

How to Win the Local Marketing Game

by John Jantsch, Duct Tape Marketing



Customers tend to stick with the local businesses they know and trust. But when they don't know who to trust, they often start their hunt by going online.

From a [customer's standpoint](#), online research holds two big advantages beyond simple convenience: First, many customers believe that the most established and committed local businesses appear toward the top of a search. Second, customers know they can narrow their choices by evaluating sites and reading other customers' reviews.

Why jump in the car and race around all day when you can narrow your search intelligently first?

But as customers continue to rely on the Web to help them screen local businesses, local businesses must take steps to ensure that they pop to the top of online searches and continuously manage the accuracy of contact information and the tone of customer reviews.

Here are five strategies to help any local business stand out online:

1. GIVE YOUR WEB PAGES AN EDGE

Just as customers localize searches by adding city and town names, and ZIP codes, you need to take steps to ensure that your business appears on the first page of local search results. As we know, most people who search online don't bother looking beyond the initial page.

One way to improve the odds of [appearing on the first page](#) of a targeted search is to add your full address to each page of your website. Search engines make selections based on keywords and combinations of keywords. Since your business's town and state or ZIP code will likely be typed into a local search, full contact information appearing repeatedly across your site's pages will help improve your search ranking.

But don't stop with your address. Weave the names of local towns and neighborhoods into your site's content [in a natural way](#). For example, "We're an Atlanta landscaper with clients in Dunwoody, Buckhead and Ansley Park" is more beneficial than simply saying you're based in Atlanta.

Adding words and phrases to your site's content that are most often used by customers searching for businesses like yours also is helpful. Finding such keywords can be done at [Google Keyword Tool](#) or [Wordtracker](#). These sites let you type in a description of your business and location to see which words and phrases are most popular in online searches.

Improve the odds of appearing on the first page of a targeted search by adding your full address to each page of your website.

For example, keying in “Atlanta,” “landscaping” and “lawn care” shows that “garden landscaping,” “landscaping ideas” and “lawn care services” are among the most popular search phrases and words. Such results may tell you that adding a “How to Landscape” blog or “Tip of the Day” to your site might be worthwhile for search purposes. Also, integrating the words “garden,” “gardening” and “services” into your landscaper’s site content clearly is important.

Getting back to that blog for a moment and its importance: Not only will the [keywords](#) used in blog posts help online searches but also you will be providing a vital service to interested readers. Such posts will encourage landscaping enthusiasts to return regularly to your site to read your latest advice, which in turn will improve your number of page views and local search rankings.

If you [start a blog](#), consider posting on local events, such as fairs and concerts, which will improve your local search standing. Also consider adding a list on your site that features the links of local bloggers in exchange for them doing the same for you. This move will raise your online visibility. To find local bloggers, consider using an online tool such as [Placeblogger](#).

2. CHECK YOUR DIRECTORY LISTINGS

Online directories continue to emerge that list local businesses and their contact information. When customers search locally for a business, these directories now increasingly appear high up on the first page of a search. Many also list your business’s name, address, phone number and site link in their search summary.

Your first step is to be sure you are listed in leading directories. The best way to find out which directories relate most closely to your field is to search for your business and those of your competitors. If your business’s name does not appear in the directories that surface, review their home pages for instructions on how to [set up a profile](#) or provide a profile entry.

Also check your business in the most popular address directories, which are feeding grounds for larger directories and search sites. Popular address directories include infoUSA® and [Localeze](#) as well as Internet Yellow Pages, SuperPages, [Switchboard](#) and YellowBook.

Two good sources of information for directories are GetListed.org and Universal Business Listing. The latter is a fee-based service that will list you in numerous online directories and portals that are used by many applications and tools. You also should see how your business is indexed in five of the most popular search engines that specialize in local listings—Google, Yelp, Bing, Yahoo and Best of the Web.

Next, verify that any information about your business that already appears in these directories is accurate and up to date. Perhaps you’ve moved, or there’s [a typo](#) in your address or phone number. Also, click on all links associated with your business to ensure they are active and reach your site.

One such service that is particularly useful for small businesses is [Google Local Shopping](#), a free service that lets you list what you sell and then allows customers to find you and those products and services. To be eligible for the service, you have to own a brick and mortar store.

While regular Google displays only a few search listings, a search on Google Local Shopping provides customers with a list of every nearby merchant that offers the desired product—and even lets a searching customer know if the product is in stock.

