



What's All the Fuss with Local Search Anyway?

By Brian Wool, vice president of content distribution, Localeze

After contributing nearly 30 local search-related columns for ClickZ, I still hear, rather frequently, among my peers in the advertising, marketing and interactive space – Why does local search get so much attention?...or...Isn't the concept of local search fairly straightforward? Let's take a step back, shall we...

The U.S. consumer demands instant gratification—it's the leading reason why people continue to shop in local stores after researching products online. Consumers don't and can't wait 10 days to try out their new flat panel TV or sweater. And, people want to see and touch the product before making a purchase.

According to a Jupiter Research study, online sales will reach stable levels of penetration in 14 of 23 product categories over the next five years. While this may not be great news for Internet-only retailers, the expected plateau could prove advantageous for retailers with both online and offline channels. And, the amount of online consumer research continues to grow, as online purchases begin to stabilize. Jupiter Research indicates that 86 percent of online shoppers say they research their offline purchases online.

As consumer preferences change from traditional to new media, sites such as ShopLocal are augmenting the Sunday circular and are at the intersection of enabling advertisers to take advantage of this sea change. For traditional retailers to remain relevant in an environment where product selection is increasingly driven by online research, it will be critical for them to focus more resources on the online local search marketplace.

Online consumer research can be leveraged to the benefit of retailers, *if* done correctly. So how can you insert your business into the process? Having a website is a great start but it doesn't end there. How do you get your website, products and services found by consumers looking for the products you sell? Here are a few tips for becoming competitive in a retail market driven by local search:

Ensure your footprint of local stores is listed with all the major search engines and Internet Yellow Pages sites.

This is critical step No. 1 in the process. Then, make sure the search engines and IYPs are also linking your Web site to all local listings. Otherwise, your website will do very little to help you drive visibility to your business. And, if no one can find you....

Effectively compete with all the other local listings in your category.

So how do you achieve a higher ranking? There is no silver bullet; however, you can take specific steps to increase your viability among other local businesses in your geographical area. As content is king in the online world, make sure the search engines and IYPs have a well rounded profile of your business location. Content should include hours of operation, credit cards accepted, etc. All products/services that are highlighted on your website should be emphasized in the local listings as well. These are referred to as “business profiles.”

Make certain your website is associated with your local listing.

The negative impact of not having a website and complementary content within your listing can now be seen within Google more than ever, as Google has introduced 10 local listings with abbreviated content on each results page. When you click on one of these local listings, the link takes you to either Google Maps or the website associated with the listing. So needless to say, it’s key to achieve visibility within the first 10 listings at Google and within the first three at Yahoo and MSN. Time and time again, I see an incorrect website listed with a business; I liken it to generating phone calls for one of your competitors or leaving your phone off the hook.

Submit your listing to a distribution broader than the three major search engines.

Be careful not to get caught in the trap of only submitting your listings and product information to the three major search engines. Online consumer researchers visit a myriad of local reference sites so it is critical to list your business in all of them. In doing a search for dishwashers in Washington, DC, the information presented around the local results—in many cases—comes from various local sites. For example, at MSN you will see reference sites such as Judysbook and Yelp.

Bottom-line: Local Search may seem simplistic, but if your local business, products and/or services aren’t being found, your competition is winning.