Simple Spam Fighting: The Easiest Local Rankings You'll Ever Earn

Image credit: Visit Lakeland

Reporting fake and duplicate listings to Google sounds hard. Sometimes it can be. But very often, it's as easy as falling off a log, takes only a modest session of spam fighting and can yield significant local ranking improvements.

If your local business/the local brands your agency markets aren't using spam fighting as a ranking tactic because you feel you lack the time or skills, please sit down with me for a sec.

What if I told you I spent about an hour yesterday doing something that moved a Home Depot location up 3 spots in a competitive market in Google's local rankings less than 24 hours later? What if, for you, moving up a spot or two would get you out of Google's local finder limbo and into the actual local pack limelight?

Today I’m going to show you exactly what I did to fight spam, how fast and easy it was to sweep out junk listings, and how rewarding it can be to see results transform in favor of the legitimate businesses you market.

Washing up the shady world of window blinds

Image credit: Aqua Mechanical

Who knew that shopping for window coverings would lead me into a den of spammers throwing shade all over Google?

The story of Google My Business spam is now more than a decade in the making, with scandalous examples like fake listings for locksmiths and addiction treatment centers proving how unsafe and unacceptable local business platforms can become when left unguarded.

But even in non-YMYL industries, spam listings deceive the public, waste consumers’ time, inhibit legitimate businesses from being discovered, and erode trust in the spam-hosting platform. I saw all of this in action when I was shopping to replace some broken blinds in my home, and it was such a

hassle trying to find an actual vendor amid the chaff of broken, duplicate, and lead gen listings, I decided to do something about it.

I selected an SF Bay area branch of Home Depot as my hypothetical “client.” I knew they had a legitimate location in the city of Vallejo, CA – a place I don’t live but sometimes travel to, thereby excluding the influence of proximity from my study. I knew that they were only earning an 8th place ranking in Google’s Local Finder, pushed down by spam. I wanted to see how quickly I could impact Home Depot’s surprisingly bad ranking.

I took the following steps, and encourage you to take them for any local business you’re marketing, too:

Step 1: Search

While located at the place of business you’re marketing, perform a Google search (or have your client perform it) for the keyword phrase for which you most desire improved local rankings. Of course, if you’re already ranking well as you want to for the searchers nearest you, you can still follow this process for investigating somewhat more distant areas within your potential reach where you want to increase visibility.

In the results from your search, click on the “more businesses” link at the bottom of the local pack, and you’ll

be taken to the interface commonly called the “Local Finder.”

The Local Finder isn’t typically 100% identical to the local pack in exact ranking order, but it’s the best place I know of to see how things stand beyond the first 3 results that make up Google’s local packs, telling a business which companies they need to surpass to move up towards local pack inclusion.

Find yourself in the local finder. In my case, the Home Depot location was at position 8. I hope you’re somewhere within the first set of 20 results Google typically gives, but if you’re not, keep paging through until you locate your listing. If you don’t find yourself at all, you may need to troubleshoot whether an eligibility issue, suspension, or filter is at play. But, hopefully that’s not you today.

Next, create a custom spreadsheet to record your findings. Or, much easier, just make a copy of mine!

Populate the spreadsheet by cutting and pasting the basic NAP (name, address, phone) for every competitor ranking above you, and include your own listing, too, of course! If you work for an agency, you’ll need to get the client to help you with this step by filling the spreadsheet out based on their search from their place of business.

In my case, I recorded everything in the first 20 results of the Local Finder, because I saw spam both above and below my “client,” and wanted to see the total movement resulting from my work in that result set.

Step 3: Identify obvious spam

We want to catch the easy fish today. You can go down rabbit holes another day, trying to ferret out weirdly woven webs of lead gen sites spanning the nation, but today, we're just looking to weed out listings that clearly, blatantly don't belong in the Local Finder.

