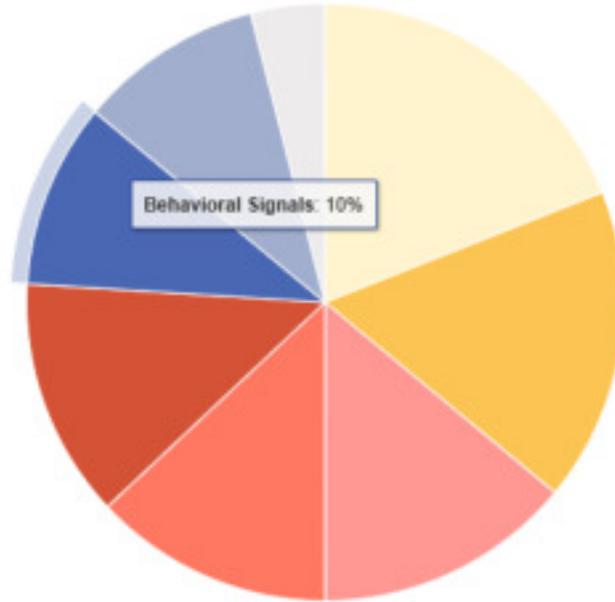


Local Pack/Finder Ranking Factors



Created with Highcharts 5.0.9 Citation Signals: 13%

My Business Signals (Proximity, categories, keyword in business title, etc.) **19%**

Link Signals (Inbound anchor text, linking domain authority, linking domain quantity, etc.) **17%**

On-Page Signals (Presence of NAP, keywords in titles, domain authority, etc.) **14%**

Citation Signals (IYP/aggregator NAP consistency, citation volume, etc.) **13%**

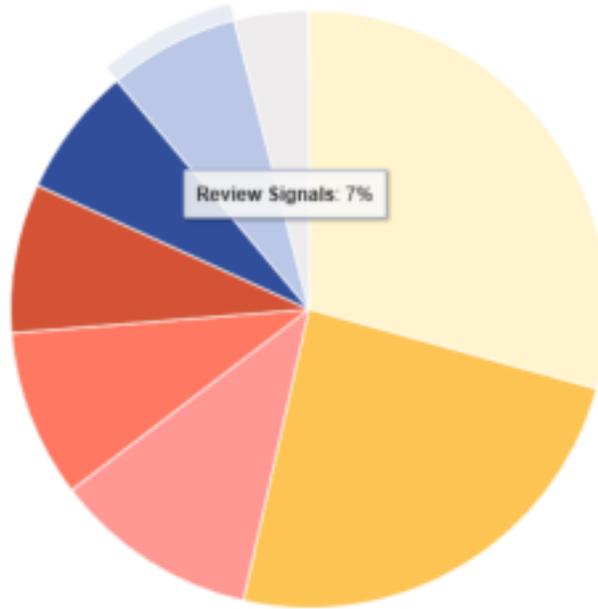
Review Signals (Review quantity, review velocity, review diversity, etc.) **13%**

Behavioral Signals (Click-through rate, mobile clicks to call, check-ins, etc.) **10%**

Personalization **10%**

Social Signals (Google engagement, Facebook engagement, Twitter engagement, etc.) **4%**

Localized Organic Ranking Factors



Created with Highcharts 5.0.9

Link Signals (Inbound anchor text, linking domain authority, linking domain quantity, etc.) **29%**

On-Page Signals (Presence of NAP, keywords in titles, domain authority, etc.) **24%**

Behavioral Signals (Click-through rate, mobile clicks to call, check-ins, etc.) **11%**

Personalization **9%**

Citation Signals (IYP/aggregator NAP consistency, citation volume, etc.) **8%**

My Business Signals (Proximity, categories, keyword in business title, etc.) **7%**

Review Signals (Review quantity, review velocity, review diversity, etc.) **7%**

Social Signals (Google engagement, Facebook engagement, Twitter engagement, etc.) **4%**

Introduction

This year's Local Search Ranking Factors marks at least one significant change: David Mihm has handed over the data collection, analysis, and publication of the survey results to me, Darren Shaw ([official announcement](#)).

Thank you, David, for trusting me with this important industry resource. It is an honor to follow in your footsteps with this, and I hope to live up to the high standards you have set for it year after year.

My apologies to the community for the delay between the last Local Search Ranking Factors (September 24th 2015) and this one. While David passed the reins to me in the summer of 2016, it has taken me this long to get everything organized and put together. I now have a much deeper appreciation for the amount of work David has invested in this for the past eight years. :)

Changes Made to the Survey

I have kept David's survey style mostly intact, aside from the following 5 changes:

1) Foundational factors versus the competitive difference-maker factors

Many of the local search ranking factors are "foundational," in that they are needed to have any chance at showing in the local results, but continuing to focus on them isn't going to move the needle (proper GMB categories, for example). On the other hand, many of the factors can be considered "competitive difference-makers" in that continuing to invest in them will push your local rankings further.

By surveying the participants on which factors are foundational and which factors are competitive difference-makers, I'm hoping to provide some guidance on what to focus on in your ongoing local search work, after you have laid down the proper foundation.

2) Changes in approach to local search since the Possum update

Has the Possum update had much of an impact on anyone's approach to local search? Here I ask participants to rate the top 5 factors they're focusing on more since Possum, and which factors they're focusing on less.

3) Breaking down citation consistency into multiple factors

How far do you need to go with citation consistency? Do you need to spend hours and hours hunting down and fixing ALL incorrect citations that exist on the web? For some businesses that have been around for a long time and have gone through many name, address, and phone number changes, this could mean hundreds or thousands of incorrect listings to clean up. Do you just do the top 10 sites? The top 30?

To answer this, I removed "Consistency of Structured Citations" as a general factor and replaced it with these 4 new factors:

Consistency of Citations on the Primary Data Sources (aggregators in the US and primary data sources in other countries)

Consistency of Citations on Tier 1 Citation Sources (the top 5 to 10 most prominent structured citation sources in the country)

Consistency of Citations on Tier 2 Citation Sources (the next 10 to 50 most prominent structured citation sources in the country)

Consistency of Citations on Tier 3 Citation Sources (the hundreds of other business listing sites out there)

4) Expanded commentary by asking direct questions

Each year of the survey, I find that the real gold can be found by reading the many insightful comments that participants provide. [Phil Rozek](#) suggested the excellent idea that I could encourage more commentary by prompting with questions. I tried to leave the questions open-ended enough to get a broad range of answers, and it appears to have worked well, since I've ended up with 33 pages of incredible insights from the best in the business.

5) Factors dropped and factors added

There were a total of 115 ranking factors and 27 negative ranking factors in the 2015 survey. Some of these factors just aren't relevant anymore (for example, you can no longer edit the description on your Google listing), and some of them were just so obscure that they never made anyone's top 20 list anyway ("Number of +1s on Website"). Also, many new factors that we're seeing these days weren't on the list; I went through all the factors, removing 32 of them and adding 38.

For anyone interested, you can see the full list of added, removed, and updated factors [here](#).

Definitions

Is it called a snack pack, a local pack, a pak, or something else? I'm hoping to help standardize the terminology used across the industry, particularly with the pack types. I can't think of a better place to define these than on the Local Search Ranking Factors Survey results.

GMB Listing

Google My Business Listing. Your primary listing at Google that is editable in the GMB dashboard and publicly accessible at 3 locations:

Google Search (knowledge panel) ([example](#))

Google Maps ([example](#))

Google+ ([example](#))

GMB Landing Page

The page that a GMB listing links to. Usually the homepage or a location page. ([example](#))

Local Pack

The regular local 3-pack that appears for most local search terms. ([example](#))

Local ABC Pack

A local 3-pack with A, B, and C to the left of each result. No review stars, ratings, or counts appear for this type. This pack type is returned for branded terms such as "Starbucks" and, inexplicably, for storage and gas station terms. ([example](#))

Local Snack Pack

This style of local 3-pack appears for dining, hospitality, and entertainment terms. Results have a photo, no phone number, and no links to the website. ([example](#))

Local Sponsored Pack

The special pack type that is currently appearing in San Diego for plumbers and locksmiths. It appears in addition to the regular local pack. ([example 1](#)) There are also these sponsored pack types appearing for home services businesses in the San Francisco area: ([example 2](#))

Local Finder

The complete list of local results that appears when the "More places" link at the bottom of a local pack is clicked. ([example](#))

The Survey

The 2017 survey is structured into five primary sections:

- Thematic Ranking Signals

- Specific Ranking Factors in Local Pack/Finder and Local Organic Results

- Foundational vs. Competitive Ranking Factors

- Impact of the Possum Update

- Negative Ranking Factors

I. General Ranking Factors

In this section, participants are asked, "In your opinion, to what extent do each of the following thematic clusters contribute to rankings across result types at Google?" They then enter a percentage of influence for each of these 8 thematic areas, for both local pack/finder results and local organic results:

- My Business signals (proximity, categories, keyword in business title, etc.)

- Citation signals (IYP/aggregator NAP consistency, citation volume, etc.)

- On-page signals (presence of NAP, keywords in titles, domain authority, etc.)

- Link signals (inbound anchor text, linking domain authority, linking domain quantity, etc.)

- Review signals (review quantity, review velocity, review diversity, etc.)

- Social signals (Google engagement, Facebook engagement, Twitter engagement, etc.)

- Behavioral/mobile signals (click-through rate, mobile clicks-to-call, check-ins, etc.)

Personalization

The results here give us a sense of which general ranking factor areas are more important than others.

II. Specific Ranking Factors

In part A of this section, I asked the experts to rank the top 20 individual ranking factors (out of a total list of 113) that have the biggest impact on pack/finder rankings.

In part B of this section, I asked them to rank the top 20 factors from the same list, only this time to rank them based on impact on localized organic rankings.

Results were then tabulated via inverse scoring, where the number one-ranked factor received the most "points" for that question, and the lowest-ranked factor received the fewest points. (The factors ranking outside the top 20 for all respondents ended up with zero points.)

III. Foundational vs Competitive Factors

In this section, I asked the experts to rank the 10 factors they think are the most important foundational ranking factors, and to rank the 10 factors they think are competitive difference makers.

Results were then tabulated via inverse scoring, where the #1 ranked factor received the most "points" for that question, and the lowest-ranked factor received the fewest points. (The factors ranking outside the top 10 for all respondents ended up with zero points.)

IV. Impact of the Possum Update

Here, I asked the experts to rank the five factors they were paying more attention to since the Possum update, and the five factors they were paying less attention to since the update.

Results were then tabulated via inverse scoring, where the #1 ranked factor received the most "points" for that question, and the lowest-ranked factor received the fewest points. (The factors ranking outside the top 5 for all respondents ended up with zero points.)

IV. Negative Ranking Factors

In this section, I asked the experts to rank 34 negative factors in order of most damaging to most benign.

