

The SEO impacts of Google Places

POV from Geary Interactive
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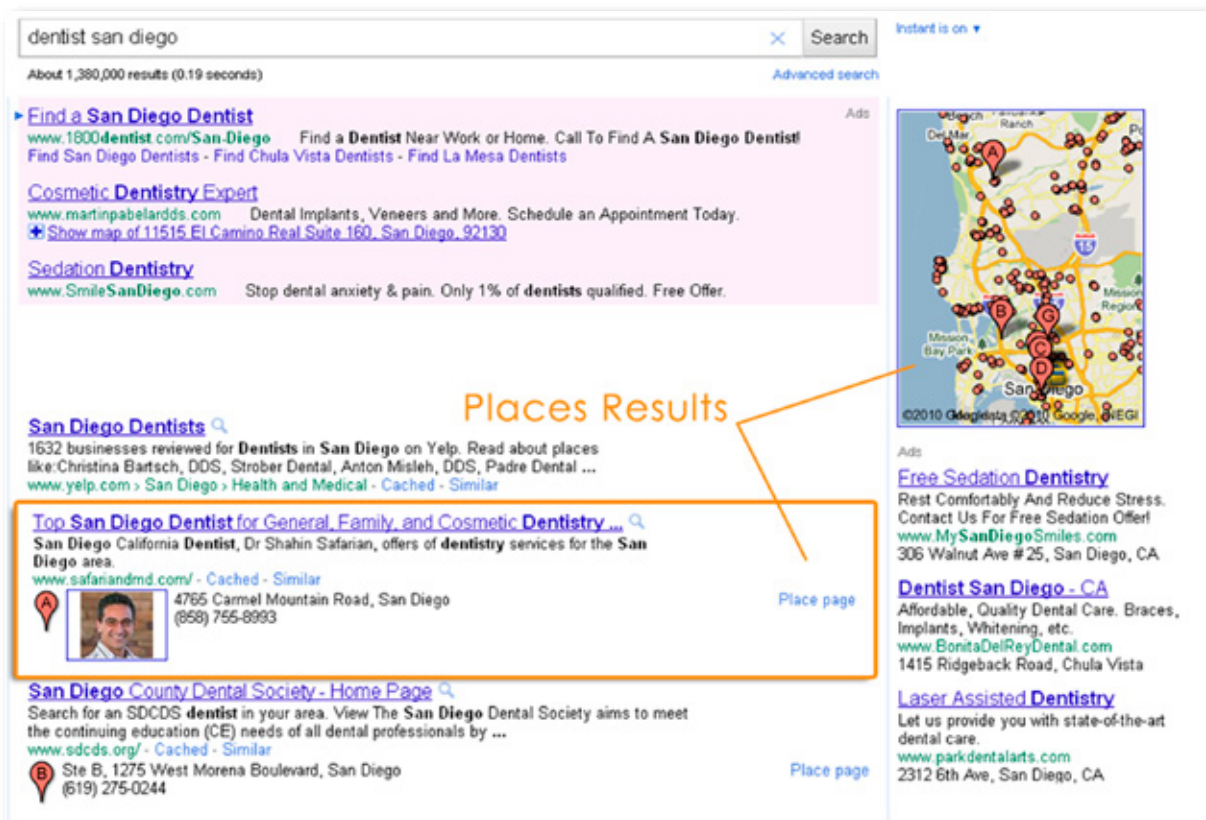
What is Google Places?

Google Places is the current evolution of Google Local, a melding of the search engine's map technology overlaid with local business listings—relevant to local keyword searches. Until recently Google's local results typically appeared near the top of search result listings, adjacent to a small map defining the listings in a geographical area. Along with the new moniker, Places listings move the map into the right column. This frees up a large amount of prime real estate that was previously reserved for the most relevant web results relating to a local business listings.

Marketing Impact:

- Notable emphasis of local and sponsored listings
- Advantage to smaller, local businesses
- Fewer organic listings appearing on first results pages

The shift definitely increases the prominence of locally relevant search results for users, especially those on mobile devices who find a newly updated layout. For users conducting search queries on a computer, the recent updates change the search results landscape substantially. It is arguable whether this update is in the best interest of users, as the new Places listings often displace websites previously ranking in the first few spots as Places results are intermixed with organic results. This heavy emphasis on local results means that SEO professionals (SEOs) may need to adjust their optimization strategies. Otherwise, hard earned organic rankings could be lost to Places results.



Why the change?

At face value, the motivation behind this move seems to be driven by three things. The first is a pure revenue play. The search giant does not make money driving traffic through non-paid, organic search engine listings. It is Google's equivalent to a non-converting visit. By giving Places more prominence, while simultaneously calling out paid listing enhancements for businesses (Google Tags and Google Boost), the engine can now monetize this previously free real estate through each business in Google Places.

The second possible motivator could be growing complaints about how Google's algorithm slowly crowds out smaller businesses and their websites. As larger companies continue to invest time and money to gain top organic rankings, smaller businesses that optimize for local spots have a hard time holding onto top positions. A similar criticism is that Google focuses on "commercially viable" keywords. With Google Places, many commercially viable local searches highlight smaller, localized businesses.

