What’s behind the badge that powers Google’s local trust layer?

Google’s strategy for local has revealed itself. There will be two types of Places in Google – *trusted* and *untrusted.*

Get used to this subjective, binary world. The game has changed.

What makes a local business trusted on Google? A badge.

To this point, the use of the badge has been confined to Local Services Ads (LSA). Now visible within the GMB dash, the new critical designation makes known that it transcends any one Google product. It is a distinct attribute that lives at the customer ID level. Therefore, it is transportable with a business across Google’s business units and ad types.

The badge will sheriff Google My Business next. It will live within a new class of “trusted” GMB profiles. Currently visible in a limited beta within GMB dashes of non-LSA home services providers, business owners are being encouraged to “Upgrade profile.” To do so, businesses will have to pay a $50 monthly fee.

The upgraded profile is unlike any other GMB display. This profile is the most stable and rich single-location view of a business on Google. It displays business content in a more traditional online profile manner. At present, upgraded add-ons for the GMB profile include the Google Guaranteed Badge, access to call recordings on the GMB app, extended license, insurance and background check details, local booking interactions, and Google support. You can view some of these attributes in the “Overview” cross-section of the LSA profile below.

For six years, we have been told that Google My Business is a “free and easy-to-use tool.” Moving forward, GMB owners will still engage with customers for free. But to “stand out,” they are now being encouraged to upgrade. If a business does not upgrade, they will not be explicitly trusted by Google.

Google has squarely shifted the qualitative burden inherent in maintaining local data integrity to business owners themselves. It is a brilliant, albeit contentious move to subsidize better local results for its users while delivering organic revenue growth for its shareholders.

At present, the process of getting approved for the badge is time-consuming and frustrating. Google has multiple third-parties that they rely upon. One of these companies is TTEC, a multi-billion dollar public, outsourced arm of the giant (and

other giants). They are the voice behind the number you call. TTEC, on behalf of Google, attempts to get the application process started for Screened or Guaranteed candidates. They are very busy and the process is often challenging.

To qualify for the badge of trust, service pros undergo an examination that we as marketers, technologists, business owners and employees, may find uncomfortable. Businesses withstand personal identity and background checks for authorized representatives and field workers. Approval also means a business status check into litigation history, including past judgments and previous liens filed against it. Google also makes sure that certain businesses carry general liability insurance with variable minimums and it checks to ensure that businesses hold appropriate licenses at the federal, state, and county levels.

Google’s outsourced partners like TTEC (Badge Approvals) and Cognizant Technology Solutions (LSA), have carried much of the burden through the program’s difficult early years. But now, Google has a sleek, new front-end to these disjointed processes. It is integrated seamlessly into the GMB dashboard. Businesses will now be able to more easily find their way through badge approval stages, as seen in the view below:

Google prioritizes users. The money follows.

Consumers prefer trusted results over non-trusted results.

Algorithmically speaking, it is rather natural to argue that the badge itself will be a primary ranking factor. The badge forms a very strong qualitative signal that will be readily subscribed to by business owners. As demonstrated by the behavior of Local Services Ads, however, the badge in and of itself, forms no inherent advantage. Everyone has one in LSA. In GMB, hundreds of thousands of business owners will adopt. The early adopters will be the ones that are already active in building reputations and contributing content to GMB.

As a result of the ultimate ubiquitous nature of the badge, Google will continue to look at a myriad of ranking factors

relating to relevance, distance, and prominence. But there is one new ranking signal that will rise to the surface for all badge owners on any Google ad type – Responsiveness.

Google's users are already waking up to the fact that the badge also stands for speed, access, and ease. Programmatically, the badge-driven trust layer is more reliable because the businesses that are most responsive are prioritized in ranking. Google wants answers for consumers when they are in need and that requires responsiveness. Badged businesses that are detached from the process will not age well in this brave new world of local.

Responsiveness is a critical go-forward signal for badge owners that money cannot buy. So much so, that Google encourages businesses to establish native booking functions through partners Housecall Pro and ServiceTitan. As such, users can now book a trusted service pro directly through an upgraded profile. Consumers can see the availability and pricing of the provider upfront and schedule house calls with security and ease from an LSA ad unit and profile itself.

The badge equals trust. Consumers favor trust. In home service categories, the badge also stands for safety, as background checks give consumers inviting pros into their homes, a sense of security. Guaranteed transactions are also financially backed by Google. In professional services categories, the badge provides the qualitative scrutiny that consumers favor in disciplines such as law, real estate and finance. The badge will also find its way to non-LSA categories that were unsuccessfully monetized like roadside assistance, general contractors, and handyman services, among others.

For years, Google has been plotting and positioning themselves for what they are now unveiling. Their plans by all estimations have remained very secretive. Google is walking a very thin antitrust line. Their move to charge for trust is aggressive.

Their plot can no longer be kept quiet. It will transform local advertising.

For marketers, the squeeze is on.

Opinions expressed in this article are those of the guest author and not necessarily Search Engine Land. Staff authors are listed here.

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