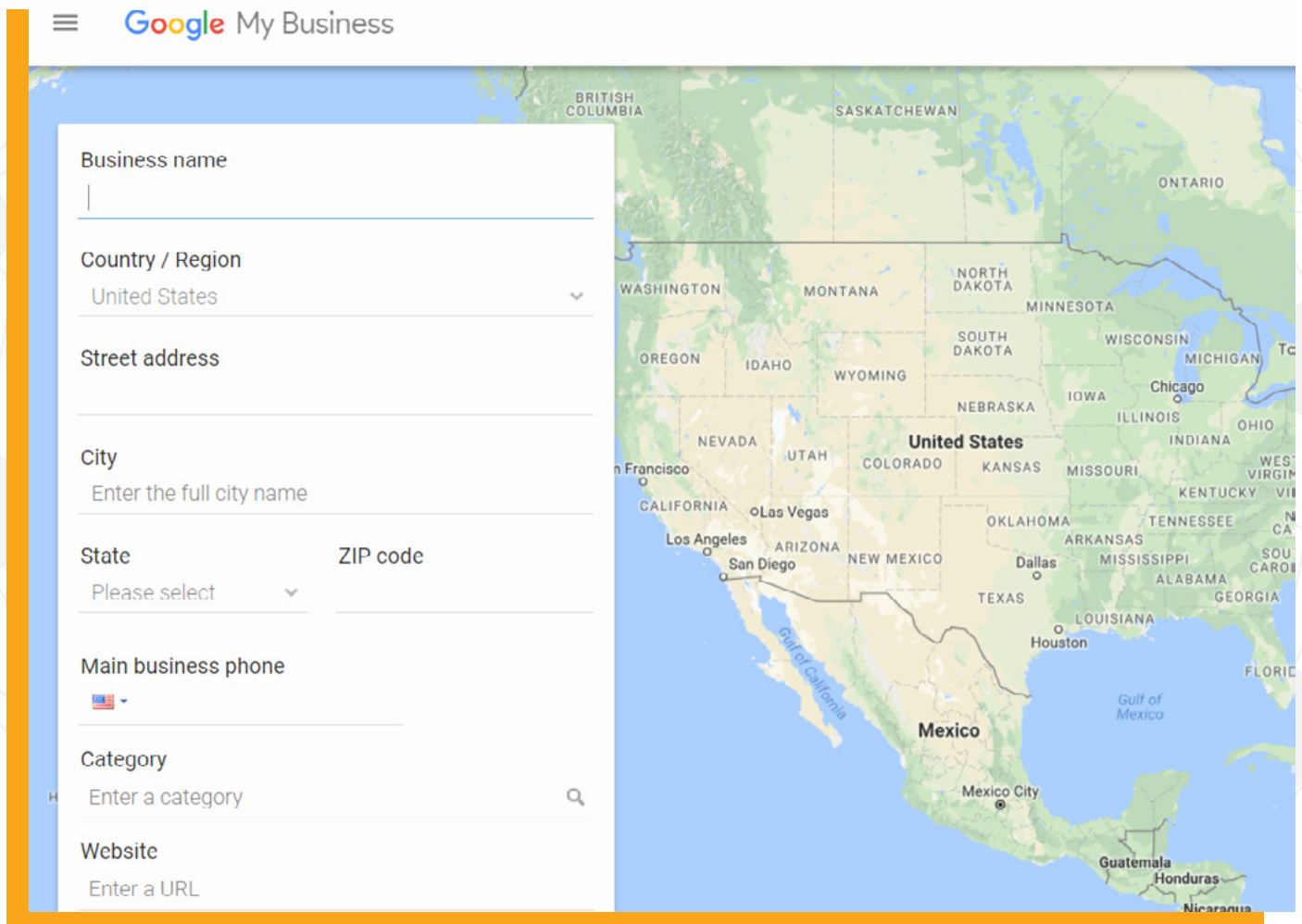
Not only does GMB help you get found for relevant local business opportunities, it is a tool to help you build credibility with Google and manage your business information. According to Google, businesses that set up a proper GMB profile are twice as likely to be considered reputable by customers. It is essential to make sure that when your card shows up in a Google search, all relevant information is available and accurate.

