

# TOP RANKING AND CONVERSION FACTORS FOR LOCAL SEARCH

*A SOCi Research Report*



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# 01 INTRODUCTION

The vast majority of consumers use local search platforms to find information about nearby businesses, many of those searches resulting in a transaction. Previous SOCi research has shown that 74 percent of consumers conduct local searches at least once a week, and 56 percent visit a business right after searching. For most consumers, the default local search platform is Google. Our research shows that 77 percent of consumers use Google to find businesses on a regular basis, twice as many as the next most popular platform.

In search, Google favors just three businesses with placement in the so-called 3-Pack, the area in the search engine result page (SERP) that showcases local listings. Though some consumers click “More places” to view additional choices, top placement confers real advantages to a store’s bottom line, and results in higher search traffic as well as a greater number of conversions.

These statements are self-evident, but can they be quantified? In this report, we looked to measure the impact of high rank position in Google local searches

in terms that would be meaningful to most people: search traffic and customer interactions. These data points were derived from the insights provided to businesses in the Google Business Profiles platform.

Furthermore, we were aware that achieving high ranking, on its own, is only half of the battle of converting online searchers into offline customers. A high-ranked business with poor photo content, bad reviews, or inaccurate contact information will be less compelling than its competition.

In recent years, Google has begun showcasing availability of service features like pickup and delivery, as well as keyword-matching content from business profiles and secondary sources, in order to show consumers that a particular listing is likely to meet their needs. We were curious to discover how often prominent attributes, photos, and justifications appear in today’s search results, something else we analyze later in this report.

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## 02 THE CHALLENGE OF RANKING CORRELATION

We were presented with some difficulties when we began looking at the early results of our analysis. As you will see in the results section, many data points, much to our surprise, appeared to have a negative correlation with search ranking. For example, our study of review volume as it relates to rank shows that, after the first few rank positions, review volume increases gradually as rank goes down. This would seem to contradict the common assumption that high review volume correlates with high ranking.

But in fact, there is a pattern in the data that explains this apparent anomaly. In order to make sense of it, we need to make reference to the three main factors that determine local search ranking, according to Google's own [help documentation](#). These factors are listed below along with Google's commentary on each.

### RELEVANCE

"Relevance refers to how well a local Business Profile matches what someone is searching for. Add complete and detailed business information to help Google better understand your business and match your profile to relevant searches."

### DISTANCE

"Distance considers how far each potential search result is from the location term used in a search. If a user doesn't specify a location in their search, we'll calculate distance based on what we do know about their location."

### PROMINENCE

"Prominence refers to how well known a business is. Some places are more prominent in the offline world, and search results try to reflect this in local ranking. [...] Prominence is also based on information that Google has about a business, from across the web, like links, articles, and directories. Google review count and review score factor into local search ranking. More reviews and positive ratings can improve your business' local ranking. Your position in web results is also a factor, so search engine optimization (SEO) best practices apply."

It's likely no accident that Google has more to say about prominence than it does about the other factors, which are somewhat more straightforward. In a nutshell, relevance means "this business matches what the user was searching for"; distance means "this business is close to the user"; and prominence means "this is a good example of the type of business the user was searching for." As you can see from the various signals Google cites, prominence is more complex and harder to achieve. It also turns out to be the most important of all factors when it comes to the likelihood your business will appear in a search.



The reason has to do with the limited inventory available for any given search result. If you search for “Mexican restaurant near me,” Google will show you, in the first several results, as many Mexican restaurants as it can find that are truly “near me” and that represent the best available examples of that business type. But inevitably, the inventory of local results matching all three criteria will reach a limit. There may only be seven restaurants, or ten, or twelve, that truly meet the criteria of being relevant, close, and excellent. What our data shows is that when Google runs out of local inventory for a given search, it begins to substitute businesses that are less relevant or further away but not less prominent.

If Google runs out of Mexican restaurants that are truly “near me,” the next several rank positions will tend to be occupied by restaurants that are near but not Mexican, or Mexican but not near. But they will still be the restaurants, whatever their type or location, that have the best reviews and show other signs of being an excellent choice.

As the diagram shows, most local results will have a Zone 1, within which Google displays results that are highly relevant, near, and prominent, and a Zone 2, where distance and relevance slip but prominence does not. We can now begin to see why review volume increases as rank decreases: this is a testament to the fact that Google is trying to show the best available options even if they are not particularly near or relevant to the user’s search. Businesses beyond rank 10 are likely those that would rank much higher in a different search.

