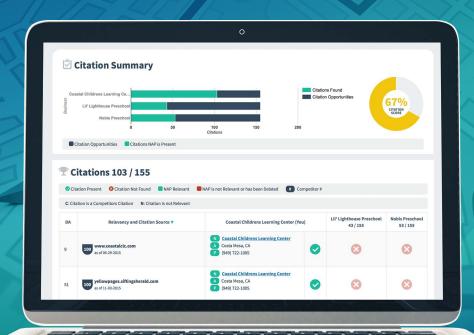
THE COMPLETE HOW-TO GUIDE FOR

# Local Citation Audit And Cleanup



BY BERNADETTE COLEMAN







## **BERNADETTE COLEMAN**

Follow the #QueenofLocalSEO









Bernadette is the CEO of Advice Interactive Group (AIG), an award-winning Inc. 500 company. Brands under the AIG umbrella include Advice Local, Advice Mobile and BubbleLife Media to name a few.

Bernadette has been actively involved in digital marketing with an emphasis on local SEO since 2001. She focuses on developing enthusiastic and innovative teams to research, create and develop exciting digital marketing strategies for AIG clients.

Known to industry peers as the Queen of Local SEO, Bernadette's constant focus is on how businesses—small and large—can leverage content marketing, search engine optimization and social media to dominate local search.

This focus led to the creation of **Advice Local**, a citation submission technology that helps businesses "get found" easier and more quickly on Google, Bing and other local business directories.

Among the awards she has received in recognition of her achievements, Bernadette is especially proud of her Female Entrepreneur of the Year Stevie® Award. Succeeding as a female CEO is no small feat, and she strives to inspire women daily.

As co-founder of the popular news site **Rocks Digital**, Bernadette helped create a digital marketing resource with an influence that transcends the competition. Educating the digital community via this website, along with her other endeavors, feeds her soul and pushes her not only to track and follow trends, but to also create them.

Her efforts to educate and enlighten include regular contributions to national digital marketing publications such as Search Engine Journal, Social Media Today, Search Engine People, LSA Insider and Forbes.

Bernadette and her husband Tom also work as advocates for brain injury awareness through their co-founded nonprofit, TryMunity.



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Many small local businesses have been relatively slow to integrate online marketing into their advertising campaigns, as shown by the SMBs (roughly half of them) that have no website of their own. Some site-less businesses do use social media, and that's great, but it's not enough.

Whether they are tech-phobic, or simply believe that having a website will not pay off for them, these businesses are really missing out. It all comes back to data, and ideally, the business must protect and manage their online data – or hire someone who will.

Consumers start with the search engines when looking for products and services in their own geographic area. Even if the consumer lives right down the road, they'll likely still be looking for that business online. The digital marketing strategies designed to increase visibility in Google and other search engines are collectively referred to as search engine optimization (SEO). However – and this is a big however – local SEO does work a bit differently than the strategies used by companies with a global reach, or that operate online exclusively. This is where local citations come into the picture.

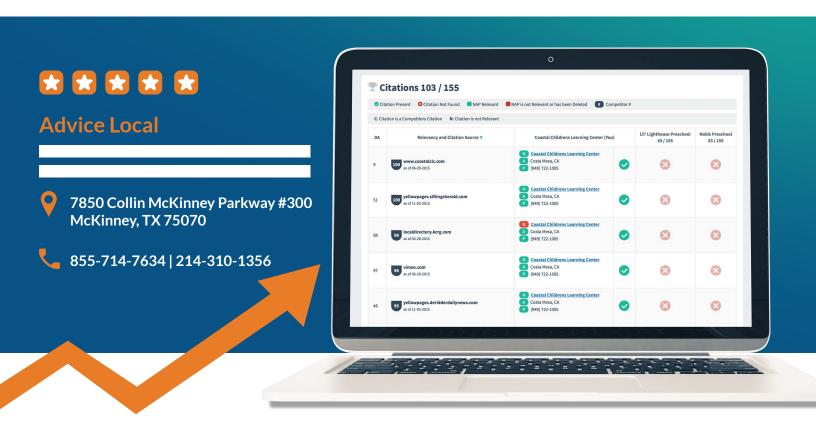
Are online business citations really a big deal? Absolutely – and that's the reason I created this guide. I'll define the nature of citations and explain the audit and cleanup process with enough detail for you to get started cleaning up the bad data that impacts the business in question.

