DEMYSTIFYING SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION (SEO)

Langley, Hubert Kang

Most people start their journey to purchase anything—vacations, products, services, experiences and more—by performing an online search on Google or another search engine. Search Engine Optimization (SEO) ensures your website can be found amongst other competing content on the Internet.

SEO is the practice of optimizing your website to gain organic (or unpaid) traffic from search engine results. It's about understanding what your potential customers are searching for online, and then including the keywords and terms they are using in their search, along with answers to their questions, and the type of content they are looking for, on your website. Knowing these things will allow you to connect to people online who are searching for the solutions that you offer.

There are lots of search engines out there like Yahoo, Bing, and many more, but, as it is the most common, Google is used as an example throughout this guide.

Oliver, Hubert Kang

COVER PHOTO: Meares Island, Jeremy Koreski

GETTING FOUND
THROUGH SEARCH ENGINES

Search engines find, sort, and present billions of pages of information in a meaningful way for every searcher. All parts of an SEO strategy are geared towards ensuring the following items for your website:

1.
CRAWLABILITY

Virtual Spiders / Crawlers visit your website and discover all the pages available for indexing. Crawlability refers to how easy it is for a search engine to process ("crawl") the information on a website.

2.
INDEXABILITY

After Google crawls your website, it adds your website to its index. Google's index is essentially a library of all websites that exist online, and the product, offering, or solution that each of those websites represents.

3.
RETRIEVABILITY

Search engines are big answering machines! When a user performs a search, Google fetches a list of websites from its index to serve in the search engine results page to answer the user's question.

4.
CLICKABILITY

When your website is retrieved from the index and presented on a search engine's results page (SERP) along with many others, your result on that page must be compelling enough to be the one that people click. The titles and descriptions added to each of your pages, along with other content you add to your site, are critical to ensuring your site gets clicked.

Parksville, (@glamouraspirit_

ANATOMY OF THE SEARCH ENGINE RESULTS PAGE

The Search Engine Results Page (SERP) has many different categories of results on it. The one that people think of the most is what is called a "regular result", but results frequently also include ads, maps, a Google Knowledge Panel, and Google My Business listings. Varying combinations of different categories of results show depending on the search. For example, maps tend to show up when you do a search for a business that includes a location name or the phrase "near me". Except for ads (which have the word Ad in front of the result), SEO tactics can assist your business to show up in all the other types of results.

An example of a SERP for the search "British Columbia" is shown here.

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE WHERE YOUR PAGES RANK

Search engines decide what content to put on the SERP with an algorithm, which is basically a set of rules run by a computer to come up with an answer. Some of the important factors for ranking include:

- Whether your website is secure (i.e. your website URL starts with https).
- Whether your website works well across devices (i.e. mobile phones, tablets, or desktop).
- How quickly your website loads.
- Whether the content on the pages of your website is optimized (this refers to the activity of regularly updating your content so your site will appear higher in the search results).

Having good on-page SEO plays a key role in ensuring that your website can be found for your business' relevant keywords & queries.

Prince George, 6ix Sigma

ON-PAGE SEO

Many of the factors that rank your website come from optimization of content. All content, on every page of your site, should have a clear purpose and be written for your target audience.

If this is achieved, you are well on your way to also meeting the needs of search engines, as their aim is to show relevant, quality content to searchers.

Well-written and well-organized content helps users have a great online experience, but it also helps search engines interpret the meaning of the content.

SOME WAYS TO OPTIMIZE YOUR CONTENT TO IMPROVE YOUR SEO INCLUDE:

Set up thoughtful internal linking. Internal linking helps users easily navigate content on your website, but it also sends signals to search engines about your website's hierarchy and helps them understand what content on the site is related. This gives search engines a richer understanding of the site's content and its context. Strategically, linking content on a similar topic can be helpful.

Frequently update your content. Search engines like new, fresh content, so—if possible—review and refresh the content on your website regularly, making sure that it is up-to-date and still meeting the needs of your visitors.

