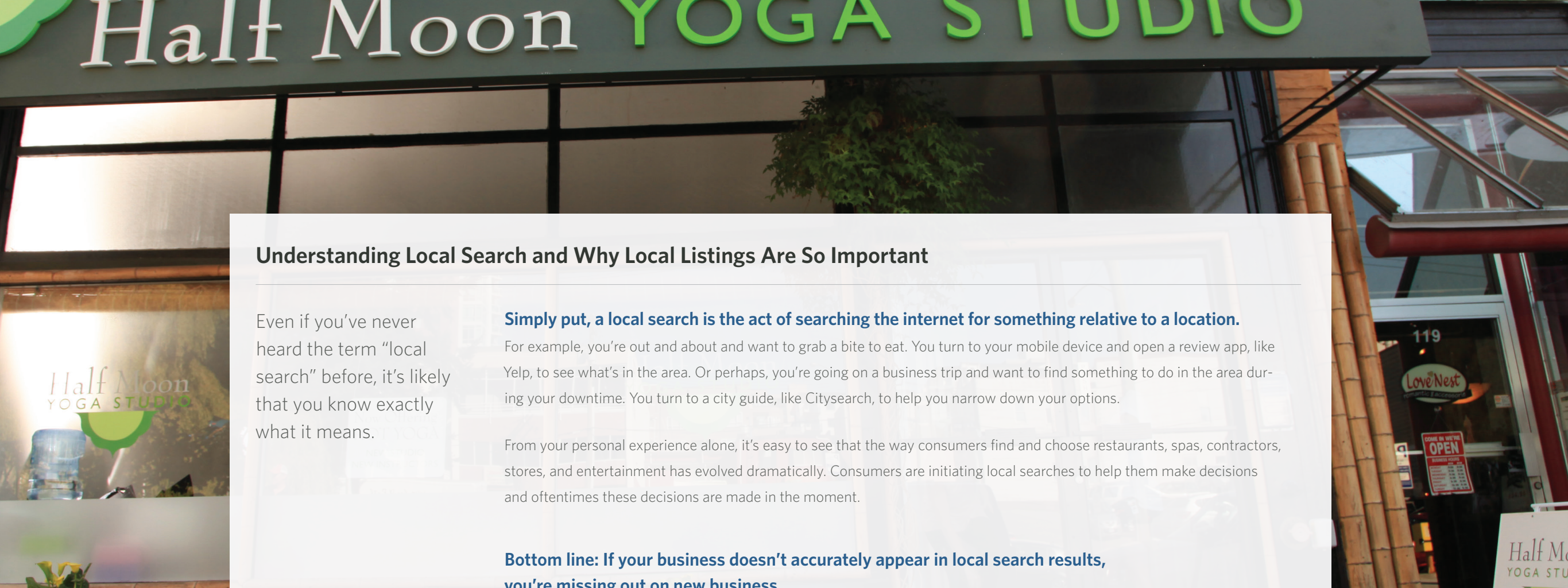# The Mechanics of Local Listings

How Small Businesses Can Take Control and Reach New Customers

Understanding Local Search and Why Local Listings Are So Important

Even if you've never heard the term "local search" before, it's likely that you know exactly what it means.

Simply put, a local search is the act of searching the internet for something relative to a location.

For example, you're out and about and want to grab a bite to eat. You turn to your mobile device and open a review app, like Yelp, to see what's in the area. Or perhaps, you're going on a business trip and want to find something to do in the area during your downtime. You turn to a city guide, like Citysearch, to help you narrow down your options.

From your personal experience alone, it's easy to see that the way consumers find and choose restaurants, spas, contractors, stores, and entertainment has evolved dramatically. Consumers are initiating local searches to help them make decisions and oftentimes these decisions are made in the moment.

Bottom line: If your business doesn't accurately appear in local search results, you're missing out on new business.

Ensuring that your business appears in local search results is a crucial task. Not only do you want your business listed, you also want your business information to be accurate across all the places consumers are searching.

This guide is designed to help you understand the mechanics of local listings so you can answer the following questions:

> **How are consumers finding listings through local search?**

> **Where does local listing information come from?**

> **How can I make sure my business has a quality local search presence?**

Let's get started!

How are Consumers Finding Listings through Local Search?

Consumers typically come across local listings in one of three ways:

1. When searching for a specific local business:

This type of search occurs when a consumer is looking for information related to a specific business (ex: address, phone number, web address, hours of operation, menus, products, services, or directions). Since this type of search begins with a specific query about a business, it's important that accurate listings surface to help the consumer find the information they need so they can take a desired action.

2. When browsing via local search:

This type of search happens when the consumer is looking for information to help them select a business, think "Burgers in Boston." What's important here is that the secondary information in your listings is properly categorized and includes relevant keywords for search engines.

3. When exposed contextually:

In this scenario, the consumer may not be searching for a business at all. Instead, their search is tailored to a particular subject. For example, they might be reading online news, participating in an online discussion, or looking at a map when a local listing shows up alongside or within the content they're reading. The local listing is based on the context of the consumer's activity, so if they're reading an article about how to plan a birthday party, they may see listings for local caterers or banquet halls.

The local search results that a consumer sees also fall into three categories:

1. Organic business listings:

These listings are managed by publishers and derived from a variety of sources. When displayed within search results, they show basic information such as the name of the business, address, and phone number.

