

LOCAL SEO FOR YOUR SITE

The Internet opens up worldwide marketing possibilities for even the smallest enterprises and organizations. But if your business or website is set up only to deal with local or national clients, local search engine optimization will help you target your customers and deliver the highest performance. Since Google's country-specific search results offer diverse rankings compared to Google.com, it is essential to know how to benefit from local search traffic.

Search engines like Google index sites in the most appropriate index they have; thus a UK-based website will be primarily indexed and ranked in the Google.co.uk search results. But country-targeted sites seeking top placement in search results should not only target their audience but also prepare to compete with local sites. They should be flexible in their approach and country specific SEO techniques. You have to be aware that the closer your business is to the user, the more relevant it will be to that user.

Below you will find several simple tips that will help you feel assured that the search engines are aware of your site's true geographic location.

COUNTRY-SPECIFIC LOCAL SEO TIPS

1. Arrange for local domains and local hosting

The major search engines (Google, Yahoo!, Bing) check Top Level Domain (TLD) names to determine where a website is located. If your site has a Country Code Top Level Domain Name, that is, a domain name that ends in a country code like ".ca" for Canada, ".uk" for the United Kingdom, or ".fr" for France - then your site will be included in the country-specific search results. In most cases, the local TLD will outrank a .com name when it comes to local search results.

Registration criteria differ from country to country. It is fairly easy to register a .co.uk or a .co.nz, whereas registering a .com.au name, for example, involves establishing a business entity in Australia. Therefore, if your core goal is to get your content to make top matches in Google.co.uk or Google.co.nz, you had better host that content on country-specific TLDs.

The second method search engines use to determine the geographic location of a website is the IP address of the site. If your site is hosted on a server that is physically located in the target country, then that site will be included in country-specific searches, even if you have a generic TLD domain name like ".com", ".net" or ".info".

You can also register and redirect domains from other countries. It's possible to register a UK website with a hosting provider from anywhere in the world, e.g. the US registrars provide hosting from all over the world. But if you are particularly interested in local SEO, host the

main content on your co.uk domain. Be sure to check the physical location of local hosting servers using, for example, SEOmoz's IP Location Tool.

2. Include contact information

Specify your address, location, and contact details in the footer of each page. This will help tell your clients and the search engines that you are a local business. It doesn't really help if you have offices in multiple locations, because mentioning many countries/cities in the footer won't do much for your local profile in each of those places.

3. Take care about language issues

Take the time to check your spelling and use the type of wording your clients will understand and are familiar with. Different English-speaking countries use different spellings and different words in their specific use of the English language, so you should use the most appropriate for the country you are targeting. For example, if you are optimizing a US-based travel portal, you will use "vacation". However, searchers from the UK, Australia and New Zealand use "holiday" instead of "vacation". Punctuation and the spelling of certain words also differ between certain English-speaking countries, so it would help to become conversant with these differences and avoid the incorrect use of words, which may be perceived as spelling errors.

In targeting different countries, you will encounter the problem of mirror content when you simply put the same content to your websites located on different domains. You might think Web pages translated into different languages avoid the mirror content problem. Not really. You have to remember marketing demands will be different among English-speaking readers in American, Canada, New Zealand and other countries.

In performing local optimization, you will need to adhere to local approaches. For example, the USA sales language is more direct compared with the tone adopted in Australia, the UK and New Zealand. If possible, employ the services of a local copywriting service.

4. Get local inbound links

Search engine spiders consider the inbound links that form your link profile. Inbound links from local TLDs will help you to get into the top results of local search engines. Try to gain links from local business partners, chambers of commerce, government agencies, suppliers, etc.

Local directories are also very useful, particularly local Yellow Pages such as Yellow Pages Australia, Yellow Pages New Zealand, and Yell (UK). Listings in the regional sections of the DMOZ, Yahoo, and BestOfTheWeb global directories will also help to improve local link popularity.

