



Building Store Locators for SEO

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Introduction

Store locator queries have inherently high purchase intent, which makes them an essential tool for marketers. Despite this fact, store locators are often overlooked and neglected by marketers who assume that store locator technology and design hasn't evolved.

This whitepaper aims to help marketers employ best practices to fully optimize and utilize store locators, boost SEO, and engage directly with the consumer at a critical moment in the path to purchase.

What is a Store Locator?

In a basic sense, a store locator is a map embedded in a business website that displays locations of that business. It allows a potential customer to find the business, either by entering information such as address or zip code, or by allowing the map to auto-detect a user's location, which is particularly useful for mobile. The locator then returns locations closest to the customer, ordered by distance and any other filters that the user may have specified.

The primary goal when designing a store locator is to get users through it quickly and painlessly, providing them with the information they need. The store locator design is productivity-based, focusing on two targeted user experiences:

1. Seeking to find information on the page (getting directions, calling, services, etc.)
2. Attempting to use that information (action)

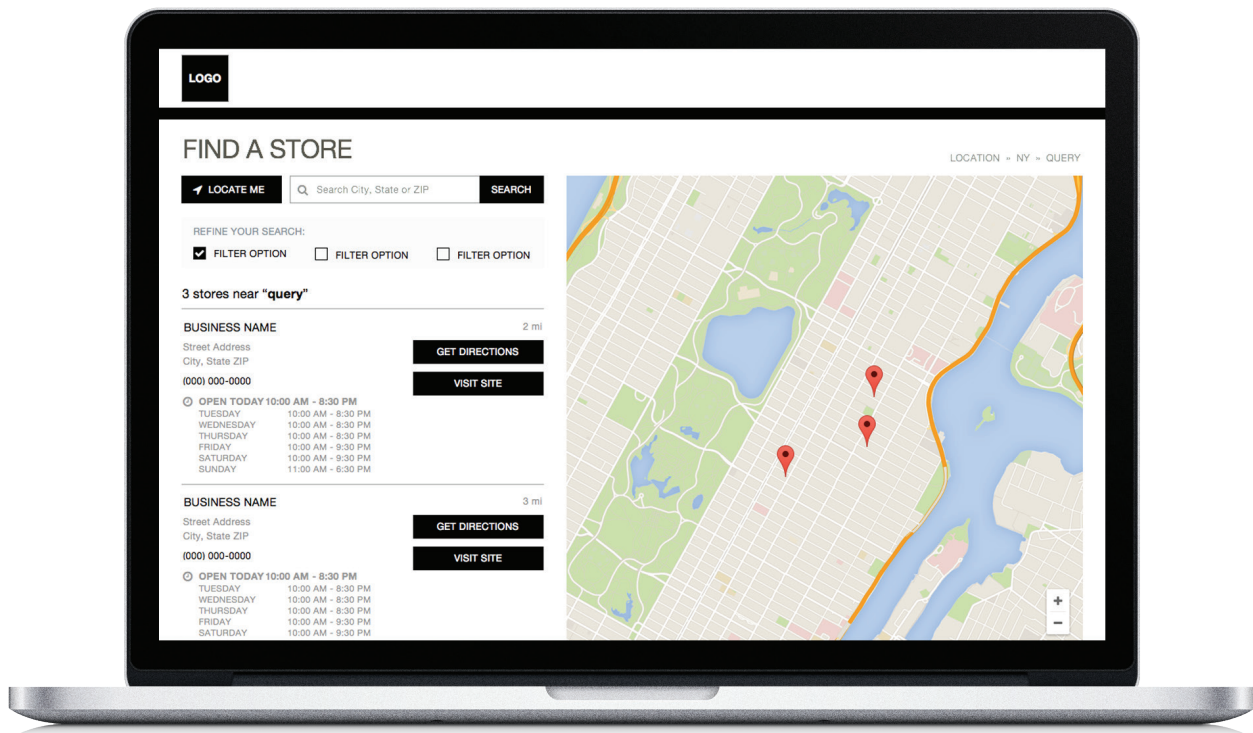


Fig. 1: Example store locator results page

Store Locator Content

A basic store locator includes name, address, and phone number (NAP) information. If the NAP is incorrect or outdated, the information is no longer useful to customers and can result in negative customer experiences, so accuracy must be the first priority for any store locator.