Read the guide, scan it, make notes, and use it to get a citation audit process started for the businesses you represent. The citation audit and cleanup is a process, not a one-and-done job. So whether you jump in with both feet and get started in-house, or delegate the responsibility to a company that specializes in this task, you must know the information in this guide. Let's get started!



## WHAT IS A CITATION, AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

In terms of local SEO a citation is any mention of a business online, typically in the form of Name, Address and Phone Number, called NAP data. The most basic citation may be nothing more than the business name. However, additional details such as phone number, address and a link to the website may also be included.



When it comes to marketing a local business online, local citations play an important role in improving SEO and boosting visibility in local search results, and this is especially true for mobile search results.

As search engine algorithms continue to evolve and get smarter, businesses and their representatives must get smarter as well, becoming more focused on where the citations for local businesses are built.

Citations are a valuable component of local SEO optimization regardless of whether or not they provide the business with a direct link. The benefits of citations go far beyond getting a backlink.

Common citation sources include directory sites, data aggregators (i.e. Factual, Foursquare, Localeze, and Infogroup), Chamber of Commerce websites, social media, review sites such as Yelp, plus Google My Business (GMB) and Bing Places. It's important to note that a mention of a business on its own website does not count as a citation.



# THE IMPORTANCE OF CITATIONS FOR LOCAL BUSINESSES



Search engines use citations (among many other SEO factors) to gauge the online reputation of a business. Therefore, the more quality online citations that a business has, the higher the placement in local search engine results pages.

Over the past decade the prevailing mindset has been that having more citations is always better. Today, however, this is no longer valid. In fact, low-quality citations, particularly those that are linked to a website, can negatively impact Google's trust in the business. This tactic of trying to improve online reputation through sheer volume is outdated.

Advice Local's experience and research has led to an effective strategy of identifying and targeting specific high-quality sources to build citations. Advice Local submits local businesses only to those directories that meet the strictest of qualifications, determined by examining 23 different metrics, including domain authority (DA).

Another important characteristic of these valuable sources is how they distribute their data. As this data is shared across other directories and networks, it acts as a data amplifier for local business citations. This powerful group of quality directories makes up Advice Local's Data Amplifier Network.



# Search



Search



Search engines take many ranking factors into account when determining which results to display and the order in which to display them, but as far as local SEO is concerned, citations are among the most important. Even without a website or social media profiles – certainly not a recommended practice – a business can still get some exposure in search engine results from citations alone.

#### **Examples of Citations Include a Business Listing in the Following:**



**Google My Business** 



The online directory of a local Chamber of Commerce



Judy's Book



Foursquare

Local citations are not restricted to local directories. They may appear in general business directories, niche-specific directories, local news outlets, press release websites, locally oriented blogs, and other websites or social media platforms.



#### At Advice Local, we take data very seriously.

Visit **AdviceLocal.com** to view the current list our Data Amplifier Network distributes and publishes data to. These high-quality directories help business data become more open and accessible to customers who are searching.

# WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO HAVE CLEAN DATA?

Although a citation can consist of nothing more than a mention of the business name, when creating or claiming any business profile or online listing, be sure to include the following four critical pieces of information.

- 1. The branded trading name of the business.
- 2. The physical address of the brick-and-mortar business.
- 3. The local telephone number, complete with area code.
- 4. The website URL for the business (if it has a website).