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## GOOGLE’S ZONE BASED LOCAL RANKINGS

### “Best” Results

Zone 1: Relevance +  
Proximity + Prominence

### “Pretty Good” Results

Zone 2: Loss of Relevance  
and/or Proximity



# 03 THE VALUE OF HIGH LOCAL RANKING

With the caveats described in the previous section, we can begin to explore how local ranking correlates with listing performance. Upon examining insights data from approximately 300,000 Google business listings, we were able to derive meaningful correlations between local rank and volume of the Google metric known as Discovery Searches as well as three types of Action: Phone Calls, Website Visits, and Requests for Directions.

Search Advantage of Rank 1 Over Others	
2	11.13%
3	26.70%
4	33.19%
5	37.80%
6	96.06%
7	226.19%
8	556.30%
9	435.54%
10	612.38%

Action Advantage of Rank 1 Over Others	
2	4.88%
3	16.69%
4	5.72%
5	24.22%
6	102.19%
7	107.22%
8	325.31%
9	336.62%
10	397.13%





The Discovery Searches metric tells us how many times a given listing surfaced for generic keyword searches that do not mention the brand by name, such as “Mexican restaurant near me” in our earlier example. Assuming most brands will rank well for their own business names, it’s Discovery Search traffic that really tells the story of performance in competitive results. As for Actions, though these do not represent hard-and-fast evidence that a searcher has been converted into a customer, they do indicate high intent to convert and can be used as a proxy for determining whether high-ranking businesses are more likely to earn new customers.

Our results show that overall, multi-location businesses that achieve the coveted status of ranking in Google’s 3-Pack will earn 126 percent more traffic in the form of Discovery Searches, as well as 93 percent more Actions, than businesses ranked 4 through 10. In the table, we show the relative advantage in Searches and Actions of businesses at rank 1 as compared to other rankings from 2 through 10. The line graphs show volume of Searches and Actions by rank position.

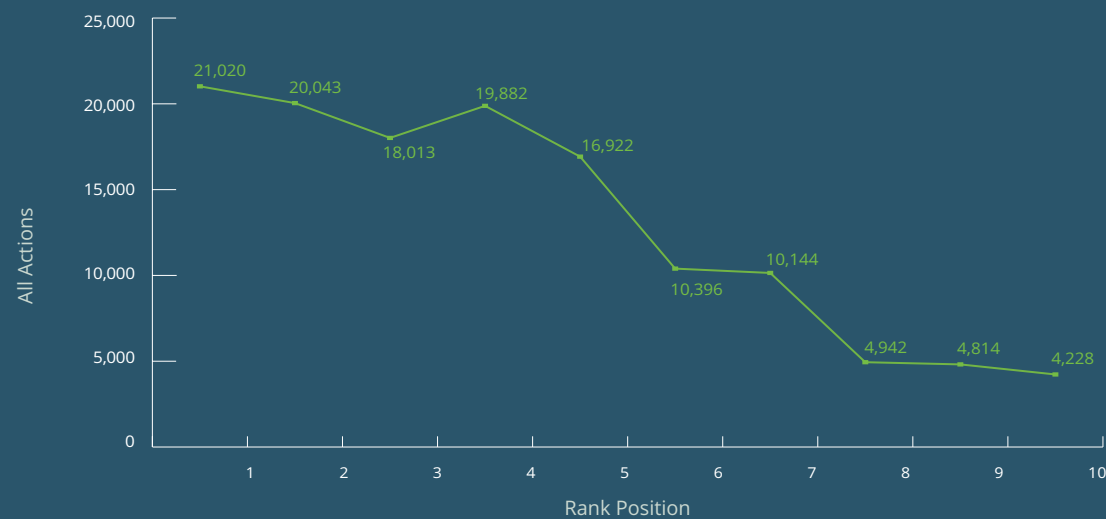
## THE IMPACT OF RANKING ON SEARCH VISIBILITY

Monthly Discovery Search by Rank Position



## THE IMPACT OF RANKING ON GBP ACTIONS

Monthly Actions by Rank Position





Though our results offer strong support for the notion that a high rank position in local searches drives better results affecting a business's bottom line, the picture is not entirely bleak for lower-ranking businesses. Although Searches and Actions decline as rank declines, the proportion of Searches that result in an Action actually increases to a modest degree, as shown in our final chart. This is evidence that at least some searchers are happy to have more than a few options and will sometimes choose businesses that rank lower. (Of course, given the results above, the pool of potential customers is much lower for low-ranked businesses, even if the likelihood to convert is higher.)

Because of the ranking correlation challenges described in the previous section, we did not feel confident making any claims about the performance of businesses below rank 10. Our data tended to show that these businesses had higher Search and Action counts than their rank position would suggest, indicating that these were prominent businesses that would ordinarily rank well in searches for which they were the closer or a more relevant option.