A store locator may be the customer's only digital interaction with a brand: user wants to find nearest store; user goes to site; user finds nearest store; user embarks. Marketers should maximize this opportunity to communicate with prospects by delivering the full range of content that can help influence a customer's decision, including:

- Hours
- Special offers
- Link to driving directions
- Events
- Products/Services
- Social feeds
- Rich content: Photos, Videos

Responding to Mobile

Studies show that for certain industries more than 60% of smartphone searches convert within one hour. Because of this high conversion, local results are becoming even more valuable as a growing percentage of search takes place on mobile. This trend will continue to intensify.

Especially on mobile, a user who is searching for a brick and mortar location of a specific business can be literally steps from walking in the door. Contrast this with an organic search that requires a business to bid against other stores in the same category for space, ranking, and potential attention. A customer who is searching a store locator has already bought in. Failing in the final step of the search process (i.e. discoverability) is forgoing a near-guaranteed sale.

For these reasons, it is crucial that businesses prominently feature store locator functionality on their mobile page and their mobile app. Optimizing for local discovery on mobile also offers the advantage of using smartphones' GPS to auto-detect a user's location and provide them with a customized local experience that does not require them to enter information.

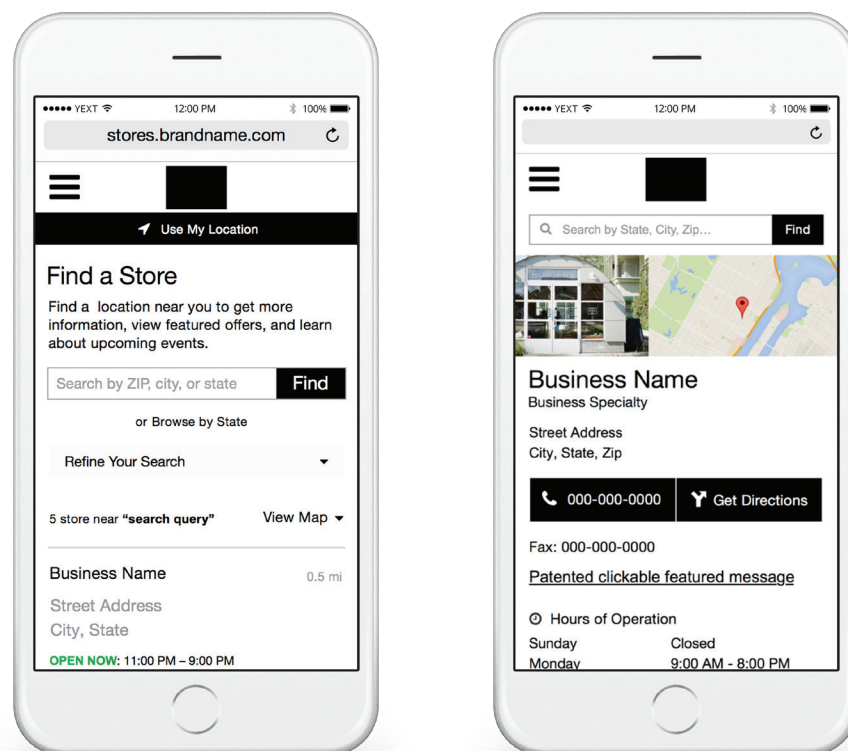


Fig. 2: Mobile store locator results page and single store landing page

Store Locators and SEO

Because of the dynamic map component of store locators, designing them for SEO has proven challenging. In order for the crawler to index the dynamic map, it has to run every permutation of zip code and other options available to the user, which is complex and inefficient for a search engine. That means the same Web development techniques (e.g. AJAX, which combines JavaScript with XML) that allow store locators to dynamically respond to a user's location and inputs also render the page "invisible" to search engine crawlers.

To combat this, businesses should utilize static elements from store location landing pages combined with the dynamic elements from the store locator. This maintains the live search functionality of the store locator while leveraging the SEO power of store location pages.



