

Local Search for Location-less Businesses

While vacation rental companies, ghost kitchens, and e-commerce brands may not rely on a physical location to serve their customers, a local online presence is still critical to their success

This report was commissioned by



Executive Summary

There have always been companies that operate within a specific geographic area but do not have a physical business location in that zone. Or at least not one that the public can visit.

Think of the HVAC repair pros who work out of their vans. Or the real estate agents pulling “open house” signs out of the trunks of their Mercedes. Those cases have been around for a while. And more likely than not, the HQ operation of these businesses is comprised of a pile of papers on the dining room table.

Let’s add a modern twist to this. How about dark stores and ghost kitchens? Just a few years ago, these delivery-only operations didn’t exist. Now they serve very specific local areas with at-home food or grocery delivery. But they do not have locations that are open to the public. Only to delivery drivers.

There are countless other virtual or online-based businesses that may service a given zip code, but don’t have any physical storefronts of their own. You can imagine what these businesses are. They include everything from job recruiter sites to eCommerce businesses to digital-first brands that sell out of major retailers.

Imagine you are a consumer looking for a fresh box of coffee pods. You will want to know where you can find your favorite brand nearby. And if you are still looking for that first cup of the day, you are going to want to have that answer right away. Localized content can be part of the answer to this dilemma as well.



What many of these “location-less” businesses often fail to appreciate is that when they don’t have a store or an office per se, having a local online presence becomes even more critical to being found online.

Local search results tends to favor the brick and mortar location. So it takes an extra effort for a location-less business to rank within the territory its targeted for food delivery, subscription services, home repair, or whatever.

The stakes for getting this right are high. After all, more than half of Google searches include a local intent. And 58 percent of consumers find brands via unbranded search queries. So not having a strong local presence, including using tools like local pages, is to risk missing out.

If anything, local search is most critical for these local but location-less businesses. This report explains why. And it also offers some ideas on how location-less businesses can create a strong local digital presence with unique localized content.



Part I: It's All About Local

Location-based online searches are on their way to becoming the rule rather than the exception. Here are some facts that will convince any business selling in a local area how essential it is to optimize for local search.

- First, 56% of all Google searches have local intent. That works out to about 19 billion local searches per month. Any business that isn't following basic local SEO practice risks missing out on half of daily search volume.
- 18% of local searches involve consumers searching for nearby businesses with no name in mind (unbranded search).
- And of these unbranded local searches, 50% click on organic results rather than paid results. This means there are 1.9 billion monthly local searches that have no name in mind. Those businesses that are most optimized for local search will be first in line for these new consumers.
- When searching for businesses, consumers use mapping applications 44% of the time.
- Almost a third of online consumers in the United States used the internet to search for local businesses on a daily basis.
- More than half of "near me" searches result in a physical store visit.
- 56% of online consumers in the United States had searched for local businesses via mobile browser.
- Half of mobile-local searchers are looking for local businesses addresses.
- 78% of mobile-local searches lead to an offline purchase.
- 18% of mobile local searches convert into a sale within one day. This compares to just 7% among non-local searches.

CONSUMERS PURCHASE AT A HIGHER RATE AFTER LOCAL SEARCH



18% of local smartphone searches led to a purchase within a day compared to 7% of non-local searches

Source: Neil Patel

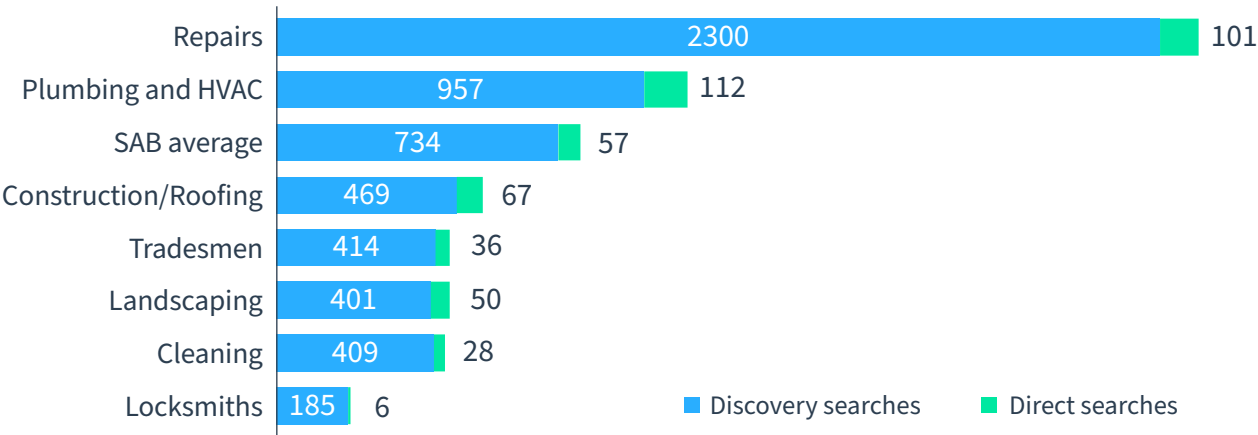
- 72% of local searches seek businesses within five miles of their location.
- More than 90% of mobile searchers never look past the first few search results. And 75% of desktop searchers never look beyond page one of a Google search result.
- Voice search now accounts for 10% of local searches.
- It's also worth noting that businesses that are the least likely to have a physical location also overwhelmingly depend on discovery search (aka nonbranded search) vs branded searches in order to be found.