Discussion

My initial reaction to the results of this survey can be found [here on the Moz blog](#). If you would like to comment on this project, please [join the discussion here](#).

Darren Shaw Edmonton, Alberta, Canada February 27, 2017

Top 50 Local Pack Finder Factors

#1 492 total

Proximity of Address to the Point of Search (Searcher-Business Distance)

#2 436 total

Physical Address in City of Search

#3 402 total

Proper GMB Category Associations

#4 400 total

Quality/Authority of Inbound Links to Domain

#5 361 total

Consistency of Citations on the Primary Data Sources

#6 288 total

Domain Authority of Website

#7 244 total

Product/Service Keyword in GMB Business Title

#8 243 total

Quality/Authority of Structured Citations

#9 234 total

Consistency of Citations on Tier 1 Citation Sources

#10 197 total

Click-Through Rate from Search Results

#11 182 total

Quality/Authority of Inbound Links to GMB Landing Page URL

#12 166 total

Location Keyword in GMB Business Title

#13 165 total

Verified GMB Listing

#14 154 total

HTML NAP Matching GMB Listing NAP

#15 145 total

GMB Primary Category Matches a Broader Category of the Search Category (e.g. primary category=restaurant & search=pizza)

#16 135 total

Diversity of Inbound Links to Domain

#17 134 total

Quantity of Inbound Links to Domain

#18 134 total

Quantity of Native Google Reviews (with text)

#19 125 total

City, State in GMB Landing Page Title

#20 119 total

Quantity of Inbound Links to Domain from Locally Relevant Domains

#21 106 total

Quality/Authority of Unstructured Citations (Newspaper Articles, Blog Posts, Gov Sites, Industry Associations)

#22 106 total

Page Authority of GMB Landing Page URL

#23 106 total

Topical (Product/Service) Keyword Relevance of Domain Content

#24 94 total

High Numerical Ratings of Business by Google Users (e.g. 4–5)

#25 89 total

Age of GMB Listing

#26 88 total

Product/Service Keywords in Reviews

#27 83 total
Mobile-Friendly/Responsive Website

#28 82 total
Quantity of Inbound Links to Domain from Industry-Relevant Domains

#29 80 total
Quantity of Citations from Locally Relevant Domains

#30 75 total
Proximity of Address to Centroid of Other Businesses in Industry

#31 73 total
NAP in Schema/JSON-LD on GMB Landing Page URL

#32 70 total
Local Area Code on GMB Listing

#33 63 total
Product/Service Keywords in Anchor Text of Inbound Links to Domain

#34 63 total
Quantity of Inbound Links to GMB Landing Page URL

#35 63 total
Clicks to Call Business

#36 61 total
Association of Photos with GMB Listing

#37 59 total
Prominence on Key Industry-Relevant Domains

#38 58 total
Location Keywords in Anchor Text of Inbound Links to Domain

#39 54 total
Diversity of Inbound Links to GMB Landing Page URL

#40 52 total
Quantity of Citations from Industry-Relevant Domains

#41 50 total
Geographic (City/Neighborhood) Keyword Relevance of Domain Content

#42 50 total
Product/Service Keyword in GMB Landing Page Title

#43 50 total
Driving Directions to Business Clicks

#44 49 total
Enhancement/Completeness of Citations

#45 49 total
Proper Category Associations on Aggregators and Tier 1 Citation Sources

#46 49 total
Positive Sentiment in Reviews

#47 47 total
Quantity of Structured Citations (IYPs, Data Aggregators)

#48 47 total
Quantity of Inbound Links to GMB Landing Page URL from Locally Relevant Domains

#49 47 total
Overall Velocity of Reviews (Native + Third-Party)

#50 44 total
Proximity of Address to Centroid

Top 50 Local Organic Factors

#1 519 total
Quality/Authority of Inbound Links to Domain

#2 510 total
Domain Authority of Website

#3 308 total
Diversity of Inbound Links to Domain

#4 300 total
Topical (Product/Service) Keyword Relevance of Domain Content

#5 297 total
Quantity of Inbound Links to Domain

#6 251 total
Quantity of Inbound Links to Domain from Locally Relevant Domains

#7 230 total
Click-Through Rate from Search Results

#8 220 total
Geographic (City/Neighborhood) Keyword Relevance of Domain Content

#9 217 total
Product/Service Keywords in Anchor Text of Inbound Links to Domain

#10 213 total
Mobile-Friendly/Responsive Website

#11 209 total
Quantity of Inbound Links to Domain from Industry-Relevant Domains

#12 197 total
Volume of Quality Content on Entire Website

#13 189 total
City, State in GMB Landing Page Title

#14 182 total
Location Keywords in Anchor Text of Inbound Links to Domain

#15 180 total
Physical Address in City of Search

#16 175 total
Quality/Authority of Inbound Links to GMB Landing Page URL

#17 159 total
Product/Service Keyword in Domain

#18 147 total
Page Authority of GMB Landing Page URL

#19 141 total
Proximity of Address to the Point of Search (Searcher-Business Distance)

#20 132 total
Product/Service Keyword in GMB Landing Page Title

#21 126 total
Volume of Quality Content on Service Pages

#22 123 total
Quality/Authority of Structured Citations

#23 122 total
Geographic Keyword in Domain

#24 115 total
Consistency of Citations on The Primary Data Sources

#25 115 total
Quantity of Inbound Links to Landing Page URL from Industry-Relevant Domains

#26 108 total
Loadtime of GMB Landing Page URL

#27 103 total
City, State in Most/All Website Title Tags

#28 101 total
Diversity of Anchor Text to Domain

#29 86 total
Quantity of Citations from Locally Relevant Domains

#30 80 total
City, State in GMB Landing Page URL

#31 79 total
NAP in Schema/JSON-LD on GMB Landing Page URL

#32 76 total
HTML NAP Matching GMB Listing NAP

#33 74 total
Prominence on Key Industry-Relevant Domains
#34 74 total
Quality/Authority of Unstructured Citations (Newspaper Articles, Blog Posts, Gov Sites, Industry Associations)
#35 74 total
Quantity of Citations from Industry-Relevant Domains
#36 73 total
Diversity of Inbound Links to GMB Landing Page URL
#37 73 total
Quantity of Inbound Links to GMB Landing Page URL from Locally Relevant Domains
#38 72 total
City, State in GMB Landing Page H1/H2 Tags
#39 57 total
Volume of Searches for Business Name
#40 53 total
Verified GMB Listing
#41 50 total
Business Title in Anchor Text of Inbound Links to Domain
#42 46 total
Length of Dwell Time on GMB Landing Page
#43 45 total
Location Keywords in Anchor Text of Inbound Links to GMB Landing Page URL
#44 44 total
Proper GMB Category Associations
#45 42 total
Proximity of Address to Centroid
#46 42 total
Quantity of Inbound Links to GMB Landing Page URL
#47 40 total
Authority of Third-Party Sites on which Reviews are Present
#48 39 total
Product/Service Keywords in Anchor Text of Inbound Links to GMB Landing Page URL
#49 39 total
Product/Service Keywords in Reviews
#50 38 total
Quantity of Unstructured Citations (Newspaper Articles, Blog Posts)

Top 30 Foundational Factors

#1 243 total
Proper GMB Category Associations
#2 199 total
Consistency of Citations on The Primary Data Sources
#3 189 total
Physical Address in City of Search
#4 143 total
Proximity of Address to the Point of Search (Searcher-Business Distance)
#5 137 total
Consistency of Citations on Tier 1 Citation Sources
#6 122 total
Verified GMB Listing
#7 61 total
HTML NAP Matching GMB Listing NAP
#8 56 total
Domain Authority of Website
#9 51 total

Quality/Authority of Inbound Links to Domain

#10 47 total

GMB Primary Category Matches a Broader Category of the Search Category (e.g. primary category=restaurant & search=pizza)

#11 47 total

Mobile-Friendly/Responsive Website

#12 46 total

Quality/Authority of Structured Citations

#13 44 total

Consistency of Citations on Tier 2 Citation Sources

#14 39 total

Geographic (City/Neighborhood) Keyword Relevance of Domain Content

#15 36 total

Volume of Quality Content on Service Pages

#16 34 total

Local Area Code on GMB Listing

#17 34 total

City, State in GMB Landing Page Title

#18 33 total

Age of GMB Listing

#19 30 total

Volume of Quality Content on Entire Website

#20 28 total

Proper Category Associations on Aggregators and Tier 1 Citation Sources

#21 24 total

Topical (Product/Service) Keyword Relevance of Domain Content

#22 24 total

Quantity of Native Google Reviews (with text)

#23 23 total

Product/Service Keyword in GMB Landing Page Title

#24 20 total

City, State in GMB Landing Page URL

#25 20 total

NAP in Schema/JSON-LD on GMB Landing Page URL

#26 19 total

Proximity of Address to Centroid

#27 19 total

Enhancement/Completeness of Citations

#28 15 total

Numerical Percentage of GMB Listing

#29 15 total

City, State in GMB Landing Page H1/H2 Tags

#30 13 total

Product/Service Keyword in GMB Business Title

Top 30 Competitive Difference-Makers

#1 156 total

Quality/Authority of Inbound Links to Domain

#2 85 total

Quantity of Inbound Links to Domain from Industry-Relevant Domains

#3 84 total

Quality/Authority of Inbound Links to GMB Landing Page URL

#4 71 total

Quantity of Inbound Links to Domain from Locally Relevant Domains

#5 69 total

Quantity of Native Google Reviews (w/text)

#6 65 total

Click-Through Rate from Search Results

#7 64 total

Quality/Authority of Unstructured Citations (Newspaper Articles, Blog Posts, Gov Sites, Industry Associations)

#8 59 total

Domain Authority of Website

#9 58 total

Quantity of Inbound Links to GMB Landing Page URL from Locally Relevant Domains

#10 52 total

Diversity of Inbound Links to Domain

#11 49 total

Mobile-Friendly/Responsive Website

#12 47 total

Quality/Authority of Structured Citations

#13 47 total

Page Authority of GMB Landing Page URL

#14 41 total

Quantity of Inbound Links to Domain

#15 37 total

Quantity of Citations from Locally Relevant Domains

#16 37 total

Loadtime of GMB Landing Page URL

#17 37 total

Product/Service Keywords in Reviews

#18 36 total

Positive Sentiment in Reviews

#19 34 total

Quantity of Inbound Links to Landing Page URL from Industry-Relevant Domains

#20 32 total

Diversity of Third-Party Sites on which Reviews are Present

#21 30 total

Volume of Quality Content on Entire Website

#22 30 total

High Numerical Ratings by Authority Reviewers (e.g. Yelp Elite, Google Local Guides, etc)