Store Location Landing Pages

A store location landing page is a dedicated page on a business' website for each location with the location's geodata (NAP, hours, rich content, etc.) collected and structured in the body of the page using a search-engine friendly semantic HTML markup such as Schema.org (discussed below). The store landing page should also include an embedded map with a marker and geocoding for the location.

Experts consistently agree that search engines and their crawlers prioritize store location pages information because they are authoritative and clearly structured. For a store locator to harness the SEO power of store location landing pages, they should link to the corresponding pages in the store locator. This maintains page authority of the store locator while also improving the organic search relevance of the connected pages.

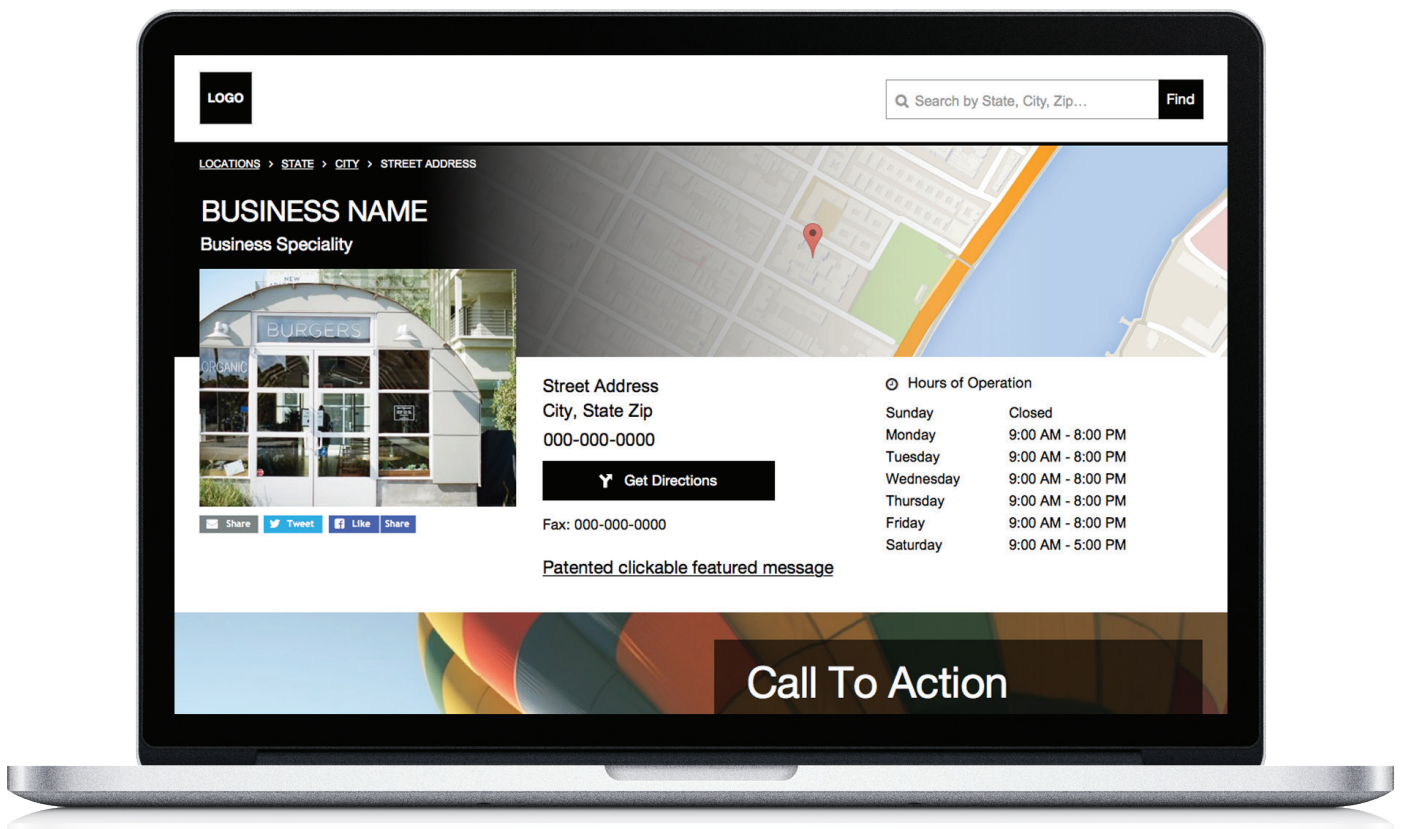


Fig. 3: Example single location landing page

Semantic HTML Markup for SEO

One of the most useful features of the store locator and location pages is the structured data. For it to be found by search engines and crawlers, the information must be structured using Semantic HTML markup (of which Schema.org is the most popular). Semantic HTML is a way of marking structured data on web pages so that search engines can easily understand the context of the information. It allows for metadata to be inserted into the text of web pages that is visible to the crawler programs.