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Here are steps to help you get started on Google Local Shopping:

- **Create a [Google Merchant Center account](#).** You need a separate Merchant Center account for your local product listings. If you already have a Merchant Center account for online listing, create a new one that’s strictly local.
- **Create an [online product listing feed](#)** and upload it to your account. You can use Excel for this. Go [to this help section](#) to learn about what must be in this file and how to get the attributes correct.

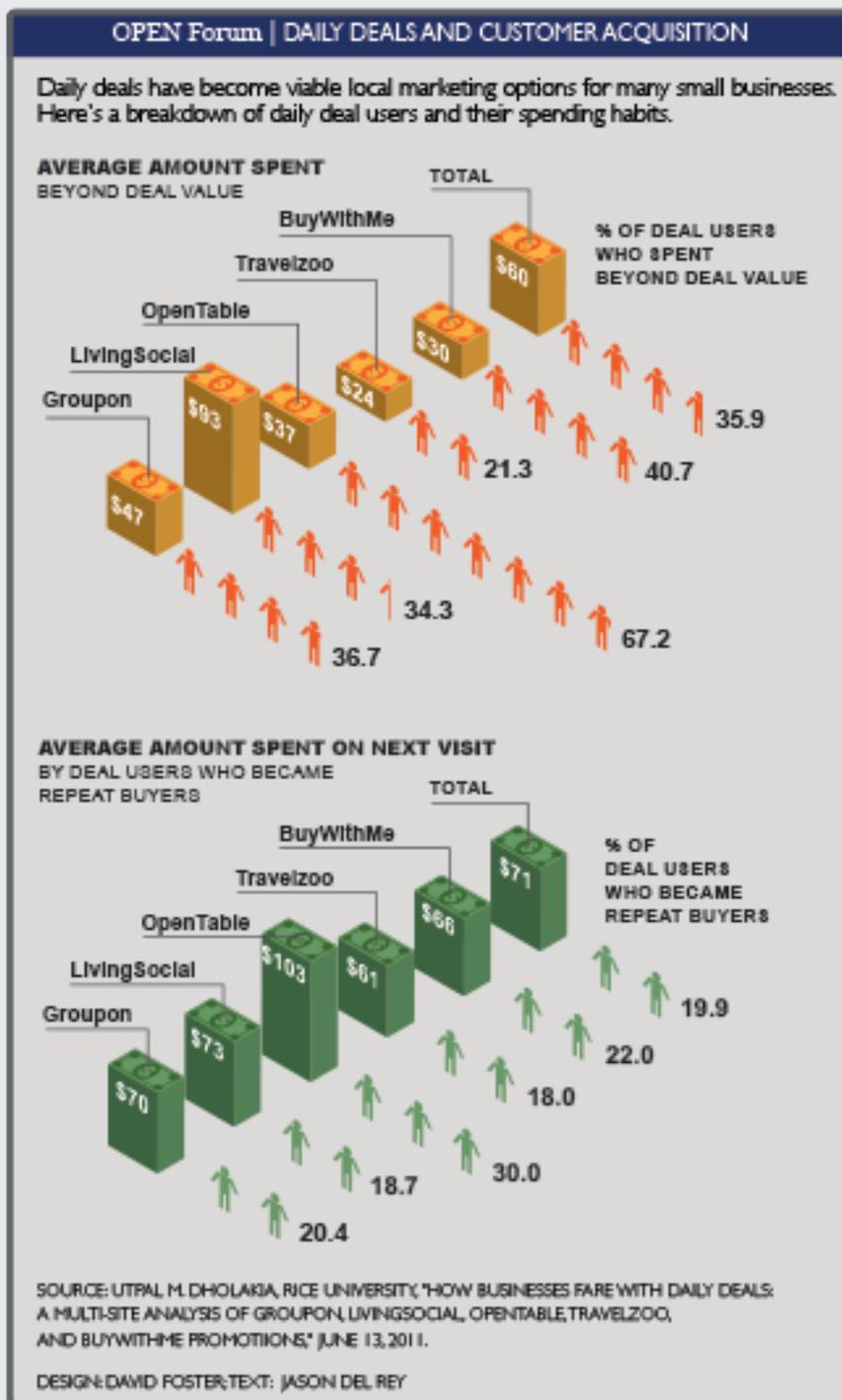
GROUP BUYING SITES: WHAT'S THE LOCAL DEAL?

