

A MODERN GUIDE TO RANKING A LOCAL BUSINESS



SEOBlog.com eBook Series

Written by James Parsons

Chapter 1:

Background on Local SEO

Hi there! I'm James Parsons. I've worked with hundreds of different clients through several different businesses to implement local SEO strategies (and fix ones that weren't performing).

Not surprisingly, most local SEO strategies are **based on outdated information**, or are using basic SEO principles but executing them poorly (such as over-optimizing and creating pages that look unnatural to search engines).

In this eBook, I'll cover several different local SEO strategies to get your website ranked for many different local keywords and locations, as well as common pitfalls that most business owners and webmasters run into when trying to improve the rankings of their website.

But first, some background.

Local search results are quite a bit different from regular search results that are not location-specific.

For example, if you're searching for good places to eat Pho in Los Angeles, you might Google "**Pho in Los Angeles**". Google realizes it is a local search term, and will try to deliver pages that actually have good information for people in Los Angeles looking for Pho. For example, reviews, hours, menus, physical addresses matching your Los Angeles query, comparisons, photos, and more.

The same goes for other local businesses. Take "Pool cleaning companies"; Google understands more about individual keywords and queries than most people realize, so the more you cover and the more you cater to individual searches, the more likely you are to rank for those terms.

The key is, and will always be, **relevance**. Put yourself in the shoes of your visitor, and focus first on creating great content that caters to their search and is more informational and thorough than your competitors. This is why sites like Yelp rank so well; they are very useful and informational (usually more informational than local company websites themselves).

Here's a bad example of local SEO:

A local business is trying to rank for “Bee removal Los Angeles”. Their page for the “Los Angeles” location talks mainly about why they’re the best and why they should choose them; in other words, *a long sales pitch of SEO filler content*.

Instead, they should **create content on that page that caters specifically to that area**. For example, photos of bee removals in different areas in Los Angeles with captions, bees that are common/native to that area, maps and text illustrating the service area and locations served, an address to show that you have a

physical location, and more. All of these are helpful to your visitors, and actually belong on a “Los Angeles Bee Removal” page.

Otherwise, it’s just a sales page for your bee removal business telling users why you’re the best, just like everybody else. These are the pages that are very difficult to rank well on Google; you will be fighting an uphill battle.

So, now that we’ve learned that relevance and content are the two most important factors when getting a local page ranked, let’s move on to the next chapter; pitfalls and outdated techniques.

Chapter 2:

Pitfalls and Outdated Techniques

The reason I want to cover pitfalls and outdated techniques is that **you may be using some of these techniques that I'm about to mention, without realizing** that they may be actually hurting your efforts to rank well. You'd be surprised how many times I've had clients argue with me that their efforts and content they've created was helping them, only to later find out that it was hurting the overall quality and rankings of their website.

Let's start going down the list of things that no longer work after Google algorithm updates, or are common SEO techniques that are misinterpreted or skewed.

Pitfall #1: Hidden or low quality pages

I've seen people do all sorts of weird things trying to rank for long tail keywords. Avoid using hidden pages that aren't part of their main site structure, pages stuffed at the bottom of their site, and having less than 500 words of content on a page.

Why you should avoid this: These are generally over-optimized and low-value pages that are created solely to rank for multiple terms on Google, and they aren't fooling anyone; Google can spot these from a mile away, especially after the [Panda algorithm updates](#).

Pitfall #2: Creating location pages in bulk

It makes sense when you first hear of it. "Hey, I can just create 100 pages of surrounding cities and SEO optimize each one to rank for hundreds of keywords, right"? Well, unfortunately this generally won't work very well. Most people are more focused on creating the pages and targeting keywords than they are on

actually providing real value for the visitors that will land on each of those pages.

Why you should avoid this: This is one of the very first things Google had to deal with when SEO started trending, and believe me, they are very good at detecting “location carpet bombing”. Unless you really work your ass off to make each of those location pages natural looking and full of value specific to visitors in that area (which is going to be very difficult, even for a master SEO), this is a surefire way to be slapped by an [algorithmic penalty](#) for over-optimized pages.

