



OPTIMISING FOR LOCATION BASED SEARCH



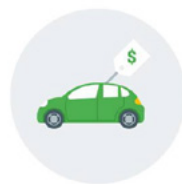
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INTRODUCTION

Local search has changed somewhat over the last few years, to the point where we can safely refer to it as location based rather than local – with a growth of 500% in ‘near me’ searches between the six month periods of July to December 2015 and July to December 2017. Where, previously, searchers may have simply been researching the local area, the purchase intent and immediacy of these location based searches has been increasing almost exponentially as mobile technology has influenced the search industry.

GROWTH IN SPECIFIC ‘NEAR ME’ SEARCHES

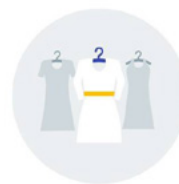


↑ 200% +

growth in **car-dealer related** searches “near me”.

Examples:

- “car dealerships near me”
- “used car dealerships near me”
- “[brand] dealership near me”



↑ 600% +

growth in mobile searches for **dress-related** “near me”.

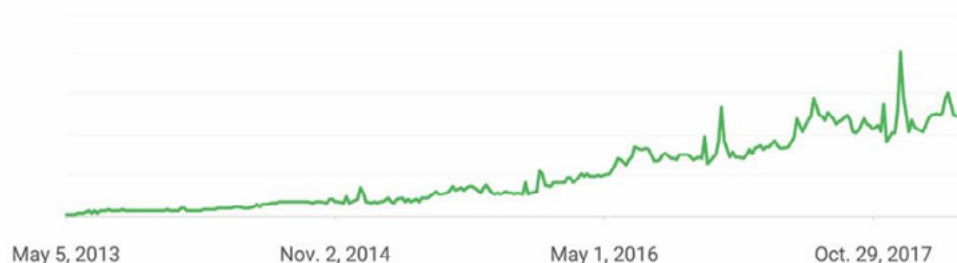
Examples:

- “homecoming dresses near me”
- “wedding dresses near me”
- “evening dresses near me”

Source: Google

This is combined with an increase in timed searches as people look for goods and services on the go.

Growth in “near me now” searches

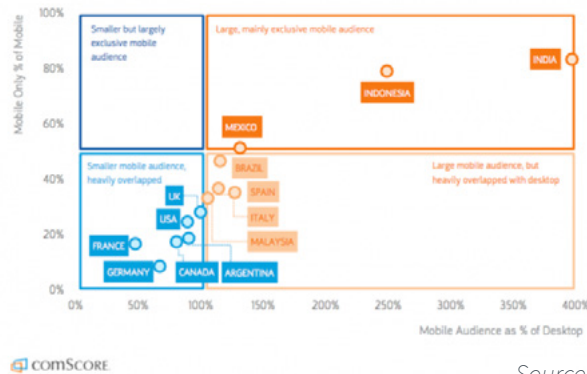


Source: Google

In an increasingly mobile-centric world, with search moving ever away from the desktop and on to the handheld device, with the second phase of the Mobile First index rolling out and with the growing sophistication in voice search technology, the need to implement specific measures that cater to this new (and increasingly local focused) user has never been more important.

While the search industry has a habit of overplaying or over-extrapolating from trends, the world – especially developing nations – is increasingly reliant on its mobile devices.

'Mobile-Firstness' of Markets' Total Digital Populations



Source: Comscore

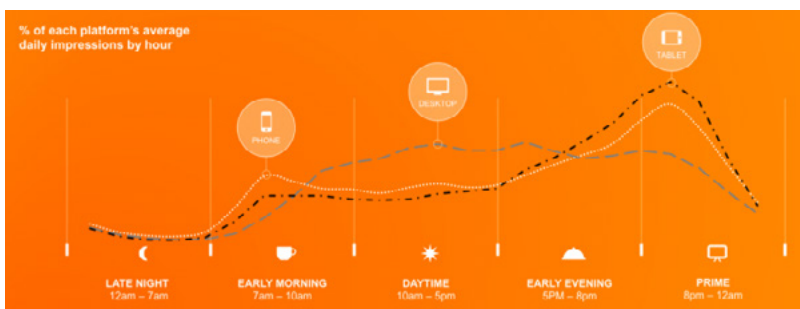
The argument against mobile has always tended to be that the conversion rate of mobile devices is significantly lower than that of desktop.