Perhaps no other marketing vehicle is sending actual customers into small businesses like group-buying and local deal sites like [Groupon](#) and [Living Social](#) (among others). But, in many cases, to create these “deals,” businesses have been asked to effectively discount their products and services up to 80 percent. So despite the promise of an influx of customers, many business owners still ask, “[Is it worth it?](#)”

Given the growth of social media, it's easy to forget that most lead-generation efforts (think advertising, direct marketing) have [costs](#) associated with them. So the key is to determine your typical costs to acquire a customer and make sure the costs are manageable against what you can [expect to get in return](#). Prepare in advance for how you can build on these initial visits by:

- Upselling them with another promotion when they're on-site
- Collecting contact information so that you can invite them back for additional sales and events
- Making them feel special so that [they come back](#)

Remember that even if they don't return, they may refer others to your business. Getting that word of mouth, though hard to measure, may also make the costs worth it. ■



3. PROVIDE IN-DEPTH LOCAL PROFILES

Google, Yahoo and Bing encourage local businesses to provide them with detailed profile information to improve your chances of [appearing toward the top](#) of highly targeted local searches.

For example, by including the products and services that your business offers, how long you've been in business, the size of your staff, and your range of clients, you will improve the chances that customer searches will latch onto these phrases.

Why do these search sites bother? They know that detailed profiles will allow them to deliver greater satisfaction to customers searching for local businesses.

For example, Google Places functions like a directory, helping customers find local businesses while also giving them an opportunity to write [reviews](#) about their experiences.

Its search functionality uses the reviews as well as keywords to determine the ranking of search results.

More important, Google Places enables you to refine and enhance search criteria by providing information about your local business. You do this by “claiming” your page. (Do it [here](#).) Be sure to fill out all forms accurately, without leaving any blanks. Also, include keywords you've already researched.

You can get started at the three search sites here:

- [Google Places](#)
- [Yahoo Local Business Center](#)
- [Bing Local Listing Center](#)

Another important local directory is [Google Mobile Search](#), since customers increasingly are using their smart phones to search locally when on the go.

4. TRACK GOOD AND BAD REVIEWS

Customers who search locally for businesses often want to see what other customers have said about your business. Such reviews are becoming [highly influential](#), often determining whether customers patronize or hire your business.

While you cannot prevent customers from saying what they wish about your business online, you can keep track of what is being said and try to address grievances quickly with hopes of turning negative viewpoints positive going forward.

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For example, when you come across negative remarks, your goal should be to reach out to disgruntled customers and [iron out the difficulties](#). Hopefully, those customers will feel so overwhelmed by your effort and support that they will post positively about their most recent experience with you.

Among the major sites that host customer comments and reviews are [Yelp](#), [Insiderpages](#), [Citysearch](#), [Local](#) and [Merchant Circle](#).

In addition, several tools can keep you up to date on what's being said about your business so you can address customer dissatisfaction quickly and efficiently. These include [HootSuite](#), [Hubspot](#) and [YourBuzz](#) (a free service from American Express OPEN).

How should you respond to customer comments? [Here are a few tips](#):

- View all comments—even negative ones—as a positive. Most comments will provide insight into the customer experience and give you an opportunity to fix what's broken on your end, as well as right a wrong. Think of online comments as a free focus group rather than as personal attacks.
- Know who deserves a response. A good rule of thumb is to respond when your business has truly made a mistake or a reviewer's opinions are inciting other customers to post negative remarks for sport.
- Understand that the online world performs a [necessary function](#)—allowing customers to let off steam. A harsh response from you or one that isn't sympathetic can actually result in even more trouble for your business as disgruntled customers redouble their negative efforts online.

- Be humble and contrite. By ending all responses to negative comments with an apology and a vow to improve, you will almost always defuse a heated situation and signal that you care about individual customers and take pride in your business and the products and services you sell.
- Encourage satisfied customers to post about their positive experience at one or more review sites. A greater number of positive remarks can overshadow a few negative ones and sway potential customers.

5. FORM A SOCIAL NETWORK GROUP

No matter what products or services you sell, there are enthusiasts who would be thrilled to share their personal expertise online with other customers. By establishing a Facebook, Tumblr, Flickr, LinkedIn, MeetUp or Biznik page, you can encourage ongoing remarks, monitor the dialogue and chime in as needed.

Such activity not only can raise your business's visibility and improve search results but also may result in worthwhile ideas for the growth of your business. For example, our Atlanta landscaper might create a [Facebook page](#) exclusively to host a dialogue on new ways to keep lawns green, best ways to mow the grass, how to prepare lawns for the winter and spring, and how to care for lawnmowers.