GMB is a great place to interact with customers. As the business owner, you can read and respond to reviews and post photos that promote your business. Google states that companies that add photos to their listing receive 42% more requests and 35% more clicks than those that don't.

Four steps to setting up your Google My Business listing:

1. **Claim your GMB page** - Go to google.com/business and click on 'Start Now.' Log in with your Google email log on if you already have them, or set up an account. Start filling in the information about your business. Double check accuracy of all fields.

   • A note about categories – choosing the best category for your business can make a big difference in where you rank on the search engine results page (SERP). There's a free tool you can use that aggregates and sorts all of the 4000+ Google business categories at blumenthals.com/google-lbc-categories.
   • Type in your best guess for a category.
   • Choose only one category that holistically describes what your business offers. It is not recommended to choose more than one category.

2. When you finish entering the information, you will be asked to verify the business. This means Google wants to make sure your business is legit. Google will send you a postcard with a PIN to verify the address is a real business location. There may also be options to confirm by telephone, but it depends on your website configuration.

3. To enhance your listing, make sure to include additional information such as business hours and upload a few photos that represent your business.

4. If you have an active Google AdWords campaign, you can also connect your business listing to your ads.

4 THE IMPORTANCE OF ONLINE REVIEWS TO YOUR LOCAL SEO

Online reviews are increasingly important for local SEO as they influence your search engine ranking, especially for local customers. Search engines acknowledge that customers are looking for reviews, particularly positive ones, and they reward the businesses that build them with better search engine ranking. Lastly, online reviews build credibility with the search engines which also influences your search engine ranking.

Digitally Attract More Customers

Online reviews are also important for influencing customers. According to Inc. magazine, "84 percent trust online reviews as much as a personal recommendation." And according to Marketing Land, "an overwhelming 90 percent of respondents who recalled reading online reviews claimed that positive online reviews influenced buying decisions."

How to Get More Reviews for Your Business

Generating online reviews is an ongoing process. Like the content you regularly post on your website, reviews need to be fresh! Search engines reward new content, while searchers are interested in what your business is

doing now, not in what you were able to offer your customers a month ago.

Best Practices for Convincing Your Customers to Leave a Review

These best practices for generating online reviews will help you convince your customers to generate the content you need.

1. **Add reviews to your website.** Reviews on your website are among the easiest to collect — after all, your customers are already there! Make sure there's a dedicated place on your website for submitting and reading reviews by satisfied customers.

2. **Address ALL reviews - even the negative ones.** Customers aren't just out to see what others think of you. They also want to know how you handle problems as they arise. Do you contact customers who have issued negative reviews to try to make it right? Is your business going the extra mile for customer satisfaction? And, have you taken the time to acknowledge good reviews?

Madeline Marva
14 reviews

★☆☆☆☆ 6 months ago

The agent who was supposed to show me a house never showed up. Had to call the office to find out she wasn't coming, and was told she would send me a copy of her schedule so we could do it another time...which she never did. So I emailed her asking when we could reschedule and she told me they had already approved someone's application. Unprofessional, rude, not a good way to run a business.

👍 1

Response from the owner 5 months ago

Madeline, we understand your frustration! Yes, you should have been called as soon as we realized our rep was not able to meet you. (She got a flat tire en route.) Please accept our sincere apologies! We've taken this to heart and are formalizing the communication process so this does not happen again. Additionally, a partial application was submitted on the property prior to your call. Our clients, the property owners, expect us to show a vacant rental until it is rented. Showing rentals until there is a fully approved and completed lease is also an industry practice, and we completely understand why this seems unfair from your side. We hope you'll consider another ▮▮▮▮▮▮ rental property in the future!

3. Own review sites. Make sure that you claim your business profiles on Yelp, Google, and Facebook, to name a few. Check to be sure that your website and contact information are correct.