## CONVERSION RATE GOES UP AS RANK DECLINES

Conversion Rate by Rank Position





# 04 SEARCH FEATURES BY RANK POSITION

As noted in our introduction, Google has increasingly focused on providing signals in search results that demonstrate relevance or prominence, or that offer supplementary information Google believes to be of interest to the majority of consumers. These features fall into four main categories:

1. What we refer to as a summary result is the brief version of a Google listing, displayed in a rectangular box in the 3-Pack, Local Finder, or Maps result page. Summary results display only a small amount of select information from the full Google Business Profile.

## Ratings and reviews

Google has long featured a business’s average rating and review count in its summary local search results<sup>1</sup>, providing a quick indicator of how well-regarded a business is in the eyes of fellow consumers.

## Prominent attributes

Launched to advertise needed services like pickup, delivery, and virtual appointments during the first year of the pandemic, prominent attributes are still very common. They are pulled from the attribute list in Google Business Profiles and are displayed in summary search results.

## Photos

Google now commonly displays cover photos in results for generic queries, as well as photos pulled from the gallery in the Business Profile that match queries for specific products and services. These photos help to demonstrate the relevance of the listing for a particular search. For example, a search for “tacos” may bring up Mexican restaurants with photos of taco dishes prominently displayed.

## Justifications

These are snippets of text pulled from a wide range of sources including Google Posts, reviews, the business website, Google service attributes, and feedback from Google users about the offerings of a particular business. They are displayed prominently in search results and tend to be used to reinforce the relevance of a listing.

For this part of our report, we were able to tap into a much larger dataset of approximately 8.6 million local search results. However, it’s important to note that the kinds of niche queries that often give rise to justifications and photos in search results were not used to generate our results. Instead, we focused on high-volume queries based on a wide range of Google primary categories. We did so in order to analyze the most common types of search results and describe their common features.



## Reviews and Ratings in Top Results

As alluded to previously in the report, our results find that review volume declines with rank for the first few rank positions, but begins a trend of negative correlation thereafter. It's striking that across the entire dataset, this reverse trend starts at rank position 5, earlier than we might have predicted. In fact, businesses ranked 3 through 5 all hover around an average of about 280 reviews, far fewer than rank 1 at 404 reviews and rank 2 at 375. With little inconsistency, after rank 5, review volume increases gradually as rank declines, reaching an average of 324 reviews at rank 20.

### These results tell us a few things:

- 1. A higher than average review volume appears to be an indicator that a listing has potential to achieve top ranking, especially in positions 1 and 2.
- 2. Review volume is not the only factor that can make Google decide a listing is prominent enough to rank highly. The notable drop in review volume at rank 3 shows us that Google begins to consider alternative signals at about this point in the average search result. As rank declines further, Google pulls listings into the results that are further or less relevant, using review count as an important indicator that these listings are still prominent examples of their business type.

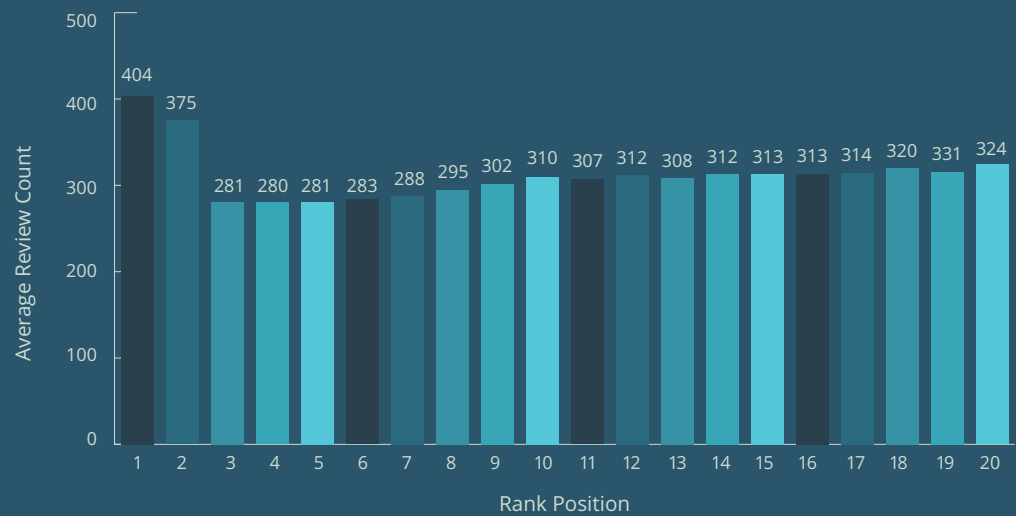
The following ratings chart tells a somewhat different story, one that aligns with the common perception that Google reviews have become biased toward the positive. Our findings show that the average star rating at all rank positions from 1 through 20 hovers around 4.1 stars. In the chart, we took our calculated averages out to the thousandths place so that the actual variation by rank position would be visible, but we know that in reality, Google rounds results to the nearest tenth. If we did this, our chart would be flat.

