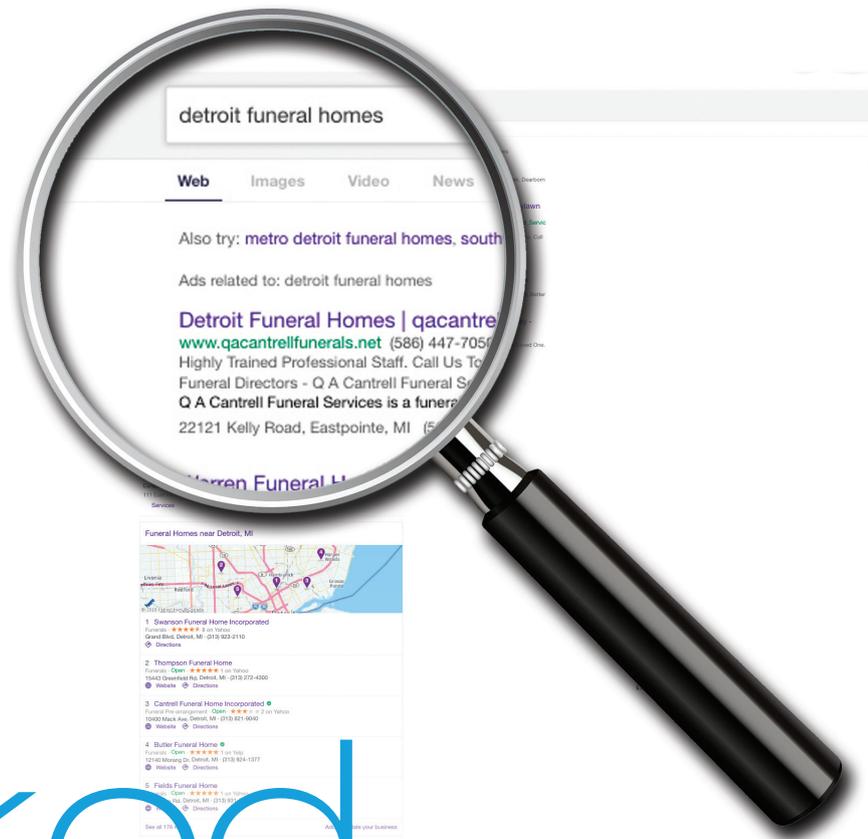


Marketing

By Welton Hong



How to Get Ranked in Local Search

That headline alone might be a little confusing if you're only slightly familiar (or entirely unfamiliar) with the terminology of online marketing. Don't worry: I'll make it clear.

Actually, I'll start off by making it a little more confusing. (Bear with me.) Wikipedia defines local search as "the use of specialized internet search engines that allow users to submit geographically-constrained searches against a structured database of local business listings."

No wonder business owners, especially those who run traditional businesses such as funeral homes, get so confused about how to employ online marketing techniques. Even Wikipedia struggles to

make one of the foundational concepts easy to understand.

Here Are the Basics

Let me try to make it as simple as possible: When you punch a term or phrase into a search engine (such as Google, Yahoo! or Bing), you get a list of results, right? Those are what we call *organic search results*. They're called *organic* because they're ranked purely based on relevance to your search. They're also called *natural* or *unpaid* search results. They're not

ads; you don't pay Google or any other service for them.

The page that comes up when you do this search, appropriately enough, is called a search engine results page. In the industry, we call it a SERP for short. A SERP will display both organic and paid search results.

The paid search results, of course, are advertisements. You pay the search engine a certain amount to display your ad prominently. Different search engines handle this in various ways.

For example, if you searched for “Detroit funeral homes” on Yahoo!, a bit of text before the paid results simply reads: “Ads related to: Detroit funeral homes.” If you did the same search on Google, a small green icon with the word “Ad” appears next to each result.

These paid advertisements are typically pay-per-click ads, aka PPC ads, which means you only pay the search engine when someone actually clicks on the ad to reach your website.

Understanding Local Search

With me so far? If so, let’s move on to local search. This simply means the process by which someone searches for a *particular type of business* in a *specific geographic area*. It could be “Cincinnati optometrists” or “Oakland pizzerias” or “Birmingham teeth whitening.” It’s just as simple as that.

This is how most people search for local businesses today: [geographic area] + [service]. Often, a search engine will provide a list of local businesses even if the searcher omits the location, because today’s technology makes it easy for the search engine to know your current location. But if you’re searching for services in an area other than where you live, you’ll need to include the location.

Here’s why all of this matters to you: Many people today pass by the Yellow Pages and other print directories to find local businesses on the Internet. This most certainly includes both at-need and preneed death-care services. To generate case counts among this clientele, *you need your business to rank well in local search*.

It’s Profitable at the Top

When I talk about ranking well, I specifically mean being in the *top half of the first page of search results* when someone searches for funeral homes in your geographic area. These days, most people don’t even scroll down to the bottom half. And

if you’re on the *second* page, you’re *effectively invisible*.

More than 90 percent of searchers never make it past the first page on a Google SERP! In fact, more than 50 percent of searchers choose among the first three providers listed on the first page.

If you’re on the first page, you’re in Major League Baseball. Your games are on television. They’re covered on SportsCenter. If you’re on the second page, you’re in Triple-A ball. Strictly minor league. No TV, no SportsCenter, no traffic to your website – and thus no leads, no case counts, no revenue.

When it comes to organic search results, the order in which you’re listed depends on your business’s search engine optimization, which is largely – but not entirely – based upon the SEO of your website.

While the rise of paid ads has mitigated the importance of organic results a bit, they’re still critical to your funeral home’s success, especially for at-need clientele. Some searchers still prefer to go straight to the organic search results instead of checking out paid funeral home advertising.

However, many other searchers do review the paid ads that also naturally appear on the top of a SERP. These PPC ads are vitally important for driving visitors to your site and converting visitors into paying clientele. PPC is one of the primary types of effective, efficient funeral home advertising.

A key difference between organic search results and PPC advertising is that PPC ads give your business priority on a SERP almost immediately. Improving your SEO is more of a gradual process – it will make you rank higher, and it’s absolutely worth doing, but it doesn’t happen overnight. *PPC advertising does*. If you’re looking to *rapidly* increase website visits and drive case counts, PPC is one of the most effective tools.

(PPC is also great for funeral home advertising because of its excellent return on investment. As I noted earlier, “pay per click” means exactly what it says: You only pay when someone actually clicks on your ad, sending the searcher to your website.)

Key Elements to Ranking Well

Regardless, let’s focus for now on how to ensure the best organic rankings in local search. In addition to generally good SEO, make sure to:

Build trust with Google: The internet’s most-used search engine is constantly refining its algorithm to ensure the top results for any search are the most relevant to searchers.

To build trust with Google, you want your website to have strong, relevant content; include plenty of good “About Us” information; link to relevant services and information, and have backlinks from the same (which means they also link to *your* site); and include relevant images and video wherever they naturally fit.

Generate citations: These are essentially mentions of your funeral home’s name and address on other webpages – even if there is no link to your website. One example might be an online directory where your business is listed, but there’s no link to it.

Citations can also be found on local chamber of commerce pages, or on a local business association page that includes your business information, even if neither is linking to your website. News stories and even obituaries and death notices can count as citations.

It’s important to ensure that your business’s name, main address and main phone number are correct and consistent on your website, in your marketing materials and in online citations. If a search engine “sees” a variety of different addresses or phone numbers, it might be confused over whether they’re different businesses, and you might not get full credit for all of your citations. •