

A Look at Local Search

By Jim Hedger, StepForth News Editor, [StepForth Placement Inc.](#)

September has graduated into October and there is simply no more time to whine about a summer spent staring at the screen. Autumn is upon us and the retail world is gearing up for what should be the most wonderful time of the year. Not only is my birthday just two days away, Christmas is coming. With the traditional surge in consumer activity spurred by both events, I am curious about what is happening on the local search front.

For most of the last decade, search engine marketers have been able to tell their clients that one of the primary benefits of search engine advertising is instant access to a worldwide market. The Internet is the first public medium that is global in nature, offering advertisers the ability to reach potential customers virtually any place on Earth and many smaller businesses that started marketing their services over search engines found themselves able to grow into markets larger than their general urban area.

A flaw in that strategy is that for smaller retail operations the global nature of search engines has never been a huge selling point. Most street-front small businesses cater to a slightly smaller area, often a sliver-sized slice of the city or region they are located in. Many are competing against other businesses with similar products or services marketed to the same pool of potential customers. Until recently, search advertising was a less attractive option for a wide range of street-front businesses than other traditional types of advertising such as print, radio, local TV and the ubiquitous Yellow Pages.

That is how the situation stood until about a year ago when Amazon, Google and Yahoo, along with a slew of smaller search tools introduced the concept of local search as a feature. Making a local search tool was a fairly simple stretch for the search engines. Proving a bit harder is getting consumers to refer to local search when looking for products or services. In order to get the public to adopt local search, the major engines had to make it simple to use and more effective than general search could be.

In some ways they are already there. There has been a lot of buzz and hype about local search engines over the past year. The major search engines have been rolling out technologies to support local search and each has made some sort of arrangement with local phone directories to absorb information contained in the Yellow Pages.

That said it appears there is still a long way to go. Let's get the bad stuff out of the way early. I performed one of my less-than-scientific studies on four of the most popular local search tools, [Google-local](#), [Yahoo-local](#), [MSN-local](#) and Amazon's [A9](#). To conduct the study, I used three keyword phrases, each consisting of one, two and three unique words (Xbox, Baking Goods, and Rocky Mountain Bicycles).

For example, a local-search for the Xbox Game System performed on [Google](#), [Yahoo](#), [MSN](#) and [A9](#) [Xbox] produced widely different results that can be viewed by clicking on the links for each engine. Of each engine tested, Yahoo produced the best initial results for a person interested in popping down to the local store to buy something, with the first four results being local stores offering the product. Google offered a list of newspapers, institutions and marketers writing about the Xbox but did include two local shops. MSN didn't produce any results, surprising for a product designed by their parent and sold in their

Search engine placement experts

StepForth Placement Inc.

2-1358 Gladstone Avenue
Victoria, BC V8R 1S1 Canada

T 250 385-1190
F 250 385-1198

1 877 385-5526
info@stepforth.com

hometown. A9 produced a unique set of results including images drawn from the Google image-bank but did not offer information on where one could actually buy the product. Grace will be given as the search consisted of only one keyword.

Another search, this time for the two-word phrase "baking goods" produced similarly disappointing results. ([Google](#), [Yahoo](#), [MSN](#), [A9](#) [*baking goods*]) This time none of the search engines were able to help me find the products I was looking for. Not one of the four engines returned anything even remotely useful, aside from purchased ads from the hardware/household goods chain Canadian Tire, which (as all Canadians know), carries an assortment baking goods. Perhaps I wasn't being specific enough.

For a third test search, I used the name of a fairly well known bicycle maker, Rocky Mountain Bicycles. Using the three-word brand name I received some useful results from three of the four local engines being tested however the bulk of results were still, for the most part, less than useful. ([Google](#), [Yahoo](#), [MSN](#), [A9](#) [*Rocky Mountain Bicycles*]). This time, MSN wins by producing the greatest number of shops in their listings though they lose a lot of points for the stunted presentation style. Yahoo did fairly well, offering me two credible choices as the first results and a couple lower in the list. Google only offered one immediate choice. As for A9, it again offered a number of general web-drawn references, some cool images drawn from Google and nothing in the way of a local store referral.

Ok. That experiment stunk. I was hoping to write something highly positive about the state of local search. From a technology standpoint, there are a number of very interesting and intriguing things happening in the world of local search. For instance, Google, Yahoo and MSN have all integrated extremely cool mapping technologies in the bid to help consumers find their way to specific stores. A9 took this a step further in their bid to photograph every storefront in America to provide searchers with the ultimate in visual confirmation that this is indeed the door they want to walk through.

I was impressed by the information provided by Yahoo-local for shops that came up in my searches. When a user clicks on a reference provided by Yahoo local, they are brought to a page that shows a clear address, a map, detailed information about the business, and consumer generated product/service reviews. Neither MSN nor Google provided results as detailed or thorough, though that, unfortunately isn't saying very much.

The major search engines are trying to make local search portable by serving results and self-generated maps to hand held devices such as PDAs and Palm-pilots. Google and Yahoo are also both rumoured to be merging local-results with product comparison engines in their bid to help users find the best products at the best prices. Lastly, each of the engines tested are working to produce personalized results for each user by asking they register in one way or another.

I was hoping to test out a number of these technologies while researching this piece but alas, have been confounded by the apparent inability of these engines to help me find a sufficient number of sources in Seattle to buy stuff at. My memories of Seattle, a city I lived in fifteen years ago, still serves me better. I remembered a number of department stores (each of which carry the Xbox), a few restaurant suppliers who carry baking goods, and several sporting goods and bike shops that carry the Rocky Mountain brand of bicycle. Most of the shops I remember are still in business, at least according to their websites, each of which is in the general indexes of Google, Yahoo and MSN. As for A9, perhaps I simply don't get it.

2005 is not likely going to be the break-through year for local search, at least not in time for the two most important retail events in my part of the world (according to my less-than-scientific study at any rate). My friends and family will simply have to rely on their memories when choosing my birthday



www.stepforth.com

presents and a continent full of eager Christmas shoppers will continue to muddle through the same way we have for the last fifty years, by clogging up the streets and freeways in the final week before the holidays.

StepForth Placement Inc.

2-1358 Gladstone Avenue
Victoria, BC V8R 1S1 Canada

T 250 385-1190
F 250 385-1198

1 877 385-5526
info@stepforth.com

Search engine placement experts