As it stands, we see that the highest ranking results have a very slightly higher rating than the norm, but the range from lowest to highest rating is only 0.059 stars. These averages vary significantly by industry; according to our [2022 Localized Marketing Benchmark Report](#), the average Google rating is only 4.0 for retail and hotels but 4.6 for fitness and education. Still, no matter the industry, brands must achieve high star ratings to be competitive in search.

The average star rating at all rank positions from 1 through 20 hovers around 4.1 stars.

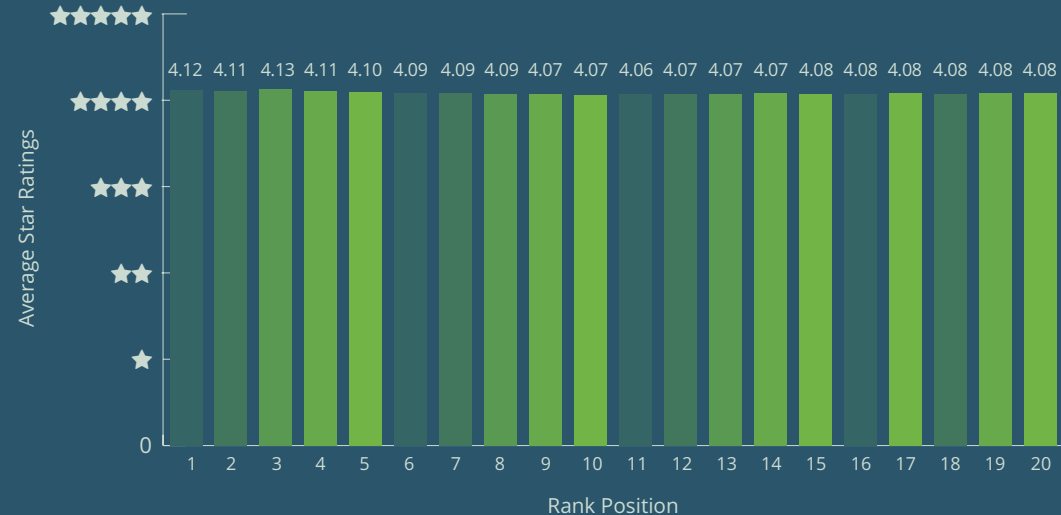
## REVIEW COUNT BY RANK POSITION

Average Review Count by Rank



## STAR RATING BY RANK POSITION

Average Rating by Rank





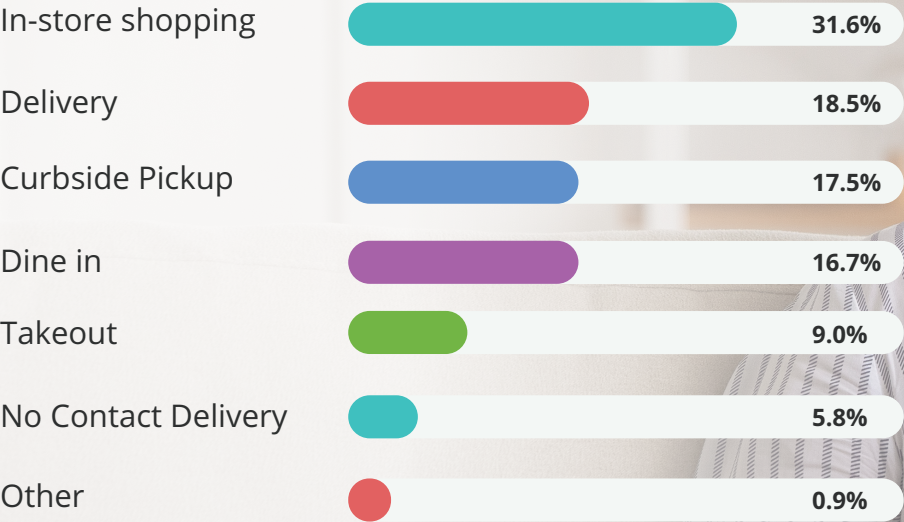
### Frequency of Prominent Attributes

We looked for a range of prominent attributes in the 8.6 million results we examined for this part of the report. Overall, we found that these attributes appear with a remarkable frequency: 43 percent of listings in rank positions 1 through 20 display at least one prominent attribute. As for frequency by attribute type, our findings indicate that the most popular attributes are in-store shopping, curbside pickup, delivery, dine in, takeout, and no contact delivery, in that order. Even as the intensity of pandemic conditions has waned, Google clearly still believes these convenience and availability oriented attributes represent critical information in the eyes of consumers.