4. Ask for reviews. Customers may not be aware of the importance of online reviews to your business—and in many cases, customers are naturally more likely to submit a review when they're dissatisfied than when they're happy with the service they've received. Make sure your customers know that you need those reviews, including:

- Creating an email campaign with requests for reviews, including links to your personal review site or the sites you'd like customers to use.
- Encouraging users to generate blog post reviews. This offers them exposure and increases your review library at the same time.
- Including links to review sites in your regular communications with your customers and linking them from your website.

> According to Inc. magazine, "84 percent trust online reviews as much as a personal recommendation."

Of course, the best key to creating great online reviews is making sure that your customers are satisfied. Satisfied customers post great reviews of your business, which in turn helps improve your search engine ranking and increase your click-through rate. Dissatisfied customers, on the other hand, are unwilling to take the time to generate a review for your business — or if they do, it's a negative one.
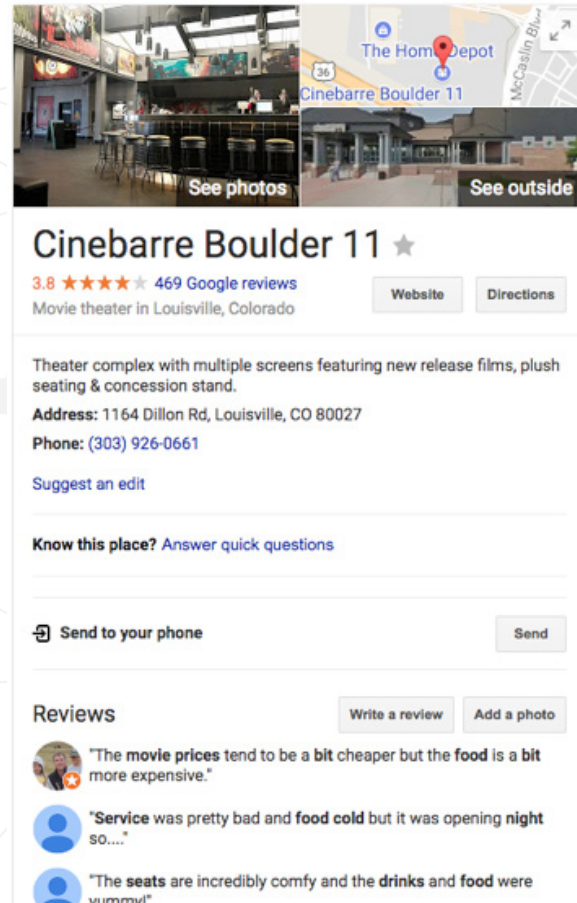
5 SCHEMA

Schema is another word for structured data. Structured data is a standard format code on a web page that provides precise information about the page content to the Google searchbot. The most important aspect of schema is that it enables Google to show unique search result features and enrichment. When you search for "local movies," the information that shows up about the local showplace such as show times, reviews, and more is the result and more is a result of structured data.

Learn more about the schema structured data markup at schema.org. Some commonly used schema to help your business get found and displayed in local search results include:

- Creative work: books, movies, music, recipes, and TV series
- Events
- Organization information
- Personal information
- Place, local business, restaurants
- Product
- Review

Writing Schema for your website is a language all its own. If you are technically oriented or an HTML programmer, you can probably write it on your own. Consider seeking professional help if you're unsure. Check out this MOZ page for more information about Schema.org structured data.