Conversion Rate	Q4 2016	Q1 2017	Q2 2017	Q3 2017	Q4 2017
Global	3.23%	2.88%	2.96%	2.89%	3.26%
US	3.01%	2.69%	2.72%	2.65%	3.08%
GB	4.38%	4.00%	4.29%	4.20%	4.26%

Conversion Rate by Device	Q4 2016	Q1 2017	Q2 2017	Q3 2017	Q4 2017
Traditional	4.62%	4.17%	4.24%	4.30%	4.68%
Smartphone	1.65%	1.54%	1.69%	1.68%	2.03%
Other	0.42%	0.35%	0.35%	0.34%	0.39%
Tablet	3.90%	3.38%	3.76%	3.75%	4.19%

Source: Comscore

While the mobile and tablet conversion rates are still behind desktop, however, the case for mobile relies on a number of things – from the need to cater to a consumer journey that features multiple devices to the popularity of various devices throughout the day.



Source: Google

Brands need to take in to account, however, the fact that – in addition to traditional eCommerce activity – mobile is also, according to Google, responsible for between 30% and 50% of all local intent searches; and there has been enormous growth in 'near me' searches that carry a purchase intent modifier such as 'can I buy' and 'to buy'.

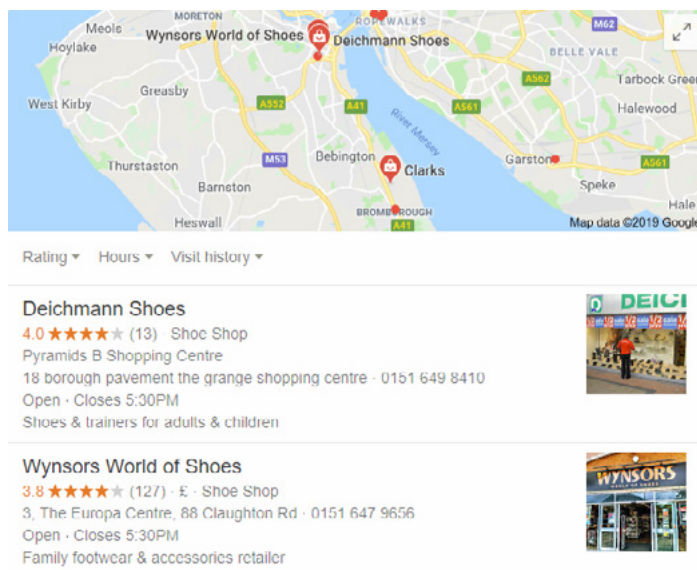
We've made the case for implementing mobile strategies elsewhere (you can find a boxset of resources we put together at the time of the first mobile first index roll out [here](#)), so we're going to focus specifically, in this eBook, on the reasons for and the methods of implementing a strategy that specifically aims to address the local side of mobile SEO.

WHAT IS LOCATION BASED SEARCH?

Put simply, location based search is any search conducted which contains a location modifier – such as ‘shoes in Chester’ or, more and more often ‘shoes near me’ where the [near me] relies upon the geolocation of the searcher to set the parameters for the area involved. What differentiates these from what has come to be known as local search is simply that they no longer rely on where people live, but – thanks to mobile – instead it is about where people are.

While, in the early days of search, local searches may have been research based – an area specific prospecting that looked for, for example ‘kitchen showrooms in Liverpool’ or a search for directions to a particular street or place – the modern local search is increasingly immediate and high purchase intent.

For the above ‘shoes near me’ query, you are now presented with a local pack rich result that displays not only location, but opening hours, contact details and an overview of stock.