By featuring a different topic each day or week, or even by sharing related YouTube clips of interest, you will build a community of readers around your [original content](#). Most important, other customer-experts will be able to share their strategies and thoughts. Through [a blog or discussion group](#), our Atlanta landscaper not only may hear about new products to stock and new services to provide but also what customers like and dislike about landscapers in general, enabling the business to alter its sales approach and manner.

USING LOCATION-BASED APPS

Similar to local deals, location-based apps, like [Foursquare](#), Facebook Places, [Gowalla](#) and [SCVNGR](#), also allow businesses to attract foot traffic, with the added benefit of being able to target customers according to how often they “check in” (first-time or repeat customers) or how well they complete a “challenge.” Whereas local deals are most often used to entice first-time customers, though, location-based apps are being used by many businesses for rewarding loyalty.

How they work: In short, app users create a profile and find their friends who also use the app. Then, whenever they visit a business identified on their app, they “check in,” thereby alerting those friends to their location. Some services, like Foursquare, build in incentives to keep customers checking in, like awarding badges; you, too, can build in incentives through [special promotions](#).

As with local deal sites, the [location-based app market](#) is growing, so you have multiple options. While trying to decide which to use, try playing with them yourself to see 1) which features best align with your marketing, and 2) which app(s) more of your customers are using. Once you decide, here are a couple of other tips to keep in mind:

- Make sure your staff knows of any deals and how to confirm a “check-in”
- Keep the deals fresh
- Track comments, make any necessary changes, and offer a positive response to negative reviews

Above all, [be responsive](#). Look at your entry into location-based apps as a learning experience, and be prepared to make changes that respond to what your customers are doing online. Follow these simple guidelines, and you'll come out ahead of the game.

GENERATE AWARENESS THROUGH LOCAL ONLINE ADVERTISING

For some, the thought of purchasing advertising to drive awareness seems almost unnecessary in this free social-networking, email-marketing world we live in today.

However, ads are a great way to generate awareness and they still offer marketers the greatest amount of control. If you want to target a very specific market and have that market see your ad on a very specific day, advertising is your best bet.

The key to getting the most from your online ad spend is to offer compelling information as your call to action and not simply try to sell something with every click. Your information can educate and build trust and that's how you turn your ads into leads and leads into customers.

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There are a variety of offerings available for the local business targeting local-area shoppers. Each of the major search engines—Google, Yahoo and Bing—have local ad options. Facebook also offers a very compelling ad unit that can be targeted to Facebook users in specific geographic regions only, essentially making it a local ad.

Google

Google makes it very easy to incorporate your advertising into your local Places Page. (Don't forget to add free coupon-style offers to your Places page.) Google has also created a simplified offering of their AdWords Platform targeted specifically to local businesses called [AdWords Express](#).

With AdWords Express, you can advertise your business on Google and Google Maps (including on mobile devices) and attract visitors to your website or Place page.

Yahoo and Bing

Yahoo and Bing have consolidated their offerings through [Microsoft Advertising](#) and have a number of small business and local units available. (Of course, make sure you claim your Yahoo and Bing Local Profiles too.)

Facebook

Anyone with a Facebook profile can create ads that are shown to other Facebook users. If you have a Facebook business or fan page you might find that driving people to content on your page or website with Facebook ads is a very effective medium.

Facebook allows you to choose various ways to target who will see your ad, such as city or state, and is a very cost-effective way to target. You can find out about all of the various types of ads by visiting the [Guide to Facebook Ads](#).

Where.com

Another local ad option is the mobile ad platform from [Where.com](#). With Where.com, mobile shoppers are shown your ads on their phones in both mobile search and in popular shopping and entertainment applications such as Pandora.



About John Jantsch

John Jantsch is a marketing consultant, award-winning social media publisher and best-selling author of [Duct Tape Marketing](#) and [The Referral Engine](#), and he is the creator of the Duct Tape Marketing System and Duct Tape Marketing Consulting Network, which trains and licenses small business marketing consultants around the world. [His blog](#) was chosen as a Forbes favorite for marketing and small business and his podcast, a top ten marketing show on iTunes, was called a “must listen” by Fast Company magazine. He is the featured marketing contributor to American Express OPEN Forum (openforum.com) and is a popular presenter of workshop and webinars for organizations such as American Express, Intuit, Verizon, HP and Citrix. His practical take on small business is often cited as a resource in publications such as The Wall Street Journal, New York Times, and CNNMoney.