Group similar content into categories or topics.

Provide the right amount of content for your user's needs. There's a sweet spot between too much and too little. Focusing on your customers' needs will help to establish how much content you should have and in what format (i.e. text, infographics, e-books, maps, images, videos, etc.). Ensure that you provide enough content on the page to educate the user to assist in their decision making, while not having so much content that it feels overwhelming.

If you have a blog, carefully consider what topics you could include that would be helpful to your users or will demonstrate your authority and expertise in your business. It's more important to publish several longer, well-planned blog posts, than many short, frequently published posts that may not offer any real or lasting value. When you publish valuable, helpful, and unique content, other people will link to it from their websites, helping to build your site's overall authority on the Internet.

Make sure each page is unique and valuable. Search engines don't like duplication as it makes it harder to determine the authoritative content that should rank for a search query.

Clearly label headings throughout your website to show the hierarchy of content on each page. Headings are organized from H1-H6. Your content should start with an H1 and if possible, it should include a keyword for which you're trying to rank on the SERP. ("Keywords" are words people type into search engines to find the information they're looking for.)

OTHER ELEMENTS OF YOUR WEBSITE'S PAGES YOU CAN EASILY OPTIMIZE INCLUDE:

- **THE URL** When possible, the URL (or web address such as https://www.hellobc.com) of a page should be short, clear, descriptive, and not cryptic in any way. Don't use upper-case letters or underscores. Use hyphens to separate words such as https://www.hellobc.com/things-to-do/backcountry-skiing/.

- **PAGE TITLE** A page title or title tag is an HTML element that specifies the title of each web page. They are displayed on SERPs as the clickable headline for a given result (image below) and are seen when the page is shared on social networks.

Titles also show as the page title in the browser and the title of the page if the page is added to favorites. The title tag of a web page should be an accurate and concise description of a page's content.

◊ Titles should be in the format "Title of Page | Business Name" or "Title of Page—Business Name". Choosing a pipe or a dash as the separator often varies by site—what is important is to be consistent across all pages of the same site. Sometimes the Business Name is used at the front of the title, but this is often suggested for new brands and only on the homepage. The Business Name can be used in other locations within the title if the title reads more naturally that way.

◊ Do not include the word "homepage" or "home" in the title of the site's homepage. This does not provide any value to search engines or the searcher seeing the title in the SERP.

◊ Titles should be unique to each page of the website and must accurately reflect the content on the page.

◊ A title should be no longer than 60 characters. If it is, it may get cut off in the SERP result.

◊ If possible, titles should be written to include a relevant keyword (a term you think people will search for in a search engine), always with the end-consumer in mind. This means using the keyword as a guide but not just adding the keyword as the title arbitrarily. Whenever possible, include keywords at the front of the title.

◊ Use keywords only once. If keywords are used multiple times, this may be considered "keyword stuffing" (or cheating) by search engines, which can negatively affect your page.

