

Hyde & Co.

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FREE RESOURCE · NO. IV

# The local SEO *playbook*

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How to get found when someone nearby searches for what you sell.

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Built almost entirely from **Google's own published rules**, quoted directly, with the source for every one — including an honest account of where popular practitioner advice openly conflicts with policy.

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FREE TO USE AND SHARE  
COMPANION TO THE WEBSITE PLAYBOOK

AN AGENCY FOR BUSINESS OWNERS  
ORLANDO, FLORIDA



# How Local search actually works

When someone searches for a service near them, Google usually shows two different things: a map with three businesses on it, and the ordinary blue links below. These are ranked by different systems. You can be strong in one and invisible in the other, which is why "we rank well but never show on the map" is such a common complaint.

## Google's three stated factors

Google publishes exactly three factors for local results. Its wording matters, so here it is directly:

| FACTOR     | GOOGLE'S DEFINITION                                                                                     | CAN YOU INFLUENCE IT?                  |
|------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Relevance  | "How well a Business Profile matches what someone is searching for."                                    | Yes — most of your effort belongs here |
| Distance   | "How far each business is from the customer who's searching."                                           | <b>No.</b> Not at all                  |
| Prominence | "How well-known a business is" — including how many websites link to you and how many reviews you have. | Yes, slowly                            |

That middle row is the most important line in this playbook. A large part of local ranking is simply where the searcher is standing, and no amount of money or expertise changes it. Any strategy that ignores this will disappoint you.

## What Google says you can actually do

- "Businesses with complete and accurate info are more likely to show up in local search results."
- "More reviews and positive ratings can help your business's local ranking."
- Keep your hours — including holiday hours — current.

**And what nobody can do.** Google states it plainly: *"There's no way to request or pay for a better local ranking on Google."* Separately, Google's search documentation confirms that its advertising programs are independent of search results and that participation "doesn't positively or negatively affect inclusion or ranking." Anyone who implies a relationship with Google gets you results is describing something that does not exist.

## Are you actually eligible?

Start here, because a profile that breaks Google's eligibility rules can be suspended at any moment — usually after a competitor reports it, and usually at the worst possible time. Reinstatement is slow and not guaranteed.

### Google's basic test

Google's requirement is one sentence: *"To qualify for a Business Profile, a business must make in-person contact with customers during its stated hours."*

#### Explicitly not eligible

- Rental or for-sale properties (houses, apartments, vacant units)
- "An ongoing service, class, or meeting at a location that you don't own or have the authority to represent"
- **Lead generation agents or companies**
- "Brands, organizations, artists, and other online-only businesses"
- Any business whose address is a P.O. box or a remote mailbox

### The three business types

| TYPE         | WHAT IT MEANS                                                                                    | ADDRESS SHOWN?              |
|--------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Storefront   | Customers come to you at your address.                                                           | Yes — and required          |
| Service area | You "visit or deliver to customers directly but don't serve customers at your business address." | <b>No — must be removed</b> |
| Hybrid       | You serve customers at your address <i>and</i> travel to them.                                   | Yes                         |

Google's instruction for service-area businesses is unambiguous: *"If you don't serve customers at your business address, remove your address from your Business Profile."* Home-based businesses showing a home address they do not receive customers at are the most common version of this violation.

#### QUICK TIP

If you do show an address, Google expects *"permanent fixed signage of your business name at the address."* This is the rule that makes virtual offices, mailbox services and address-only coworking listings risky. Google does not name those services specifically — the problem is that they fail the signage and in-person-contact rules.

## Your business name — the rule most people break

This one deserves its own section because it is simultaneously the most commonly violated rule and one of the things practitioners most often claim "works". Google's requirement:

*"Your name should reflect your business's real-world name, as used consistently on your storefront, website, stationery, and as known to customers."*

Not permitted in the name field: marketing taglines, store codes, trademark symbols, all-caps text, hours, phone numbers, website addresses, special characters, service or product descriptors, location descriptors, and containment information. Google's own examples: *"TD Bank, America's Most Convenient Bank"* should simply be *"TD Bank"*; *"Verizon Wireless 4G LTE"* should be *"Verizon Wireless"*.

