



Optimizing Local Search for iOS 9

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By Andrew Shotland, LocalSEOGuide.com



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The rise of the smartphone has forever changed how people search for local products and services. This Fall, expect local consumer behavior to dramatically change again with iOS 9, Apple's newest mobile operating system.

iOS 9 (currently in beta) is a significant building block in Apple's quest to make iOS and mobile apps the primary way to connect its hundreds of millions of users to the local offline world. It also represents an opportunity for local brands that move quickly to drive more traffic to their apps and websites, and to solidify their presence on the platform where many of their customers spend most of their digital lives.

RISE OF THE IOS LOCAL ECOSYSTEM

Since the launch of the iPhone in 2007 we have seen Apple gradually put the pieces of the iOS Local Ecosystem in place:

2007: iPhone introduced with user location detection.

2008: The iOS App Store launches and with it the birth of location-based apps.

2012: Apple Maps launches on iOS 6.

2013: iBeacons introduced to foster location awareness/interaction at physical locations.

2014: Maps Connect goes live to allow businesses to claim and update their business information on Apple Maps. Apple Maps now available on desktop Macs.

2014: Apple Pay in iOS8 creates a new way to pay at your local store.

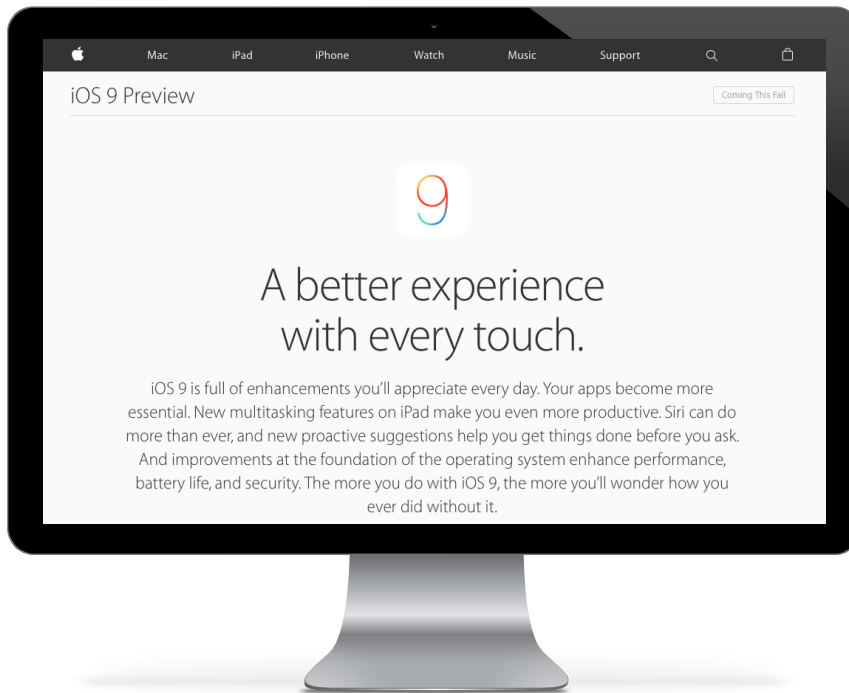
2015: Apple Watch brings all of these services to your wrist.



Now this fall, Apple's iOS 9 will introduce the next piece of its local search puzzle, App Search, which will allow users to view search results on iOS devices indexed from both the web and from apps—even if those apps aren't on a user's device.

Consumers will experience connections through iOS 9's web and app crawler, Applebot, which will show results through the iPhone's personal digital assistant, Siri, the on-device search tool, Spotlight, and in its web browser's, Safari's, search.

iOS is Becoming the Primary Local Search Platform for Millions



This year, Google announced that mobile search volume would surpass desktop search volume. Concurrently smartphone users have been migrating from mobile browser-based web platforms to apps.