2. Sponsored business listings:

These listings are similar to organic listings, but are offered by the publisher to the business for a fee. These sponsored listings appear in results when specific search criteria are used. The results are labeled as "sponsored" or "advertisement" so the consumer can distinguish them from the organic results.

3. Local organic search results:

These search results are displayed below listings and are links to content such as a business's website, specific articles about the business, and other information about the business, related to the search terms.

How are Consumers Finding Listings through Local Search? (cont.)

Consumers are conducting these local searches via multiple sources on both desktop and mobile devices.

Search engines:

These results generally come up in a list, and include both organic and paid results. Sometimes search engine results also contain profile pages that have more information about the business.

Mapping services:

These results are shown on a map, and display listing information when clicked. Mapping services can show up in search engine results, in stand-alone apps, or in GPS devices. The results also make it easy for the consumer to get directions from their current location.

Internet yellow pages:

These are online versions of the traditionally printed business directories. These directories often include maps, business profiles, and product information. The listings include both paid and organic results.

Local and vertical-specific directories:

These directories contain similar information, but are more focused on specific categories such as industry, profession, medical, hotels, or local neighborhood.

Social media:

These websites and their companion mobile apps allow consumers to discover businesses based on reviews, check-ins, and the people they're connected with. Information from these social sites is often integrated with other local search publishers.

Mobile apps:

These applications are designed specifically for mobile devices. They are particularly important because they reach the on-the-go consumer when their purchase intent is incredibly high.

Now that you understand the intent with which consumers find local listings, the types of results they're exposed to, and where consumers go to conduct local searches, you may be wondering, "Where does all this business listing information come from?" Let's take a look.

Where Does Local Listing Information Come From?

Publishers build their databases from a variety of sources. Each publisher also has their own methods for gathering and validating data. Data is often generated from the following six sources:

1. Consumers:

Some websites or applications allow members of the general public to add information about a business, regardless of whether or not they're affiliated with the business. This is what you would call consumer-generated content.

2. Business direct claims/submissions:

This is when someone directly affiliated with the business provides information to publishers. NOTE: This manual process varies by publisher.

3. Listing management services:

These services help small businesses manage their listings across multiple publishers from a single location.

4. Data aggregators:

This is a source that compiles business listing information from multiple sources such as public records, surveys, utilities, merchants, agencies, and web-mining efforts. Data aggregators attempt to clean the information, normalize it, and license it directly to publishers.

5. Vertical-specific providers:

This source gathers and sells category-specific business information to others. There are some situations where businesses may need to pay to be included.

6. Scraped data:

Some publishers extract business information from websites and public data.

Since there are multiple sources providing publishers with information, it's understandable if you feel confused about how to manage your business listings in order to ensure that your information is accurate. So let's take a look at what you should do.

How Can You Make Sure Your Business has a Quality Local Search Presence?

A quality local search presence starts with taking control over your business listings. Here are the key actions you should take to make sure you have a cohesive presence across local search sites and apps.

☐ **Optimize your website with location information.**

Make sure your business website has accurate information for each of your locations. This information should be highly visible on your website and tagged appropriately so search engines and other data sources can robotically find the correct information.

☐ **Gather information you may be asked to provide across local search sites and apps.**

This information varies by publisher. Here's a look at the main types of data you'll want to compile for submission.

Business name, address, phone: Make sure you enter this information exactly the same way across all sites to avoid duplicate entries (e.g. don't submit Joe's Towing to one site and Joe's Towing, Inc. on another). This can cause a less than optimal experience for consumers.

Service area: If you have a business that doesn't publish a physical street address, you'll want to include your service area.

Business category: Select relevant business categories as these are the keywords consumers use to locate a specific business, product, or service. For example, restaurant, pizza, subs, take-out food, delivery.

Business description: Provide a concise description of your business that includes the city and state you service.

Keywords: Use keywords whenever possible so that local consumers can find the information they need. This provides a positive experience for the consumer.

Enrich the listing: Add your website address, Facebook Page, Twitter handle, hours of operation, menus, services, products sold, payment options, business logo, email address, photos, videos, coupons, directions, and all other information the consumer may be looking for.

How Can You Make Sure Your Business has a Quality Local Search Presence? (cont.)

☐ **Provide location information to a data aggregator.**

Data aggregators provide listing data on a large scale.

☐ **Use a listing management service provider.**

A listing management service provider allows you to keep your information accurate and optimized from a central location, rather than having to manually update it with every publisher individually.

☐ **Create profiles with vertical-specific providers.**

If appropriate, this allows you to gain exposure with highly-specialized publishers.

☐ **Engage with consumers on social media.**

Social media has an effect on search rankings. Sites like Facebook are also becoming a source for local searches. Encourage consumer check-ins and reviews to influence opinions and increase social visibility for your business.

☐ **Claim your listings.**

When you claim your listings, it has a positive effect on your search engine rankings, and allows you to maintain control over the accuracy of the information in the listings.

☐ **Buy sponsored listings.**

This tactic is worth testing, as it can improve your business's visibility by showing up at the top of search results.

When you implement the tactics above, you'll put your business in the best possible position to take advantage of local listings and local search to reach new customers.

As you can see, the world of local listings and local search can often feel overwhelming and difficult to navigate. The key is staying on top of your listings to make sure consumers can find the information they need to take their desired actions. When you show up in local search results, it's likely you'll find that new business is always headed your way.

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