These come prior to the traditional organic blue links, catering to the perceived immediacy of the search. I'm no longer looking for a place, but indicating a desired purchase. As stated in the introduction, these location based searches are expanding to include a host of queries such as 'open now' as well as 'near me today/tonight'.

As Googler Lisa Gevelber put it in the previously linked to article:

“It's clear that expectations for finding exactly what people want, exactly when they want it, are growing.”

A BRIEF HISTORY OF LOCAL SEARCH

Local search, while theoretically a subset of search in general, has been the focus of a number of specific Google algorithm updates designed to improve the relevance and usefulness of geographically linked searches. The following is a list of those updates and changes that have had a direct influence on local search.



GOOGLE LOCAL – 2005

Following the release of what would become Google My Business (then Local Business Center), Google merged the service with Google Maps, allowing users to see more relevant business information in search, from directions to opening hours and telephone numbers.



GOOGLE PLACES – 2010

Local Business Center underwent a name change and an update to functionality – becoming Google Places, and offering geolocation tags, image and advertising features to the local search offering.



VENICE UPDATE – 2012

Venice was the first real algorithm update to specifically change search results on a local level – with the generic national SERP being tailored to smaller citywide areas with local businesses able to rank better within their geographic location just through their presence in the area.



HUMMINGBIRD UPDATE – 2013

Hummingbird, while not a specific local search update, did augment the search engine's semantic search performance which, in turn, increased the performance and importance of long tail keywords –something invaluable to local search.



PIGEON UPDATE – 2014

While not a direct roll back of the Venice update, Pigeon did scale back some of the big gains possible through simple location, instead reinforcing the relationship of local search to the multitudinous ranking signals of generic search.



RANKBRAIN – 2015

As with Hummingbird, it is the increased ability to 'read' that makes the introduction of RankBrain important to localised search as local brands and businesses were better able to rank for natural language and long tail keywords.



POSSUM UPDATE – 2016

Possum was one of the more important updates for local brands in search – implementing changes that used the user's location in addition to their search term to understand what 'local' meant for a given search.

WHY LOCAL IS INCREASINGLY A MATTER FOR MOBILE

More than just a phone (and for some, not even a phone), your mobile device increasingly takes the place of more and more others – it's your camera, your fitness tracker, your map and your assistant. With so many uses, it's hardly surprising that it places such large demands on our attention – and, in addition, why it is the first place we look when we need information on the go.

With a survey titled 'Near Me Shopping Report' by Uberall finding that, as with desktop, 90% of respondents were either likely or very likely to click one of the top three results, it's clear that to succeed in local it's necessary to be on the top of the pile – and that requires addressing the technical and creative needs of mobile users.

According to the same piece of research, smartphone users were searching for the following reasons:

- 63% were conducting product research
- 62% were looking up price comparisons
- 56% were searching for coupons/deals
- 54% were researching opening hours
- 52% were looking up store locations

Even shoppers on the go, it's clear, were using their mobile as a key point of contact with brands and that that interaction will influence their purchase decisions should be apparent. For this reason, local search should be a priority for any brand operating brick and mortar locations, but equally eCommerce sites are able to be present with 'free/next day delivery to [area]' offers that could capitalise on queries late in the buyer's journey.

METHODS OF OPTIMISING FOR LOCAL SEARCH

There is no one way to win at SEO – whether local or general – but there are methods and techniques you can implement to give yourself and your brand the best chance.

CLAIM YOUR FREE SERP REAL ESTATE

GOOGLE MY BUSINESS

What is Google My Business (GMB)?

With a log in/sign-up page that promises to help you ‘Manage’, ‘Connect’ and ‘Understand’, [Google My Business](#) seeks to be a hub for a number of Google’s small business products including (but not limited to) local listing info for maps, Google reviews, ‘Insights’ and the latest addition ‘Website’. The platform (not to be confused with [Google Business Solutions](#)) is a good starting point for any start-up looking to hit the ground running.