- **META DESCRIPTION** Meta descriptions should provide concise explanations of the content of web pages. While not as important to search engine rankings, they are important in encouraging a user to click through to your website as they often appear under the page title in search results on the SERP as shown below.
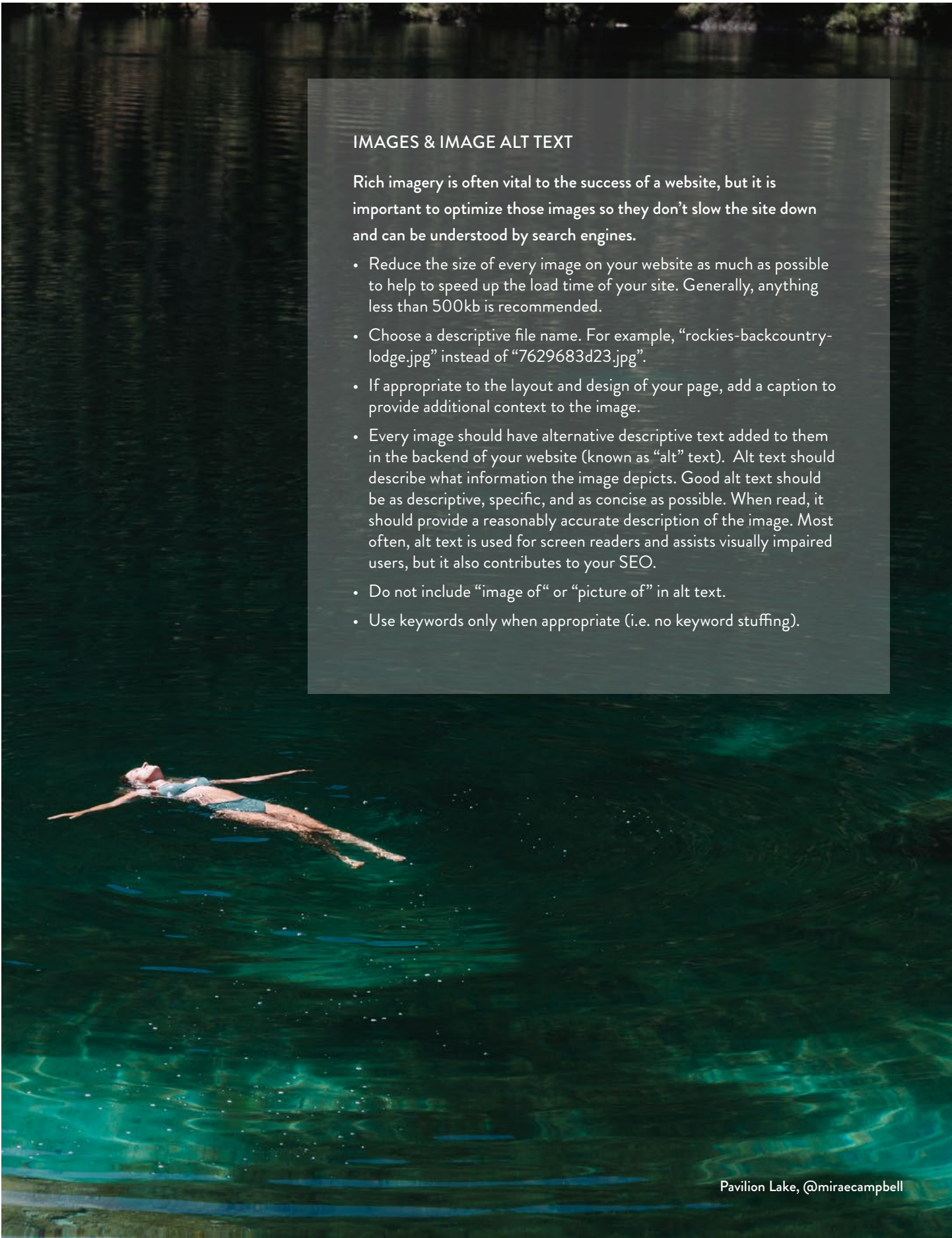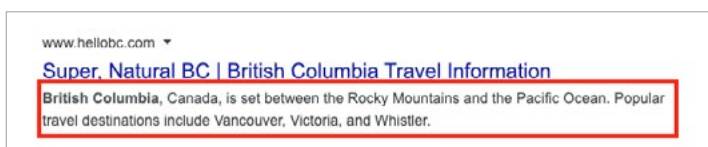
A FEW THINGS
TO KEEP IN MIND:

- Write meta descriptions to entice searchers to click on your site over a competing search result. They should be compelling and descriptive but must also provide a clear and accurate reflection of the content on the page.

- Meta descriptions can be very long. However, anything over 160 characters may be cut off in search results. When this happens, searchers will not see the full description.

- Include keywords, or semantically related words, but don't use the exact keywords more than once in a description.

- If appropriate, put keywords close to the beginning of the description. The reason for this is that if someone performs a search, the terms they use in the search query, if found in the description, will appear bold in the search result. This helps to draw the attention of the searcher to your search result, to highlight your result's relevance to that search, and improving the searcher will click.