Though most prominent attributes have not been shown to influence ranking directly, it's fair to state that businesses offering any of these service features should make sure to enable the relevant attributes in their Google Business Profiles to get the benefit of prominent placement in Google results. Those who neglect this risk being perceived as not offering a service that may in fact be available.

43% of listings in rank positions 1 through 20 display at least one prominent attribute.

### FREQUENCY OF COMMON ATTRIBUTES





## DELIVERY BY RANK POSITION



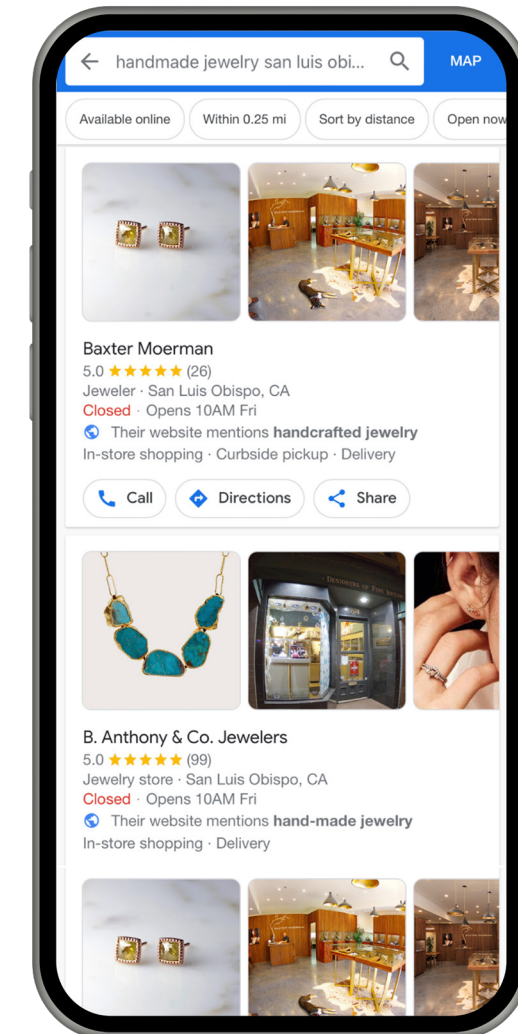
Some prominent attributes show interesting correlations with rank position. An example is the attribute “delivery,” which appears most frequently at rank position 1, and generally declines along with rank. Again, most local SEO experts agree that enabling such attributes does not in itself cause a business to rank higher, but given that overall Google Business Profile completeness is agreed to be the single most important factor in local ranking, we can extrapolate that businesses for whom attributes like delivery are enabled have also done a good job filling out other important sections like secondary categories, business description, special hours of operation, ordering and booking URLs, and so on, making these profiles more likely to appear in top positions.

## Frequency of Photos

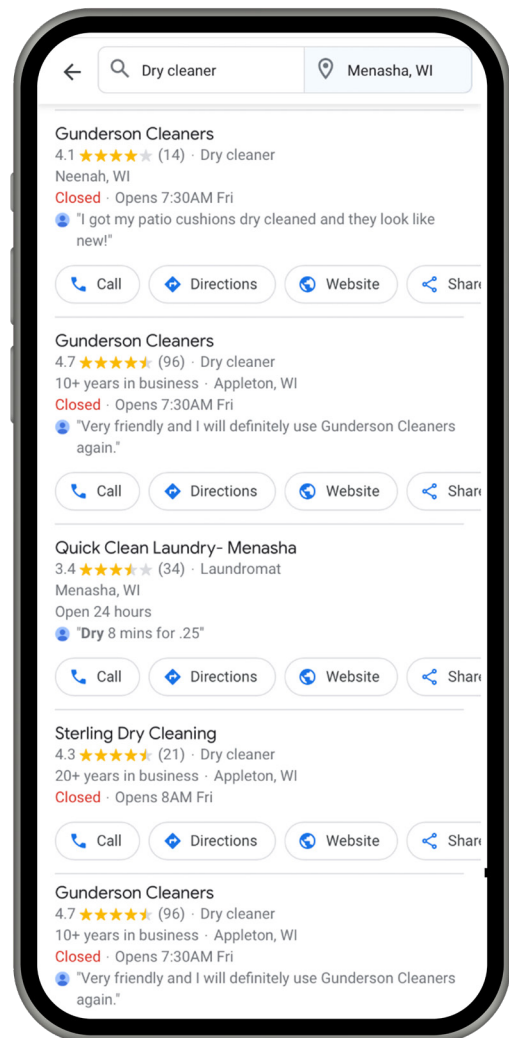
When photos appear in summary listings, they tend to appear in all search results regardless of rank position. This is true even to the extent that when Google has no photo of any kind to display, the listing will show a generic placeholder icon where the photo would be. Photos are more common in verticals like restaurants and retail where evidence of available meals or products is especially meaningful to the consumer. But overall, the incidence of photos in local search results is quite high – our report finds that 44 percent of local results contain a featured photo in the summary listing.