What it offers

What Google My Business represents is, essentially, its efforts to offer an alternative to the ease and speed of market access provided by Facebook and Amazon.

Website

By allowing brands to enter the marketplace using a simple site customisation tool ([or ‘complement \[their\] existing website’](#)) through Google, they are able to offer a similarly low bar to business owners without the budget or skill to design and build a site while exceeding the competition in terms of integration with other search properties and in customisation options (which are virtually non-existent with other platforms).

In addition to this, the Website option is mobile-first-proof from the get go, improving user experience (UX) and potentially placing brands with a Google Website in a priority position versus competition when it comes to search engine results pages (SERPs).

Google Posts

Allowing businesses to create content directly on Google (which then ranks highly in brand name SERPs), Google Posts can serve as SERPs ranked ‘business cards’ ([as Search engine Land has called them](#)).

Reviews

As with Amazon and, to a lesser extent Facebook, Google My Business allows brands to interact with their reviews – both for the purpose of building relationships and for complaint handling. While Google reviews are still [vulnerable to manipulation](#), interaction with consumers is a major part of a modern digital presence so, while it does require improvement, the option to engage in conversation with consumers is an important one to have.

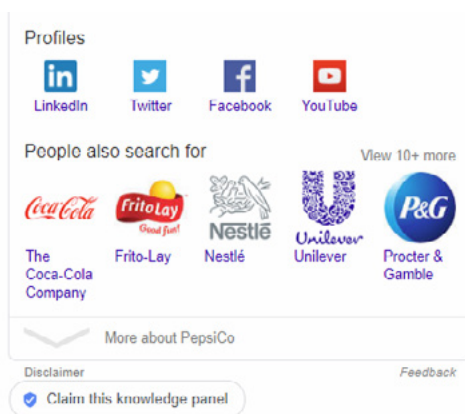
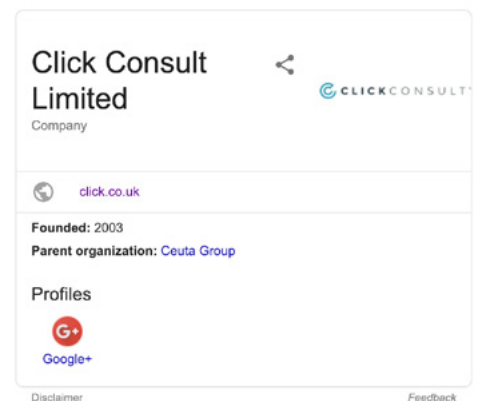
Insights

A more visual, Google Analytics-lite tool, Insights gives brands the ability to view and compare key performance metrics... much like Amazon and Facebook’s own platform analytics.

KNOWLEDGE PANEL

What is a Knowledge Panel?

Introduced to assist consumers in finding and finding out about brands, the knowledge panel sits to the right of brand searches and offers organisational and contact information about the brand. While it doesn’t offer as much functionality as the GMB listing, it still represents free, branded space in the SERP.



In addition, while GMB requires sign up to display, the knowledge panel will auto-populate if unclaimed, so it’s better to own it and, therefore, the information therein. If unclaimed, there’s a button at the bottom of the panel which can be clicked to take you to the form required to declare ownership.

SCHEMA MARKUP & STRUCTURED DATA

What is structured data?

Rather than being a specific subset or variety of data, when we refer to '[structured data](#)' we are talking about an organisational construct of data. While prose may convey information, it tends to do so in an organic way - conveying information in a looser, more conversational manner. However, if you were to study the prose, and distil its meaning in to, for example, a table – this would represent 'structured' data, essentially the same information in an easier to digest format.

Where search engines are concerned, it is easier for an algorithm to parse information if it is offered within a scaffold or framework of structural information. This tends to be done using HTML, microdata and JSON-LD cues that provide the search engine with additional pointers that it can use to determine the nature of the data it is processing.

Why use structured data?