#23 29 total

Quantity of Citations from Industry-Relevant Domains

#24 29 total

High Numerical Ratings of Business by Google Users (e.g. 4–5)

#25 28 total

Presence of Business on Expert-Curated “Best of” and Similar Lists

#26 28 total

Topical (Product/Service) Keyword Relevance of Domain Content

#27 28 total

Location Keywords in Anchor Text of Inbound Links to Domain

#28 27 total

Product/Service Keyword in GMB Business Title

#29 27 total

Velocity of New Inbound Links to Domain

#30 24 total

Quantity of Inbound Links to GMB Landing Page URL

10 Factors Experts Are Focusing On More Since the Possum Update

#1 50 total

Proximity of Address to the Point of Search (Searcher-Business Distance)

#2 34 total

Proper GMB Category Associations

#3 20 total

Quality/Authority of Inbound Links to Domain

#4 20 total

Quantity of Inbound Links to Domain from Locally Relevant Domains

#5 19 total

Click-Through Rate from Search Results

#6 17 total

Geographic (City/Neighborhood) Keyword Relevance of Domain Content

#7 13 total

Quantity of Inbound Links to Domain

#8 12 total

Velocity of Native Google Reviews

#9 11 total

Presence of Business on Expert-Curated "Best of" and Similar Lists

#10 11 total

Mobile-Friendly/Responsive Website

10 Factors Experts Are Focusing On Less Since the Possum Update

#1 70 total

Proximity of Address to Centroid

#2 48 total

Physical Address in City of Search

#3 39 total

Proximity of Address to Centroid of Other Businesses in Industry

#4 34 total

Quantity of Structured Citations (IYPs, Data Aggregators)

#5 33 total

Consistency of Citations on Tier 3 Citation Sources

#6 15 total

Enhancement/Completeness of Citations

#7 10 total

Velocity of Native Google Reviews

#8 9 total

Volume of Quality Content on Service Pages

#9 9 total

Authority/Quality of Engagement Metrics (+1's, comments, shares) on Google+

#10 8 total

Proximity of Address to the Point of Search (Searcher-Business Distance)

Negative Factors

#1 568 total

Listing Detected at False Business Address

#2 492 total

Incorrect Business Category

#3 480 total

Reports of Violations on Your GMB Listing

#4 455 total

Site Hacked/Presence of Malware

#5 422 total

Mismatch NAP/Tracking Phone Numbers Across Data Ecosystem

#6 410 total

Address is a PO Box, UPS Mail Store, or Other False Address

#7 407 total
Presence of Multiple GMB Listings in the Same Category with Same/Similar Business Title and Address

#8 357 total
GMB Listings with Same Address/Phone Marked as “Permanently Closed”

#9 347 total
Presence of Businesses in the Same Category at the Same Address

#10 319 total
Mismatch NAP/Tracking Phone Number on GMB Landing Page

#11 300 total
Mismatch Address on GMB Landing Page

#12 288 total
Association of GMB Account with Other Suppressed Listings

#13 270 total
Presence of Multiple GMB Listings with Same Phone Number

#14 254 total
Absence of Crawlable NAP on Website

#15 199 total
Incomplete/Missing Data on the Primary Data Sources

#16 196 total
Absence of Crawlable NAP on GMB Landing Page

#17 164 total
Incorrectly Placed Map Marker in GMB

#18 159 total
Choosing to Hide GMB Address

#19 157 total
Keyword Stuffing in Business Name

#20 156 total
Low Numerical Ratings of Google Reviews (e.g. 1–2)

#21 116 total
Choosing Service Area for Business in GMB (as opposed to in-location visits)

#22 109 total
Listing 800 Number as Only Phone Number in GMB

#23 105 total
Negative Sentiment in Google Reviews

#24 94 total
Keyword Stuffing in Title Tag of GMB Landing Page

#25 92 total
Presence of Multiple Crawlable NAP on GMB Landing Page

#26 91 total
No Hours of Operation on GMB Listing

#27 83 total
Category Dilution

#28 54 total
Reviews Copied from Third-Party Sites as Testimonials in Schema/JSON-LD on Website

#29 46 total
Low Numerical Ratings of Third-Party Reviews (e.g. 1–2)

#30 42 total
Receiving Too Many Google Reviews Too Fast

#31 41 total
Multi-Lingual GMB Listings for the Same Place

#32 38 total
Negative Sentiment in Third-Party Reviews

#33 23 total
Malformed Phone Number on Website (dots or spaces instead of dashes)

#34 15 total
Mismatched or Private WHOIS Information

Comments

What you're seeing affecting rankings this year

[Brian Barwig](#), AttorneySync

More than anything, I am seeing that links are playing a huge role in ranking — both organically and in local SEO. In terms of local specifically, spam still works. Spammy business titles and low-quality links dominate certain niches.

[Brian Smith](#), Placeable

Filtering within Google has shown to be a big issue affecting organic ranking for enterprise locations. Around local listings, recency on when a profile was updated, along with managing the expanded location attributes, has played an added role over years past. Google also seems to be paying greater attention to CTR and conversion (click-to-call) performance.

[Caleb Donegan](#), Baliwoo

Although not affecting rankings itself, paid presence has changed the way we think about ranking. Previously, when dealing with many local businesses that are under the same brand, we have aspired for search saturation. Where this has been possible for many years, now the strategy has shifted to obtaining as high of a single spot as possible, and relying on that to drive awareness to the other locations. With the limitation of organic results and the continued trend this represents, getting many to rank is not as important as getting one to rank really high.

[Casey Meraz](#), Juris Digital

2016 was a very turbulent year for local search. We saw a lot of changes, as usual, but this year we saw diminishing returns going after 3rd tier citations. Links were our big focus and we saw a lot of wins, making that a core part of our strategies.

[Colan Nielsen](#), Sterling Sky Inc.

Links, reviews, and keyword stuffing!

This year we continue to see major ranking increases over and over again for our clients that we have invested a significant amount of time into digital PR (AKA link building). Success in this area, both now and in the future, will come to those who approach it as relationship building, not just link building.

Native Google reviews continue to play an increasingly important role. We still see outliers that rank well in a competitive industry with next to no Google reviews. But the overall trend is clearly moving towards businesses who are investing time and energy into their review strategy. Reviews = trust and increased CTR. And just put yourself in Google's shoes for a minute. Do you feel there is more value to the searcher (and to Google's own interests) in showing them a listing with no reviews, where the user needs to go to Yelp and other places to get more information to make a decision? Or is it more valuable to show a listing that has a "story" about that business in the form of reviews, which allows the user to get all the information they need to either choose or not choose that business?

Adding service-related keywords to the GMB business name is another huge ranking factor that I saw over and over again in 2016. It's almost as if Google cranked the dial up on this factor more and more as the year went on. If you are doing local SEO for your clients, you need to have a strategy in place to analyze your clients' competitors for this type of guideline violation. The problem is that even if you do a community edit to revert the business name back to the proper name, all the business owner has to do is login to GMB and switch it back. It becomes an ongoing game of back-and-forth.

[Cori Graft](#), Seer Interactive

Google really seems to have turned up the dial on local brand relevance this year. Well-known local chains are ranking more prominently than in the past. Being mentioned on other local sites (unstructured citations) and driving branded searches should be a focus in local SEO strategies moving forward.

[Dan Leibson](#), Local SEO Guide

I'm still amazed that having your keywords in your business' name has such a drastic impact on how you rank. To me, it shows that there is still a part of the local ranking algo that is very "immature" and based on their very early local ranking technology. Other than that, link building continues to be the name of the game in terms of what I'm seeing move the needle for local businesses.

On the brand side, the ability to leverage technical SEO through internal links, widgets, and cross-linking pockets of large sites also can have a huge impact on a brand's search presence while not costing an arm and a leg. SMBs should be wary that lots of brands haven't tried to flex their muscle in the local search space, and when they do they can potentially change the impact of an entire vertical.

[David Mihm](#), Tidings

It's a very difficult concept to survey about, but the overriding ranking factor in local — across both pack and organic results — is entity authority. Ask yourself, "If I were Google, how would I define a local entity, and once I did, how would I rank it relative to others?" and you'll have the underlying algorithmic logic for at least the next decade.

How widely known is the entity? Especially locally, but oh man, if it's nationally known, searchers should REALLY know about it.

What are people saying about the entity? (It should probably rank for similar phrases.)

What is the engagement with the entity? Do people recognize it when they see it in search results? How many Gmail users read its newsletter? How many call or visit it after seeing it in search results? How many visit its location?

[David Oremland](#), Maryland Bartending School

I've always found links to be tremendously effective. In the latest time period, it appears that volumes of citations have less impact, hence links are more important. They have never *not* been important; it just could be they are more important now.

As to the impact of Possum and how important searcher location is to rankings, honestly, we have tracked this for years for our SMBs which are in small niches (meaning overall less competition and an ability to get seen in the pack for greater areas of geography). That means we have tracked

rankings from adjacent town to town to town. It's more pronounced now, but it's been there for a while! With Possum, it's incredible how granular search is contingent on where the searcher is!

[Dev Basu](#), Powered By Search

We work with enterprises that have hundreds or thousands of listings and have seen some interesting trends. In all cases, any time we built relationships that yielded high authority and locally relevant links to the locations nation-wide, we saw a large spike in rankings within a 90-day period.

Citations are mostly commoditized at this point, so having NAP consistency and coverage on its own doesn't offer competitive advantages.

We've also seen that anything we can do to increase the volume of business name searches for the business name has yielded great results. This includes tests such as offline advertising asking the user to Google the business name (via radio or print), which engineered CTR increases.

[Eric Rohrback](#), Gemini Guys

Still seeing quality links dominate the playing field. Those buying links or doing something shady eventually see a lot of fluctuation in the SERPs, and in many cases dropping out of the top 50–100 spots. Quality links are still required to rank.

[Greg Gifford](#), DealerOn

In automotive, we really didn't see too much of an effect from Possum, other than the increased importance of proximity. Duplicate GMB listings are a beast, and can cause major havoc, but they're increasingly hard to find/diagnose.

More than anything, we saw the basics work better than anything else — great content that's well-optimized and a robust inbound link profile. Location info in title/H1/content is incredibly important, and can make a huge difference for a site that wasn't well-optimized before. We've also seen massive swings in visibility with the acquisition of local links. Geographic keyword relevance of the entire site seems to make a big difference, as well.

While most people equate citations with table stakes, we still see them as vitally important in automotive. So many auto dealers have incredibly messy citation profiles, so in many cases, cleaning up citations and building new quality citations can actually move the needle... especially in a more competitive landscape.

[Gyi Tsakalakis](#), AttorneySync

Businesses have to get the table stakes right. After that, it seems to be all about local relevant links. We are seeing a lot more sites that rank with lower quantities of higher-quality (read: local and industry-relevant) links. Even sites with very few pages and limited content still seem to win with enough quality links.