Pitfall #3: Paid directory services

I won't beat around the bush on this one. About 99.9% of these paid directory submission services are junk, and some will actually get you in trouble with Google.

Why you should avoid this: They just don't work as well as they used to. Don't bother with them. There is only one paid directory submission service that I will recommend at the end of this eBook.

Pitfall #4: Over-optimization

People still try to cram a ton of keywords into their meta tags and content, and create over-optimized page URLs like this:

<http://mycompany.com/pho/los-angeles/>

<http://mycompany.com/pho-in-los-angeles/>

Why you should avoid this: This shows you know too much about SEO; the URLs are too over-optimized. Putting the keyword in your URL is trying to cram the idea that your site is relevant to that keyword right down Google's throat. Most pages like these will never rank because they are over-optimized and Google is apprehensive to display SEO and sales content to visitors. Natural URLs and content written for humans will rank much better; we'll get to that later in this eBook as well.

Pitfall #5: Thin sites

Perhaps the most common pitfall of the ones I've mentioned; sites that are "thin". These sites generally have less than 10-15 pages and are very small and basic.

Why you should avoid this:

Google is most nervous of thin websites. Why? They can be created very easily by most webmasters and SEOs and uploaded overnight; 99% of spam websites are less than 10 pages, so you don't want to be sorted into the same category as these guys.

Larger websites with more content and pages (think ones with hundreds of blog posts) are created slowly over time with much effort and dedication; these pages are less likely to be created for SEO purposes, as significant time and energy has been invested to create a great resource for people on the web. They are more likely to be trusted by Google as you build content over time.

Now that you know what not to do, let's move onto the good stuff.

Chapter 3:

3 Secrets to Get Local Pages Ranked

Here are the three secrets to getting local pages ranked.

1. Provide value through properly optimized quality content.
2. Make individual local pages core parts of your website.
3. Put man hours into your website to become an authority.

Let's go down the list

Secret #1: Provide value through properly optimized quality content.

Like I mentioned earlier in this eBook, providing value through high quality content is key. Stop writing for search engines and cramming keywords into copy, and write for the people who are landing on your page. Google knows the difference; it's a billion dollar company whose reputation depends on its algorithm. You better believe it knows the difference between over-optimized content and natural content. Google doesn't like it when people try to manipulate their rankings, and it's easy to lose their trust if you do.

Content has always been king in the SEO world. A page with 2000+ words of useful content and media is almost always going to outrank a much smaller page. There are exceptions to this, but for all intensive purposes, content is king, so don't cheap out.

So how do you properly optimize content, you ask?

I'll be mentioning that in the next chapter of this eBook (Chapter 4); URL string optimization, keyword selection and optimization, and more.

Secret #2: Make individual local pages core parts of your website.

So you have a few killer pages for some cities in your area and for keywords that will be profitable to your business, and you're excited for them to rank. Great!

However, if they are stuffed down at the bottom of your website, or in your sidebar, or not at all part of your main website navigation, then Google will not put a lot of weight on those pages.

Why should they?

Google figures that pages that are in your footer (or pages that are more difficult for users to find) are significantly less important than

other pages on your website, and are therefore much more difficult to rank.

Conversely, pages in your navigation bar are going to have the highest authority out of any of the pages on your website. If your local SEO pages you've created are going to bring you the most business, shouldn't they be a core part of your site and placed in your navigation bar? The answer is yes.

A healthy percentage of business owners I've talked to are against doing this because they don't want their visitors seeing SEO pages. My answer to that is, if you're ashamed of the low quality content you've created for the "SEO landing pages" on your site, then you should remove them altogether and create some better content that you can make a core part of your website. They will perform better and will help your future customers.

Secret #3: Put man hours into your website to become an authority.

As I mentioned earlier in this eBook, Google is hesitant to trust smaller websites. This is because most spammy and over-optimized websites generally have very little unique content, so you don't want to match the profile of these websites.