So "Miller Plumbing — Emergency Plumber Tampa" is a violation, even though people will tell you it works. See page 12 for an honest discussion of that tension.

## Hours, phone and address

- **Hours** must be accurate, including holidays. Google explicitly calls out keeping regular and special hours current. Inaccurate hours also invite user-submitted corrections.
- **Phone** should be a number that reaches you directly and matches your website.
- **Address** must be a real, staffed location with signage — or hidden entirely.

## Service areas, if you travel to customers

Two published limits worth knowing, because most advice gets them wrong:

- **"You can have up to 20 service areas."**
- **"The boundaries of your overall area shouldn't be more than about 2 hours of driving time from where your business is based."**

Adding every town within four hours does not extend your reach. It just makes your profile inaccurate.

## Categories: the highest-leverage field you have

If there is one setting worth getting right, it is your primary category. It is the clearest statement of relevance you can make, it takes two minutes to change, and it is wrong on an enormous number of profiles.

### Google's guidance, directly

- *"Select a primary category that best describes your business. When you choose your category, select a specific category from the list that shows up."* Google's own logic: choose "Nail salon" over the broader "Salon".
- *"Use as few categories as possible to describe your overall core business from the provided list."*

### The test that settles most arguments

*"Select categories that complete the statement: 'This business IS a ' rather than 'this business HAS a.'"*

A hotel with a restaurant IS a hotel. It HAS a restaurant. So "Hotel" is the category, and "Restaurant" is not — unless the restaurant is genuinely a separate business the public can visit independently.

### How to choose yours in ten minutes

1. Write down the single service that produces the most revenue. Not the widest description of what you do.
2. Search that service plus your city. Look at the three businesses in the map pack.
3. Click each one and read their primary category (it appears directly under the business name).
4. If all three use a category you are not using, that is a strong signal about how Google understands the query.
5. Choose the most specific category that is genuinely true of you. Add secondary categories only for things you actually *are*.

#### QUICK TIP

You will read everywhere that you get one primary and nine additional categories. That limit is observed in the product, not published in Google's guidelines — we checked. Treat it as a practical ceiling rather than a documented rule, and remember Google's actual instruction is to use as *few* as possible.

## Reviews: what is allowed and what is not

Reviews are one of the two things Google names under prominence, and they are the area where well-meaning businesses most often break the rules without realising it. The policies below are quoted from Google's own contribution policy.

### Asking for reviews is allowed

Google is explicit: *"Remind customers to leave reviews: To leave reviews, you can ask customers to visit a Google link or scan a QR code."* You may ask. What matters is *how*.

### What Google prohibits merchants from doing

| PROHIBITED                                     | GOOGLE'S ACTUAL WORDING                                                                                                                                                                       |
|------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Incentivising reviews                          | "Offer incentives — such as payment, discounts, free goods and/or services — in exchange for posting any review or revision or removal of a negative review."                                 |
| Review gating<br>(asking happy customers only) | "Discourage or prohibit negative reviews, or selectively solicit positive reviews from customers."                                                                                            |
| On-premises pressure                           | "When soliciting reviews, merchants should not require or pressure users to leave ratings or write reviews while on the premises, nor should they request that specific content be included." |
| Fake reviews                                   | Content "not based on a real experience", reviews "paid for, directly or in kind", and content "posted from multiple accounts by or at the request of one person."                            |

Two of those catch honest businesses constantly. The first is the "how did we do?" text that routes happy customers to Google and unhappy ones to a private form — that is selective solicitation. The second is the tablet at the counter where staff watch customers write. Both are explicitly prohibited.

### What happens if you get caught

Google may block your profile from receiving new reviews for a period, unpublish existing reviews, and *"display a warning to let consumers know that fake reviews were removed."* That last one is public, visible to every customer, and far more damaging than a ranking dip.