SOCi analysis has shown that only 3.4 percent of photos in Google Business Profiles were uploaded by the merchant, meaning that most photos are uploaded by Google users and may not reflect well on the business. The high incidence of photos in summary listings should be a wake-up call to businesses that they must take control of the photo content in their Google Business Profiles.

44% of local results contain a featured photo in the summary listing.



Photos are especially prominent in local results on mobile devices, where they are often featured in carousel format

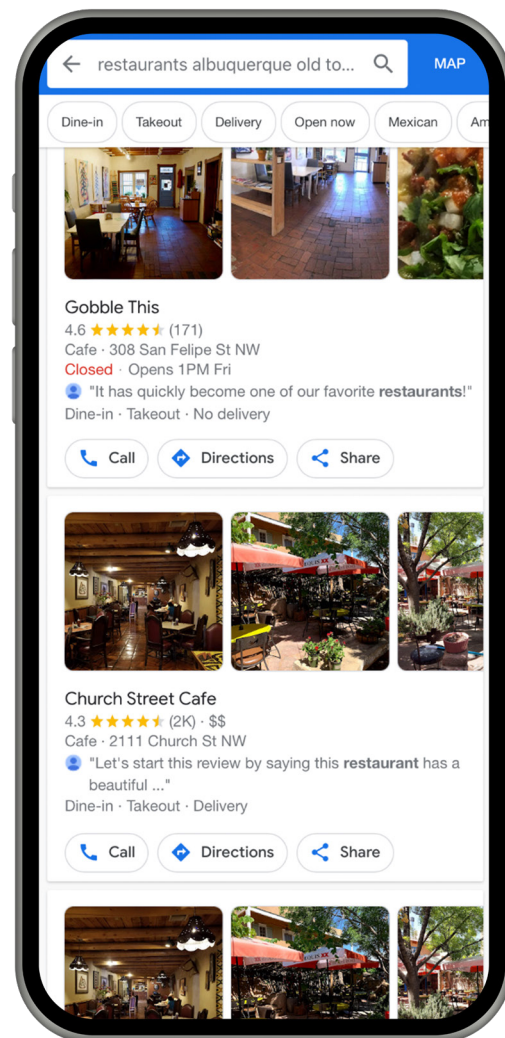


Review justifications offering additional prominence signals

## Frequency of Justifications

As we've mentioned, the results in this section are skewed to some extent by our emphasis on popular search queries. In a future report, we may examine the frequency of justifications for long-tail search terms, where their appearance and popularity can tell us more about Google's attempts to pull content into search results in order to demonstrate their relevance. For the purpose of this report, the intent is to show which justifications appear most frequently in the highest volume of queries – and thus most frequently overall in local search results.

Among the various justification sources – reviews, Google Posts, service attributes, website content, product listings, menus, Google Q&A, and Google user input – the overall winner by a wide margin is reviews, which appear a whopping 92 percent of the time when Google decides to display a justification. (Reviews are followed distantly in popularity by service attributes, website snippets, and menu highlights, in that order.) Review snippets in search results for popular terms help to provide additional context about the business, and can be seen as an extension of the common practice of showcasing review count and average rating.

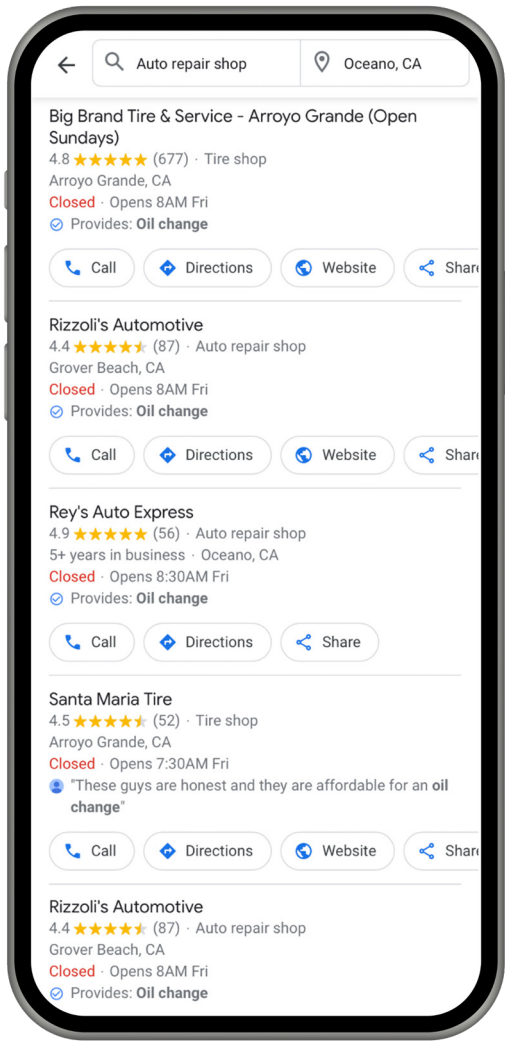


Review justifications with the keyword "restaurant(s)" matching the search query, though both examples are listed as cafes

Review justifications can also be used to demonstrate that listings further down the rankings are relevant to what the user is searching for. In these snippets, a keyword in the review shows that the business matches the search intent even though the listing's primary category does not.