Chilliwack, Hubert Kang

Bella Coola, William Drumm
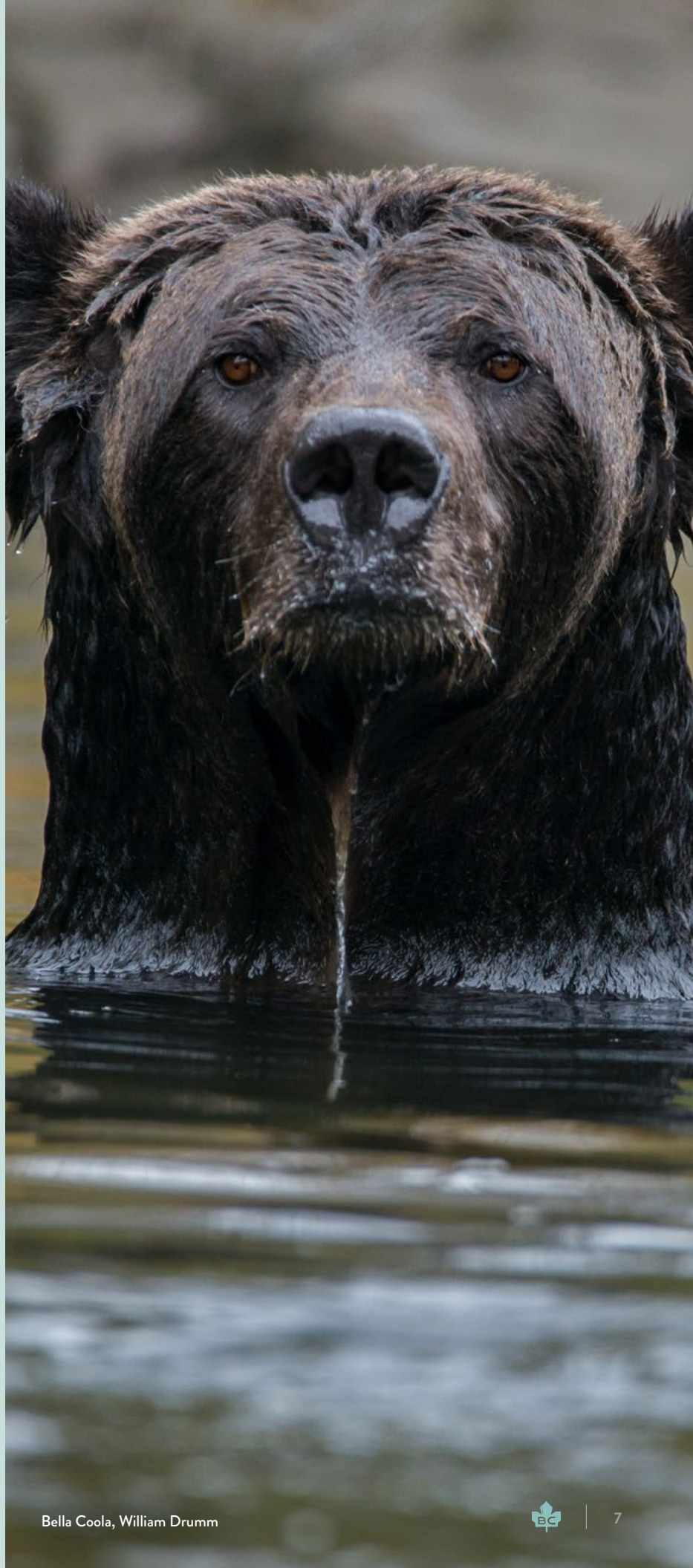
IMAGES & IMAGE ALT TEXT

Rich imagery is often vital to the success of a website, but it is important to optimize those images so they don't slow the site down and can be understood by search engines.

- Reduce the size of every image on your website as much as possible to help to speed up the load time of your site. Generally, anything less than 500kb is recommended.