[James Watt](#), James Watt Marketing

In some ways, I don't think what it takes to rank has really changed much. In other ways, there's a lot that's new.

Best practices still apply. Work on getting high-quality backlinks to your site, get reviews, optimize your site and GMB listing, and pay attention to NAP consistency on the major citation sites. From what I've seen, part of what's changed is the kind of results you can expect. Searcher proximity to the business seems to be even more important since Possum. This might limit exposure for businesses that have traditionally swept the 3-pack across the whole city, but it also provides more opportunity for smaller businesses hoping to get more leads from their immediate neighborhood. Going forward, local SEO consultants and businesses focusing on organic SEO in addition to maps rankings are going to have an easier time delivering results.

[Joy Hawkins](#), Sterling Sky Inc.

In 2016, the biggest thing we saw impacting local rankings was definitely the Possum algorithm update on September 1. In my findings, it changed [over 64%](#) of the local 3-packs, which is no small change. The major thing I saw change with this update was that Google started filtering listings from local results more based on similar addresses, phone numbers, and business names. The location of the searcher is also way more important than it used to be. Searches done on computers are showing that Google appears to be starting to follow the hyper-local trend they've been using on mobile for a while now.

[Lisa Kolb](#), Acorn Internet Services

In the lodging industry, after April 1, we saw that Google began using the actual filter dates from the OTAs (online travel agencies). Without OTA participation, in an area with any competition, lodging providers found themselves slipping lower and lower in the local 3-pack and maps listings, based on the filtered travel dates. Local guidelines still have to be in place, but this seems to be a big influencer, as it is now showing actual room rates per filtered dates. As you can imagine, lodging properties that don't employ OTAs as part of their room sales strategy are seeing a serious impact to their bookings.

[Matthew Hunt](#), Powered By Search

Google seems to be interested in providing personalized experiences in local more than ever before and I suspect that will be a continued trend. With the Possum update, the user's location determines the search results. Plus now, on many GMB listings, the user can also filter by business hours and review ratings. Google also lists peak hours for businesses now, too. Google cares a lot about users and giving them the best possible experience based off the intent of their search. Now businesses are probably thinking, "Well, I can't control where users are," but they *can* control their business hours and create an automated system to increase Google reviews. PRO TIP: Open earlier and close later than your competitors and you'll immediately get an uptick in business.

Google cares about users' behavior and they use that user behaviour to help determine rankings. Google is paying attention to things like [dwell rate](#), [click-through rates](#), [driving directions](#), and [clicks-to-call metrics](#). Even though this may seem like it's out of your control, there are quite few things you can do. For example, you can optimize the following things for users' intent:

Write better title tags that encourage the click and improve your CTRs

Write better H1/H2 tags to make the user want to read more and improve dwell rates

Write better meta descriptions to sell the click and improve CTRs

Optimize URL slugs that sell the click and support what your local page is about to help improve CTRs

Have schema markup on your website to gain more SERP real estate (like review snippets) that will make your listings stand out even more and to improve CTRs

Drive users from your website to Google Maps to get “driving directions” to your location(s) to improve rankings

Increase your reviews on Google by investing in an automated review management system to improve rankings, CTRs, and convince browsers to become buyers

Make sure your website is responsive and mobile-friendly to improve dwell rates and improve users’ experience

Make sure your website loads fast on both mobile and desktop to improve dwell rates and improve users’ experience (remember, people love their back buttons and no one has time for a slow-loading website today)

If you take care of those items listed above, you’ll most likely be light years ahead of most of your competitors. The big take away is to always think about human intent. Google cares about people and users. If you always optimize your marketing to give a better experience for people and their intent, you’ll most likely always make the right decisions that will future-proof your local search marketing.

[Mike Ramsey](#), Nifty Marketing & NiftyLaw

The main thing I have been focused on for the last few years is content and links. They have a great effect on rankings for both organic and map listings, so it’s a no-brainer to put focus there. If you aren’t competitive with your website and with your Domain Authority, you are rarely even part of the race. I find once you are on page one, the other things really start to matter.

[Nyagoslav Zhekov](#), Whitespark Inc.

Without a doubt, the biggest changes in local search during the last year have been associated with the Possum update. However, this algorithm update didn’t really affect in a major way the core factors everyone should focus their SEO efforts on, but rather improved the quality of Google’s local search results. At the same time, this update would hopefully curb the very negative practice of businesses setting up virtual offices (or using outright fake addresses) if their physical address is not near the centroid of the major city they want to rank for. Proximity of business to point of search (or to user) has been a factor whose inclusion in the LSRF I first suggested in 2012. It only made sense that Google would decrease the value of the “proximity to centroid” factor in their algorithm and at the same time would increase the value of the “proximity to user” factor.

[Phil Rozek](#), Local Visibility System, LLC

There seem to be more “black box” ranking scenarios, which to me suggests that behavioral factors have grown in importance. What terms do people type in before clicking on you? Where do those people search from? How many customers click on you rather than on the competitor one spot above you? If Google moves you up or down in the rankings, will many people still click? I think we’re somewhere past the beginning of the era of mushy ranking factors.

[Susan Hallam](#), Hallam Internet

We are seeing an uplift in “illegal stuff” working. Keyword-stuffing in domain names, third-party reviews markup, lots of those old-fashioned “locksmith”-type tricks are still giving short-term gain.

There appears to be an even greater divergence on the specific factors governing the various types of “local” businesses, and it would be worth exploring these in greater detail.

And there is still a great divergence in desktop versus mobile results.

Foundational factors versus competitive difference-makers

[Brian Barwig](#), AttorneySync

Google has dialed up the foundational factors when it comes to local SEO in the past year. It seems if a business does not have proper NAP, schema, a verified GMB page, is located in the city being searched, and does not have at least a few high-quality citations, the listing doesn't have a chance. Competitive factors include local, relevant links, and matching your GMB landing page closely with the business information (having the city/state/name in page title/H1). I see links as the biggest differentiator here.

[Brian Smith](#), Placeable

In my opinion, foundational factors should cover the basic bases for 1) listing creation, 2) Schema/JSON-LD (entity-based search), and 3) proper site optimization between your landing page and local listings. The competitive factors require more investment — both monetarily and from a time commitment. These items include content expansion and site upgrades.

[Casey Meraz](#), Juris Digital

While we're big fans of earning links, you still can't really take any shortcuts. You should always focus on fixing your foundational factors such as proper optimization and a proper primary citation tier. Making sure this information is accurate and your top citations are correct is not only essential to your search success, but it can bring actual new business through the directories, as well.

If you're looking to continue to increase your visibility, don't ignore reviews on Google and third-party platforms like Yelp. Potential customers are reading these and looking at these. Many of the click studies we have done show that users are more likely to click on highly rated businesses with consistent positive feedback. Even if you rank below a competitor in a local pack, you can snag more clicks just by focusing on running a good business and getting positive reviews.

[Colan Nielsen](#), Sterling Sky Inc.

One of the greatest competitive difference-makers, especially if you are in a notoriously spam-filled industry, is developing an ongoing strategy to actively monitor and combat spam. I have worked with businesses that had more than seven spam GMB listings ahead of them in ranking; after having them removed (because they were totally fake listings), the business I was working with shot up in ranking to the first page. But this strategy needs to be ongoing. It will often feel like you are playing whack-a-mole, but it is a necessary part of any modern local SEO strategy. It's also one of the few tactics that you can perform that has an immediate ranking boost (once the spam is removed).

[Cori Graft](#), Seer Interactive

It's nice to see the local algorithm finally making strides toward catching up to the sophistication of the traditional one. I don't think it's there yet, but it's getting close. The foundations are the same — make sure your data is out there and correct, optimize your listings, and make sure your website is topically and locally relevant. But just doing the basics won't get you very far anymore. This space has grown astronomically over the last few years, both by the sheer number of businesses listed online as well as the number of people who search for local businesses on a regular basis.

To put it shortly, foundational factors are the things you have to do to establish your business online. Competitive difference-makers are the things you put effort into to make your business stand out and connect with your potential customers online. Reviews, mentions on local or industry websites, your website's user experience, photos and complete business information on your listings — these are all the things that help people get to know you online and ultimately inform their decision to visit you in person.

[Dan Leibson](#), Local SEO Guide

I think this is a really important discussion; thanks for getting into it with us! I think it's important to recognize that local SEO is becoming more and more like traditional, technical SEO + local stuff. That means foundational ranking factors are things like:

Is your site crawlable?

Have you dealt with duplicate content?

Are you targeting your keywords with content?

Is your NAP information consistent?

Without stuff like this, then unless you are in a non-competitive vertical or geo, you are going to have a really hard time ranking. After that, it really becomes about how to achieve parity with your SERP competitors. That means in terms of content, links, citations, and reviews. Those are the levers that we are really seeing drive the needle.

[David Mihm](#), Tidings

A clean citation profile at the major data aggregators and tier 1 sources remains essential. Beyond that, there's no sense in paying for a bunch of weak sites that never rank on page one and get virtually zero traffic.

But citations won't move the needle; they're table stakes. Think of them as the basic molecule of the organism that is your local entity.

The competitive difference-makers are brand authority and brand engagement signals. Right now links are still the overwhelming markers for authority, but their power will fade over time as Google is able to get more and more engagement signals from Google Voice and relentless (and invasive, but few consumers seem to care) tracking of Android, Google Maps, and Waze users' locations.

[David Oremland](#), Maryland Bartending School

Again, we have always seen links as tremendously valuable. With Google devaluing volumes of citations, we see a greater value to links, links, links. We've seen terrific value to volumes, absolutely diversity of URLs, and then if you are creative enough to get high-value links from very strong websites, all relative to your competition, it's a huge boon. Alternatively, when we see weak link profiles, we see sites that can't expand their visibility let alone enhance their rankings in pack and organic.

One thing we've continued to experiment on is to increase "stickiness" to pages — that is to say the time spent on pages. If it goes up over time, we've seen organic rankings increase!

[Dev Basu](#), Powered By Search

In all our testing at Powered By Search, we're seeing a shift from foundational factors like claiming, consistency, and coverage of local search data being a competitive factor to becoming more foundational. Simply put, doing this on its own doesn't cut it anymore.

This is one reason why aggregators or listing distribution platforms are only a part of the equation, especially in hyper-competitive markets. What you need on your side is expertise that can laser-focus on the key local and industry websites that hold authority, and then figure out how to build relationships with them (whether via co-citation or inbound links).

The biggest competitive factors are quality of links, quantity of links, and increasing velocity of business name searches.

[Eric Rohrback](#), Gemini Guys

I think there is a huge difference when it comes to citation building between sites that need it and those that don't. Businesses that need citation work are those which have moved addresses, changed phone numbers, bought another business, etc. The root of the need is that information is mismatched, and will need work to correct.