This is similar to how car insurance companies work. They look at certain demographics that are more likely to get into accidents and are more cautious for people that meet those criteria, as statistically, they are more likely to be problematic.

So, create some useful content, and don't have a thin site. A blog is generally the best way to strengthen the architecture of your site; every single time you blog, you're creating a new page on your website. However, every new page on your website is also factored in to the overall quality of your site, so make every post count; write useful articles to benefit your readers, and write long and informative pieces with images, links, and links to sources. Never steal or copy content from other pages, even if it is slightly rewritten; it will land you a search engine penalty and hurt the trust of your website.

Chapter 4:

Proper Optimization Techniques

We mentioned several outdated techniques that would ensure your pages would not rank. Now let's dig into some ways that you will ensure your pages **will rank** for your local terms.

URL String Optimization

The key here is to create URLs that look natural. Earlier in this eBook, I mentioned these bad examples of URLs:

<http://mycompany.com/pho/los-angeles/>

<http://mycompany.com/pho-in-los-angeles/>

Several years ago, including your main keywords in your URL structure used to be a great way to rank for those keywords. Many Google updates later, **the benefits of including your keyword in**

the URL string are significantly reduced; especially for absolute match keywords (like /pho-restaurants-in-los-angeles/).

So, what are some good examples?

<http://mycompany.com/location/la.php>

<http://mycompany.com/los-angeles/info/>

Now, here's why I used these.

1. Google already understands what you do (in this example, a Pho restaurant), as your homepage likely mentions those words a lot. Therefore, including that in the URL is not necessary.
2. I kept it short because shorter URLs perform better. I try to never use more than one dash in the URL string, as generally, Google doesn't really like dashes in URLs.
3. I only included "Los Angeles" into the URL because, in this example, it is relevant to the information on the page. Including "LA" would be fine too, as Google will treat them both the same; they are a synonym.
4. I included other words in the URL string so that it looks natural. Having a URL that is composed of mostly keywords can be

troublesome, especially with local pages (where this is done by your less-savvy competitors in excess). Having a more natural URL structure with other words/phrases in it will work to your benefit.

So, to wrap this section up: **URL selection is not as important as most people make it out to be**. Just make sure it isn't over-optimized, and you'll be able to rank that page just fine through your content and through your meta tag title and description (coming up next).

Meta Tag Optimization

If you don't already know what a meta tag title/description is, head over to Moz for a quick read on it. I'd rewrite it, but I'll save my breath for the things they don't mention.

Link: <http://moz.com/learn/seo/meta-description>

Every page on your site should have a meta title and a meta description; these are very important and help Google and your visitors understand what your site is. Think of it as a little preview of what the page is about.

The image shows a Google search interface with the search term "share results". The search results page displays a link to "Free share prices" from "www.ADVFN.com". A red callout box points to the search term, stating: "This text is generated by the meta title." Below the search results, there is a section titled "Share Results Affiliate Network - Affiliate Programs for Selective ..." with a description: "Looking for an Affiliate Program? Join the Share Results Affiliate Network." and the URL "www.shareresults.com/ - 17k - Cached - Similar pages". A second red callout box points to this section, stating: "This text is generated by the meta description." Below this, there is a list of affiliate links: "Affiliate", "eLearners", "Featured Merchants", "Blog", "Mobivox", "GoNannies", "Photobucket", "Real Arcade", and a link to "More results from shareresults.com »". At the bottom, there is a section titled "A Relationship based Affiliate Network" with a description: "An affiliate network that offers personalized support and features, unique merchants and promotions." and the URL "www.shareresults.com/affiliates.php - 15k - Cached - Similar pages".

Web [Images](#) [Maps](#) [News](#) [Video](#) [Gmail](#) [more](#) ▼

Google™ [Advanced Search](#)
[Preferences](#)

Web

[Free share prices](#)
www.ADVFN.com get the latest share p

Share Results Affiliate Network - Affiliate Programs for Selective ...
Looking for an Affiliate Program? Join the **Share Results** Affiliate Network.
www.shareresults.com/ - 17k - [Cached](#) - [Similar pages](#)

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[Blog](#) [Real Arcade](#)
[More results from shareresults.com »](#)

[A Relationship based Affiliate Network](#)
An affiliate network that offers personalized support and features, unique merchants and promotions.
www.shareresults.com/affiliates.php - 15k - [Cached](#) - [Similar pages](#)

Moz says that the ideal **meta description** length is between 150 and 160 characters. Ideally, you want to limit it to 156 characters; that is the max Google will display.