According to an Interactive Advertising Bureau [study](#), consumers spend 88% of mobile internet time in apps. According to Comscore, as of April 2015 Apple Maps is now the 11th most popular mobile app in the U.S. If the next iPhone performs as well as the the iPhone 6 and 6 Plus, it is likely to continue to cement iOS as the primary local search platform for millions.

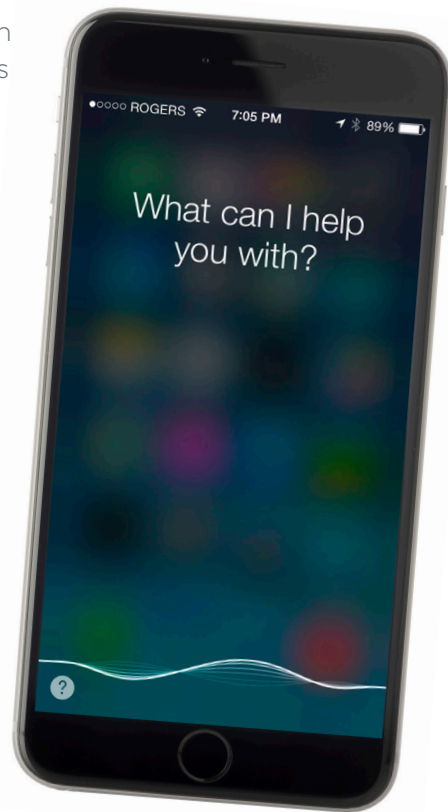
Is iOS Search Taking on Google?

Whether iOS is a deliberate shot across Google's bow, or more likely in Google's face, or just Apple trying to continually improve its customers' experience, there's little doubt that iOS Search will start to chip away at people's reliance on Google Search. In fact, it already has.

Consider the following use cases that already exist:

- 1 A Siri voice query for local information (e.g. "bars") brings up local results from Apple Maps
- 2 A Spotlight search for local information brings up local results from Apple Maps, links to relevant installed apps and suggestions for new apps
- 3 A local query in Safari, on both iOS and Yosemite, suggests an Apple Maps listing in the address bar before ever launching Google Search.

Of course there are plenty of non-Local use cases as well. Apple is building a search engine baked into its operating systems. It is focusing on the content that its customers have shown to value most—content within apps—and leaving Google and Bing to duke it out over which wants to pay for the privilege of being backfill.



How Does iOS Search Work?

iOS 9 introduces a variety of APIs to enable indexing of user-generated content, features in your app, and public website content. This indexed content is then accessible to people in iOS 9 Search as well as from Safari. Content generally falls into one of two categories:



PUBLIC:

Public content comes from your website. Apple uses a web crawler, called Applebot, to gather publicly available content that has been marked up using standard web markup techniques. This information is then presented to users when they use Search in iOS 9 or from Safari suggestions.



PRIVATE:

Private content is indexed directly by your app. Your app can index content that the user has created (e.g. documents or messages), or points of interest in your app such as main views (e.g. a list of top restaurants in Pleasanton, CA). This content remains on the user's device and is only searchable locally.

This means that all of your website and app content can be available to iOS users via search. For example, for retailers, this could mean a store's location and other pertinent info could be presented to mobile searchers—whether or not a user has even downloaded the app onto their iPhone.

iOS Search Best Practices

While the service is still in beta and will likely evolve considerably, Apple provides the following recommendations for having your content appear in iOS Search:

1 Drive interactions with your search result to improve ranking. Having rich search results is the best way to foster engagement. Include images, reviews, ratings and actions whenever possible. In other words, make sure your content is great.

2 When responding to search result engagement, go straight to the content in your app, avoid any mid-steps, splash-screens or interstitial views.

3 Speed matters. Time from tapping a search result to the content in your app is measured and used in ranking.

4 Always index your user-generated content.

5 Use the same identifier when indexing the same item with multiple APIs in order to avoid duplicates and help your app rank higher. See Search for Developers for more detail on the iOS Search APIs.