- N Advice Local
- A 7850 Collin McKinney Parkway #300 McKinney, TX 75070
- P 855-714-7634 | 214-310-1356
- www.AdviceLocal.com

As mentioned earlier, the above info is often referred to as NAP. All mentions of a business' NAP online must be kept as consistent as possible around the web. Maintaining only the most important business listings (such as a GMB listing) is not enough. It's true that directories can vary in importance, with directories related to a business' industry and location being especially influential. But since any incorrect citation reflects badly on the business, maximum local SEO value requires consistency everywhere.





Problem citations include duplicate (and often incorrect) entries in the same directory, mismatched listings, or listings that are incomplete. When incorrect information about a business gets fed to search engines, the reduced trust means the business loses ground in the search results. In brief, the goal is to have identical NAPs displayed in every source where a citation exists.

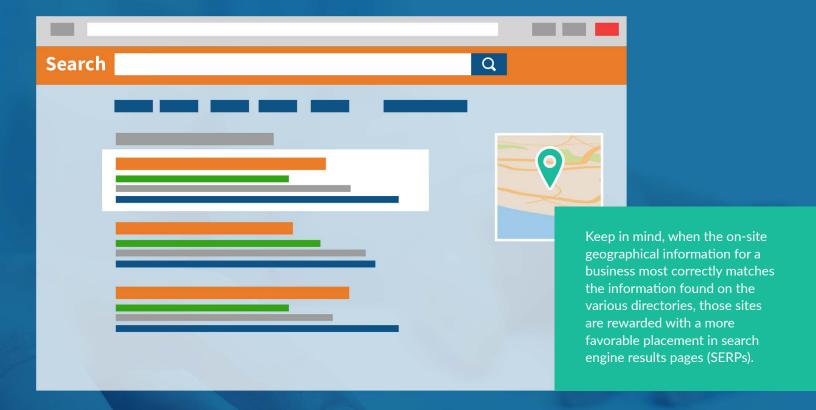
Later in this guide, we will explain how to conduct a local citation audit in order to clean up online business listings and make them more consistent. As a result, a business' standing in search engines will improve, and consumers will be able to more easily find the business when conducting relevant local searches.



# HOW DOES LOCAL BUSINESS DATA GET CORRUPTED?

As a business continues to expand its reach, incorrect citations will inevitably start to appear over time. Because businesses can be listed on directories in many different ways, the bad data may not even result from mistakes by business employees. No matter how the bad data is created, when customers use it to find a local business and get lost, they lose trust. In fact, it's been reported that 67% of them will lose trust in the business!

This is exactly why businesses are advised to periodically conduct a local citation audit. There are tools to monitor citation consistency for a business, such as Advice Local's Local Safeguard. Rather than the business having to continuously find and correct bad data, Advice Local's technology will maintain the accuracy of the data.



are uniform in appearance.

A new business will actually have a small advantage, in that it should not have any bad data online to clean up. For a new business, take the time and effort to submit to as many high quality and niche directories as possible, especially those that are related to the business category or industry. When submitting listings that do not otherwise exist, you can control what the listings say, ensuring that they provide accurate information and

When the listings for a business are already present on various directories across the web, then there's a significant chance discrepancies exist.

Discrepancies and errors can be defined as:



Misspelled words



Variations in the business name



Varying website URLs



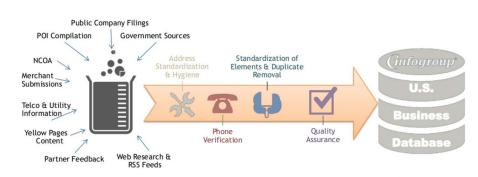
Old or wrong phone numbers and addresses

So how does this happen? In some cases it's quite evident – directory listings were likely created by different employees at different times, resulting in a lack of continuity. Or perhaps the business moved, changed phone numbers, or uses multiple numbers that vary by department.