Established businesses that have made little to no changes over the course of their existence really don't need much citation work. Optimizing listings is great to try and improve conversion rates (click-to-call, driving directions, leave a review), but it's not going to move the needle as much, so time is better spent elsewhere.

The real difference-makers will come down to links and powerful reviews. Reviews are additional UGC for your web properties, and can have a valuable effect on user engagement. More quality links still means better ranking ability, so those are the major competitive difference-makers.

[Greg Gifford](#), DealerOn

Again, most people count citations as foundational — but we've found them to be a huge difference-maker. Foundational tactics include quality content, citations on the major aggregators, and the beginnings of a quality link profile. Local area code number, citation consistency, proper GMB setup, etc. are also important pieces of the foundation.

For competitive difference-makers, it really comes down to local links more than anything else (at least in our experience). Citations from local sources and vertical sources can help as well, since many competitors only focus on the major basics. Everyone's got lots of content now, so ensuring keyword relevance throughout the site (both topical and geographical) is incredibly important.

[Gyi Tsakalakis](#), AttorneySync

Spend 80% of your time on competitive difference-makers and 20% of your time on foundational factors. In competitive SERPs, foundational factors are the ticket to entry. That's not to say that they're not important; it's just that everyone is getting better at implementing them. If you want to rank, you have to find ways do what your competitors aren't doing or can't do. Use your business' competitive advantages in your local search marketing strategies.

[James Watt](#), James Watt Marketing

The biggest competitive difference maker I see is domain authority and backlinks. Sites on the 1st page of the SERPs for a local keyword aren't always in the 3-pack, but the 3-pack sites are very rarely not on the first page. Between what I've seen, and the results of Local SEO Guide's [2016 Local SEO Ranking Factors](#), I'm convinced that backlinks are going to be the real place where battles are won. You still need a strong foundation, but it's not enough by itself in a competitive market.

[Joy Hawkins](#), Sterling Sky Inc.

I think in the coming years, the SEO agencies and consultants that are going to be able to get real results for their clients are going to be the ones that don't follow a cookie-cutter approach. It's no longer good enough to follow the standard checklist of items to optimize your listing and then expect it to rank well. Google is going to continue to make it more difficult for one company to dominate the search results. As they do this, it's going to take a lot more effort and strategy for businesses to remain on top. I think it's going to be crucial for businesses to have not just a local strategy, but an organic one as well that involves having people actually see their content and bringing in other mediums like Facebook and Twitter. I also think backlinks are more important than ever and getting links outside of the standard citation-building will continue to make an impact in ranking.

[Lisa Kolb](#), Acorn Internet Services

In the lodging industry, now that Google is relying on OTAs (online travel agencies) available room nights for 3-pack and maps placement, we have identified that the default search filter for available lodging nights is set to a Sunday, 10–14 days out, on a one-night minimum stay. Obviously once the guest changes the date, this strategy ceases to assist. We have found great success with our clients who are willing to set a one-night minimum on Sunday in the 3-pack versus clients who choose not to. This assumes that our clients have already met Google's local guidelines. We don't expect this to continue very long into the future, as we have seen Google's testing of encouraging guests to physically change the filters. Once the date is changed, the strategy will no longer apply.

[Matthew Hunt](#), Powered By Search

The foundation of local SEO is still much the same. Focus on your website first, as you own that asset and control it. Make sure it's optimized well for organics, especially now that it's hard to rank in the 3-pack without first-page rankings organically. Claim your GMB listing(s) and make sure the GMB listing(s) are fully filled out. Make sure you have good consistency with your NAP information across the web. Secure your tier 1, 2, & 3 NAP citations. It looks like this:



Another minimum table stake item is to get at least 5 positive reviews on your GMB Listing(s). The above is the ABCs of local SEO; we call it the “[5 Pillars of Local Search Engine Optimization](#)” at Powered By Search.

PRO TIP: If you want to do the least amount of effort and get the maximum impact, be sure to reverse-engineer those in your space who are getting great results with minimum backlinks and citations. Often it’s just a handful of backlinks and citations that make the real difference in improved rankings. If you pay attention to those competitors who have done the least and yet still rank well, often you can uncover the gold. It’s not about quantity, but about quality.

[Mike Ramsey](#), Nifty Marketing & NiftyLaw

Having custom categories and a claimed listing used to be gold. Nobody even knew about maps, so if you did, you could literally dominate overnight. Then, it was understanding the importance of citations and online listings for authority to increase rankings. Now, there are more than enough competitors in most markets with claimed listings and citations to make it basically the gate you need to enter to even run in the race.

[Nick Neels](#), Location3

Most multi-unit and franchise systems are now executing some form of local business listing management, making local search more competitive than ever. The brands that are the biggest winners in local search are the ones that don’t set it and forget it with an off-the-shelf solution. Rather, they continually analyze location-level performance, prioritize markets, and invest ongoing resources to move the needle. No longer does simply creating citations cut it in competitive markets.

To truly outperform the competition in local search, brands need to be critical of their listing and location-page performance down to the location level, as well as work internally or with their partner to execute hyperlocal optimizations.

[Nyagoslav Zhekov](#), Whitespark Inc

There are a number of factors that are both foundationally and competitively important to a different extent (for instance, quality of inbound links to domain or overall domain authority). At the same time, in a super competitive environment where everyone has gotten all the basics perfectly right, factors related to ongoing effort would be most beneficial. These factors include new, quality content publishing on a regular basis (which is related to velocity of inbound links to domain), the finding of niche opportunities for additional citations (for instance, on local newspaper sites or industry-related blogs), and solicitation (direct or indirect) of additional reviews — both on Google and on third-party sites.

[Phil Rozek](#), Local Visibility System, LLC

[As I wrote recently](#), IN GENERAL I consider local listings + “website optimization” to be the foundational factors. Longer-term, links and reviews are what really divide the food chain.

How Possum has impacted your approach, if at all

[Brian Barwig](#), AttorneySync

Possum hyper-focuses on everything local. I’ve zeroed in on everything local to the city my client is located in. My experience has been that local is now about attaining even more local links. If possible, try and get the links to the same page as your GMB profile.

[Brian Smith](#), Placeable

Filtering has been our biggest issue. We’re moving towards adding more localized content, such as neighborhoods, landmarks, roads, etc. to help designate separation between each organic result we achieve.

[Andrew Shotland](#), Local SEO Guide

We have been focused on pulling agencies who had been using spammy links and low-quality sites out of the ditches they drove themselves into. Other than that, it has been business as usual. :)

Since Possum, we haven't had to do as much convincing of our multi-location clients re: investing in local SEO. Those who had been doing the right things before Possum saw the benefits, and those who weren't saw their competitors crank up. It focuses the mind. :)

[Caleb Donegan](#), Balihoo

Possum didn't necessarily change the way we approached optimization, but rather was a clear foreshadowing of paid ads becoming a part of the pack. Removing the importance of being in the city of search, let alone being close to the centroid, makes it pretty clear that they are broadening the criteria for ranking and, in essence, preparing to introduce new ways to compete.

[Colan Nielsen](#), Sterling Sky Inc.

As part of your local SEO audits, and — to a lesser extent but still important — as part of your ongoing strategy, you need to be auditing all the other businesses that exist at the same address as your client's business. Google is filtering business' GMB listings in situations where there are multiple businesses with the same category at the same address. Develop a system for auditing this, and do whatever you can to ensure that Google chooses not to filter your client's business over the others.

[Cori Graft](#), Seer Interactive

It hasn't much, honestly; but it's certainly helped direct the conversation away from some of the more traditional local SEO tactics and toward a "people-first" approach to local search marketing. The Possum update was the logical next step in more closely aligning the local and traditional algorithms. The aftermath of it has been frustrating for a lot of SEOs, but from the perspective of a normal person searching the Internet, it makes sense. They're seeing a wider variety of results scattered across the map that are physically closer to them than they were pre-Possum. Is Google really serving up the best user experience if the entire local finder is filled with businesses all located in different suites in the same building? They might all technically be different businesses, but it doesn't give the searcher many different options. Now they can decide where they want to go, zoom in on that area, and see more results in that area (i.e. the businesses that were filtered in the original search). On the localized organic side of things, they're presented with more directories and sites that they know and trust, which they can visit to make their decision.

My advice: Focus on establishing your business as THE local leader in your category. Get listed on those "Best Of" lists that are ranking more often now, make sure that your listings are optimized with photos and complete info, and make sure you're present on the sites that people actually go to.

[Dan Leibson](#), Local SEO Guide

Not really at all, not much to do about businesses being clustered together. If a client appears to have been impacted by "Possum," we have a specific series of tactics we will run to try to get them to stand out. This is primarily around structured data.

[David Mihm](#), Tidings

I gave some answers in this section, but my overarching answer would be Possum hasn't impacted my approach to local SEO at all, other than to tell people affected by Possum that they shouldn't have put all of their eggs in the local SEO basket in the first place. If you breathlessly await each Google update with bated breath, you're doing it wrong.

[Dev Basu](#), Powered By Search

Possum didn't affect our clients much, given their enterprise nature. They don't tend to have peer-type businesses operating in the near proximity quite as much. Interestingly, we did see many franchisee-type businesses not located in the city being searched showing up in the local pack SERPs.

[Eric Rohrback](#), Gemini Guys

I think making sure categories are correct and accurate. If you're in a dense business area (think: mall or business park), then the business really needs to double-check if there are related businesses

around their office. The other area is content to make sure there's something on the website speaking to surrounding neighborhoods, not just the primary city.

[Greg Gifford](#), DealerOn

It didn't really have much influence on us in automotive, so we didn't make much of a change. We had already started to focus a bit more on third-party reviews, so it only reinforced that decision. We've focused a bit more on acquiring links from industry sites as well. Other than that, not much changed.

[Gyi Tsakalakis](#), AttorneySync

If you rely on local search for business and you don't have a physical location in the city in which you want to earn customers/clients, you should seriously consider opening a location in that city or moving. I suspect it's going to be increasingly difficult to appear in local search results in locations in which businesses don't have a physical location.

[James Watt](#), James Watt Marketing

There are two things I've changed since Possum. The first is obvious: You need to know how to diagnose a potential Possum filter that might be affecting your business, and you need to know what to do about it if you find an issue. The second: I've become less trusting of ranking trackers. The 3-pack has had heavy variation depending on what part of the city you're in for a while now, but I've seen that variation go up since last September. I feel it's more important now than ever to set proper tracking links and goals to get a real number for 3-pack exposure trends, since changes (or no change) in the ranking tracker you're using may tell you less of the full story now.

[Joy Hawkins](#), Sterling Sky Inc.

It has caused me to spend more time educating the business owner on why they are going to see different results than their customers. Especially for businesses in big cities, it is becoming almost impossible for them to rank all over the city regardless of where the user is. For example, what they see when searching from their office will differ from what they see in their home. It's important now to make sure ranking trackers are set to a zip code level versus a city level, or the results will be really inaccurate.