# A review system that stays within the rules

## Ask everyone, at the right moment

The compliant version is also the simpler one: ask **every** customer, at the point they are most satisfied, using a direct link, with no incentive and no filtering. Asking everyone is not just safer — it produces a more believable profile.

- Get your review link from your Business Profile and shorten it. Make it one tap.
- Send it shortly after the work is done, while the result is fresh.
- Ask in a way that invites detail: what you did, where, and how it went. Never dictate content — requesting specific wording is itself prohibited.
- Build it into your process so it happens without anyone remembering to do it.

## Why a perfect record is not the goal

Research from Northwestern University's Spiegel Research Center found purchase likelihood peaks somewhere between 4.0 and 4.7 stars and *declines* as ratings approach a perfect 5.0. A flawless record reads as filtered. The same research found that nearly all of the lift comes from the first handful of reviews — which is good news if you are starting from nothing.

## Responding, including to the bad ones

Google states that positive reviews and helpful replies can help a business stand out. Practical version:

- Reply to everything, ideally within a day or two.
- Make replies specific to what happened. Ten identical "Thank you for your review!" replies are worse than none — they signal a template, not a business that listens.
- On a negative review, respond once, publicly, calmly, with the facts and an offer to resolve it offline. You are not writing to the reviewer. You are writing to the next hundred people who read it.

**On removing negative reviews.** Practitioners widely report that aggressively flagging reviews can result in a period where new reviews fail to post. Google does not document this mechanism, so treat it as field observation rather than fact. What is certain: a well-handled negative review costs you far less than a visible gap in your review flow, and peer-reviewed research has found negative reviews carry more weight than positive ones — which makes your *reply* to them unusually valuable.

Your Business Profile does not work alone. Google's prominence factor explicitly includes how many websites link to your business, and your own site is where you prove you are real and local.

## The non-negotiables

- **Your address or service area appears on the site itself** — footer and contact page at minimum.
- **Name, address and phone match your profile exactly.** Character for character, including "Suite" versus "Ste".
- **One page per service**, named the way customers say it.
- **LocalBusiness structured data** confirming your name, address, phone and hours in a format search engines read directly.

## Location pages, done honestly

Location pages work when they are genuinely about the location. They fail — visibly and predictably — when they are one template with the city name swapped. That pattern is the single most commonly flagged issue in public site audits, and it is trivially detectable.

### A location page worth publishing includes

- Actual jobs you have done there, with details and photos
- Neighbourhoods, landmarks or districts named because they are relevant, not stuffed in
- Anything genuinely specific: response times, local regulations, common problems in that area's housing stock
- Reviews from customers in that area
- Links to the service pages the page relates to

#### QUICK TIP

If you cannot write 300 honest words about working in a town, you do not have a location page yet — you have a placeholder. Three real location pages beat thirty thin ones, and carry none of the risk.



## Citations: consistency matters more than volume

A citation is any place your business name, address and phone number appear online. The goal is not to be listed everywhere — it is to have nothing anywhere that contradicts your profile.

### The audit, in one sitting

1. Search your business name in quotes. Note every listing on the first three pages.
2. Search your *old* phone number in quotes. This is where the damage usually lives.
3. Check the big ones directly: Apple Maps, Bing Places, Yelp, Facebook, the Better Business Bureau, and the two or three directories that actually matter in your industry.
4. Fix or claim anything that disagrees with your profile. Start with the ones customers actually use.

Paid citation-building packages that blast your details to hundreds of low-quality directories solve a problem most small businesses do not have, and create new inconsistencies to clean up later.