The business might have purchased local SEO services from a company that created landing pages and established phone numbers for the local business. If the client business did not have access to these pages, canceling services with the listing company could mean all of those directory listings are now pointing to a domain that the business does not own, to a domain that no longer has a website – or even worse, hosts a website for a different business. A disconnected phone number might also be displayed, or forward calls to another business, and so on, and this would persist until it is corrected.

In some cases, incorrect data was submitted to the data aggregators or scraped from other websites, corporate records and online directories, and has become extremely widespread. After all, a single incorrect citation – particularly on a popular website – can easily multiply if not dealt with quickly. Let's look at how Infogroup, for example, gathers data.

### Infogroup's Data Compilation Process



(infogroup

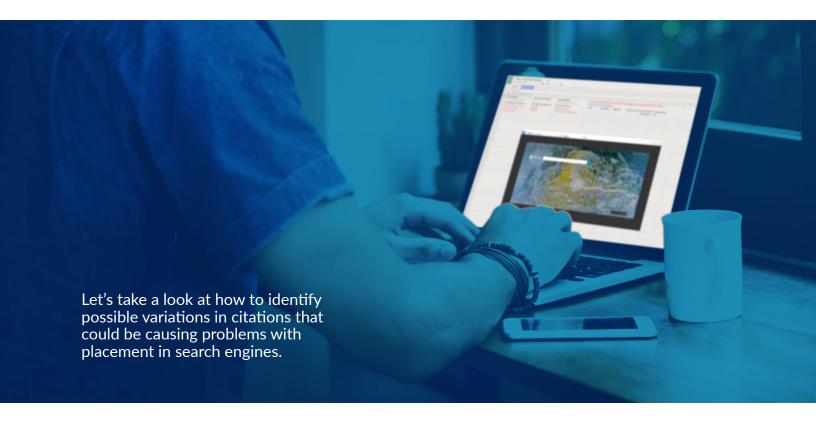
As shown, Infogroup pulls data from various sources including public company filings, merchant submissions, Yellow Pages content, web research, RSS feeds and more. The many sources from which data is gathered each represent a window where bad NAP and other wrong information can enter the data pipeline.

When Google sees too much conflicting data they may ignore it altogether, and the business will never make it into the top of search results.



## RESEARCH BEFORE REPAIR - GET STARTED WITH NAP VARIATIONS

During the first part of the audit, the goal is to document all the potential name, address and phone number (NAP) variations. As you identify issues throughout the audit, resist the temptation to start correcting data right away. You will want to correct issues in a specific order so you fix the data at the source first, if possible.



Start by listing all the possible variations in the NAP. You'll want to create a spreadsheet and write down the correct name, address and phone number of the business along with a list of all the possible variations that you can think of, including common misspellings, mistyped numbers, or old names, numbers and addresses.

- Has the business changed phone numbers or used other numbers?
- Has the business moved or changed addresses?
- Has the business changed the website address?
- Does the business have any other locations? (The data could be mixed up between them.)

# TOOLS, TIPS & TRICKS TO FIND CITATIONS EASILY AROUND THE WEB

In this section of the guide, we're going to cover several ways to find local business citations. We'll examine free tools to find business citations wherever they may be, and learn how to find bad data using Google Search.



What about the citations out there with incorrect business names? We'll learn to find them, too. While the tools are free, this part of the process is time-consuming and will require diligence. As mentioned above, you will want to document each citation you find on a master spreadsheet. Even if the citation is correct, document it. That way, you can easily monitor it in the future.

## **Capitalize on Free Tools to Find Business Citations**

Fortunately, there are a variety of tools to help make the task of finding problematic citations a bit easier. Such tools typically won't help track down citations on some smaller or niche-specific directories or websites, but they generally cover most of the larger, more important resources.

Let's look at the Advice Local tool and see how you can track down these citations. Follow these steps to generate the free report:



- Click this link to run Advice Local's free
  Online Visibility Report
- Enter the business name and ZIP code, then click "Check My Online Visibility"
- Scroll to the bottom of the page and select the business by clicking "This is me" or "My business is not listed"
- If no business was found, try a different name or search term by entering data into the search bar under "Select your business," then click "Update List"
- Keyword: return to top of page and enter the best keyword for the business
- Contact Information: fill in or update the contact information (full name, phone, email); then select "I am the business owner" or "I am a reseller"

Wait a moment while your report is being generated. You'll need to sign up for a free account to save the report.