Not all justification types show a correlation with rank position, but some do. One example that is negatively correlated with rank, in a manner that aligns with many other observations in our report, is the "provides" justification. The "provides" justification appears when service attributes configured in a Google Business Profile match the intent of the search, often in cases where the primary and secondary categories do not. (Service attributes are managed from the Services tab in the Google Business Profile Manager dashboard.)

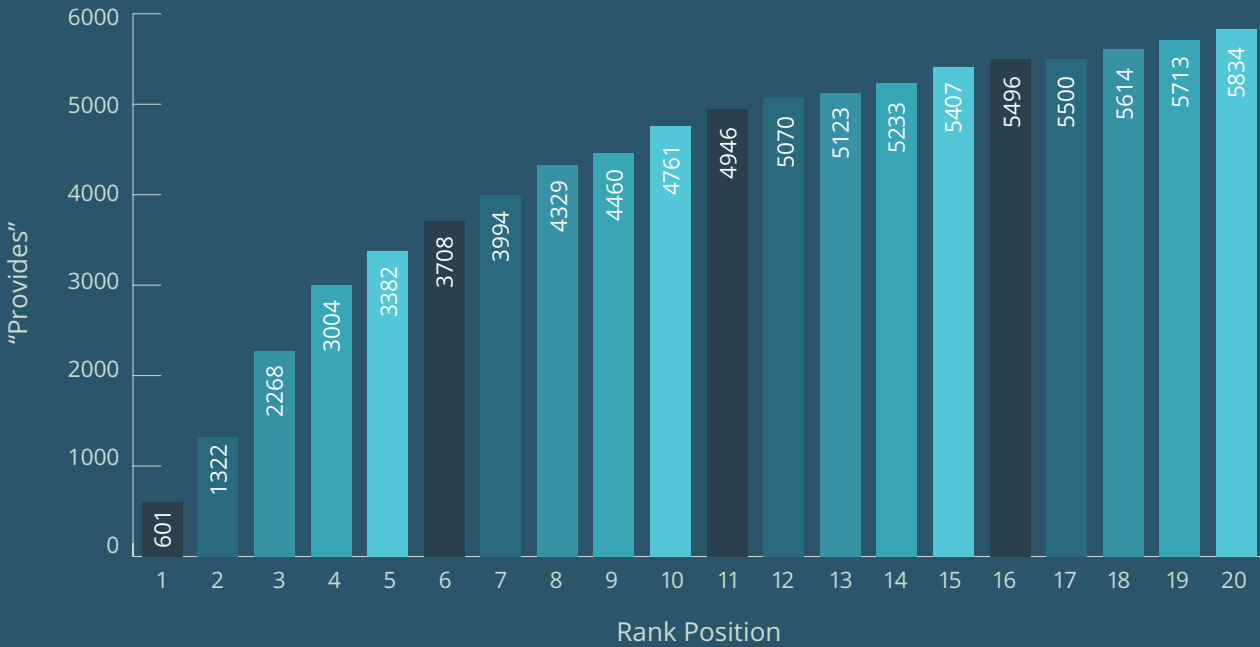




The “provides” justification shows that these businesses provide oil changes (matching the search query “oil change near me”), though their primary categories do not match this term

Knowing what we do about the first and second zones of Google’s local results, it will not be surprising to discover that the “provides” justification occurs more frequently as rank declines. This is evidence of Google’s effort to display relevant results once it has exhausted the available inventory of listings with primary or secondary categories that match the intent of the search.

### “PROVIDES” BY RANK POSITION



## 05

# KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR MULTI-LOCATION MARKETERS

The results of our report clearly demonstrate the value of high placement in Google results. With listings in the 3-Pack earning 126 percent more search traffic and 93 percent more conversion-oriented actions than listings in the Local Finder, local marketing teams need to pull out all the stops to rank as well as possible for popular and niche terms.

In addition, Google is highly focused on providing information in summary search results that is designed to help consumers quickly identify the right business for their needs. These information snippets take several forms including review data, prominent attributes, photos, and justifications. Though businesses cannot control whether these elements will appear in search results, they can ensure that their own listings are more likely to stand out from the competition when such features do appear.