The following charts show search results for businesses in seven categories widely seen as driven by service area rather than business location. The first chart shows discovery vs. name in mind search. And the second shows search vs. map views.

The dominance of discovery-based search makes sense, given searches for these categories tend to be infrequent. So “plumbers near me” seems a more likely action than “Pasquesi Plumbing”, for example.

SERVICE-AREA BUSINESSES: AVERAGE MONTHLY DIRECT AND
DISCOVERY SEARCHES PER GMB LISTING

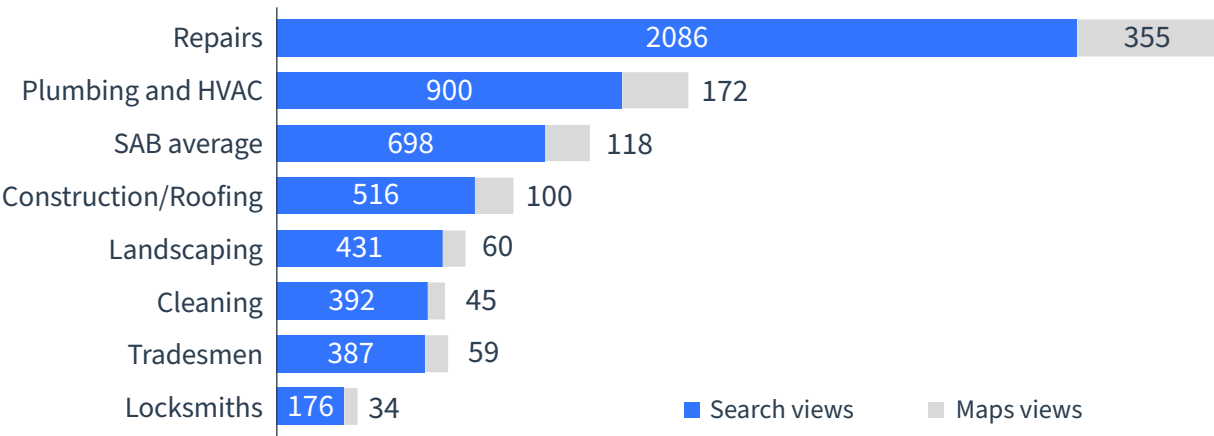
Source: BrightLocal



It may seem counterintuitive, but consumers also search for service-area businesses on Google Maps. As the following chart shows, map-based search accounts for a small but significant number of searches for businesses without locations that are open to the public.

SERVICE-AREA BUSINESSES: AVERAGE MONTHLY VIES ON
SEARCH AND MAPS PER GMB LISTING

Source: BrightLocal



Part II: Breaking Down Location-less Businesses

There is a range of business models that fall loosely under the term “location-less.” Some have places of business but are not open to the public. Others follow a hybrid model. And some are truly virtual, with everything being handled online.

Each of the following categories can benefit from local SEO strategies that will ensure they are not left out when consumers do a local search for whatever it is they offer, from virtual teledoc appointments with a local professional to food delivery.

Service Area Businesses

This is the classic plumber, landscape, carpet cleaner. You operate in a defined service area, but you do not have a business location that is open to the public. These businesses might be home-based. Or they may have an office or warehouse at a commercial address. But what these businesses all have in common is that they want to be found based on the areas they serve and not where they do their paperwork at night.

A relatively new example of this type of business is the ghost kitchen. These are industrial kitchens that prepare food designed exclusively for home delivery. These companies will want to be found based on where they deliver, not where they prepare the food. And for Google Business Profile (aka GMB) purposes, Google considers ghost kitchens as service-area businesses.

Virtual Businesses

A virtual business delivers a service digitally and never comes into physical contact with the consumer. ECommerce businesses are the classic example of this. Services delivering digital content also qualify as a virtual business. The key element is that a virtual business is that you never interact in person with customers.

Hybrid Businesses

As consumer expectations have shifted over the past couple of years due to the COVID-19 pandemic, more and more location-based businesses are finding ways to provide contactless service, including “we come to you” options. A classic example is a restaurant that does in-store dining plus curbside pickup and home delivery. Automotive repair businesses are providing at-home repair service to customers. Cracked phone screen repairs can now be done at home instead of in-store. Similarly, brick-and-mortar retail stores with extensive eCommerce and delivery operations may also count as hybrid businesses.