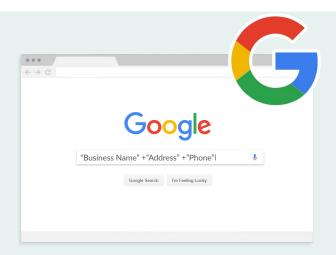
The report will reveal wrong listings, duplicate data, bad NAP and listings in which you need to be included (but are not). This is a great starting point for identifying problems that need to be fixed!

Advice Local isn't the only company providing tools to run free citation reports. A few others include GoDaddy Local, Synup, Moz Local and Connectivity.



## Find Bad Data Using Google Advanced Search Operators

Before you resort to using paid tools to audit local citations, there are a number of methods you can use to track down the most important issues. One of the first places to turn is Google itself, where you can make use of various advanced search operators to help find problematic citations. Although a fair amount of trial and error is involved here, you'll need to use the search engine to search for the variations in the business NAP that you documented earlier.



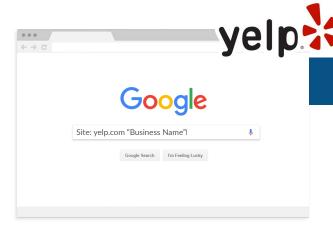
If the business has ever changed its phone number or address, you should also conduct searches for the business name and its old address – any citation that shows up needs to be updated. Refer to the list of possibilities you wrote down previously in your spreadsheet, as well as any that came to light in previous searches.

When searching via Google, ensure that each element (the name, address and phone number) is kept in quotation marks so that Google searches for the exact terms entered. Use a minus symbol before a quoted element to exclude it entirely from the search results. (The search style rules for other search engines may differ slightly.)

#### Format as follows:

- A search to include: "33452 Westfield Avenue" + "555-987-6543"
- A search to exclude: "33452 Westfield Avenue" "555-987-6543"

Another effective way to identify problematic data is to use the "site:" operator. In this way, you can search specific websites and online directories for mentions of the business and ensure their accuracy. Once armed with a list of the most important local citation sources that include the business name, search in Google using the following format:



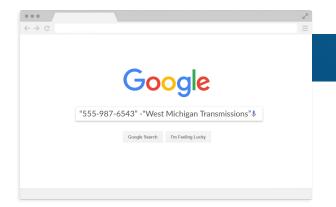
Site: yelp.com "business name"

Yelp is a major local citation resource, so you'll likely want to search for any listing that the business might have on the website. To search other sites, simply replace "yelp.com" with the website you want to search.



#### **Find Citations with Incorrect Business Names**

Search for the correct phone number, followed by the name of the business in quotation marks preceded by a minus symbol. Doing so will exclude results with the business' name, thus helping you find citations that mention the business' phone number, but an incorrect name.



Format as follows:

555-987-6543" -"West Michigan Transmissions"

In order to find other citations (that may or may not be correct), you can search for the business name and address, or business name and ZIP code.

You will want to make sure and find all correct citations, too. Simply enter the city name, ZIP code, business name and phone number in the search bar. For a more precise search, use quotation marks and plus symbols.

### Find Additional Citations Using these Search Queries

"Part of business name" "Phone Number" - "800 number" example:

Advice Local" -"214-310-1356" -"855-714-7634"

As you discover different numbers, exclude them from the guery to refine the results:

Part of business name" - "Phone Number" - "800 number" - "1st Found Number"

Look for same phone number and different addresses:

Part of business name" - "Phone Number" - "Part of the address"

Just like with the phone number, as you find different addresses, exclude them from the guery to refine results:

Part of business name" -"Phone Number" -"Part of the address" -"Part of address 2"









There are browser extensions or add-ons you can use to make this process easier and more manageable, such as **Linkclump** (*Chrome*) or **Multi Open** (*Firefox*).