- Choose a descriptive file name. For example, "rockies-backcountry-lodge.jpg" instead of "7629683d23.jpg".

- If appropriate to the layout and design of your page, add a caption to provide additional context to the image.

- Every image should have alternative descriptive text added to them in the backend of your website (known as "alt" text). Alt text should describe what information the image depicts. Good alt text should be as descriptive, specific, and as concise as possible. When read, it should provide a reasonably accurate description of the image. Most often, alt text is used for screen readers and assists visually impaired users, but it also contributes to your SEO.

- Do not include "image of" or "picture of" in alt text.

- Use keywords only when appropriate (i.e. no keyword stuffing).
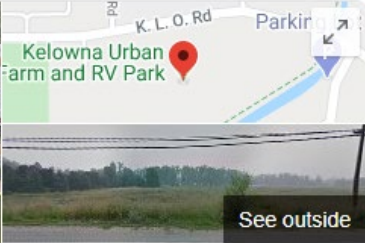
Pavilion Lake, @miraecampbell

LOCAL SEO AND GOOGLE MY BUSINESS PROFILES

Local SEO refers to optimizing your online presence, so your business shows up when people perform a relevant local search. A local search is one where the searcher uses terms that indicate a geographic location, such as "campgrounds near me" or "campgrounds in Kelowna BC". An example of a local search is shown to the right.

Google searches its sources of information to determine what to present on the map, in the Local Pack below the map, and in the regular results. Google Maps is a top source of web traffic and impressions for many businesses and is Google's second-most important product after Search. The main sources of information that should be optimized to make sure your business shows up in local search results include your website, your Google My Business profile, and citation sites across the Internet.

Vernon, @miraecampbell

Egmont, @dolfvermeulen
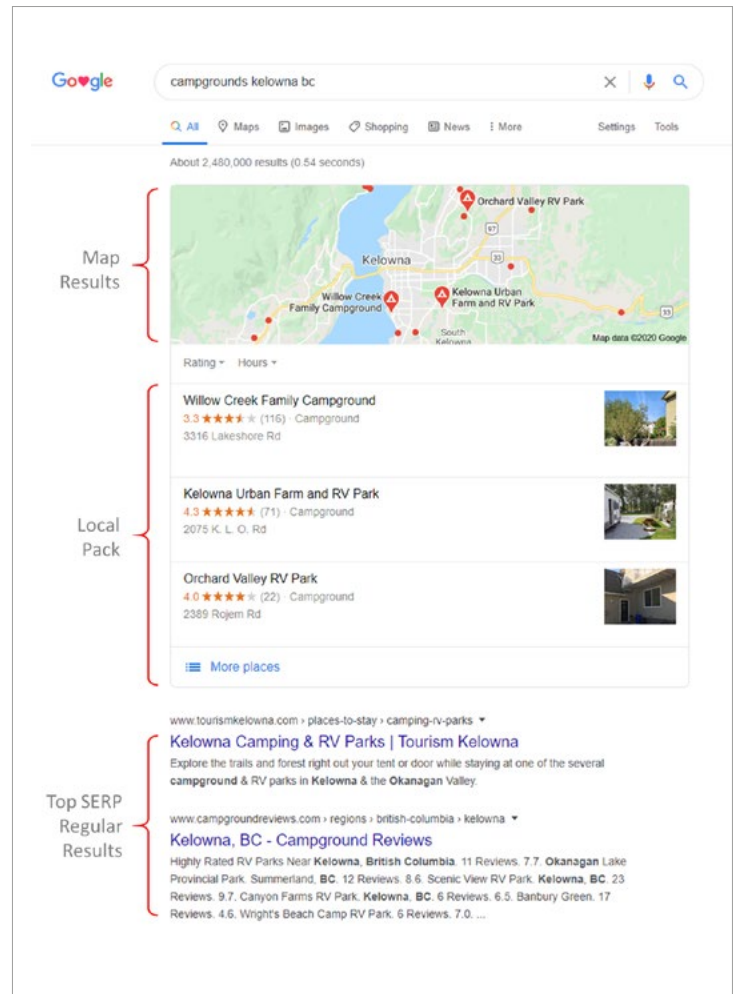
Kelowna Urban Farm and RV Park

