

The 60 seconds before someone calls a local business

Why three businesses get the call and the rest never hear a thing. Six places you lose it, and what each costs to fix.

Almost everything written about getting found online is about websites, because websites are what people sell. For a lot of trades the website is the fifth thing a customer looks at, and plenty of them call before they ever get to it.

So here is the actual minute, step by step. Six places you can lose it, and what each one costs to fix. The answer is nothing, every time, which is the point of writing it down.

Most of this is about the free listing Google shows for your business on Maps and in search results. Google calls it a Business Profile. If you have never claimed yours, that single step is most of this guide.

PART ONE — GETTING INTO THE BOX

01 They search, and what comes back is a map

The search is *plumber near me*, or *dog groomer Poughkeepsie*, or *mobile detailing near me*. They don't know your name. Not knowing your name is the entire problem you are trying to solve.

What comes back first is not a list of websites. It's a small map with three businesses under it, each with a star rating and a call button. On a phone those three and the ads above them can fill the screen. Getting to anybody's actual website means scrolling past all of it.

If you're not one of the three, you're competing for the people who scroll. Some do. Most, having just been handed three plausible answers with phone numbers attached, don't.

WHAT TO DO THIS WEEK

- Search the thing your customers would actually type, on your phone, and from somewhere that isn't your own driveway. Your results at home are flattering and not what anybody else sees.
- If your business isn't in that box at all, search your own business name. If a profile exists, Google offers a link to claim it. If none exists, you can add one from the same place. It's free, and it's the biggest single item in this guide.
- If you're there but below the three, the next section is about why.

Your website's job starts after this moment. This is the part before it, and it is the part most people never look at.

02 Google picks three, on things you can change

Google says it ranks local results on three things: relevance, distance and prominence. Distance you can't do anything about. The other two are mostly admin, and mostly untouched.

Relevance is largely your categories. There's one primary category and room for others, and the primary one does most of the work. *Contractor* and *plumber* are different searches by different people.

Prominence is partly your reviews, partly how completely the profile is filled in, and partly whether the rest of the internet agrees you exist and are where you say you are.

WHAT TO DO THIS WEEK

- Set your primary category to the exact words people search, not the broadest thing you're capable of.
- Add secondary categories for everything else you do. They cost nothing and they widen what you can turn up for.
- Fill in every field there is: hours, phone, website, services, the description. A half-finished profile loses to a finished one.
- If you travel to customers rather than them coming to you, set it up as a service-area business and list the towns. Otherwise you're mostly offered to people nearly on top of you.
- Write your business name, address and phone number identically everywhere else they appear online. Two versions of the same phone number make you look like two businesses, neither convincing.

You can't move closer to the customer. You can be more obviously the right answer, and that's the half nearly everybody skips.

PART TWO — BEING THE ONE THEY TAP

03 They read the stars before they read anything

Now there are three names, each with a rating and a number in brackets. That's the first real comparison, and it happens before anyone has read a single word about what you do.

Three things get noticed: how many, how recent, and whether you replied.

Count does more work than perfection. A 4.6 from forty people reads as more trustworthy than a 5.0 from two, because five stars from two people looks like your family. Recency matters because a newest review from three years ago suggests you might have stopped. And replies matter in a

way people underestimate: a reply to a bad review is not written for the person who left it. It's for the next person reading it, who is deciding whether a bad day is normal for you.

WHAT TO DO THIS WEEK

- Ask. Most happy customers are willing and simply never thought of it. Ask at the end of the job while they're pleased, not a week later by email.
- Get the short review link from your profile and save it as a text you can send in two taps. Explaining where to click loses most of them.
- Reply to every review you already have, good and bad. Short and calm. Thanking somebody takes ten seconds and it's visible forever.
- Never buy them and never write them. It's against Google's rules, people are better at spotting them than you'd think, and a removed batch can take your real ones with it.

You're not collecting reviews for the person who left one. You're collecting them for the stranger comparing three businesses at eight o'clock at night.

04 They look at the pictures

A profile with photographs looks like a business. A profile without any looks like a listing somebody filled in once and forgot.

This is the cheapest thing in this guide and the most skipped, because it doesn't feel like marketing. It's ten minutes with the phone that's already in your hand.

WHAT TO DO THIS WEEK

- Add photographs of finished work, not your logo. People want to see the thing you would do for them.
- Before and after pairs, if your trade has them. That's the most persuasive picture you will ever own.
- Add one of you, or the van, or the crew. A face makes a stranger readier to call a stranger.
- Keep adding them. A profile that gets new pictures looks like a business that's working.
- Leave out anything with a customer's address, a number plate, or somebody's kids in it.

At the moment of choosing, stars and pictures are the only two things visible. Everything else you have said about yourself is a scroll away.

05 They tap the number, or they don't

On a phone the profile has a call button, right there, and a great many people use it without visiting anybody's website at all.

So two things decide it: whether you look open, and whether the number works.

Open now or *Closed* comes straight off the hours you set. If those are wrong, or never filled in, or say you're shut on a Saturday you actually work, you lose the person who needed you on Saturday. They don't call to check. They tap the next one.

WHAT TO DO THIS WEEK

- Set your hours to what is actually true, including the evenings and weekends you really do answer.
- Add special hours for holidays, so one closed Christmas doesn't read as closed permanently.
- Call your own number from the listing and make sure it rings the phone you carry.
- If you can't answer while you're working, record a voicemail greeting that says when you'll call back, and then call back.
- Turn messaging on only if you'll read it. A channel nobody answers is worse than one you never offered.

The most expensive word on your profile is Closed on a day you were open.

06 If they do reach your website

Some people check. They tend to be the ones about to spend real money, and what they're checking is whether you're a business or just a phone number.

At that point the site has one job, and it isn't to be beautiful. It's to confirm the three things they already half believe: you do this, you do it here, and you can be reached.

WHAT TO DO THIS WEEK

- Open it on your own phone, on mobile data rather than your own wifi. It's a different experience and usually a slower one.
- Check the phone number is right and that tapping it actually starts a call.
- Read your services list cold. Is it what you do now, or what you did three years ago?
- Send a message through the form and make sure it arrives somewhere you actually read.
- Make sure the towns you cover are written out somewhere in words. It helps a stranger and it helps Google, in that order.

By this point they want reassuring, not persuading. That is a far easier job than most websites try to do.

WHERE TO START

If you do one thing from this guide: claim the profile and fill in every field. If you do two: that, and start asking for reviews at the end of jobs.

None of it needs a website, a designer or an agency. It's an afternoon, and then about ten minutes a month. It gets skipped because it's admin rather than anything that feels like marketing, which is exactly why doing it puts you ahead of the businesses that don't.

Step 04 is easier if you have decent photographs of your work, and step 03 is easier in a quiet month when you have time to go back through old customers. The slow season playbook covers when to do both.

Get found. Look open. Answer the phone.

Step 06 is the one I'll do for you. Send me your website and I'll test your contact form, your phone links, and how you show up on Google. You'll get a short list of fixes within two business days, free, and it obliges you to nothing.

Written by JT Creeden at RedHorseWebDev, who builds websites for small businesses in the Hudson Valley. The whole guide is free to read at redhorsewebdev.com/learn — this PDF is just easier to keep.