As you work through all the above searches, make sure you continually update the spreadsheet so you can deal with any issues later.

Other ways to identify possible citation variations include the following:



If the business is listed on the Better Business Bureau website, double-check to verify there are no additional names, addresses or phone numbers associated with the business. Here's an article on hacking the BBB to find bad data you may want to check out by Darren Shaw at Local Visibility System.



Search for cell phone numbers of company principals and tracking phone numbers the business may have used.



Check corporate records filed with the state. Many business owners start their business in a home office or shared office, then forget to update the details once they move.



If the business uses an alias or a DBA, check those too.

As you work through the citation audit, you may also want to list minor secondary issues to be addressed later.





## DETERMINE WHAT CITATIONS NEED A CLEANUP

Before you begin the cleanup portion of the audit, it is important to firmly establish priorities. If there are hundreds, or even thousands of problematic citations online, make sure that you focus primarily on the ones listed on the most popular websites, as well as those that are specific to the industry and geographical location first.



As with most rules there are some exceptions. You may safely ignore the address and phone number variations shown in the examples below:

Street vs ST
Northeast vs NE
Suite vs Ste
Floor vs Fl
75070-7654 vs 75070
(214) 310-1356 vs 214-310-1356

Take action here – absolutely do not ignore the following variation types:

Different business name	$\rightarrow$	Same address/phone
Different phone	$\rightarrow$	Same name/address
Different address	$\rightarrow$	Same name/phone



## FIX THE MOST IMPORTANT BAD DATA FIRST

By now, you have a list of local citations that need to be cleaned up. Most likely, it's a pretty long list. As discussed earlier, it's important that you determine which ones need attention first. We have listed the sites to start with below, in order of priority. Once you get through this list, you'll want to widen the approach and work through the others.

#### 1. Government Sources

Most states have a searchable business registry on their Secretary of State website. Use the earlier list of NAP variations and search for all of them on the site. You'll need to contact them to fix any incorrect details. Why are government sources the most important? It's because directories and crawlers continually scrape government sites for business information. If you fix citations in the directories first, when they scrape the government site again the bad data could be disseminated, and you'll have to start over.



#### 2. Phone Company

Double-check the NAP information on file at the telephone company that the business deals with. Online billing is a good place to start.



#### 3. Utilities

Double-check the NAP information through utility companies that the business deals with. Again, online billing is a good place to start.



#### 4. Infogroup

Infogroup is one of the data aggregators you'll want to fix next. Go to Infogroup's Express Update and search for all variations of business information on the NAP list. To edit a listing, you'll need to log in (or create an account) and claim the listing. They will verify the details by phone, so coordinate a time to speak with them. It's important to add as much information as possible to all the correct listings you find.



#### 5. Neustar Localeze

Go to Neustar Localeze, another data aggregator, and search for all variations of business information on the NAP list. Claim and enhance accurate listings and remove any incorrect listings.



#### 6. Foursquare

Go to Foursquare, another data aggregator, and search for all variations of business information on the NAP list. Claim and enhance accurate listings and remove any incorrect listings.



#### 7. Other Data Providers

For CityGrid, Judy's Book, Superpages, Yellowpages and Yelp – click the logos below and search for all variations of the business information on the NAP list. Claim and enhance accurate listings and remove others.













Most of these companies will verify details by phone, so coordinate a time to speak with them.

#### 8. Dun & Bradstreet

Another important and commonly used source is Dun & Bradstreet. Search for listings with a **Credibility Review**, then claim, update and enhance.



#### 9. Factual

Factual's location data is used by Apple Maps and various mobile apps (which sometimes publish their listings to the web). Search for listings and if you find any inconsistencies, contact them at Update/Add Business to resolve.



