



Got SEO?

GROCCERS THAT AREN'T TRYING THESE TIPS TO IMPROVE THEIR GOOGLE RANKING ARE MISSING MAJOR INCREMENTAL SALES OPPORTUNITIES.

By Randy Hofbauer

Every day, thousands of searches for retail businesses take place on the internet, with the majority of them occurring on Google. And if a retailer's stores aren't on the first page of search results in the paid, organic and Google Maps sections, users are far less likely to find any of those locations when searching for stores.

Among mobile device users, 82 percent have reported trying a "near me" search on their devices, a number that rises 10 points among Millennials, according to recent research from Uberall, a San Francisco-based location marketing solution provider. These findings suggest

that a growing number of consumers are placing proximity as their top priority, and brand loyalty below it.

This is an especially big deal for grocers: When survey respondents were asked what they typically use "near me" searches for, 84 percent said food. And not everyone's searching for specific banner names: Nearly one-third (30 percent) of respondents said

that their "near me" searches are generic, such as "groceries near me."

Arguably even more convincing of the importance of proximity is that the 72 percent of consumers who perform a local search visit a store within 5 miles, Google has reported. This speaks to the importance of search engine optimization (SEO) and better rankings in Google.

"Ranking better on Google really is an integrated approach to digital marketing" for grocers, notes Jonathan Camerata, sales executive with digital marketing and advertising service LocalIQ, a division of Tysons Corner, Va.-based media company Gannett Co. "It's about the makeup of their website plus content on their website, as well as information about them across the web."

To better rank in Google and, in turn, drive incremental foot traffic, grocers should consider taking the following actions.

Design a Mobile-Friendly Website

Having a website optimized for mobile devices is smart not just for ease of browsing, but also for helping Google's bots do their job of analyzing its content.

"We know that mobile is huge, so optimizing for mobile is a must," Camerata says.

Jonathan Obar, search and social manager with Chicago-based EnsembleQ, a retail intelligence provider and parent of *Progressive Grocer*, agrees, noting that as of 2017, 57 percent of all search engine traffic comes from mobile devices.

"That's a huge opportunity to cater to consumers on the go," he points out, "and the first step to getting those mobile searchers through your doors is having a mobile-friendly website."

This year, Google rolled out its Mobile First algorithm, which means that the engine now bases its rankings on the mobile version of websites. Before, sites were ranked based on desktop versions. This underscores the power and importance of a mobile strategy.

List Every Store Consistently, Accurately

Whether they operate two or 20 locations in a given area, grocers need to ensure that information is live and up to date on each store if they want all of them to rank.

Obar explains that it's also not enough to have basic information up on the stores — listings must be complete and identical.

"You want to make sure that those store listings are on every reputable directory site — Yelp, Google My Business, Bing, Four-square — because Google checks all of them for accuracy," he says. "The more listings, the more trustworthy the location is."

"Retail businesses need to optimize their site and business listings to make sure content is consistent about them and all their locations across the web," Camerata agrees.

As a rule of thumb, when it comes to filling out store information on online directories, remember "NAP" — name, address, and phone number with area code. This information has to be identical to, and consistent with, the grocer's website and all other listings. If there's a discrepancy between listings, it can confuse Google's bots.

For instance, a store might be located at "5204 Mott Street." However, if its operator uses that format in one directory but lists "5204 Mott St., 60113" in another, Google's bots might not see them as the same listed store.

Listings should also house a unique description and images of each store.

"Pay attention to all the details, because it could mean the difference between your store or a competitor's being shown to a customer on the go," Obar advises. "This is one time that taking a 'NAP' at work is beneficial for your business."

Use Regional Keywords

When titling stores in a website's local pages or directory listings, grocers must include a town, neighborhood or other indicator of the store's specific location, whether in regard to one store in a smaller town or several within a larger city, Obar explains.

"The key is to be specific," he says.

For example, if you have one store in a smaller town like Corinth, Texas, label it something like "Corinth Albertsons." If you have multiple locations in a big city, however, label each one after its respective neighbor-

hood, such as "Ravenswood Mariano's" for a Mariano's store in Chicago's Ravenswood neighborhood.

Basically, when asking what to name it, ask yourself: If a local consumer searched for your store, how do you think he or she would label it?

Encourage Shopper Reviews With Incentives

Do you have a huge shopper base that loves to tell friends about how awesome your store, products and shopping experience are? Then leverage that power online by asking patrons to leave positive reviews on Google My Business.

"It shows authority and trustworthiness to your customers and to the search engines," Obar notes.

Of course, people today are time-starved, so they might not have, or be willing to take, the time to write a review. That being the case, it's important to offer coupons or other incentives to get a store's great reputation shared online.

Advertise Local Listings Through Google Ads

In recent years, Google has been adding services that can help drive foot traffic to brick-and-mortar stores. Grocers can now find options designed to increase foot traffic through such platforms as Google Maps and Google Ads (formerly Google AdWords), the latter of which allows advertisers to sponsor specific keywords to display ads and listings to people in the Google ad network.

"Some of these offerings include coupons on the business listing, promoted pins and the ability to display local inventory," Obar observes. "You can even measure ROI by tracking store visits."

Connect With the Community to Get Links, Mentions

Grocers already know that when they set up shop in a new community — or debut their first store

altogether — publicity is key to having a successful opening day. This is also critical for SEO purposes: Every time they open a store, grocers should work to get mentioned on community websites, whether in the local news or on the city's official blog.

"It's worth it to connect to the community," Obar counsels. "This makes the locals aware of your store and helps Google verify that your store is legitimate. Taking part in local events, sponsoring local teams and holding events of your own are great ways to get picked up by a local blog or news source."

He adds that it's even better if that local blog or news source ends up backlinking to a grocer's site, as it "greatly helps" websites rank on search engines. **PG**