The ideal **meta title** length is less than 67 characters.

When creating a meta title and meta description, I use this tool at SEOMofo.com to visualize how it will look in search engines. It also lets me know if my title/description is too long:

<http://www.seomofo.com/snippet-optimizer.html>

So, let's dig into what is ideal for a title, and what is ideal for a description.

For a title, I like to mention my keyword at least once. Not necessarily word-for-word, but all of the components will be in the title; here's an example:

Tran Cafe of Los Angeles | Pho and Vietnamese Food

My title is less than 67 characters; check. It tells Google and my visitors my restaurant name, where it is, and what kind of food I serve.

It also will rank very well for **“Pho in Los Angeles”**, **“Los Angeles Pho”**, **“Los Angeles Vietnamese Food”**, **“Vietnamese Food in Los Angeles”**, and more; even though those keywords aren’t necessarily in the title in that order. They are all relevant to this title.

Now, here’s a less-ideal and over-optimized meta title for the same local restaurant:

Los Angeles Pho and Vietnamese Restaurant | Tran Café

Your main keyword “Los Angeles Pho” is mentioned right away in the front of the title; it looks unnatural, and like you know too much about SEO. In my professional opinion, it will not rank as well as the first example, which looks much more natural and is more useful to Google users.

Next, let's dig into meta descriptions. I'll generally type my meta descriptions out into Wordcounter.net as I'm thinking of them, or the SERPMofo.com tool I linked above.

Here's an example for the same imaginary pho restaurant:

Tran Cafe is an award-winning family restaurant in the heart of Los Angeles, serving traditional Pho and Vietnamese food made from organic ingredients since 1983.

This meta description is also properly optimized for the same keywords; **“Pho in Los Angeles”, “Los Angeles Pho”, “Los Angeles Vietnamese Food”, “Vietnamese Food in Los Angeles”**. However, notice they aren't grouped together like this at all. It looks very natural and is useful to visitors.

And of course, here's a bad example:

Tran Cafe serves Pho in Los Angeles, Palmdale, Malibu, Santa Monica, and San Bernadino areas, as well as Vietnamese food. We are the #1 Pho restaurant in LA!

Why is this description poorly optimized?

1. Spamming locations in the description
2. Mentions your main keyword more than once
3. Mentions your main keyword group too closely together (Pho in Los Angeles, and Pho restaurant).
4. Over-optimized

To wrap up this section, the key really is to put a primary focus on making your titles and descriptions useful for search engine users, while making sure your keywords are still peppered into your meta info so that Google knows the page is relevant to users searches (without over-optimization).

Keyword Optimization

How many times should you mention your keyword in your content?

In my opinion, you shouldn't really focus on mentioning it at all. People have all of these dated theories on keyword density (mentioning your keyword at least 2% of the time in your content),

but truthfully, these are outdated and no longer apply to modern SEO.

Google will determine that your page is relevant to your keyword without you mentioning that keyword a certain number of times; force-feeding it to them is going to look unnatural and will be counter-productive.

Instead, once you've written up all of your content, do a scan for individual parts of your keywords. Do you mention your city a few times? Do you mention your industry / services a few times? If so, perfect. If not, consider re-writing your content so that it is more relevant to the location you're targeting; if you're writing a page for the Los Angeles Pho restaurant example I've been using and you don't have "Los Angeles" or "Pho" mentioned organically in your content, you're not creating content that caters to those organic searches. The best content is content that doesn't need to be optimized at all, because it is already useful and relevant to your page and your keywords.

Content Length and Quality

The only thing you really have to worry about in regards to content length is that your content isn't too thin.