#### 10. Google My Business and Bing Local

Both of these search giants allow a business to claim their listings and edit them as required. To complete the process, ownership must be verified. Here's how to accomplish that for a **Google My Business** listing, and here's how to get it done for **Bing Places**.



To sum up these important must-do's we must also include a don't. Do not start the audit & cleanup process by focusing on citation sites that get data from the major aggregators. Why? Because when a source gets data from major data providers like Infogroup, the bad listings can show up on the site again in the future.

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# IT'S TIME TO CLEAN UP THOSE STRAYS

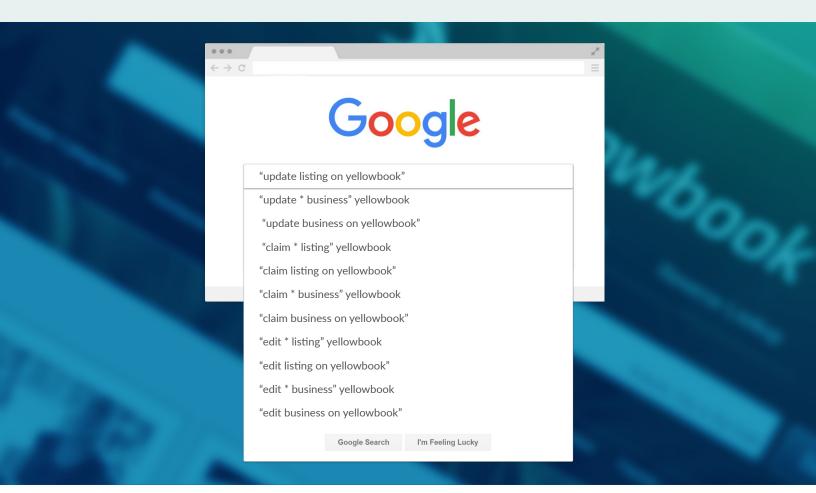
You've combed the web, you've claimed, optimized and corrected as many citations as possible, but are there still some strays that need attention? Most reputable business directories and similar services provide a straightforward way of contacting them.

However, there will be a few holdouts! If you cannot find contact details, you may need to use Whois lookup at Whois.

#### Google Can Help - Here's How

Before you head over to the Whois lookup, here are a few more search queries you can try out to find the process for updating local citations on 3rd party sites.

Here are some examples of search terms to try for Yellowbook.



In some situations, the only practical way to modify a local citation is to email the website in question a request. Make sure that you conduct any such correspondence from the business' email address. Some may not reply, while others may charge a fee to fix any citations. You will have to deal with each case individually, depending on the importance of the source. Here's an email template you can use.



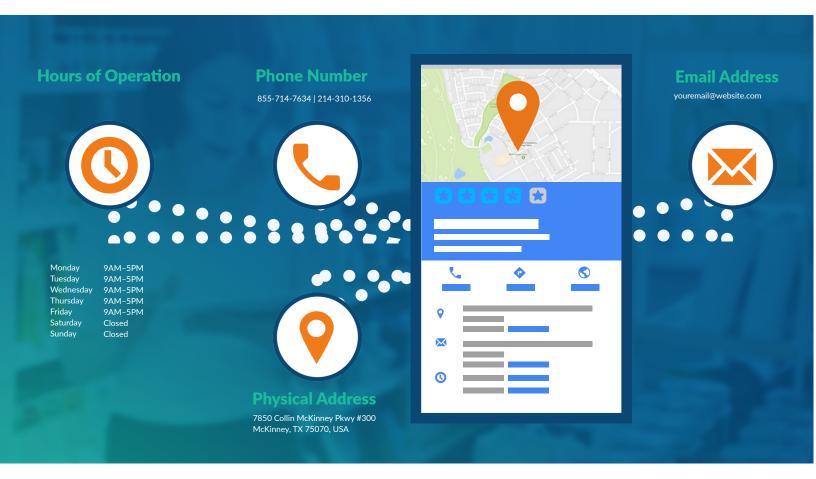
# OPTIMIZING NEW BUSINESS CITATIONS ACROSS THE WEB

Having a business listed on high-quality online directories is a great way to boost a business' local SEO and web presence.