## The monthly rhythm

| HOW OFTEN | WHAT TO DO                                                                                                                                   |
|-----------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Weekly    | Reply to new reviews. Add a photo or two of real work.                                                                                       |
| Monthly   | Check hours are still right. Skim the profile for user-submitted edits Google has accepted without telling you.                              |
| Quarterly | Re-check your primary category against the current map pack — Google adds and renames categories regularly. Re-run the citation audit above. |
| Annually  | Review whether your service areas still reflect where you actually work.                                                                     |

## Recent changes worth knowing

Advice written before 2025 will tell you to do things that no longer exist:

- **Chat and call history were removed from Business Profiles** as of 31 July 2024.
- **The Business Profile Q&A API was discontinued** on 3 November 2025, and Google has signalled that the consumer-facing Q&A experience is being replaced. Any guide telling you to seed your own questions and answers should be treated as out of date.
- **Posts still work**, and are archived after six months unless you set a date range.

# Where the advice and the rules disagree

This is the part most local SEO guides leave out. Several tactics are widely reported to work *and* are explicit policy violations. You deserve to know both halves before you decide.

## Putting keywords in your business name

Whitespark's 2026 survey of local search practitioners ranked keywords in the business title among the top few factors for map pack ranking. Google's guidelines prohibit it outright. Both statements are true. What that means in practice: it appears to work until someone reports you, at which point you risk suspension and a slow, uncertain reinstatement. It is not a tactic. It is a bet, and you are betting the profile that drives your phone calls.

## Creating extra profiles for extra coverage

Practitioners report fast ranking gains from additional profiles for secondary services or locations. Google requires each profile to represent a real, distinct, staffed location with signage. A second profile at an address where nobody meets customers fails that test. Legitimate second locations are fine. Invented ones put every profile you own at risk, because suspensions can cascade across an account.

## Buying reviews, or "review management" that filters

Prohibited, increasingly detectable, and the penalty is public: Google can display a warning on your profile telling customers that fake reviews were removed. Whatever you paid for the reviews, that notice costs more.

## Paid citation blasts and "guaranteed rankings"

Google states there is no way to request or pay for better local ranking. Any guarantee of position is either meaningless (guaranteeing a term nobody searches) or based on something that violates policy.

## How to think about it

The honest framing is this: the rule-following version of local SEO is slower and does not have a ceiling. The rule-breaking version is faster and has a cliff at the end of it. If your business depends on the phone ringing, you are not in a position to gamble the asset that makes it ring.

# The first 90 days

If you do nothing else in this playbook, do this in this order.

| WHEN      | WHAT                                                                                                                                         | TIME NEEDED             |
|-----------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Week 1    | Claim and verify the profile. Confirm you are eligible and the right business type. Remove your address if you do not serve customers there. | 2 hours                 |
| Week 1    | Fix the business name if it contains anything other than your real name.                                                                     | 10 minutes              |
| Week 2    | Set the primary category using the map pack comparison on page 5. Trim unnecessary secondary categories.                                     | 1 hour                  |
| Week 2    | Correct hours, phone, service areas. Match everything to your website exactly.                                                               | 1 hour                  |
| Weeks 3–4 | Build the review request into your process. Ask every customer, no filtering, no incentives. Reply to every existing review.                 | 3 hours to set up       |
| Month 2   | Run the citation audit. Fix the old phone number that is still live somewhere.                                                               | 3 hours                 |
| Month 2   | Add your address and LocalBusiness structured data to the website. One page per service.                                                     | Developer, half a day   |
| Month 3   | Write two genuine location pages for the areas you most want more work in.                                                                   | A day of honest writing |
| Ongoing   | Weekly photos and review replies. Quarterly category and citation check.                                                                     | 20 min/week             |

**Measure it properly.** Before you start, write down today's date, your review count, your average rating, and where you rank for your three most valuable searches (in a private browser window, from your actual business location). Without a baseline you will not be able to tell whether any of this worked — and you will be an easy sell for whoever claims credit next.

— IF YOU WOULD RATHER NOT MANAGE IT YOURSELF

# We can run your local presence *quietly*.

Everything in this playbook is something you can do yourself, and the ninety-day plan is deliberately written so you can.

It is also relentless — weekly photos, review replies, quarterly category checks, citation audits. **Hyde & Co. is an agency for business owners.** We take it off your desk and keep it running in the background.

