

How to Boost Bookings & Conversions with Google Posts: An Interview with Joel Headley

Have you been exploring *all* the ways you might use Google Posts to set and meet brand goals?

Chances are good you've heard of Google Posts by now: the micro-blogging Google My Business dashboard feature which instantly populates content to your Knowledge Panel and individual listing. We're still only months into the release of this fascinating capability, use of which is theorized as having a potential impact on local pack rankings. When I recently listened to Joel Headley describing his incredibly creative use of Google Posts to increase healthcare provider bookings, it's something I was excited to share with the Moz community here.

Joel Headley worked for over a decade on local and web search at Google. He's now the Director of Local SEO and Marketing at healthcare practice growth platform PatientPop. He's graciously agreed to chat with me about how his company increased appointment bookings by about *11% for thousands of customer listings via Google Posts*.

How PatientPop used Google Posts to increase bookings by 11%

Miriam: So, Joel, Google offers a formal booking feature within their own product, but it isn't always easy to participate in that program, and it keeps users within "Google's walled garden" instead of guiding them to brand-controlled assets. As I recently learned, PatientPop innovated almost instantly when Google Posts was rolled out in 2017. Can you summarize for me what your company put together for your customers as a booking vehicle that didn't depend on Google's booking program?

Joel: PatientPop wants to provide patients an opportunity to make appointments directly with their healthcare provider. In that way, we're a white label service. Google has had a handful of booking products. In a prior iteration, there was a simpler product that was powered by schema and microforms, which could have scaled to anyone willing to add the schema.

Today, they are putting their effort behind Reserve with Google, which requires a much deeper API integration. While PatientPop would be happy to provide more services on Google, Reserve with Google doesn't yet allow most of our customers, according to their own policies. (However, the reservation service is marketed through Google My Business to those categories, which is a bit confusing.)

Additionally, when you open the booking widget, you see two logos: G Pay and the booking software provider. I'd love to see a product that allows the healthcare provider to be front and center in the entire process. A patient-doctor relationship is personal, and we'd like to emphasize you're booking your doctor, not PatientPop.

Because we can't get the CTAs unique to Reserve with Google, we realized that Google Posts can be a great vehicle for us to

essentially get the same result.

When Google Posts first launched, I tested a handful of practices. The interaction rate was low compared to other elements in the Google listing. But, given there was incremental gain in traffic, it seemed worthwhile, if we could scale the product. It seemed like a handy way to provide scheduling with Google without having to go through the hoops of the Maps Booking (reserve with) API.

Miriam: Makes sense! Now, I've created a fictitious example of what it looks like to use Google Posts to prompt bookings, following your recommendations to use a simple color as the image background and to make the image text quite visible. Does this look similar to what PatientPop is doing for its customers and can you provide recommendations for the image size and font size you've seen work best?

Joel: Yes, that's pretty similar to the types of Posts we're submitting to our customer listings. I tested a handful of image types, ones with providers, some with no text, and the less busy image with actionable text is what performed the best. I noticed that making the image look more like a button, with button-like text, improved click-through rates too – *CTR doubled compared to images with no text.*

The image size we use is 750×750 with 48-point font size. If one uses the API, the image must be square cropped when creating the post. Otherwise, Posts using the Google My Business interface will give you an option to crop. The only issue I have with the published version of the image: the cropping is uneven – sometimes it is center-cropped, but other times, the bottom is cut off. That makes it hard to predict when on-image text will appear. But we keep it in the center which generally works pretty well.

Miriam: And, when clicked on, the Google Post takes the user to the client's own website, where PatientPop software is being used to manage appointments – is that right?

Joel: Yes, the site is built by PatientPop. When selecting Book, the patient is taken directly to the provider's site where the booking widget is opened and an appointment can be selected from a calendar. These appointments can be synced back to the practice's electronic records system.

Miriam: Very tidy! As I understand it, PatientPop manages thousands of client listings, necessitating the need to automate this use of Google Posts. Without giving any secrets away, can you share a link to the API you used and explain how you templated the process of creating Posts at scale?

Joel: Sure! We were waiting for Google to provide Posts via the Google My Business API, because we wanted to scale. While I had a bit of a heads-up that the API was coming – Google shared this feature with their GMB Top Contributor group – we still had to wait for it to launch to see the documentation and try it out. So, when the launch announcement went out on October 11, with just a few developers, we were able to implement the solution for all of our practices the next evening. It was a fun, quick win for us, though it was a bit of a long day. :)

In order to get something out that quickly, we created templates that could use information from the listing itself like the business name, category, and location. That way, we were able to create a stand-alone Python script that grabbed listings from Google. When getting the listings, all the listing content comes along with it, including name, address, and category. These values are taken directly from the listing to create Posts and then are submitted to Google. We host the images on AWS and reuse them by submitting the image URL with the post. It's a Python script which runs as a cron job on a regular schedule. If you're new to the API, the real tricky

part is authentication, but the GMB community can help answer questions there.

Miriam: Really admirable implementation! One question: Google Posts expire after 7 days unless they are events, so are you basically automating re-posting of the booking feature for each listing every seven days?

Joel: We create Posts every seven days for all our practices. That way, we can mix up the content and images used on any given practice. We're also adding a second weekly post for practices that offer aesthetic services. We'll be launching more Posts for specific practice types going forward, too.

Miriam: Now for the most exciting part, Joel! What can you tell me about the increase in appointments this use of Google Posts has delivered for your customers? And, can you also please explain what parameters and products you are using to track this growth?