If you're finding it difficult to write more on a subject, stop writing. You'll end up repeating yourself or writing crappy content. Don't force long SEO articles.

However, bear in mind that pages that have ~2000+ words of great unique content are proven to rank better than smaller pages with less content. Media, images, comments, engagement, links, and proper formatting will also help to improve the quality and ranking of your content.

Page Speed

Fast loading pages rank better than slow loading pages. Optimize your images (if you have a Mac, I highly recommend [ImageOptim](#), a free app). Have a properly designed and efficient website. If

possible, get your load time to under 2 seconds; you can test using this tool: <http://tools.pingdom.com/fpt/>

User Experience

User experience is also very important for ranking local pages. If your users aren't finding what they are looking for, or if your pages are too "salesy", they will "bounce" or leave your site without browsing further. Poor engagement will result in poor rankings; if a lot of people are clicking "Back" in their browser to go back to Google results as soon as they land on your site, that doesn't look good on you, does it?

There are a lot of things that fall under "user experience"; design, speed, content quality, avoiding annoyances (pop-ups, small text, etc), and a clear-cut navigation, to name a few.

Proof of Location

If you're trying to get a page ranked for your local business for a specific local search term, it helps to show Google that you do indeed have a local business. After all, it wouldn't be good user experience if you were searching for a local business and landed on a page that wasn't even in the city you were looking for, right? That would hurt Google's search quality, and they have algorithms to prevent this.

There are a few things you can do that will work to your advantage:

1. Sign up with Google Places and have a local directory. This will tie your address to your website, and will confirm your address (they'll send you a post card in the mail to verify you can receive mail there).
2. Put your address on your website, with the city and zip code. Google will crawl this and see it automatically.

3. Put your phone number on the site. Bonus if it's an area code that is in the city you're trying to rank for.
4. Use citation building to build citations and other references that tie your business name to your physical location. We'll touch more on this later.

Some closing notes to wrap up this chapter:

- Don't get too carried away with optimization. Natural is better; focus on user experience and providing value.
- You don't need to make a new page for each of your keywords; make combo pages, or one page that has the potential to rank for multiple keywords through great content.
- Make any page you want to rank a core part of your website (for example, in a dropdown menu in your main navbar called "Locations" or "Service Areas").
- If you're going to try to rank for individual cities, really focus on providing value specific to each of those individual cities. Otherwise, you may be flagged for creating over-optimized pages.

Chapter 5:

How to Provide Value

I keep saying you need to provide value in your local SEO pages, so let me demonstrate what I mean by that and give you some examples.

Here's a scenario. A user searches Google for “**Miami pest control**”, and Google is about to give them search results.

Which are they more likely to deliver as the #1 result: a company touting why they are the best and showing off what services they offer, or a page that has everything a home owner needs to know when dealing with pests in Miami? (e.g. costs, types of pests in Miami, climate changes in Miami, pros and cons of certain removal procedures)?

Chances are, they'll rank the informational page, as it caters better to the users search. It's less salesy, and therefore less business

owners are willing to try it, but it **provides value** and will rank better in organic search.

Once you have visitors on your site, you can do all sorts of things to close them as a client; conversion optimization is the art of turning visitors into paying customers, and with proper call to actions at the beginning and end of your page (as well as a prominent phone number and contact form), you'll convert plenty of visitors into sales without listing all of the **great benefits of using your company** on the local pages you're trying to get ranked. You can create a separate page for those (maybe titled **"Why Choose Us?"**)

Check out this page that ranks #1 for that search:

<http://www.trulynolen.com/locations/fl/miami/commercial-pest-control-miami.asp#local-service-guide>

The page is filled with great information, but it's also very easy to pick up the phone and call them right away. This is what you want.

Chapter 6:

Strengthening Your Site Structure

Having all of these properly optimized pages isn't going to do much for you if the rest of your site isn't properly optimized and set up.

Google looks for certain things when crawling a website; they check how many pages your site has, if you have any linked social media profiles, if you have a sitemap, a contact page, etc; these are all core components to most any website, and if you don't have more than one of them, it can raise a red flag.