I also think it's more important now to be aware of duplicate GMB listings, since the filter is actively filtering out listings that are similar. Businesses with practitioners need to be aware of every listing out there and make sure they have a good strategy on how to keep the listings from competing as much as possible. Finding duplicate listings is currently harder than ever, so it has caused me to create and discover new approaches to how to find them without using MapMaker, since Google is about to shut that down in 2017.

[Matthew Hunt](#), Powered By Search

For seasoned local SEOs, Possum did not change the strategies employed to improve visibility in Google. Much of the [updates with Possum](#) were to remove duplicate content, use organic as a stronger signal, and to serve up results based on people's location. Some of the challenges that occurred: some businesses who had the same category as a competitor at the same address [got filtered](#). If you have this challenge, you want to make sure your listing has more signals and that your GMB listing is stronger so it can win that filter or move locations. ;)

[Mike Ramsey](#), Nifty Marketing & NiftyLaw

We didn't really change much. Possum basically validated things we have been doing for quite a while.

[Miriam Ellis](#), Solas Web Design

It was honestly hard for me to cite factors I'm working on less as of Possum, but there's certainly one thing I'd be detailing multi-practitioner clients about, given the fallout of this filter. I would now generally only recommend building practitioner listings where categories are different. This is my temporary stance until we see what happens after Possum. It just may not make sense at this point to build 5 extra GMB listings for 5 dentists at a practice, given how they are likely to be filtered out. Strategy may be changing as a result of Possum, and unless you can diversify categories among practitioners, practitioner listings may have decreased in volume significantly since the last LSRF survey.

[Nick Neels](#), Location3

Google introduced the Possum update to diversify the local search results based on proximity, brand/agents, address, and price. I believe Google will continue to display diverse results and drive searchers to utilize current and future filter functionality to narrow down their options. While you can't necessarily control Google's listing diversity controls, you can still ensure you've provided Google with all possible business attributes and all the listings are in good standing.

Our data showed listings that were incomplete and missing hours of operation were highly likely to be filtered out of the results and lose visibility. As a result, we worked with our clients to gather hours for any listings missing them. Once the hours of operation were uploaded, the listings no longer were filtered.

[Phil Rozek](#), Local Visibility System, LLC

Aside from catching some well-deserved flack for coming up with that name, I haven't seen much of a difference since Possum. (Maybe I'm just looking in the wrong places.) On the other hand, Google does seem a little better about drawing results from a wider geographical area — and not as many from the same stinkin' Regus office building.

Specific ranking factors

Anything working particularly well for you? Anything that used to work but doesn't anymore?

[Blake Denman](#), RicketyRoo Inc.

What's definitely not working anymore is citation building as a sole means of link building. Correct NAP across the top citation sources is your foundation, but adding 150+ other structured citations from low-level websites/directories will not move the needle.

[Brian Barwig](#), AttorneySync

Some strategies which I still see working well are links, schema, citations and in some niches, reviews. In certain niches, reviews do not seem to be much of a factor at all (for ranking anyway). Another factor which I see working well is doorway pages. Creating generic content and pages for

each city a business operates in. It's spammy, but still works well. I don't understand why Google doesn't put an end to these pages. This should be an easy fix.

[Caleb Donegan](#), BaliHoo

Although we still see effectiveness in adding geo-specific info in metadata, it has definitely lost much of the impact it used to have. This is likely a result of Google getting better at identifying searcher location.

[Casey Meraz](#), Juris Digital

Links continue to be a strong factor for success in organic and local search results. In our experience, just a few high-quality targeted links can move the needle if you're earning them to the page your Google My Business page is attached to. For businesses with a single location this seems to be the homepage pretty often, but for multi-location businesses it can get a bit trickier.

[Colan Nielsen](#), Sterling Sky Inc.

Works well: Building relationships (links) and reviews.

Not working in the same way that it used to: We continue to see less movement of the needle after performing rounds of NAP cleanup and less movement after building new citations.

[Dan Leibson](#), Local SEO Guide

To quote the amazing Gyi Tsakalakis: "Meh, links."

While I don't think that citations really do much to drive the needs for SMBs, they do really seem to move the needle for brands, most likely just because of the scale of the links that come from them.

We really strive to focus our SEO efforts for local clients on 4 buckets:

- Technical, on-site SEO

- Content

- Links

- Citations (if necessary)

[David Mihm](#), Tidings

I would get as many relevant categories added as I possibly could for both my business and my clients' businesses in Google Mapmaker before they shut it down in March of 2017. Many more are available there than are listed in the GMB console.

[David Oremland](#), Maryland Bartending School

Quality content as a mechanism to keeping people on the pages for longer times. We've engaged in experiments on this. It seems to work. We've been altering content and layouts and have seen

greater time spent on pages and we do see some changes in organic SERPs. So we keep working on that.

I suppose the google algos are measuring reader engagement. If the readers are finding the content compelling, Google will reward the pages with better rankings. We like that.

What doesn't work? Several years ago we were penalized by using the simplest methods that "worked for older Google algos." One after the other, Google seems to find them, devalue them, and then penalize them. If it's not real — for the readers, the customers, and ultimately google's algos — we stay away from it. Here is one that used to work like a citation on steroids, or a supercharged link: links with citation data from any source (unstructured citations in the form of a link). Those used to have enormous positive effect on the pack and for various organic phrases. Google killed that impact. By the way, some of the things that used to work in Google still work in Bing organic rankings.

[Dev Basu](#), Powered By Search

Creating targeted omni-channel campaigns that encourage the user to search for the business is working well for us. The age-old practice of continuing to acquire quality inbound links is working better than ever.

Here's what doesn't work anymore:

- Low-authority third-party unstructured citations

- Virtual addresses

- Posting lots of social updates from claimed pages

[Eric Rohrback](#), Gemini Guys

Links still work well. :)

[Greg Gifford](#), DealerOn

Local links. Local links. Local links. And then a few more local links.

Local content silos have been incredibly useful in getting businesses on the outskirts of metro areas to show up in the localized organic results for the major metro.

Topical keywords in reviews seem to have grown in influence this year.

"Great content" seems to be less effective — but that's probably because everyone's got great content now.

[Gyi Tsakalakis](#), AttorneySync

Unfortunately, spam still works — until it doesn't. Various older local spam techniques have recently been resurfacing and then disappearing in waves. Things like spamming business titles, using directory links as GMB landing pages, and virtual office locations tend to appear and vanish from SERPs we monitor over time. For most businesses, these tactics are inadvisable. You're better off taking your money to the casino.

However, one thing continues to work particularly well: acquiring quality local links. To me, quality is a combination of relevance to the business and location.

[James Watt](#), James Watt Marketing

The biggest thing I've overhauled this last year isn't a new focus on one particular factor, per se, so much as a change in how I decide what order to tackle things in. There are an incredible number of potential factors, opportunities, penalties, filters, onsite factors, offsite factors... if you haven't overhauled your audit procedure in awhile, it's time. A thorough audit is likely going to take a few hours to perform, and will run a few dozen pages, but it will provide you with a much better roadmap than you'll get any other way.

[Joy Hawkins](#), Sterling Sky Inc.

I've noticed with many algorithm updates that it causes lots of old listings to resurface, which generally means you see more crap or spam in the results than previously. If I am working with a business in a spammy industry (lawyers, locksmiths, carpet cleaning, etc.), I have found that monitoring the local results for fake listings and/or keyword stuffing, and then correcting those listings, can make a big impact on my client's ranking. For example, I had a business in NYC who got pushed out of the 3-pack after the Possum update by a listing set up by a competitor that was named as a keyword (not the real business name), used a residential address, and tracking phone number. This business already had another listing for their real location that ranked as well, so this second one was a complete violation of Google's guidelines. After I got it removed, my client was back in the 3-pack within a matter of hours.

I would also say consolidating duplicates works very well still. I often have businesses come to me that have duplicate listings and their previous SEO was unaware and never consolidated them. Having reviews split across listings can really weaken rankings, so I have seen consolidating these to have a big positive impact on ranking.

[Matthew Hunt](#), Powered By Search

What is new is that reviews seem to make a difference in rankings now. Before, they got you more clicks and helped influence where people would shop and buy, but it wasn't really boosting rankings. Now reviews seem to have some impact on rankings (according to [this study](#)), where they said businesses who had more reviews tend to rank higher in local search results. Something that continues to work is making sure your website ranks organically on the first page; the easiest way to do that is to have some solid backlinks that contain the main keyword as anchor text back to your website (no new news there for most people).

[Mike Ramsey](#), Nifty Marketing & NiftyLaw

Authority links... ;-)

[Nick Neels](#), Location3

Identifying priority markets and layering on additional hyper-local optimizations has been successful for our clients. Each location benefits differently from an overarching strategy and execution, so we've found it important to develop a location-prioritization system using a combination of sales data, location-saturation mapping, competitive intelligence, and performance metrics. With this location plan, we've focused on the highest-priority markets to drive the biggest impact.

[Phil Rozek](#), Local Visibility System, LLC

Google seems to love specialists more than ever. I wouldn't say that's a trend limited to this year, but it seems to be the long-term trend. As the general level of competition rises, Google's more likely to cherry-pick and not give any one business a monopoly on rankings for a wide range of search terms. That's good news if you're a specialist. But if you offer an eclectic mix of services or products, or practice several areas of law, or treat many illnesses — and you actually want to rank for them — you'd need to work your butt off. For starters, you'll need an in-depth page on each, and links specifically relevant to each, and reviews that mention those offerings specifically. You'll have to work harder than the business owner who focuses on one thing.

Where you see Google is headed in the future

[Brian Barwig](#), AttorneySync

I predict it will be more difficult to rank in both local and organic. Google is pushing all results further and further down the page with more ads in both areas. With the Local Service Ads, Google is going more pay-to-play in local as well. Now is the time to diversify. If you are relying on Google for all of your traffic, it will be difficult moving forward.

I also predict there will be more personalization in the SERPs. There is already a good amount of personalization baked in and people do not realize it. Lastly, I think there will be more answer boxes coming. Google is going to attempt to get the query right the first time. With Google Home, Echo, etc. and a focus on voice search, more and more queries will show answer boxes — another reason to diversify your traffic if you aren't already.

[Brian Smith](#), Placeable

With the introduction of personal assistants, AI and how it parses long-tailed keywords will begin to take a front-row seat for local search marketers. Google's propensity to show entity-based searches in the form of knowledge panels, keeping users within the SERP shows challenges moving forward. This is where you need to make sure you have the foundational factors down in order to take advantage of how Google will use this information within their personal assistant.

We also see that Google is trying to figure out how to monetize the map, so expect some new layouts over the next year for maps.