Joel: To track clicks from listings on Google, we use UTM parameters. We can then track the authority page, the services (menu) URL, the appointment URL, and the Posts URL.

When I first did this analysis, I looked at the average of the last three weeks of appointments compared to the 4 days after launch. Over that period, I saw nearly an 8% increase in online bookings. I've since included the entire first week of launch. It shows an 11% average increase in online bookings.

Additionally, because we're tracking each URL in the knowledge panel separately, I can confidently say there's no cannibalization of clicks from other URLs as a result of adding Posts. While authority page CTR remained steady, services lost over 10% of the clicks and appointment URLs

gained 10%. That indicates to me that not only are the Posts effective in driving appointments through the Posts CTA, it emphasizes the existing appointment CTA too. This was in the context of no additional product changes on our side.

Miriam: Right, so, some of our readers will be using Google's Local Business URLs (frequently used for linking to menus) to add an "Appointments" link. One of the most exciting takeaways from your implementation is that using Google Posts to support bookings didn't steal attention away from the appointment link, which appears higher up in the Knowledge Panel. Can you explain why you feel the Google Posts clicks have been additive instead of subtractive?

Joel: The "make appointment" link gets a higher CTR than Posts, so it shouldn't be ignored. However, since Posts include an image, I suspect it might be attracting a different kind of user, which is more primed to interact with images. And because we're so specific on the type of interaction we want (appointment booking), both with the CTA and the image, it seems to convert well. And, as I stated above, it seems to help the appointment URLs too.

Miriam: I was honestly so impressed with your creativity in this, Joel. It's just brilliant to look at something as simple as this little bit of Google screen real estate and ask, "Now, how could I use this to maximum effect?" Google Posts enables business owners to include links labeled Book, Order Online, Buy, Learn More, Sign Up, and Get Offer. The "Book" feature is obviously an ideal match for your company's health care provider clients, but given your obvious talent for thinking outside the box, would you have any creative suggestions for other types of business models using the other pre-set link options?

Joel: I'm really excited about the events feature, actually. Because you can create a long-lived post while adding a sense of urgency by leveraging a time-bound context. Events can

include limited-time offers, like a sale on a particular product, or signups for a newsletter that will include a coupon code. You can use all the link labels you've listed above for any given event. And, I think using the image-as-button philosophy can really drive results. I'd like to see an image with text *Use coupon code XYZ546 now!* with the Get Offer button. I imagine many business types, especially retail, can highlight their limited time deals without paying other companies to advertise your coupons and deals via Posts.

Miriam: Agreed, Joel, there are some really exciting opportunities for creative use here. Thank you so much for the inspiring knowledge you've shared with our community today!

Ready to get the most from Google Posts?

Reviews can be a challenge to manage. Google Q&A may be a mixed blessing. But as far as I can see, Posts are an unalloyed gift from Google. Here's all you have to do to get started using them right now for a single location of your business:

- Log into your Google My Business dashboard and click the "Posts" tab in the left menu.
- Determine which of the options, labeled "Buttons," is the right fit for your business. It could be "Book," or it could be something else, like "Sign up" or "Buy." Click the "Add a Button" option in the Google Posts wizard. Be sure the URL you enter includes a UTM parameter for tracking purposes.

- Upload a 750×750 image. Joel recommends using a simple-colored background and highly visible 42-point font size for turning this image into a CTA button-style graphic. You may need to experiment with cropping the image.
- Alternatively, you can create an event, which will cause your post to stay live through the date of the event.
- Text has a minimum 100-character and maximum 300-character limit. I recommend writing something that would entice users to click to get beyond the cut-off point, especially because it appears to me that there are different display lengths on different devices. It's also a good idea to bear in mind that Google Posts are indexed content. Initial testing is revealing that simply utilizing Posts may improve local pack rankings, but there is also an interesting hypothesis that they are a candidate for long-tail keyword optimization experiments. According to Mike Blumenthal:

"...If there are very long-tail phrases, where the ability to increase relevance isn't up against so many headwinds, then this is a signal that Google might recognize and help lift the boat for that long-tail phrase. My experience with it was it didn't work well on head phrases, and it may require some amount of interaction for it to really work well. In other words, I'm not sure just the phrase itself but the phrase with click-throughs on the Posts might be the actual trigger to this. It's not totally clear yet."

- You can preview your post before you hit the publish button.
- Your post will stay live for 7 days. After that, it will be time to post a new one.
- If you need to implement at scale across multiple listings, re-read Joel's description of the API and programming PatientPop is utilizing. It will take some doing, but an 11% increase in appointments may well make it worth the investment! And obviously, if you happen to

be marketing health care providers, checking out PatientPop's ready-made solution would be smart.

Nobody likes a ball-hog

I'm watching the development of Google Posts with rapt interest. Right now, they reside on Knowledge Panels and listings, but given that they are indexed, it's not impossible that they could eventually end up in the organic SERPs. Whether or not that ever happens, **what we have right now in this feature is something that offers instant publication to the consumer public in return for very modest effort.**

Perhaps even more importantly, Posts offer a way to bring users from Google *to your own website*, where you have full control of messaging. That single accomplishment is becoming increasingly difficult as rich-feature SERPs (and even single results) keep searchers Google-bound. I wonder if school kids still shout "ball-hog" when a classmate refuses to relinquish ball control and be a team player. For now, for local businesses, Google Posts could be a precious chance for your brand to handle the ball.

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