Local and Personalised Search

Let's say you have a business. Let's make it a painting and decorating business. You have a van. It's not a very good van, but it gets you around. You generally work in your local area, but once in a while you might have to go out of town for the odd job. You want to get more business so you ask a chap you know to make you a website and get some business from that.

After the websites been up for a couple of weeks you get an email from a lady in New Hampshire wanting a quote for painting her kitchen. Problem is, you live in Huddersfield so this lead is completely useless to you. So what is the point of trying to get to the top of search engines for 'painting and decorating services' when over 99% of the internet population live outside your area?

Businesses that deliver local services are wasting time and money if they are advertising to the wrong crowd. You can spend a year on SEO but if the leads you get are not converting into real jobs, then it's not worth it.

In this case, you should be focussing your online marketing at local search. Google is very good when it comes to pinning down websites to real world locations. It uses data from both Google maps and Google business to show searchers the most relevant local results at the top of any local search. By 'local search', I mean any web search that includes a location in the name, for example, 'hospitals in Manchester' or 'car repair London'. Usually local searches produce a map with marker points on it at the top of the SERPs.

How do I get listed in local search?

The first step to getting listed is to set up a Google My Business account (previously called Google Places). This is a free service. Just go to https://www.Google.com/business/befound.html and once logged in, you will be presented with a tour of the features and instructions on how to set it up. It's pretty easy to set up really, all you need to do is enter your business name, phone numbers, street address, business category and website url. After that your need to verify your business listing. Generally this can be done with either a pin number, or you can get Google to send you a postcard with the pin number on it (both these verification methods are also free to use).

Recently Google My Business has been upgraded so you can now update your Google+, Insights, Reviews and access Google Analytics from the same dashboard. If all this sounds a bit overwhelming, then don't worry, you don't need to use all these features just to get a local Google listing, but at some point in the future, after you have got your listing, you can explore and experiment with these features if you think they might be useful. There is now a mobile app to access Google My Business so you can use these tools anywhere.

Another key way to get listed in local search is to have your company address in the footer of your website. Including the postcode is important here as the automated Google map system finds it easier to index addresses with postcodes. If you user

For some industries, there are local business directories that you can get listed in, some examples are ratedpeople.com, and yahoo small business (which charges $30 per month for inclusion).

Another way to get listed in local search is to get reviews on sites like yelp.com and foursquare. Generally, sites with higher reviews get higher rankings in the Google Local Pack (these are the dozen or so sites with map markers that appear at the top of the results).

If your website has as locations or contact page, including an embedded Google map of your location is a good signal for Google to include your site in location search results.

Finally, you can add relevant location information in your site's content. Street names, names or local areas, local landmarks (pubs are great for this for some reason) and local events all help. Some websites create local specific content in sub-pages to specifically target local areas. This works quite well at the minute, but I think the practice is a grey hat area, so best avoided really in case an algorithm update wipes you off the map.

Personalised Search Results

Personalised search is what happens when Google modifies your search results based on what it knows about you. If you have a Google account and are signed in, then Google will have a lot of information about what sites you have visited previously, where you are, where you have been, and what sorts of things interest you. There are 3 main aspects to personalised search:

1. **Search History.**
   When you click on a website link in Googles SERPs (or indeed, when you use Google image search, Google maps, news, shopping, books or just about any other Google search tool), this information is stored in your Google account profile and is used to influence future search results. For example, if you have previously clicked on a lot of pages about cars, then a search for 'oil' will more likely bring up car related websites, but if you have previously clicked on links to pages about the environmental impact of onshore fracking, then the same search will be more likely to give you pages related to the oil and gas industry. If you use Googles search but are not signed in to a Google account, then search history is not recorded. You can tell Google to clear your history, or tell it not to record your web and app activity, but few people know about or use this option.

2. **Bounce Rate.**
   The time you spend on a website can be measured by Google by checking how long between clicking on links in the search results. If you only spend a short amount of time on a site before trying another link, then that is a signal to Google that the page you visited is of no interest to you, and should therefore be ranked lower in subsequent searches.

3. **Country.**
   Your country and location will change the sort of sites you see. Country-based search has been around for a long time. If you are in the uk and type in 'Google.com' in your browser's address bar, most likely you will be redirected to 'Google.co.uk'. This has more emphasis on UK websites but also includes international sites.

4. **GEO Location**.
   If type into Google 'garages near me', the search engine will use your geo location to generate the results. Mobile search routinely uses geo location services to modify search results, although you can turn off location services in your mobile device.

5. **Platform**.
   If you are using Google on a mobile phone, the chances are you will see different results from searches made on a desktop. If a site is not deemed 'mobile friendly' then it will be downgraded on mobile search.

6. **Time of Day/date of year.**
   There is some evidence that the time of day and the date of the year influences search results. Around Christmas, the search results are

7. **Social Connections.**
   One of the newer ranking factors is social media. If a friend in Google+ has reviewed a restaurant, or a game, or shared an article on a particular subject, then related searches are more likely to bring up these results. Google use Google+ for social ranking factors, whereas Bing uses Titter.

Do you need to be signed in to Google to see personalised search?

In the previous page, we said "If you use Googles search but are not signed in to a Google account, then search history is not recorded" This is not the same as saying you need to be signed in to Google to see personalised search results. Google will modify your search results on any or all of the other factors.

Summary

Personalised search is becoming more common. More people are using Google when signed in to their Google account, so getting traffic when personalised search is turned on is more difficult. However there are ways to use personalised search to your advantage, here are a few:

1. Create multiple locations and localised content. This might involve making multilingual versions of your website, or even having a UK/US version of your site. If you have a business that operates in multiple areas, such as a franchise or hospital group, then create a separate page for each location and optimise the local content. Make sure the local phone number and address are on this page.

2. Encourage people to write reviews on your content so they appear in their social connections and their friend's social connections.

3. Consider PPC (pay per click) – even if people click on your ad, but don't go through to conversion or purchase, this will still log the page in their history so future searches will

make your page rank higher.

4. Make sure pages are accessible on all platforms. This is something that you should be doing anyway, but recent changes in mobile search, and the increasing proportion of non-desktop browsing makes it important that you use responsive mobile websites.

5. Focus on top results. Most searchers will click on the first 3 results in any search. Therefore, if you are not in the top 3, then you won't get included in their search history, and once there, personalised search will make these results higher for that person. Therefore it is better to have a fewer number of keywords have top 3 rankings, than having lots of keywords with the bottom half of page 1 rankings.

6. Make your content engaging and make your page titles and descriptions accurate to the page to increase the amount of time people spend on your page. This will reduce the bounce rate and therefore signal to Google that the page is useful to the searcher.