What do you do if Google My Business doesn’t understand your business?

Without question, Google My Business (GMB) is the lifeblood of most local organizations that want to be found online. According to the most recent Moz Local Search Ranking Factors report, your GMB page is the biggest local ranking factor. It also functions as a website now, with rich content, visuals and customer ratings/reviews that make it possible for people to learn more about you without leaving Google’s search results. At the same time, Google My Business is not a perfect service. It often struggles with businesses that don’t fall into the two most common business types: storefronts where customers come to a permanent business location and service area businesses, where the business comes to the customer.

A common case in point: pop-up shops, which are growing in number. Pop-up shops have taken hold for several reasons. They often provide customers surprise-and-delight experiences that are not always easy to pull off in traditional brick-and-mortar stores. They make it possible for businesses to sell products and services without needing to pay expensive operational costs associated with running a permanent, brick-and-mortar store. Because they are mobile by nature, businesses can customize products literally to appeal to specific neighborhoods. Pop-up stores are legitimate businesses, and yet Google has no easy way to help you find them.

There are a couple of issues that prevent Google from being able to provide an accurate GMB page:

- The first has to do with claiming the listing. For most business types, Google needs to send the business a

postcard with a pin number on it to verify that the business exists at a location. But pop-up stores often lack a permanent location for Google to send the cards and may only be at a location for a week or less, not giving enough time for the postcard to even reach the temporary address.

- The second issue also has to do with verification but is specific to how a pop-up store manages a listing. For instance, what happens if you create a GMB listing and then move from one location to another? Does that old location get marked as permanently closed? If so, the classification implies the business is out of business instead of moved. Again, the postcard verification as the primary means of validating a business causes trouble here.

Because of this quirk in Google's approach, pop-up stores are generally beyond the reach of GMB. Their customers need to find them via word of mouth or via social sites such as Facebook, where they may operate pages without a verified location.

In the above scenario, everyone loses. The store loses potential customers. Google loses traffic to social sites such as Facebook. And customers lose because it becomes harder to find a store that might interest them. Because Google Maps and Waze draw data from GMB listings, those popular apps cannot offer users accurate directions to these types of stores.

Let's look at another interesting case from i9 Sports (a client of my company). The sports franchise pays relatively low fees in exchange for the right to operate leagues, camps and clinics in different communities. One of the ways they keep fees low is by eliminating the need for a franchise to buy any real estate. Instead, franchisees operate out of parks and fields owned by someone else – often via park districts. The beauty of the model is that it capitalizes on surplus

inventory: if a local park or playing field is unused, as they often are, why not conduct a soccer league or baseball clinic there? Why build another facility when there is unused space available?

Sounds like an efficient way to do business, right? In fact, the sports franchise has been growing steadily for years, with more than 2 million registrations in communities from New York to Hawaii. But if you Google "i9 Sports near me," you may have a less than ideal set of search results. That's because the franchises have a difficult time creating GMB profiles. The issue is that the very attributes that make it incredibly efficient and cost-effective – the lack of a permanent location – work against the organization in Google's world. There's no physical location for Google to work with in order to verify the existence so the organization is lumped together with service area businesses (e.g., plumbers and contractors) where the business goes to the client's location.

Google has good reason to verify businesses the way it does. Service area businesses require careful vetting, and it serves the interests of Google and a business's customers for Google to ensure that they are contactable, reviewable and verified. Checks and balances need to be in place. At the same time, progressive business models fall through the cracks.

Fortunately, Google has been helpful in working with us to find a solution, which shows that Google is flexible and willing to evolve. As more companies adopt business models shorn of permanent locations, the bigger question is how will Google adapt over time? If you are one such business, you may need an advocate to work with Google – but it's worth trying. Google, to its credit, watches for patterns of behavior among its users and adapts. It behooves Google to provide the best experience to its users, and if more of its users are struggling to find businesses, Google will adapt rather than lose them to another ecosystem.

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