

LOCAL SEARCH SUCCESS

Five free Internet marketing tips for tax professionals

By Jason McDonald, Ph.D.



Many businesses and consumers will soon sit down and begin to think taxes. Quite a few will be looking for a new enrolled agent, CPA, bookkeeper, or general tax service to help them. Perhaps they have opened a new business, or their taxes have become quite complex. Perhaps they have moved or are looking for a new provider. Whatever the reason, these potential customers often turn to Internet search, specifically local search via Google, Google Places and Yelp.

How can your business get listed in local search? How can you climb to the top? Following are five key tips to help you succeed at leveraging free local search as a marketing tool. But before we begin, let's define each of these services.

- **Google Search.** Simply go to Google (<http://www.google.com/>) and type in logical keyword searches your customers might use, such as "Tax Preparer Omaha," "Miami CPA," or "Day Care Tax Specialist Reno." Pay attention to the businesses returned and realize that Google returns what it sees as the "best"

results first, organized by its search algorithm. Results not marked as ads or with red balloons are Google natural results. These results come from the Google Search Engine.

- **Google Places.** Formerly known as Google Local, results from this search service are interspersed among the more traditional Google results. When doing local searches like those listed above, or when entering generic terms such as "CPA" or "Tax Service" without a geographic keyword, Google will return bulleted local search results. The Google Places results have a red Places balloon next to them, while the Google search results do not. These results come from the Google Places database with results and order defined by a separate algorithm.
- **Yelp.** Yelp is Google's largest local competitor at <http://www.yelp.com/>. The service acts as an organized Yellow Pages of local business, with listings and reviews by users. It is fantastically popular in large cities such

as Los Angeles, New York, and San Francisco and growing nationally by leaps and bounds. Results on Yelp come from the Yelp database.

While paid advertising is available, our five key tips concentrate on free opportunities available to you and your business.

First, identify the keywords your customers might use to find you. Which core words best describe your business—tax service, enrolled agent, CPA, bookkeeper, or other? What specialties do you offer—perhaps a specialty in small business tax issues, tax services for in-home day care providers, or maybe bookkeeping for side businesses like eBay sellers?

Once you have a few basic ideas, there are some free tools on the Internet that help you zero in on customer search queries. One of the best, for example, is the Google keyword tool (<https://adwords.google.com/select/KeywordToolExternal>). Input a potential customer search query, such as "Tax Service" (check the box, "Only show ideas closely related to my search term" for best

results). Then, compare and contrast the global search volume of that query versus other possible queries such as “CPA” or “enrolled agent.” To succeed at local search, you need to focus on searches actively used by your customers; search volume and the Google keyword tool give you factual data on search popularity.

Moreover, look for high value keyword searches. If you are a CPA in Oklahoma City, for example, most of your customers will append the terms “Oklahoma City” to their searches. If you specialize in day care tax issues, think about terms that define you like “day care tax service” or “child care tax service.” Think like your customers and build a robust, organized keyword list based on free tools such as the Google keyword tool. Another great tool is the “Wonder Wheel.” To find it, do your search on Google, turn “off” Google Instant, open up “more tools” on the far left, and select, “Wonder Wheel.” The “Wonder Wheel” is a great way to let your mind wander and discover all ways to search out a concept.

Second, claim and enhance your free listing on Google Places and Yelp. If you haven’t already claimed your listing, a great free tool is Getlisted.org (<http://getlisted.org/>). Input your business name and zip code, and this tool will identify your listing on each service. Once you have claimed your listing, enhance it by writing a keyword heavy description and selecting all appropriate categories. Upload photos of yourself or your business. Customer-centric keywords are critical, but also construct your listing to read in a lively, enticing way that encourages customers to reach out and contact you by email or phone. Make a commitment to monitor your listing and things being said about you online—especially on Yelp.

Third, be prepared to engage with reviews of all kinds. It comes as a shock to many small businesses that their listing appears on Google Places and/or Yelp whether they like it or not. You may already be listed, and already be reviewed. Be ready to engage customers of all types—happy, sad, frustrated, angry—and be ready to reach out to the unhappy

steady wins the race with reviews! Don’t email thousands of customers at a time. Be mindful of Google/Yelp policies against strong-arming customers to get reviews. Encourage reviews respectfully and slowly.

Fifth, learn from competitors. For the non-local results appearing on Google, find your top competitors, go to their websites, and do a

“Gain insight into how local search works from both the business and customer perspective.”

customers and attempt to reduce their frustrations. Local search is a social media phenomenon, so be prepared for how this new Yellow Pages is a two-way street between you and all types of customers.

Fourth, encourage reviews. All of the local listing services including Google Places and Yelp formally indicate that you should not solicit reviews. But there is a difference between actively soliciting dishonest reviews for your business and encouraging customers to review you. Have a policy, for example, that at the end of each successful tax engagement you ask each (happy) customer to “Yelp” you or review you on Google Places. Use a free URL shortener service like bit.ly (<http://bit.ly/>) to shorten your direct company listing on Google Places and/or Yelp, so that you can post the short URL on flyers, postcards, or email it to recent customers. **Review Warning:** Slow and

View/Page Source (Firefox) or View/Source (Internet Explorer). Three key tags—the <TITLE>, <META NAME=”DESCRIPTION”>, and <META NAME=”KEYWORDS”> will identify your competitors’ keywords. Learn from them. Moreover, be a Google critic and think critically about your competitors’ web pages that show up on Google, their listings in Google Places and listings on Yelp. What are they doing well? Not so well? How can you learn from their successes or failures?

Go beyond your own industry and participate in Google Places and Yelp as a customer. Use the services to locate your next restaurant meal, or to find a local massage therapist. By being both a user and a business on local search services, you’ll gain insight into how local search works from both the business and customer perspectives. Never stop learning! ▶

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