| Website | Directions | Save |

4.3 ★★★★½ 71 Google reviews

Address: 2075 K. L. O. Rd, Kelowna, BC V1W 2H9

Hours: Open today · 10a.m.–8p.m. ▾

⚠ Hours or services may differ

Phone: (250) 870-8998

Province: British Columbia

Ads · Check availability

| 📅 Wed., Apr. 29 | 📅 Thu., Apr. 30 | 👤 2 |

Contact this property for rates and availability

A Google My Business listing provides information that Google uses in various places across search results, including Google Maps. This makes having a Google My Business listing important to every business that wants to be competitive in the marketplace.

An example of a Google My Business listing that shows up if you click on the result on the map, or if you search for the business directly, is shown to the left.

⊕

Other factors that determine whether your business will rank for a local search include links from local authoritative sites, and ensuring your Name Address and Phone Number are clear and accurate on your website, reviews, and social mentions.

THREE STEPS
TO BUIDING
A SOLID
LOCAL SEO
FOUNDATION

1. MAKE SURE YOUR NAME, ADDRESS, AND PHONE NUMBER (NAP) ARE EASY TO FIND

on your website and, if possible, at the bottom of every page. Include a page on your site with a map and directions.

North Vancouver

2. CREATE OR CLAIM YOUR GOOGLE MY BUSINESS (GMB) PROFILE

Your GMB listing should include all the information you would want a searcher to know about your business if it appeared on a map, in the Local Pack or in the Knowledge Panel, including:

- Business Name
- Address and contact information (this should be the same as what is on your website)
- Hours
- Business Description
- Services Offered
- Products
- Photos
- Customer Reviews
- GMB Posts (Updates, Events, Offers & Products)

To optimize your GMB listing, you should:

- Include a short, but well-written and keyword-optimized, business description.
- Add your business hours (including any holiday hours or dates you know you will be closed).
- Add good quality photos that show your location, inside and outside, as well as your branding and staff.
- Ask customers to leave you reviews if they have enjoyed your service or products. Make sure to respond to all reviews in a timely manner (within a week or two).
- Enable messaging through your GMB profile.
- Respond to any Questions & Answers on your GMB listing.
- Create a GMB post (Updates, Events, Offers & Products) at least once a month.
  - ◊ Once a week would be ideal if you have the time, monitor what posts do well and which don't. If you are posting something on social media, you should post something similar on your GMB listing.

Hope, Hubert Kang

If you use one of the Google's Booking Partners, customers will be able to book appointments directly through local search. You can also add Call-to-Action (CTA) buttons on each GMB post to allow users to easily:

- Book
- Order Online
- Buy
- Learn More
- Sign Up
- Get Offer
- Call Now

If you offer additional services at your location (for example, a hotel may also have a restaurant or spa open to the public), we recommend creating a separate GMB listing for each service, with clearly different contact information for each, visible on their respective pages on your website.

Tofino, Brian Caissie

Salt Spring Island, Reuben Krabbe

3. CITATIONS

Submit yourself to the highest-ranking citation sites to help build your online authority.

The most important reason to add your business to popular citation sites is to ensure all the information is accurate and consistent. Inaccurate or inconsistent business information, including different NAPs on different sites can lead to search engine and user confusion. People also use different services to search for businesses, so being present on other citation sites increases your chances of being found.

Some popular sites that your business should be cited on include:

- Bing Places
- Yelp
- TripAdvisor
- Apple Maps (Apple gleans information from other sources such as Yelp, Factual & Yext)

If something changes, such as a phone number, remember to update this information across all listings.

NEXT STEPS

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By following the SEO basics mentioned above, your business will have a good chance of showing up through search engines when and where your prospective customers are looking for you.