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Think Global, Search Local: **Claiming Your Spot on Google Places**

STEVE MATTHEWS | Search engines have already outstripped the Yellow Pages as a way for consumers to find businesses in their city or town. Now Google has introduced a major change that will affect the chances of local clients finding your firm online easily.

Earlier this year, the national Yellow Pages Association set up a Web site (www.yellowpagesoptout.com) allowing homeowners to opt out of Yellow Pages delivery. "We don't want to send them to people who don't want them," the association's public policy director told the San Francisco Examiner. "It costs us money to send these out." Not to mention that it costs cities and towns a lot more money to recycle millions of unopened directories every year.

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matches the firm's Web site ups the odds of appearing in page-one rankings.

What's going on here? Sometime between 2007 and 2008, we reached a turning point in how people search for local business information. It's during that time, according to a ComScore study, that online search engines surpassed the Yellow Pages as the primary source of location-based business information. Search engines have never looked back, widening their lead over the Yellow Pages every year.

These developments have implications for every kind of business, but most especially for local service businesses-which is exactly what most law firms are. The new reality is that a sophisticated approach to local online search is critical to your chances of being noticed, found and contacted by prospective clients in your area.

Google Places Listings: Location Is Everything

Local search, in which users are looking for something in their specific geographic area, is one of the best opportunities to stand out in search engine rankings. For new firms, it also represents one of the fastest methods of gaining traction in competitive local markets. The key to local search, not surprisingly, lies with Google-specifically because its Google Places feature has recently undergone a dramatic change in its algorithm for returning local results. If your firm hasn't yet claimed its

Google Places listing, or if you haven't heard about these changes, read on.

Before October 2010, local search in Google consisted of maps embedded at the top of the search results pages. This became commonly known as "the seven pack," because it included the top seven Google Places listings for service providers in a given region. In October, however, Google merged its natural search results (the non-sponsored listings that usually appear on the left-side of the page, also known as "organic listings") with its local search results.

This new, combined approach means that for some local searches, 80 percent of the page-one listings now belong to local businesses. As a result, law firms without a Google Places account face the real possibility that they may fall from the number-one position to the bottom of the first page in a search result—or even off the page entirely.

The Importance of Corroborating Evidence

So what to do in response? You need to establish a Google Places account for your firm's site and begin the process of optimizing for local search.

There are a number of factors involved in local search optimization, but perhaps the one that stands out most is having corroborating directory listings. When it comes to local search, getting listed in as many local directories as possible online will support your Google Places ranking and influence how high you appear on the search results page.

Within the legal space, Avvo, Martindale-Hubbell and the Justia lawyers directory can provide these



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types of corroborating listings. Outside the law, consider consumer-based local search sources such as Bing, Yahoo Maps, YellowPages.com, Yelp, Citysearch and Dexknows.com.

Okay, now that you have the basics on this shift in local search, let's focus on more hands-on tips your firm can implement today.

Steps to Improve Your Firm's Local Presence

Here are nine steps that will enable you to take advantage of the power of local search and respond to Google's latest algorithmic changes.

1. Go to www.google.com/local/ add to set up your Google Places account. Complete the registration form as thoroughly as possible.

2. Ensure that the key contact information on your Google Places ac-

count is the same as on your firm Web site, particularly your business name, phone numbers, site address and physical address.

3. Carefully choose the categories under which your firm is listed, and use no more than five categories. Larger firms will want to cover service areas that match their brand and promote their most profitable practices, while solos and smaller firms can identify unique practice areas that may help them stand out.

4. Upload photos and videos to enhance your listing.

5. Keep your firm's site involved in the effort. Include local terms in the title tag, acquire links that embed regional search terms, and embed Google's map widget in your firm's contact page (with the location exactly matched to your business's marker in Google Maps).

6. Register your site outside of



When setting up a Google Places account, it's important to carefully choose the categories under which the firm is listed. Uploading photos or videos will enhance a listing, too.

Google as well. Bing and Yahoo Maps are good places to start. Again, ensure that everything matches and that the formatting of the firm name and contact information is replicated perfectly.

7. Register your site with both generic local business directories and law-specific directories that feed Google Places and Google's local searches.

8. Use Google's keyword research tool to maximize your exposure for searches with the highest monthly volumes.

9. If your firm has multiple offices, each should jump on the opportunity to have its own Google Places listing (again, replicating the foregoing tactics for each office).

Outflanking the Competition

One final note about local search: Because this new algorithm is a combination of the two search offerings—organic and local—it means that paying attention to your organic ranking factors is just as important as local search factors. Executing on as many fronts as possible, in *both* camps, is important to a successful approach.

The Yellow Pages aren't going to disappear altogether, at least in the near term, but their day clearly has passed and Google Places is the present and the future in online business development terms. Yes, things became more complicated with this change. But for firms facing longestablished and strong competitors, local search may offer a way to gain lost ground by tackling a new measure that competing firms haven't (yet) given their due attention. IP

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