A lot of the schema markup is particularly useful for inclusion in various types of what Google refer to as 'rich results' – these refer to the local packs, the content cards and other various SERPs features that pull directly from the web page of one URL in the SERP rather than from the defined meta description and meta title tags for that URL.

While this is not the only reason to implement structured data, the improved chances of featuring in these eye catching SERPs features are undoubtedly a major reason to do so. However, structured data also benefits the end user through increased relevance in SERPs and can benefit your brand through reducing the amount of irrelevant traffic.

LOCAL BUSINESS SCHEMA

While Google My Business allows you to appear in branded searches with vital business information, and is something you should definitely lay claim to, 'LocalBusiness' schema is a fantastic opportunity for physical businesses to improve relevance to local search queries and potentially capture the business of the growing number of consumers that will search while shopping – whether for goods, services or just for a nearby coffee.

[LocalBusiness schema](#) has a large and growing number of properties which can be used to highlight important information on your site. For the purposes of illustration, however, we'll focus – as we will for all subsequent schemas – on some of the more common requirements for a brand's site. While there is a great Google resource that can help you generate your markup ([Structured Data Markup Helper](#)), we'll look at how to implement it without to give you a better idea. You will, however, need the testing tool ([Structured Data Testing Tool](#)).

JSON-LD

```
<script type="application/ld+json">
{
  "@context": "http://schema.org/",
  "@type": ["Supermarket"],
  "name": "My Shop",
  "description": "My shop what sells stuff",
  "openingHours": ["Mo-Fr 09:00-17:00"]
}
</script>
```

MICRODATA

```
<div itemscope itemtype="http://schema.org/LocalBusiness">
  <h1 itemprop="name">My Shop</h1>
  <p itemprop="description">My shop what sells stuff
  <p>Open: <span itemprop="openingHours" content="Mo-Fr
09:00-17:00">Monday-Friday 9am-5pm</span></p>
</div>
```

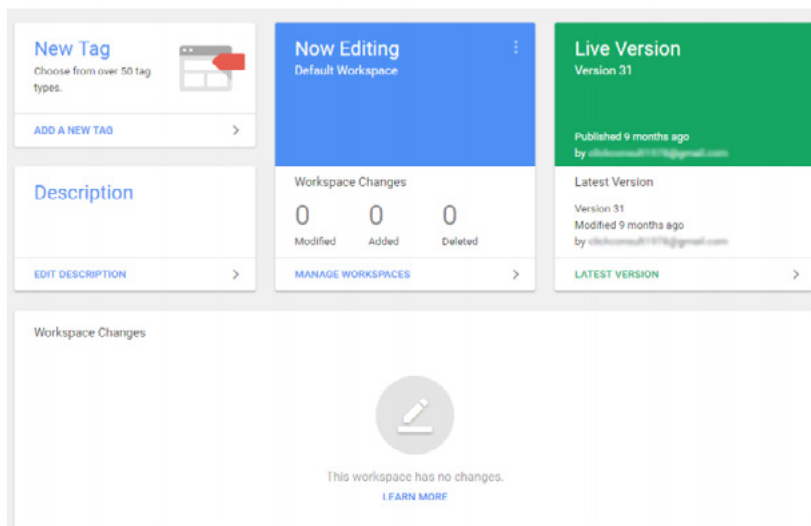
GOOGLE TAG MANAGER

While GTM is not a local search tool per se, the need to manage schema for multiple local branches will often necessitate unwieldy sections of JavaScript or the building of a CMS plug-in to implement.

However, using GTM, you can dynamically insert a set of pre-written JavaScript sections as and when they are called for, making GTM one of the easier ways to implement schema for local businesses.

What is Google Tag Manager?

Google Tag Manager is particularly well named – it allows you to manage your site's tags from a main dashboard.



While you will generally need only a single Tag Manager account per brand, it does permit the administration of multiple websites or apps. This saves having to manually (or via an external web developer) edit site code, thereby eliminating most coding errors and reduces the time lag between deciding to configure or reconfigure tags and having changes implemented (if you work through a web developer).