[Caleb Donegan](#), Baliwoo

It's becoming hard to argue the inevitability of paid ads dominating the SERP, and in the near future (possibly even in 2017) they'll likely represent a larger percentage of results on the first page than organic and the local pack combined.

[Casey Meraz](#), Juris Digital

Spam is still a large issue in local results. Everyday while doing a search, I see a few new listings that I didn't see before. Google still has a long way to go to figure out what businesses are legitimate, and I think we will see further pushes for verification in the future. We know they're testing third-party verification already, so I believe we will continue to see more of this in the future.

[Colan Nielsen](#), Sterling Sky Inc.

Pay-to-play with reviews being the competitive difference-maker.

[Cori Graft](#), Seer Interactive

Google will continue to find ways to keep people from leaving Google as much as possible, so expect your organic traffic to decline in the coming years. Stop thinking of your website as a destination, and start thinking of it as a data feed. Utilize Schema.org and JSON-LD as much as possible to highlight important information on your website.

[Dan Leibson](#), Local SEO Guide

I think citations will soon be on the way out; it really is just about Google investing the time and resources to redo their core local search algo. In 2017, it just doesn't make sense to look at business info consistency when they can rely on the link graph, reviews, etc., all of which are more scalable and produce better results for their users.

I know that everyone is bullish on voice search, but I am a huge skeptic. Having had a launch Echo (and now a Google Home), doing local searches (and really, most searches) in the voice interface is a pretty awful user experience. It prevents the ability to do research and is very slow compared to a traditional search. As AR and VR become more prominent technologies, I wouldn't be surprised for voice search to be leapfrogged at some point by better augmented UIs. After all, we are still several years away from voice search being a truly dialed-in technology, and with the amount of money being invested in AR and VR, I don't doubt that it will start to outpace voice.

[David Mihm](#), Tidings

Entities — and especially single entities returned by Google Assistant — is [where I see Google headed](#).

[David Oremland](#), Maryland Bartending School

Clearly, to us, mobile is the future. Google has told us that. Our traffic from mobile increases all the time, in gross numbers and as a percentage of all traffic. From an SEO perspective, that is rough once there are advertisements in the vertical. So, frankly, no matter how we approach this, we are looking at ever-more monetization connected to visibility. We've been advertising for years for all our sites even with some great visibility in the pac/maps and organic.

What we simply see is that every year, the percentage of AdWords clicks goes up and organic goes down. The other thing we know is occurring, because we answer the phones for our own SMBs, is that we get calls with people having never gone to the site. They are reading info from the knowledge box and never hitting our website(s). Google keeps answering questions before searchers are getting to our site. That is simply something that is difficult to deal with!

[Dev Basu](#), Powered By Search

I'm seeing Google taking personalization based on the physical location of the searcher to the next level. They are already gathering a normal distribution of usage analytics on every GMB listing, so I won't be surprised if we start seeing it become more and more difficult for the business owner to understand what their true ranking really is.

I also see Google ramping up its advertising efforts to a new level to promote GMB listings in search results.

[Eric Rohrback](#), Gemini Guys

More and more I can see a push towards user reviews as a major ranking factor for businesses as a possibility. Links started as a “vote” for a good website; what’s more powerful than a rating & explanation why a business received that grade? The only holdup now is controlling fake reviews...

[Greg Gifford](#), DealerOn

Pack/map searches will continue to see proximity grow in importance. I also see social metrics and behavioral metrics gaining importance as Google figures out how to devalue links without severely mucking up the search results.

[Gyi Tsakalakis](#), AttorneySync

Google is headed toward making us pay for more clicks. My guess is that we are likely to see instances in which as many as the first five spots on Google are paid results (i.e. four AdWords ads and a paid local pack listing). We have seen instances in which the average click-through rate for a Google My Business listing that maintains an average position of 1.2 is less than 1%. Don’t overly rely on local pack positions for business. Diversify your Internet marketing strategies across channels. Measure the effectiveness in terms of goals and conversions, as opposed to impressions and rankings.

[James Watt](#), James Watt Marketing

There are two changes I expect to see over the next few years, one I’m excited about, one I’m less than thrilled with. The potential bad news is an increasing trend on Google’s part towards pay-to-play. Ads at the top of the local finder, Google Home Service ads for a growing number of cities and industries, and an ad potentially coming to the 3-pack are all signs of a move towards monetization on Google’s part. Local SEO isn’t dying anytime soon, but we’re looking at a slowly shrinking opportunity space.

The second change is AI. For those who don’t know, Google recently scrapped 10 years of Google Translate work for a new, much more effective system that was developed from the ground up in only 9 months. There’s been a lot of talk about RankBrain (the search side of Google’s AI explorations) over the last year, and while there hasn’t been much new on the ground since RankBrain was announced, I wouldn’t be surprised to see rapid changes coming in the future. I have no idea what kinds of changes we might be looking at, but I very much believe we’re on the precipice of a new way of doing things. Enjoy business as usual while it’s here, and keep an eye on trends as they come.

[Joy Hawkins](#), Sterling Sky Inc.

I think Google will continue to roll out advanced verification in 2017, which will make it harder for spammers to create fake listings. What I’m already seeing as a result of this is an [increase in hijackings](#) (people editing listings for existing businesses but changing their phone numbers or websites). I think Google will start to integrate more paid features into the 3-pack in an effort to monetize and get a better handle on the spam problem.

I also think Google will continue to develop the Local Guides platform and (hopefully) increase the features and benefits for those who actively participate.

Google is currently testing a posting-to-search feature in Google My Business, and I would be surprised if that feature didn't launch worldwide in 2017.

[Lisa Kolb](#), Acorn Internet Services

Now that AMP is available, beyond just the news structure results, and their continuing improvements to page-speed and mobile friendliness testing tools, we feel that Google will continue to move in the direction of rewarding fast-loading, quality mobile websites.

[Matthew Hunt](#), Powered By Search

Ads: In my opinion, Google is looking for ways to get more SMBs to invest in paid advertising options. It's their primary focus because they already mostly have all the large business. Their primary goal is to grow revenue dollars from SMBs, so they will continue to experiment with ways to get them to invest in AdWords. This may mean them offering some paid opportunities with the local 3-pack, as well as pay-per-lead opportunities that you already see with hotels and flights. If your business is not on AdWords, it should be. You can get your ads in the extended map results above the fold and connect your ads to your GMB to get your amazing reviews to show in your ads. Ads are even more important on mobile because it takes up most of the above-the-fold screen real estate and because you can deploy click-to-call ads, which drive real leads and buyers directly to your business. A click-to-call is worth 3X more than a click, because most SMBs' websites and landing pages are horrible and convert at less than 5%. That basically means that 95% of traffic never takes the action you want, but if you allow Google to bypass a SMB's crappy website, the conversion rate for a click-to-call is 100%. Chew on that for a while and it will change your perspective on paid opportunities.

Personalization & less steps: Now, because Google knows most websites' experiences are crap, they will continue to find ways to allow users to skip business' crappy experiences by serving up SERPs that are easier, faster, and a Google personalized experience. We have moved from 10 blue links to knowledge graph results, and the ability to buy directly from Google for many industries already exists. For enterprise businesses, you need to position yourself with [amazing schema and JSON-LD markup](#) as much as possible so you can be the main feed to Google. I think we'll continue to see expanding knowledge graph experiences where Google will serve up all the results a user needs, so they don't even need to visit your website. As David Mihm says, "think of your website as an API." This is much easier to do for enterprise-type businesses.

Voice search: Something that is kinda new is that mobile voice searches are up by 60% in the last year and "50% of all searches will be voice searches by 2020," according to ecomScore. What this means for your business is you will need to start optimizing for the long tail and for voice search queries. When I say "long tail," I don't mean 2-3 keywords; I mean like 6-10 keywords, because people will do voice search like they speak. Voice search is pretty different from text usage.

Example: If someone was searching for vacations in Montreal via text, they'd type in "Montreal hotel deals," but if you speak a search, you'd use your own language, such as, "Who has the best hotel deals in Montreal?" Basically, start writing content that answers questions. Start by collecting your customers' FAQs and be sure to start writing them down and answering those questions on your website. It's a big difference, so continue to prep more for the mobile and voice search revolution coming.

[Mike Blumenthal](#), GetFiveStars

Google is in a transitional period from a web-based linking approach to a knowledge graph semantic approach. As we move towards a mobile-first index, the lack of linking as a common mobile practice,

towards voice search and single-response answers, Google needs to and has been developing ranking factors that are not link-dependent. Content, actual in-store visitations, on-page verifiable truth, third-party validation, and newsworthiness are all becoming increasingly important.

But Google never throws anything away. Citations and links as we have known them will continue to play a part in the ranking algo, but they will be less and less important as Google increases their understanding of entity prominence and the real world.

[Mike Ramsey](#), Nifty Marketing & NiftyLaw

“Hey Google... When are ads going to take over a lot of real estate in local search?”

Assistant then speaks up: “2017–2018.”

[Nick Neels](#), Location3

Multi-unit and franchise brands need to focus on gathering (and cleansing) location-level attributes starting now. Google has already started adding more attributes to local listings, and this will continue over the next year as Google aims to provide users the opportunity to find more specific results (“café with Wi-Fi,” “restaurant with outdoor seating,” “hotels with waterparks”). With more attributes come more filters, and if a brand is missing attributes, they will be filtered out, which is no good.

Along with more attributes, I believe Google will continue to give brands more control of the listing content and demote third-party links or content Google has been backfilling with. This means more optimization opportunities for SEOs, which is nice to see.

Aside from enhancing local listings with this data, brands need to be focused on populating their location pages with this content to provide a rich user experience and to improve the pages’ SEO potential.

[Phil Rozek](#), Local Visibility System, LLC

Google wants to be involved in the transaction itself — the booking of the appointment and the transfer of Benjamins. Google will bend local search to that goal, because it’s the best way to get more rankings-obsessed business owners to get into AdWords and stick with it.

Aside from that, I think local search Google-style will remain pretty boring for the foreseeable future. That’s why we use it.

Anything else you’d like the readers of this survey to know?

[Andrew Shotland](#), Local SEO Guide

Product/Service Keyword in GMB Business Title: Unfortunately, our own study of the local ranking factors showed that this highly spammable tactic works.

Proper GMB Category Associations: It’s not that by having the right category, you automatically are going to rank well. But by not having it, you pretty much aren’t.

Page Authority of GMB Landing Page URL: It’s the link economy, stupid.

Mobile-Friendly/Responsive Website: In the mobile-first index world, look for this factor to be even more important in 2017.

Page Authority of GMB Landing Page URL: I don't think GMB landing pages have anything to do with these, but am using GMB landing page as a proxy for local service page.