Go through these five easy steps:

1. **Look at the Google Streetview image for each business outranking you.**
   Do you see a business with signage that matches the name on the listing? Move on. But if you see a house, an empty parking lot, or Google is marking the listing as "location approximate", jot that down in the Notes section of your spreadsheet. For example, I saw a supposed window coverings showroom that Streetview was locating in an empty lot on a military base. Big red flag there.
2. **Make note of any businesses that share an address, phone number, or very similar name.**
   Make note of anything with an overly long name that seems more like a string of keywords than a brand. For

example, a listing in my set was called: Custom Window Treatments in Fairfield, CA Hunter Douglas Dealer.

3. **For every business you noted down in steps one and two, get on the phone.**
   Is the number a working number? If someone answers, do they answer with the name of the business? Note it down. Say, “Hi, where is your shop located?” If the answer is that it’s not a shop, it’s a mobile business, note that down. Finally, If anything seems off, check the Guidelines for representing your business on Google to see what’s allowed in the industry you’re investigating. For example, it’s perfectly okay for a window blinds dealer to operate out of their home, but if they’re operating out of 5 homes in the same city, it’s likely a violation. In my case, just a couple of minutes on the phone identified multiple listings with phone numbers that were no longer in service.
4. **Visit the iffy websites.**
   Now that you’re narrowing your spreadsheet down to a set of businesses that are either obviously legitimate or “iffy,” visit the websites of the iffy ones. Does the name on the listing match the name on the website? Does anything else look odd? Note it down.
5. **Highlight businesses that are clearly spammy.**
   Your dive hasn’t been deep, but by now, it may have identified one or more listings that you strongly believe don’t belong because they have spammy names, fake addresses, or out-of-service phone numbers. My lightning-quick pass through my data set showed that six of the twenty listings were clearly junk. That’s 30% of Google’s info being worthless! I suggest marking these in red text in your spreadsheet to make the next step fast and easy.

Step 4: Report it!

If you want to become a spam-fighting ace later, you'll need to become familiar with Google's Business Redressal Complaint Form which gives you lots of room for sharing your documentation of why a listing should be removed. In fact, if an aggravating spammer remains in the Local Finder despite what we're doing in this session, this form is where you'd head next for a more concerted effort.

But, today, I promised the easiness of falling off a log, so our first effort at impacting the results will simply focus on the "suggest an edit" function you'll see on each listing you're trying to get rid of. This is how you do it:

After you click the "suggest an edit" button on the listing, a

popup will appear. If you're reporting something like a spammy name, click the "change name or other details" option and fill out the form. If you've determined a listing represents a non-existent, closed, unreachable, or duplicate entity, choose the "remove this place" option and then select the dropdown entry that most closely matches the problem. You can add a screenshot or other image if you like, but in my quick pass through the data, I didn't bother.

Record the exact action you took for each spam listing in the "Actions" column of the spreadsheet. In my case, I was reporting a mixture or non-existent buildings, out-of-service phone numbers, and one duplicate listing with a spammy name.

Finally, hit the "send" button and you're done.

Step 5: Record the results

Within an hour of filing my reports with Google, I received an email like this for 5 of the 6 entries I had flagged:

The only entry I received no email for was the duplicate listing with the spammy name. But I didn’t let this worry me. I went about the rest of my day and checked back in the morning.

I’m not fond of calling out businesses in public. Sometimes, there are good folks who are honestly confused about what’s allowed and what isn’t. Also, I sometimes find screenshots of the local finder overwhelmingly cluttered and endlessly long to look at. Instead, I created a bare-bones representational schematic of the total outcome of my hour of spam-fighting work.

The red markers are legit businesses. The grey ones are spam. The green one is the Home Depot I was trying to positively impact. I attributed a letter of the alphabet to each listing, to better help me see how the order changed from day one to day two. The lines show the movement over the course of the 24 hours.

The results were that:

- A stayed the same, and B and C swapping positions was unlikely due to my work; local rankings can fluctuate like this from hour to hour.
- Five out of six spam listings I reported disappeared.

The keyword-stuffed duplicate listing which was initially at position K was replaced by the brand's legitimate listing one spot lower than it had been.