6 Markup your website with schema. iOS supports Open Graph and AggregateRating, Offers, PriceRange, InteractionCount, Organization, Recipe, SearchAction and ImageObject from

schema.org. Two actions are currently supported: calling a phone number and getting directions to an address. In order to enable these actions you must implement either the telephone item from the Organization schema or the Postal Address schema from schema.org. Only items indexed using web markup are eligible to show in Safari.

7 Providing rich results to drive engagement is the best way to improve your ranking. Always include a relevant thumbnail, title and a unique description. When possible, add metadata for ratings and actions such as dialing a phone number, or getting directions to an address. Since your engagement-to-shown ratio will be an important factor, only showing results when your app has a compelling answer is crucial. When using keywords, only include terms related to the items such as synonyms or abbreviations. Providing users with a great experience, minimizing time from result to content and avoiding any interstitials or multi-steps are very important. When handling results in your app, get the user to the relevant content as quickly as possible.

Initial Local Optimization Strategies

Based on the above and our tests with the iOS 9 beta, we recommend the following initial strategies for targeting local search queries on iOS:

1 Either include a full store locator feature within your iOS app or use Universal Linking to your website to insure your locations appear in results. It's unclear whether or not these will trump Apple Maps results. More than likely the order of these results will be based on each user's interactions.

2 Make sure your location data is visible to Applebot and up to date. Apple appears to be biased towards treating as many search results as local queries as possible. Having consistent, visible location data will be critical to your brand's visibility.

3 Focus on indexing only your best content to improve your "engagement-to-shown" ratio. For local businesses this appears to come down to avoiding indexing content that could be duplicative from a keyword-basis with your main views. For example, if you are a financial advisor company,

you'll want to make sure your "Financial Advisors in Pleasanton, CA" page is indexed but perhaps avoid indexing a legalese page on your website that uses the term "Financial Advisors" in its title.

4 Use <description> tags on web pages to target popular keyword variations of the page's main target keyword. You will need to be careful to balance this with best practices for Google, but at least in the early days, my bet is that Applebot will be much easier to game with keyword stuffing. In fact I wouldn't be surprised to see people set up sites solely to game Applebot while blocking Googlebot.

5 Invest in acquiring local user-generated content both within your app and on your website. If a user adds a review via your app or site, your content is more likely to show up in these results.

Final Thoughts...For Now

The direction is clear: search is making a leap from the public web and into the private space occupied by mobile apps which, increasingly, are capturing consumers' attention, and dominating all other forms of media engagement.

As iOS Search rolls out, businesses will need to continually test and iterate in order to stay in front of its ever-increasing mobile customer base. The iPhone's enormous penetration means that iOS Search will be used by millions from day one. Whenever new technologies emerge at scale like this, there will always be opportunities for early adopters to learn the system and reap the rewards.

In many ways, optimizing for iOS Search is no different than optimizing for Google Search:

- Make sure your content is accessible to the bots
- Understand and use keywords your target customers are searching for the more relevant and engaging the content, the more likely it is to show up

This last point is perhaps the key differentiator between iOS Search and Google Search. Instead of using backlinks as its major ranking factor, Apple appears to be focused on user engagement—both Public and Private.

Google has made plenty of strides towards this paradigm with its Google Now system, but it will be interesting to see how Apple, unencumbered by links and the SPAM created by the link economy, tries to search different.

BONUS TIP

Grow Your App's Audience with iOS 9 Search

iOS 9 search results in Safari, Spotlight, and Siri will include content directly from within apps, **even if they aren't downloaded on the user's device.**

This is a first for any mobile device.

Brands can take advantage of this breakthrough to grow their app audiences by:

- Ensuring **relevant in-app content** appears in iOS 9 search results
- Showing users who click those results a banner to **download the app** where that content lives

Want to learn more about search and location?

Yext conducted a three-month study of 31,000 businesses using PowerListings® Analytics to measure how the completeness of a listing affected the following metrics.

Check out our recent whitepaper to see the results.

Learn more at www.yext.com