You can find out how to use GTM in [this beginners' guide](#).

CONTENT

Often overlooked in response to local search briefs, content can be an important part of a localised search. While much focus is given to the other mentioned aspects of optimisation, content is often considered to be a concern for national or specifically online brands – but this is a misunderstanding that could hamper a brand's local performance.

LONG TAIL

As stated in the 'brief history' section, Google now has a much greater ability to parse natural language due to a number of individual updates – this allows local brands to compete for long tail keywords, especially those with geographic significance.

META TITLES AND DESCRIPTIONS

Meta titles and descriptions are at least partially responsible for indicating relevance to search terms, so if you have a local brand, ensure your meta-title links you to your location; if your location is important for business.

LOCATION SPECIFIC CONTENT

Location specific content can also increase geographic relevance – by this we mean onpage content which deals specifically with the local area. Say you're a small fashion brand in Manchester, you could run blogs on 'best places to get a coffee while on a Manchester shopping spree', or 'best bars in Manchester in which to show off your new suit' – articles which link your brand distinctly to the area in which you're operating.

LINK BUILDING

Again, links can be an overlooked part of an area specific strategy. While the standard link building campaign may look to target specific DAs, this can muddy the water if a local brand is consistently linked to only by blogs and sites that are, generally, unconnected to their area of operation.

LOCAL LINKS

By casting off the shackles of high Domain Authority (DA) targeting, it is possible to improve local relevance and, therefore, visibility, by targeting specific local bloggers and sites instead – again linking yourself to an area. Again, brands can target local lifestyle bloggers, or food and drink writers that, while they may be overlooked as part of a standard brand building exercise, may be perfect to build that organic link between a brand and their local area.

CONCLUSION

Location based search, a term we're using here essentially to differentiate it from traditional 'local search' which dealt predominately with the local pack, map listings etc, is a form of search which requires a great deal of bonding between brand and location. That is not to say it is only applicable for one store brands – it can undoubtedly be performed at scale – but that a genuine link between the brand and the area is and will increasingly be required to take full advantage of the on-the-go search and the immediate intent it brings with it.

There's no easy answer and while best practice remains much the same as national search optimisation, the tweaks to strategy that are involved in areas such as content and link building are deviations from the norm, while structured data is a criminally underused technique.

However, a combination of standard best practice and focused local strategy can be the defining feature of a brand's success or failure in local search – and as mobile technology makes it ever more important for the high street to be present online, local success may be the key to bigger things.



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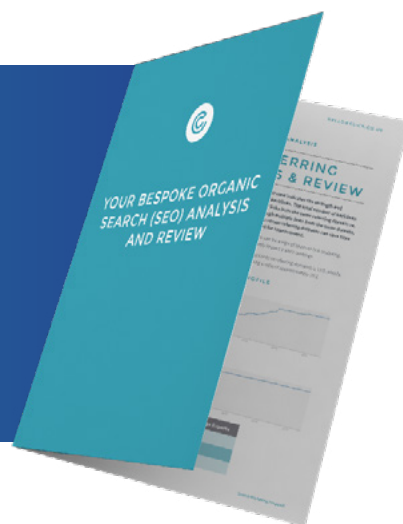
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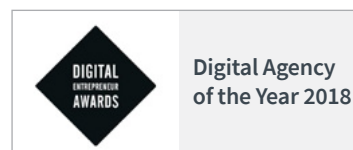
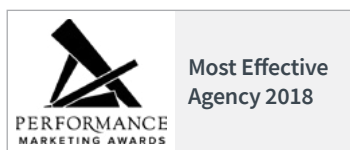
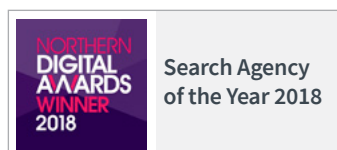
OUR ACCREDITATIONS



The Drum
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OUR AWARDS



OUR TECHNOLOGIES

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