Using semantic HTML markup is necessary in order to be indexed correctly by search engines. For example, including store hours in the correct markup is the best way to ensure those hours are correctly displayed by Google, in Maps as well as organic results.

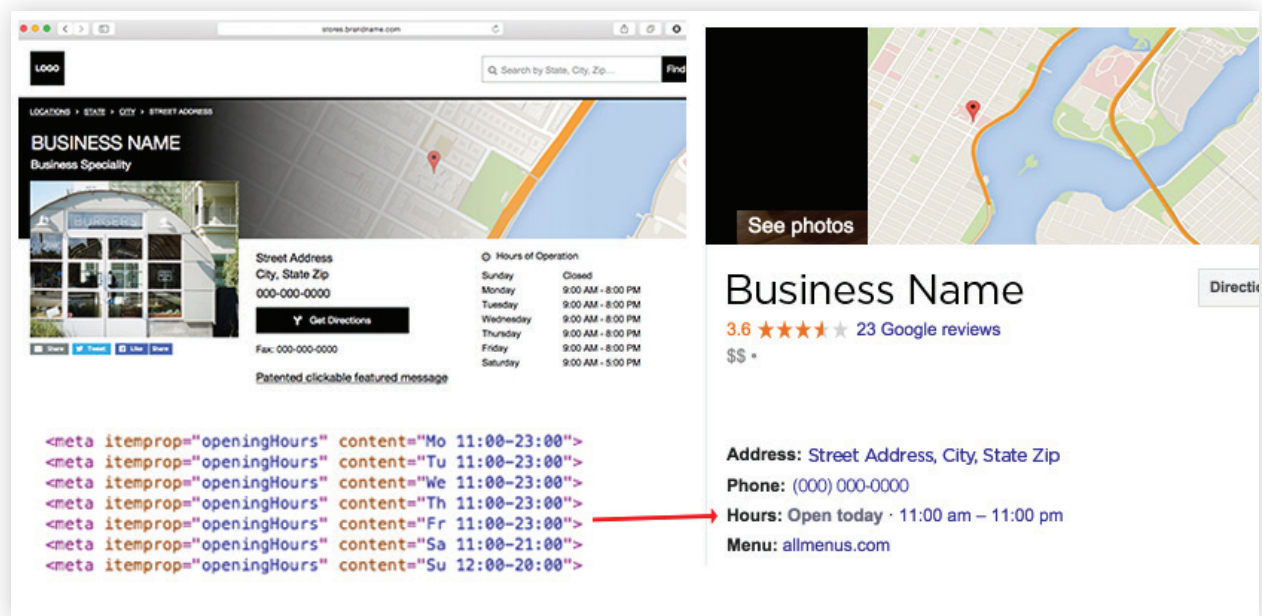


Fig. 4: Store hours marked up using Schema.org and indexed correctly on Google search results

Conclusion

In recent years store locators have been neglected and overlooked by many marketers whose focus has shifted to paid search and third-party solutions.

With the explosion of mobile and the continued proliferation of local search tools, it is vital for businesses to be the authoritative source of their own geodata.

By building out store locators with rich and complete information and linking them to store location landing pages, businesses can turn an SEO dead end into a highway of local search energy.

Remember: if a customer is on a store locator page, they are 90% of the way to a purchase. It is up to you, the retailer or brand, to ensure that the last 10% is frictionless.