5. Make use of Google Webmaster Tools

Google Webmaster Tools help you control the country association of your content. Country specification will help determine how your site appears in search engine country-specific search results, and also improves your search results for geographic queries. You can set specifications on a domain, sub-domain and directory level.

If you don't want to go to the effort of setting up structures in other countries, the alternative is to set up a Google Webmaster Tools account for the site you have and specify which country you are targeting.

This is one of the most simple but effective methods. Here is the four-step process of Google Webmaster Tools specification:

- Click on Tools
- Set Geographic Target
- Associate a geographic location with this site, and finally
- Select the Country or Region you want to target

Remember, this feature is restricted to sites with a country code top-level domain.

6. Take advantage of a free listing in search engines' local results.

When potential customers search for local information on major search engines, they will easily find information about your business: your contact details, hours of operation, even coupons to print out and bring to your shop. There are 3 major players: Google Places, Bing Business Portal and Yahoo Local Listing Center.

Google Places offers you a free listing on Google Maps. When potential customers search Google Maps for local information, they will easily find information about your business: your contact details, hours of operation, even coupons to print out and bring to your shop. You may edit your listing to have your Google Map results updated in a few weeks. Google Places may be of help even if you don't have a website of your own.

All the information you add should include your search keywords. Note however that Google's terms of service restrict any misrepresentations of your business in the listing - the business' title should be a direct representation of its name, although you can add the city, such as "Omni Hotel San Diego," to help your ranking for regional searches.

Bing Business Portal

The new Bing Business Portal (BBP) recently launched to help your local business get a better listing in its search engine, and give consumers more information about you before they click through to your website.

Enhance your online presence with details such as photos, logos, hours-of-operation, parking availability, language spoken and more. Select categories in which you want your business to appear. Edit specialties and add as many as six additional categories and keywords to provide a clear and accurate view of your offerings. Incorporate links to your company's Facebook and Twitter pages in your listing.

Yahoo Local Listing Center

Yahoo Local Listing service offers two plans, the Basic Listing which is free of charge and the Enhanced Listing which is the paid one (\$9.95 per Month), but the service is supported only if a yahoo country-sub domain exists.

Include yourself in as many relevant categories as possible at Yahoo – this can often lead to multiple URLs, and thus multiple citations. Also include your top products in your business description so your customers searching for them can find you.

7. Generate citations to supplement your local listings.

The citations help you to rank better for local search queries even if they do not have links back to your site. There are some additional tactics to assist you in finding citation opportunities besides local directories you are already listed in. First of all, analyze competitors' citations and try to get the same ones as they have. To do this, enter the localized search query that you want to show up for. Upon entering the Google Places page of your competitors and scroll to the bottom of the profile to the *more about this place* section. Here you will see the citations that are helping your competitors rank number 1 for this local search query.

Tip: You may also use Whitespark Local Citation Finder, a free tool that finds citation sources for you.

8. Create a Facebook Place Page.

With Facebook Places users can check-in their physical location or "place" on their smart phones or browser on web-enabled mobile devices. As a business owner you can use this feature to put your business in the list of nearby Places and get offline visitors.

Facebook Place Pages look similar to a Fan Page, with emphasis on an interactive map from Bing at the very top. Start by checking in from your Place (or adding it, if it doesn't show up in

the list of nearby Places), and click the link on the bottom of the page that says *Is this your business?* Check a box certifying you're an official representative of the business and click *Proceed with Verification* to continue. Then provide your business's contact information, including your Federal Employee ID number (if applicable) and some kind of official documentation (Certificate of Formation, Articles of Certificate of Incorporation, a local business license, or a BBB accreditation).

Once you've submitted that information and received the okay from Facebook's User Operations team, you are in full control of your new Place Page.

SUMMARY

1. Local link popularity, language-specific keyword research, smart spelling, and quality content are vital steps of the country-specific SEO.
2. Highlighting the country you wish to optimize for via Webmaster Tools is as good as a country-specific domain name for Search Engine Optimization purposes.
3. Use social media to target your local audience.