Here is another example of a search engine results based on schema markup for IBM.
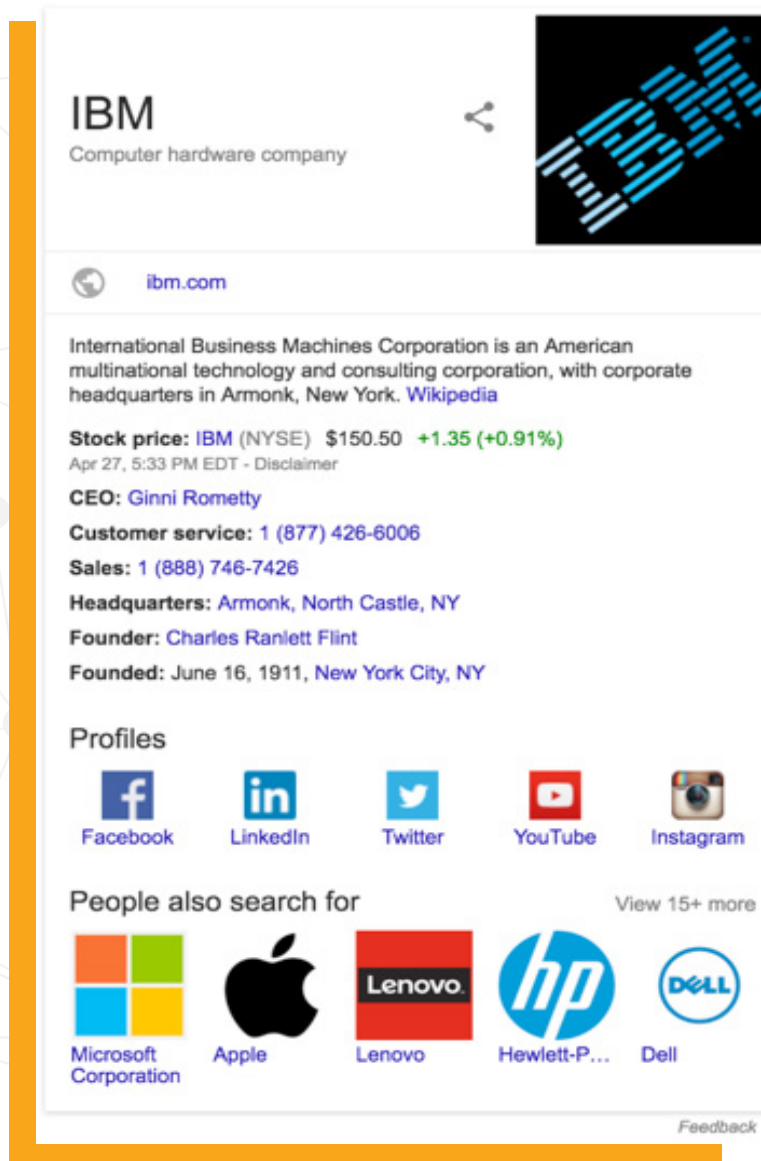
SUMMARY

Most of us start any purchasing process with a Google search. If your business relies upon or could benefit from local traffic, building a robust local SEO website is imperative. Start with making sure your site has SEO fundamentals such as meta descriptions, title tags, and H1 tags in place. Next, create or claim your Google My Business listing. You'll probably need to hire a professional to set up a robust schema that is relevant to your type of business. Make sure your citations are correct and consistent. Last, but not least, ask for positive reviews.

If you complete all of these tasks, your business will be prominently displayed on the first page of search engine results and you'll get more local awareness, more traffic, and more sales.

Local SEO is more important than ever to improve your business's search engine rankings and give local customers information that puts your company in the best light possible. If getting local SEO sounds a little complicated, well, that's because it is. Your best bet is to partner with an experienced marketing agency with deep experience in online marketing strategy and implementation.

ABOUT

BRUCE MCDUFFEE

Bruce McDuffee has been on the ground in manufacturing marketing and sales for the past 20 years. He is the author of 'The New Way to Market for Manufacturing.' His mission is to help manufacturers advance their go-to-market practice for higher growth and bigger profit. Bruce is a former US Navy officer, Civil Engineer and has an MBA in Marketing and International Management from Northeastern University.

BRUCE CAN BE REACHED VIA:
Bruce@mmmatters.com | +1-303-953-4361 | www.mmmatters.com

TRICIA AKINS

With over 20 years of corporate marketing and communications experience, Tricia Akins founded Walker-Stanley Communications in 2011. Walker-Stanley Communications specializes in helping companies generate leads through an integrated approach that leverages the essential traditional and internet marketing activities required for growth. Clients are typically growing, small to mid-sized businesses that do not have the time or internal resources needed to update existing or develop new marketing initiatives. They are seeking an experienced, professional partner that can ramp up quickly and deliver results. Walker-Stanley Communications "gets it", and is here to help!

TRICIA CAN BE REACHED VIA:
TriciaAkins@walkerstaney.com | P: +1-720-218-0370 | www.walkerstanley.com