Localized organic has become perhaps the most interesting part of the local SERPs in that it is now a zero-sum, fight-to-the-death game for local directories like Yelp and SuperPages. As local businesses invest more in SEO and Google squeezes the real estate for everyone, it gets harder and harder for businesses without a local physical location to show up in these results.

Site Hacked/Presence of Malware: You'd think that having a fake address would be the #1 negative factor, but the sad truth is that a poor shmoe SMB that gets hacked is more likely to lose their rankings than a spammer with a fake location.

[Blake Denman](#), RicketyRoo Inc.

With the rollout of the mobile-first index coming in late January, I would definitely look at improving site speed and making sure the user experience is phenomenal on all devices. Not OK or good — PHENOMENAL.

I also believe Facebook is going to make a pay-to-play ad extension for specific queries in users' posts. If you add "need recommendations," "best [category]," or variations of, FB will prompt you to add a map. From here, people (depending on your privacy settings) can add recommendations and/or tag local businesses on the map. Facebook will have a monetization method with an ad somewhere on this recommendation list in the near future.

[Casey Meraz](#), Juris Digital

You can try to game the search results all you want, but if your business is consistently getting bad reviews, you have other issues to worry about. Focus on fixing any core problems in your business so that your clients want to talk about you. SEO experts can't help you much if there are underlying issues preventing your business from thriving.

[Colan Nielsen](#), Sterling Sky Inc.

One of the greatest and most underrated strategies a local SEO and business owner can have these days is a process on how to utilize GMB's growing support channels effectively:

Phone/email

Twitter

Facebook

GMB Forum

All of the support channels have their strengths, weaknesses, and nuances. As a Google My Business Top Contributor, I spend a lot of time helping business owners at the GMB Forum. And what I am noticing is that the businesses who take the time to post their problems there, and take the

time to provide all the details, are able to get resolutions facilitated by the Top Contributors and Community Manager faster than if they use some of the direct channels.

This is especially true when it comes to issues such as suspended listings, listing reinstatements, and spam, including review spam networks. So my advice is to build an actual process around how you get problems solved for your clients using the various support networks. And at the top of that strategy I would include building relationships with Google employees, as well as Google Experts (Top Contributors) who can be a catalyst to getting problems solved.

This becomes critical if you work with large enterprise and multi-location franchises. We work with a franchise with over 1,000 locations in the US. On Veterans Day, all their locations displayed as closed even though they were open. This caused a nightmare for all the operators at each location. Utilizing the GMB forum and our ability to escalate issues as a Top Contributor, we were able to resolve the issue in 20 minutes.

Your clients are always going to be running into issues with their listings. So align yourself with a Google My Business Expert and utilize the GMB Forum often.

[Dan Leibson](#), Local SEO Guide

I think that local search is going to start getting shaken up as more and more brands start investing in local search. SMBs should be wary that lots of brands haven't tried to flex their muscle in the local search space, and when they do they can potentially change the impact of an entire vertical. The ability to leverage technical SEO through internal links, widgets, and cross-linking pockets of large sites also can have a huge impact on a brand's search presence while not costing an arm and a leg. This means that SMBs need to leverage their agility and ability to execute quickly to gain some traction in their local markets before the landscape gets too crowded. Especially with how Google seems to favor brands, and the huge positive impact that powerful organic SEO can have in local pack rankings.

[David Oremland](#), Maryland Bartending School

Smaller packs, advertising in the local finder, and possibly the packs itself (and then, as a function of Possum, pack results that are significantly dependent on where the searcher is located) — these are all tough for those trying to optimize visibility and higher rankings.

One distinguishing factor is getting more GREAT REVIEWS and having the reviews seen. Also get stickiness with visitors. If they get to you, get their contact info so you can be in touch via email and other elements. Use social media and every other element at your disposal to get them to you by name. Get your name out there. If searches become more a function of recovery than discovery, then you are winning over the searchers.

[Dev Basu](#), Powered By Search

There's very little being published about what enterprise companies with hundreds or thousands of locations need to look for and look out for related to local search optimization.

The big opportunity is to think beyond listing syndication, distribution, consistency, and accuracy. Those are table stakes. Companies who understand how to roll-up data, spot trends, and work beyond the capabilities of tools or platforms by building in-house expertise or working with talented agencies stand a chance to dominate their market.

Oh, and build more quality links.

[Eric Rohrback](#), Gemini Guys

Focus on the business and focus on the customer first.

[Greg Gifford](#), DealerOn

Can we (as local SEOs) PLEASE chat a bit the next time a major update rolls out? If we're sticking with "P" animals, we're missing a ridiculously awesome opportunity to call something the Platypus update...

For future versions, we might want to consider pulling "proximity" out from under GMB factors, as it's really become its own beast now.

Nothing was really included in the factors/study about duplicate listings, but we've seen a HUGE boost in the importance (or "negative power") of duplicate listings. They're almost a fast track to not showing in local results.

[Gyi Tsakalakis](#), AttorneySync

Google is testing the position of local pack results. In other words, it's no longer a guarantee that local packs have prominent placement at the top of SERPs. Businesses that have been heavily reliant on local pack listings should diversify. Don't put all of your eggs in the local pack basket, or for that matter, the search basket more generally.

When building links to your pages, I encourage you to prioritize relevance in both location and industry. Too many businesses seem to be overly relying on proxy metrics (particularly domain authority). Local and industry-specific links, even with lower domain authority, tend to be much more effective than links from more general sites with higher domain authority.

Anchor text still matters. While abusing anchor text can cause problems, too many businesses seem to be abandoning anchor text altogether. Strive for anchor text diversity, but be sure to include relevant keywords in anchors where appropriate.

Stop obsessing over spot-checks of individual rankings. Google is getting too localized and personalized to rely on spot-checks. Furthermore, there appears to be an increasing trend of SERP flux. Instead, focus on general ranking distribution trends over time for larger groups of target queries. While ranking trends can be a good indicator of directional improvement, they're not a reliable indicator of business success.

I'd also encourage readers of this survey to focus on viewing local search through the eyes of their potential customers/clients. For example, so many businesses focus on gaining visibility in local packs, but don't focus on earning reviews and considering hours of operation. You can hold the top local pack spot, but if you have no reviews (or negative reviews) and you're not open when your customers/clients are looking, you'll lose business to lower local pack-ranking competitors.

Readers should also focus on enhancing their listings to earn click-throughs. This starts with creating compelling page titles and meta descriptions. Too many businesses fall into the [location] [service] [brand] title tag paradigm. When all the titles on a SERP look the same, the ones that stand out are

more likely to gain clicks, even from lower positions. Beyond title and descriptions, find ways to incorporate structured data that generate snippets (i.e. review, click-to-call, events, etc).

Find ways to generate featured snippets at the local level. Go read [STAT's research](#) on featured snippets. For local queries that don't show local packs, featured snippets are a powerful way to steal click share from competitors that have higher positions. Find ways to incorporate local information in tables and lists on your pages.

[Matthew Hunt](#), Powered By Search

I'd like to let SMB businesses to know 3 important things. The first thing is that Google is NOT the only way to gain local business. There are complete local ecosystems that can drive your local business steady leads and sales. This could include optimizing or running cost-effective ads for local review sites like Yelp or for social sites like Facebook, so be sure to diversify your marketing. The second thing is to always optimize for a human's intent. Always focus on users to base all your decisions. Thirdly, invest in your own digital asset (your website) the most, and create opportunities to build your email list(s) and retargeting list(s). The money is in the list. It's the difference between "owned traffic" versus "rented traffic." The best way to recession-proof your business is to build your own community of fanatical fans. Be sure to own those relationships and lists.

I'd like to let enterprise and franchise businesses know 3 major things, too. The first is that SaaS local software will not solve all your local SEO problems. The ability to achieve success will be determined by local SEO experts who can leverage software plus their high-touch skills to dive deep into the work. At the end of the day, legitimate local SEO strategies are hard to automate and only using tools will result in less than satisfactory results. The second thing is that enterprise businesses and franchise businesses desperately need to invest in an automated review system for all their locations. So many of them are just victims of loads of poor or no reviews, which is costing them hundreds of thousands of dollars every single year. It's an easy thing to fix. The third thing is for enterprise and franchise businesses try to use "centralized SEO strategy" versus "decentralized SEO strategy." Decentralized SEO is where each franchise location runs their own marketing program(s) and it often even allows them to have their own micro-local websites. It's a s**t show. Centralized SEO is where the franchise uses only one single domain and controls all the marketing. The main reason this is better is because we can build much better authority and folder structure to gain better rankings in local search results. We can also control all the GMB listings with one account.

[Mike Blumenthal](#), GetFiveStars

Thinking about ranking in terms of individuated behaviors of the business or SEO misses the beauty and elegance of a local algo that adapts to a range of inputs across markets, industries, users, and geography. The very same algo has to rank a shoe repair shop in Kazakhstan and the world's most popular department store in NYC.

As such, focusing on single attributes — such as anchor text or review score — blinds us to the greater holistic story that is becoming search and ranking. Google is increasingly able to understand non-traditional signals that are, to a large extent, hidden from our view.

In the end, a business that has a great user-focused website, a strong social presence, content that generates attention, a great & deserved reputation, a strong local presence and an ongoing media presence will do well. By focusing on their clients' needs both pre- and post-sale and doing the things that make them happy, the business will find local search success.

[Mike Ramsey](#), Nifty Marketing & NiftyLaw

You really need to spend 2017 in diversification to a full local marketing program if you haven't already. If you are relying solely on map rankings, your world is about to change. There are so many marketing opportunities based on specific industries that you just need to dive in and learn new practice areas for a complete approach.

[Miriam Ellis](#), Solas Web Design

If I could drive home one topic in 2017 for local business owners, it would surround everything relating to reviews. This would include rating, consumer sentiment, velocity, authenticity, and owner responses, both on third-party platforms and native website reviews/testimonials pages. The influence of reviews is enormous; I have come to see them as almost as powerful as the NAP on your citations. NAP must be accurate for rankings and consumer direction, but reviews sell.

[Nyagoslav Zhekov](#), Whitespark Inc.

There have been a lot of reports recently about recurring negative SEO practices. One such practice that was thought to have been forgotten — marking a competitor's listing as closed — seems to have been returning in the past few months since it became clear that it is still relatively easy for general users to edit already owner-verified GMB listings. MapMaker has been a platform that allowed (to a certain extent) for the overall quality of edits of a user to be assessed by anyone, but with its demise upcoming in March, the future of fighting spam doesn't appear to be bright.

[Phil Rozek](#), Local Visibility System, LLC

If you're not involved in your local SEO beyond writing the check, you probably won't get far. To rank for competitive terms has become tough. If you do nothing else — and whether or not you work with a third-party SEO person or company — spend at least an hour a week doing something difficult. Find and chase down a link opportunity, or add detail to your site, or ask customers for reviews and walk them through how to do it if necessary.