- The majority of the legitimate businesses enjoyed upward movement, with the exception of position I which went down, and M and R which disappeared. Perhaps new businesses moving into the Local Finder triggered a filter, or perhaps it was just the endless tide of position changes and they'll be back tomorrow.
- Seven new listings made it into the top 20. Unfortunately, at a glance, it looked to me like 3 of these new listings were new spam. Dang, Google!
- Most rewardingly, my hypothetical client, Home Depot, moved up 3 spots. What a super easy win!

Fill out the final column in your spreadsheet with your results.

What we've learned

You battle upstream every day for your business or clients. You twist yourself like a paperclip complying with Google's guidelines, seeking new link and unstructured citation opportunities, straining your brain to shake out new content, monitoring reviews like a chef trying to keep a cream sauce

from separating. You do all this in the struggle for better, broader visibility, hoping that each effort will incrementally improve reputation, rankings, traffic, and conversions.

Catch your breath. Not everything in life has to be so hard. The river of work ahead is always wide, but don't overlook the simplest stepping stones. Saunter past the spam listings without breaking a sweat and enjoy the easy upward progress!

I'd like to close today with three meditations:

1. Google is in over their heads with spam

Google is in over their heads with spam. My single local search for a single keyword phrase yielded 30% worthless data in their top local results. Google says they process 63,000 searches per second and that as much as 50% of mobile queries have a local intent. I don't know any other way to look at Google than as having become an under-regulated public utility at this point.

Expert local SEOs can spot spam listings in query after query, industry after industry, but Google has yet to staff a workforce or design an algorithm sufficient to address bad data that has direct, real-world impacts on businesses and customers. I don't know if they lack the skills or the will to take responsibility for this enormous problem they've created, but the problem is plain. Until Google steps up, **my best advice is to do the smart and civic work of watchdogging the results that most affect the local community you serve.** It's a positive not just for your brand, but for every legitimate business and every neighbor near you.

2. You may get in over your head with

spam

You may get in over your head with spam. Today's session was as simple as possible, but GMB spam can stem from complex, global networks. The Home Depot location I randomly rewarded with a 3-place jump in Local Finder rankings clearly isn't dedicating sufficient resources to spam fighting or they would've done this work themselves.

But the extent of spam is severe. If your market is one that's heavily spammed, you can quickly become overwhelmed by the problem. In such cases, I recommend that you:

- Read this excellent recent article by Jessie Low on the many forms spam can take, plus some great tips for more strenuous fighting than we've covered today.
- Follow Joy Hawkins, Mike Blumenthal, and Jason Brown, all of whom publish ongoing information on this subject. If you wade into a spam network, I recommend reporting it to one or more of these experts on Twitter, and, if you wish to become a skilled spam fighter yourself, you will learn a lot from what these three have published.
- If you don't want to fight spam yourself, hire an agency that has the smarts to be offering this as a service.
- You can also report listing spam to the Google My Business Community Forum, but it's a crowded place and it can sometimes be hard to get your issue seen.
- Finally, if the effect of spam in your market is egregious enough, your ability to publicize it may be your greatest hope. Major media have now repeatedly featured broadcasts and stories on this topic, and shame will sometimes move Google to action when no other motivation appears to.

3. Try to build a local anti-spam

movement

What if you built a local movement? What if you and your friendlier competitors joined forces to knock spam out of Google together? Imagine all of the florists, hair salons, or medical practitioners in a town coming together to watch the local SERPs in shifts so that everyone in their market could benefit from bad actors being reported.

Maybe you're already in a local business association with many hands that could lighten the work of protecting a whole community from unethical business practices. Maybe your town could then join up with the nearest major city, and that city could begin putting pressure on legislators. Maybe legislators would begin to realize the extent of the impacts when legitimate businesses face competition from fake entities and illegal practices. Maybe new anti-trust and communications regulations would ensue.

Now, I promised you "simple," and this isn't it, is it? But every time I see a fake listing, I know I'm looking at a single pebble and I'm beginning to think it may take an avalanche to bring about change great enough to protect both local brands and consumers. Google is now 15 years into this dynamic with no serious commitment in sight to resolve it.

At least in your own backyard, in your own community, you can be one small part of the solution with the easy tactics I've shared today, but maybe it's time for local commerce to begin both doing more and expecting more in the way of protections.

I'm ready for that. And you?

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