The third reason for this change could be to motivate local businesses to pay closer attention to their Places listings. Google Local's data was ridden with duplicate listings and inaccuracies, but with the added prominence, businesses are more likely to claim their listing, verify their information and build out their Places pages. This will help Google rapidly improve its local database. Google's excellence at indexing and rendering relevant listings is undeniable; getting clean information and robust user-generated content—directly from businesses—only improves their ability to so.

What is the impact of Places on SEO?

With Places, smaller local businesses have an advantage, so what is the solution for larger brands? How can they maintain strong organic traffic flow?

The recent adjustments to Google Places signify to the SEO community that Google is placing more emphasis on local results, and they will likely continue to do so. This means SEOs will have to be much more strategic in their plans to

maintain key rankings. It will be critical for SEOs to take note of which queries include Places results for two reasons: they will need to optimize available Places pages for these keywords, and they should step up traditional SEO efforts on queries that do not include Places listings. Businesses that have local outlets for their products and services need to make sure they are taking full advantage of their locations in Google Places. Businesses that serve a national audience need to identify the keywords that are not cannibalized by Places results and prioritize their SEO efforts around these terms.

While this might seem tedious, the initial time investment will pay off in the long term, and it will actually help marketers center their SEO efforts on the most viable keywords. This allows SEOs to focus on fewer targets in their web optimization tactics, which means a concentrated effort around critical terms. The importance of this approach is further compounded by Google Instant, as results will be served based more on Google's algorithmic predictions and less on what users think their queries should be. Since Instant reduces the time users spend viewing listings deeper on page one, it is essential to focus efforts on top ranking positions for the terms favored by Instant and those that do not trigger Places results.

Will Google Tags and Boost affect SEO?

Google Tags has been around for a while, but with the increased prominence of Google Places results, it just got more important. With a flat \$25 monthly fee, businesses can include

a tag on their Places listing to catch the eye of searchers. The six kinds of tags are videos, images, coupons, reservations, posts and menus. While Tags may seem like it caters to restaurants and other quick service providers, there are tagging opportunities for almost any business. Imagine you are a dentist that is running a promotion for teeth whitening services. You can include information about the promotion in a tag, and when a user searches for a local dentist, they can hover over your listing to see the promotion.

The next question is once everyone pays their \$25 to buy a Google Tag, how can a business stand out above the rest? Google's answer is simple: you'll have to pay.

Google Boost is brand new, and it is currently in beta testing in three US cities. Boost is a step above tags in that it leverages the standard paid search area to display relevant Places listings. Here is what happens if you opt into Google Boost: when a user types in the right keyword search, this triggers your Places listing, which can be pulled out of the normal places results and displayed in paid search results. This change encroaches on both traditional organic and traditional pay-per-click listings, and it is another advantage for smaller businesses.

From an SEO perspective, the changes with Places, Tags, and Boost show that Google is favoring paid listings and willing to shrink organic listings to do so. Tags and Boost are not keyword-bid based, so businesses are paying Google to determine when their listings and tags should appear in search results.

Google is the largest US search engine because it serves the most relevant organic listings and

allows advertisers an easy way to serve ads. The company's complex search technology output is simple; accurate results bring market share domination and enormous advertising revenue. It will be very interesting to see how Google's users react to the new, mostly sponsored, information crowding SERPs. It is also clear that the owners of websites that previously ranked number one will not be happy with this change. In some instances a position one organic listing that enjoys significant CTRs will be relegated to the 8th spot on the bottom of page one.

SEO recommendations

To maximize your SEO efforts when facing competition from Places results, we recommend the following strategies.

1. Claim your listing: First and foremost it is important to claim or create a Places listing for each business location.
2. Optimize your listing: Give careful consideration to your business listings. Most companies claimed them without giving much thought to keywords used, categories selected or the value of added content. Google uses this information in their algorithm, so make sure you include keywords that will help your SEO efforts.
3. Leverage Google Tags: Your competitors will use Google Tags, so you might as well too. Give thought to the tags already being used by your competition, and leverage a Tag type that will differentiate your listing from the rest.

4. **Keyword research:** This is critical. You will need to spend some time determining the searches that prompt significant usage of Places results. This is especially important if you are looking to recover traditional organic traffic lost to expanded Places results. It will help you determine which keywords to optimize for Places and which keywords to optimize for traditional organic rankings.
5. **Monitoring:** Once the research and optimization ground work is complete, it will be important to monitor rankings and keyword performance as usual, but it will now be important to leverage Google Webmaster Tools ranking information, as well as Google Places reporting data to continue to optimize your organic and Places listings.
6. **Citations and reviews:** You will want your business information and consumer reviews to be accessible from multiple online sources outside of Google Places.
7. **Quality Inks to your website:** With the importance of local results, it might be easy to think that quality links have lost their clout. This is not true. They are still the crux of top rankings, and they help websites rank in organic results and serve as a strong quality signal for consideration in Places rankings as well.

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