Besides having a consistent NAP for dominating local search, future customers also find these listings; so don't just optimize them for citation purposes, but for customers.

#### **Always Include the Basics in Business Listings**

The majority of customers who are looking for local services online will be most interested in the basic information about the business.





Remember that some who are looking for local services online will be visitors or residents new to the area. If you can include simple directions with the listing, that's even better.



Give the customers options for contacting the business – include not just the phone number, but an email address, too.



People are unwilling to make the trip to a business location if they're unsure whether or not it will be open – so make sure and include the business hours.

#### Make the Business Listing Stand Out

Include anything that may be an added benefit to a customer - e.g., if the business stocks an exclusive brand, the restaurant has vegan options, or the store is pet-friendly, then include this information in the description.



**Products and** services offered



**Payment methods** 



Special qualifications or accreditation

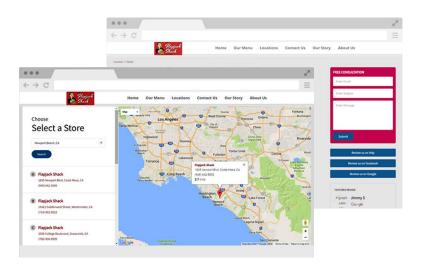


Languages spoken

#### Invite Them to Connect with the Business Online

It is fair to assume that if someone has found a business listing in an online directory, then they are web savvy. Include links for the customer to find out more about what's going on at the business on other sites.

Here are a few examples of additional links you can include:



























Getting businesses listed on online directories that count is what we do. Find out more about how we can help today. Our partner solution is the perfect place to start.



#### **Selecting a Company to Help Manage Citations**

The steps in this guide can help to find local business listings around the web and clean them up. If you're thinking you may need some help right about now, keep reading.

Answer this question: What's the best use of time and money?

A complete citation audit can be time-consuming work. It may be that choosing a company to create, monitor and maintain local business citations is the best use of business resources.

Here are a few things to know:



Do your research when selecting a company, as all companies are not created equal.



Be wary of discount outsourcing websites and budget SEO firms (particularly those based abroad).



Determine if the service is automated or manual (or both).



Always understand what happens to the listings should the business cancel the service.

Getting local citations wrong for a business will spell disaster for online visibility!

## As Clean Data Circulates, Watch Local Rankings Increase

We've audited, we've cleaned, we've optimized! While the process can take a lot of time and effort, the results can be tremendously rewarding.

It will take some time for Google and other search engines to index the new listings, update existing listings, and remove outdated information from the indexes. The payoff comes as clean data starts to circulate around the web!





If you haven't generated your free online visibility report yet, visit Advice Local TODAY and get started! It's as easy as entering the business name and ZIP code and pressing enter.

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Over 3,000 Agencies, Brands and Channel Partners Rely on Advice Local Each Day

## **Tour Our Local Presence Management Solution**



#### **Listing Distribution**

Get clients listed where it matters with our Data Amplifier Network of directories & aggregators.



#### **Branded Mobile Apps**

Create branded mobile apps on-the-fly. Score real-time updates, push notifications & other features.



#### **Citation Building & Cleanup**

From getting your clients found locally online to cleaning up bad data, we've got you covered.



#### White Label Dashboard

Brand with your logo, delegate user access and easily order services.



#### **Reputation Management**

Monitor online reputation on social media & review sites – share with a few clicks!



#### Reporting

Create and email reports in a flash! With our solution, schedule once & leave the rest to us.



#### **Locator Pages**

Add a locator map and create SEO-optimized landing pages on a business website.



#### **Local Safeguard**

Monthly maintenance protects local business data. Something breaks? We fix it.

Whether it's one location or 10,000, we have you covered!