As the next section will show, local pages are a big element of making any of these businesses visible to local searchers.





Part III:

Localized Content for Location-Less Brands

Most brands operating multiple physical locations probably already understand the need to have a unique site or landing page for each location.

These pages help consumers find their nearest location when they're visiting a business's website. They also feed search engines information about the unique characteristics of each location. For example, special offers, reviews, or information about the team running the store.

Localized content is the best way to share information about each store, restaurant, showroom, gym, clinic, etc.

The stakes are higher for businesses that aren't tied to a specific brick-and-mortar location. As SEO guru Neil Patel notes, "Local SEO tends to work best for businesses with physical locations that require direct contact with their customers."

Patel added "local landing pages have become the focus, since Google is gravitating towards user intent and not just the keywords that users searched for."

This is why unique, quality localized content is such an important tool for non-brick-and-mortar local businesses – from HVAC technicians to the ghost kitchen.

For those businesses that operate virtually or semi-virtually, localized content serves as a key part of a strategy to ensure that those businesses are not excluded from any local search results that should feature them.

Why Localized Content?

Let's take a look at one category to understand why local content is so important. We'll pick ghost kitchens. This is a relatively modern example of an industry challenged to run a legitimately local business without a public location. After all, nothing is more local than food.

Ghost kitchens take a few forms, but the basic definition is a kitchen that is dedicated to preparing food for a delivery-only restaurant. The variation comes in a few forms. Some ghost kitchens are dedicated to a single brand – which could be a virtual-only brand or a delivery-only extension for a

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brick and mortar restaurant. Other ghost kitchens are essentially takeout factories service multiple brands.

Increasingly dining brands have been launching virtual restaurant spinoffs in order to get into the cloud kitchen game. A good example of this is Chili's, which reportedly generated an incremental \$150 million per year from its virtual brand It's Just Wings.

So how does a virtual restaurant (supported by a ghost kitchen) get found in the area it serves?

It's a combination of local organic search, paid ads, social media, and listings within the major food delivery aggregators like DoorDash.



For Google Business Profile purposes, ghost kitchens are service-area business, just like a locksmith or a plumber, and need to follow the guidelines for those businesses.

Location pages are also an important way for ghost kitchens to share unique content about their various dining concepts and to improve local search ranking.

Local pages with localized content allow the virtual restaurant to share specific offerings that helps convert visitors into customers. For example, photos, menus, and reviews (embedded from Google, etc.). And these local pages are optimized for search, which means they will rank in their own right and help the virtual restaurant build its online presence.

Location Pages Do's and Don'ts

Here is a set of local pages best practices for all location-less businesses. And best practice involves what you don't do just as much as what you do.

Let's start with the Don'ts.

- **Don't** use duplicative content that's of little value to individual users. Google will deindex pages with duplicate content.
- **Don't** rely on link building and other "black-hat" SEO techniques.
- **Don't** depend on expensive distribution networks. Focus on true organic search.

And now for the Do's.

- **Do** include unique and useful content. For example, location-specific content such as unique services, information about team members, offers, and reviews is a key differentiating factor and represents the difference between adding value and mere keyword stuffing. There should also be custom modules that allow businesses to "push" this types of content to local pages.
- **Do** use techniques like structured data, mobile-friendly practices, and breadcrumbs (text paths pointing to the location on the website) to ensure maximum crawlability and indexation. Examples of structured data include names, addresses, phone numbers, reviews, and recipes.
- **Do** think strategic as to which product or service categories and local dimensions they include. For example, Mobile Mechanic in Austin, TX vs. pizza delivery 78705.
- **Do** update local pages instantly whenever unexpected changes occur. Some examples include store hour changes, service outages, product shortages, and so on.



Part V: Summary & Takeaways



Service-area businesses are nothing new. But in the Covid-era, the nature of how businesses interact with the public has changed dramatically. Increasingly, services are delivered virtually. Or what may once have been purchased or consumed in a store or a restaurant is now delivered to the home.

So while the physical location of a business is becoming a bit less important, being found in local search results is more important than ever for this expanded list of “location-less” businesses that target location-specific buyers.

Search trends also highlight the importance of local content for these types of businesses. More than half of Google searches now include local intent. And 58 percent of consumers finding brands do so via unbranded search queries. So the stakes are high for having a strong local online presence, whether or not the public comes to you, or if you go to them.

Localized content is an important way for location-less businesses to be found in a specific local area. This is as true for a real estate agent as it is for a virtual chicken wings restaurant.

Local pages allow a location-less business to share the kinds of content (structured and unstructured) that helps convert browsers into customers. For example, photos, menus, information about team members, hours, products and services, reviews are more.

The critical pieces is to use the local pages to share unique local content that drives conversion. And not the duplicate content that brings down the wrath of Google’s algorithm.

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