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*i.* We audit your profile against Google's published rules, not folklore.

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*ii.* We fix what is wrong and tell you plainly what is risky.

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*iii.* We keep it current, so it never quietly goes stale again.

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No obligation. If your profile is already in good shape, we will say so.

**Book a consultation**

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WE BUILD ASSETS, NOT JUST WEBSITES

# Where these rules come from

Every rule quoted in this playbook comes from Google's own published documentation. The two industry sources are labelled for what they are — one is a survey of expert opinion, not a measurement.

| USED IN                             | SOURCE                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Pages 2, 8<br>Ranking factors       | Google Business Profile Help, <i>Improve your local ranking on Google</i> — relevance, distance, prominence; complete info; reviews; no way to pay for ranking.<br><a href="https://support.google.com/business/answer/7091">support.google.com/business/answer/7091</a>                                        |
| Pages 3–4<br>Name, address, signage | Google, <i>Guidelines for representing your business on Google</i> — real-world name rule, prohibited name content, permanent fixed signage requirement, enforcement.<br><a href="https://support.google.com/business/answer/3038177">support.google.com/business/answer/3038177</a>                            |
| Page 3<br>Eligibility               | Google Business Profile Help — in-person contact requirement; ineligible business types including lead generation companies and online-only businesses.<br><a href="https://support.google.com/business/answer/13763036">support.google.com/business/answer/13763036</a>                                        |
| Pages 3, 4<br>Service areas         | Google Business Profile Help — remove address if not serving customers there; up to 20 service areas; roughly 2 hours' driving time.<br><a href="https://support.google.com/business/answer/9157481">support.google.com/business/answer/9157481</a>                                                             |
| Page 5<br>Categories                | Google Business Profile Help — specific primary category, as few as possible, the "IS a" not "HAS a" test.<br><a href="https://support.google.com/business/answer/7249669">support.google.com/business/answer/7249669</a>                                                                                       |
| Pages 6–7<br>Review policy          | Google, <i>Prohibited &amp; restricted content</i> — <i>rating manipulation</i> : incentives, selective solicitation, on-premises pressure, fake reviews.<br><a href="https://support.google.com/contributionpolicy/answer/7400114">support.google.com/contributionpolicy/answer/7400114</a>                    |
| Page 6<br>Penalties                 | Google Business Profile Help — blocked new reviews, unpublished reviews, and a consumer-facing warning that fake reviews were removed.<br><a href="https://support.google.com/business/answer/14114287">support.google.com/business/answer/14114287</a>                                                         |
| Page 7<br>Review research           | Spiegel Research Center, Northwestern University (2017) — rating sweet spot of 4.0–4.7; most lift from the first reviews. Observational, run with a reviews vendor.<br>Chevalier & Mayzlin, <i>Journal of Marketing Research</i> (2006) — peer-reviewed; negative reviews weigh more than positive.             |
| Page 10<br>Feature changes          | Google Business Profile Help on chat and call history removal (31 July 2024); Google My Business API change log on Q&A API discontinuation (3 November 2025).<br><a href="https://support.google.com/business/answer/14919056">support.google.com/business/answer/14919056</a>                                  |
| Page 11<br>Practitioner opinion     | Whitespark <i>2026 Local Search Ranking Factors</i> , published 6 November 2025 — 47 local search experts scoring 187 factors. <b>This is a survey of expert opinion, not a measured effect.</b><br><a href="https://whitespark.ca/local-search-ranking-factors">whitespark.ca/local-search-ranking-factors</a> |

#### DELIBERATELY NOT INCLUDED

the widely-quoted claim that photos produce "42% more direction requests and 35% more website clicks", and the claim that "46% of Google searches have local intent". Neither appears in any current Google documentation, neither has a published methodology or sample, and both trace only to blogs citing other blogs. Add photos because Google recommends it — not because of a number nobody can source.

This playbook is free to use and share.  
The only goal is better websites and better results.