Here's a small checklist of things you should have on your website:

- An about page
- A contact page
- Minimum 25 pages on your website

- A blog
- Links to your social media pages
- A physical address
- A company phone number
- An XML sitemap
- Submitted to Google Webmaster Tools
- Google Analytics installed
- Google Places set up
- Minimum 800 words on your homepage
- Hours of operation

These are the basic elements of a properly built website, so aim to have as many of these checked off as you can.

Next, one of the best things you can do to strengthen your site as a whole is blog, and blog often.

Blog, Damn It

Most business owners hate blogging, and don't really see the value in it. Hopefully you're not one of them. And if you are, my hope is to turn that around.

Blogging tells Google a few things:

1. You're alive and you have an active website that isn't stale
2. You care about your visitors and you have a following
3. You care about producing useful content
4. You are a thought-leader and cover multiple industry topics

Are these things you want Google to think? You bet.

These aren't the only reasons you want to blog regularly, though.

Here are some reasons why you should blog as often as you can.

1. Every new piece of content is another hook in the sea. By exploring new topics, you're essentially creating new keywords and articles that Google will pick up and deliver visitors to. You will eventually get new customers that may have never found your business otherwise if it weren't for that blog post.
2. Every new blog post strengthens your site architecture and is associated with your website. A site with 500 great blog posts is almost always significantly more powerful than a site with 50 great blog posts.
3. Good content attracts links, benefits user experience, and strengthens your site as a whole. Best of all, that content will continue to rank for years to come, so the more of it you have indexed in Google working for you, the more people will be regularly served your content.

Chapter 7:

Services That Benefit Local SEO

I mentioned earlier that you should avoid directory submission services and 99.9% of other services that promise to help with local search results.

However, there are two services that I (and agencies I've worked with) have used with success in the past. They are not necessarily cheap, but for the value they provide, they are worth the investment.

Many SEO agencies will charge thousands of dollars per month for local SEO clients, and then they will simply sign up to one or both of these two services for their clients.

Well, just sign up for yourself instead of hiring an SEO firm; this is probably what they'd be doing for you anyway.

Whitespark.ca Citation Building Service

What is it?

WhiteSpark does citation building for local businesses.

What are citations?

Remember earlier in this eBook I said that Google likes to see your physical address reaffirmed through third-party sites? This helps show Google that your address is indeed real, as well as assist with backlink building.

How much is it?

The price ranges; you can choose how many citations they will build for you per month.

Any other notes?

When you sign up, expect a lot of spam calls and emails for the first week or two. A lot of people crawl the websites that Whitespark submits your business to, so you'll get some solicitations for a while. They'll die down.

Yext PowerListings

While I haven't personally used this, I've worked at agencies that charged our clients a premium for this service. They create listings on all of the top directories for you; this is a great way to build backlinks, and our clients who used Yext PowerListings ranked much higher than our clients who didn't.

What is it?

Yext PowerListings is an annually billed service that manages your directory pages.

How much is it?

If I recall correctly, it's in the tune of \$500/year.

Any other notes?

If you cancel their service, you lose most of the pages they create for you; they will be deactivated. Definitely a con of using their service, but for how effective it is, our clients generally agreed that it is worth the annual cost.

Chapter 8:

Closing Thoughts

There's a lot of misinformation out there about local SEO; almost more than any other type of SEO.

Can a website rank using outdated techniques? **Absolutely.**

Are those outdated techniques the reason they are ranking? **No.**

There are literally hundreds of factors that encompass SEO; domain age, domain authority and backlinks, competitiveness, and more. Your best bet is to create a properly designed and properly optimized site, and keep it updated regularly. You can build a powerful and authoritative site without building a single backlink. I've done it many times, including with my site, SEOBlog.com (that's right, I didn't build a single link; they are all organically derived to my content I created).

Do you have any questions for me about this eBook? Feel free to shoot me an email at james@parsons.me and I'll respond as soon as I can.

Thank you for reading!

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<http://www.seoblog.com>