## Best practices include:

- 1 Respond to reviews using keywords you would like to rank for. The responses themselves are not eligible for justifications, but keywords may indirectly prompt other reviewers to write about the same topics.
- 2 Configure any and all attributes that apply to your business, with a special emphasis on attributes displayed prominently in listings such as in-store shopping, delivery, and pickup.
- 3 Upload great photos of the products and services you want to rank for, and refresh photo content on a regular basis.
- 4 To ensure your products, services, and service features are eligible to be showcased in justifications, make use of as many of the following as possible:
  - Google Posts:** Create post content that is keyword optimized for terms you want to rank for. Posts must be recent to qualify for a justification. Offer-type posts are showcased most frequently.
  - Google Q&A:** Respond to user questions or seed your own questions and answers with content that contains relevant keywords.
  - Service attributes:** List all relevant service features for your business.
  - Local Inventory Ads:** Use these Merchant Center ads to have your products showcased in your summary and full Business Profiles.
  - Menus:** Restaurants and service businesses can utilize menus to list their offerings and perhaps earn menu snippets in summary listings.
  - Website:** Website content is eligible for the “Their website mentions” justification, so your local landing pages, and pages linked to them should be optimized for keywords that enumerate your important service features.



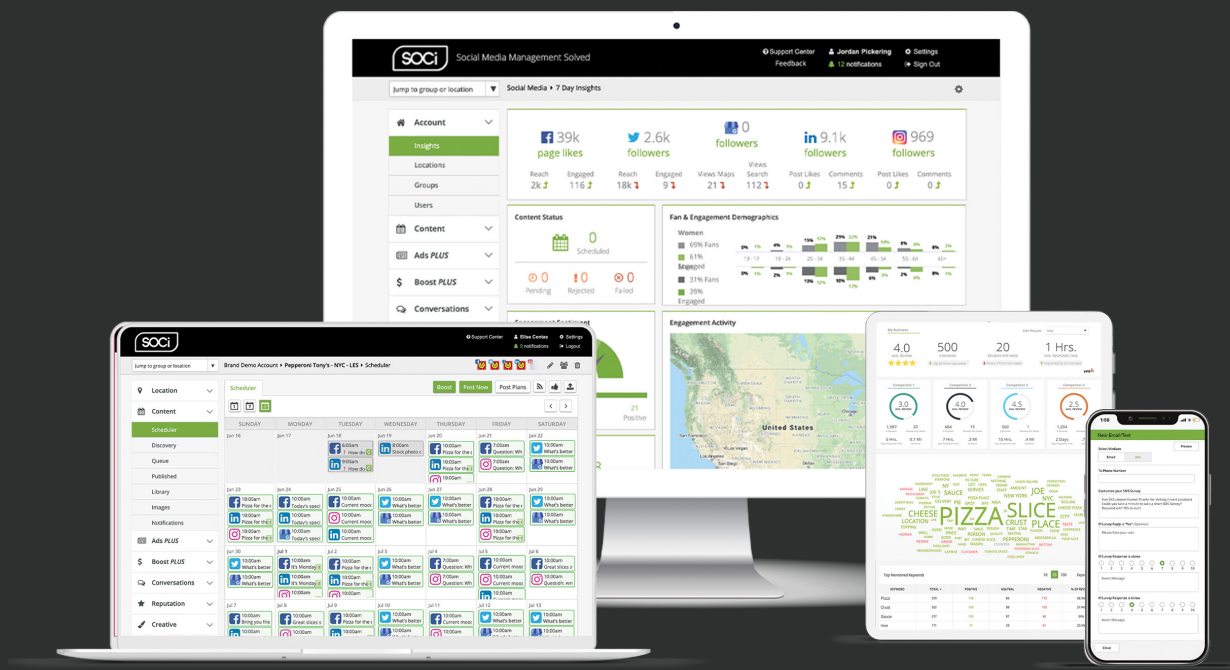
A word of caution: we are not advocating for rampant keyword stuffing as a technique to help you rank better in local search. This practice has long been frowned upon and is likely to provide a bad user experience that will do you no favors in your quest to convert searchers into buyers. All of the strategies suggested above should be implemented with customer experience in mind. Content should not exist merely for the purpose of gaming the system, but should provide real value to consumers seeking information about your business.

Many factors determine performance in search, and some of them – such as the density of competitors or the proximity of a business to the searcher’s location – are very difficult if not impossible for the business to control. But businesses can do quite a lot to increase their chances of achieving high ranking and, when they do, of presenting themselves to the customer as the best choice among the available options.

Now that you’ve gained a better understanding of the factors that accompany top ranking in local search, it’s time to get to work optimizing your Google Business Profiles to win more customers.



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