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LOCAL SEARCH OPTIMIZATION

The Multi-Location Google Business Profile Playbook

Access control, category audits, review response cadence, and suspension recovery for operators running Google Business Profiles across more than one location.

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Who should actually hold primary ownership

Google Business Profile has two access levels that matter: primary owner and manager. A primary owner can add or remove any user, transfer ownership, and delete the profile outright. A manager can do nearly everything else — edit business information, respond to reviews, publish posts — but cannot touch user access or remove the listing. That distinction is the entire access-control model, and most multi-location operators get it backward: they leave primary ownership with whoever set the profile up, which is often an employee, a freelance marketer, or an agency, rather than a role the business controls independently of any one person.

The practical failure mode is straightforward. An employee or agency contact who held primary ownership leaves on bad terms, stops responding to email, or simply forgets they still hold the account. The business now has an active, publicly visible profile it cannot edit, cannot add new staff to, and cannot transfer without the departed owner's cooperation. Google's process for reassigning ownership without the current owner's consent exists but is slow, requires proof of business legitimacy, and is not guaranteed to succeed on the first attempt.

Primary ownership should sit with a company-controlled account — a role-based email address the business owns, not a named individual's personal Google account — held by someone with long-tenure oversight, such as an owner, a marketing director, or an operations lead who is unlikely to be the first person let go in a reorganization. Agencies and contractors should almost always receive manager access, never primary ownership, however much day-to-day editing they do. New owners and managers also face a mandatory seven-day restriction after being added, during which they cannot remove other users, transfer ownership, or delete the profile — plan handoffs with that delay in mind rather than assuming access transfers instantly.

- Primary owner: a company-controlled account tied to a role, not a person who might leave
- Manager access: the default for agencies, freelancers, and day-to-day editors
- A written access roster reviewed at every staffing change, not just when something breaks
- A seven-day grace period built into any planned ownership transfer

> *An employee or agency contact who held primary ownership leaves on bad terms, stops responding to email, or simply forgets they still hold the account.*

02

Why the wrong category costs more visibility than a weak description

Category selection determines which searches a profile is even eligible to appear in — before hours, reviews, or photos matter at all. Google's own guidance is to choose the most specific primary category available rather than a broad one: "nail salon" instead of "salon," "personal injury attorney" instead of "lawyer." A business that defaults to a general category because the specific one was harder to find, or because someone assumed broader meant more reach, is opting out of the exact-match searches that specific category creates and gets no compensating benefit in return.

Additional categories compound the same mistake in the opposite direction. Google's guidance is explicit that categories should describe actual functions of the business, not serve as keyword targets — a grocery store should add "bakery" or "deli" only if those departments genuinely exist on-site, not attach every category that seems adjacent to groceries. Overloading additional categories dilutes relevance signals rather than expanding them, and edits to primary category can trigger re-verification, so this is not a change to make casually or repeatedly while testing.

A category audit across locations means pulling every location's primary and additional categories into one sheet and checking each against what that specific location actually does on-site, not against a corporate template applied uniformly. Locations drift from each other over time — a service added at one branch and not documented at the others, a category chosen years ago that no longer matches the business. Service-area configuration deserves the same scrutiny: a business that does not serve customers at its physical address should hide that address entirely and rely on service areas instead, defined by city or postal code rather than a radius, with the total area kept within roughly a two-hour drive of the business's base — Google will not display a service area drawn as a raw radius.

> *Additional categories compound the same mistake in the opposite direction.*

03

What a defensible review-response cadence actually looks like

A response-time target only works if it is written down and assigned to a person, not left as a general expectation that "someone" handles reviews. A reasonable operating standard for a multi-location business is a same-business-day acknowledgment for negative reviews and a same-week response for positive ones, with a named individual or rotating on-call role responsible for checking every location's incoming reviews — not the manager of whichever location happened to get the review, since that creates uneven response times across the portfolio. Google reviews every reply against its content policies before publishing it, and approval commonly takes minutes but can take up to 30 days, so a fast internal response does not guarantee a fast public one.

Most negative reviews can be handled with a direct, specific reply: acknowledge what happened, avoid generic apology language, and give a concrete next step such as a phone number or an invitation to discuss the issue offline. Template replies are fine as a starting structure but need to be edited enough that they read as written by someone who read the actual review, not copy-pasted.

Escalation rules exist for the reviews a template cannot safely handle: allegations that could expose the business legally, reviews naming a specific employee, reviews describing safety or health incidents, and reviews that look coordinated or fraudulent. Those should route to a manager or legal contact before any public reply goes out, and the business can flag reviews it believes violate Google's content policies for removal — flagging is not a substitute for responding to reviews that are simply negative but legitimate, since Google will not remove a review just because the business disputes it.

- Same-business-day acknowledgment target for negative reviews, same-week for positive
- One named owner or rotation across all locations, not per-location assignment
- A short escalation list: legal exposure, named employees, safety claims, suspected fraud
- Flagging reserved for actual policy violations, not for reviews the business simply dislikes

> *Template replies are fine as a starting structure but need to be edited enough that they read as written by someone who read the actual review, not copy-pasted.*

04

Keeping photos, posts, and service listings current without a full-time team

Freshness signals — recent photos, active posts, an up-to-date services list — are easy to maintain for one location and easy to let collapse across twenty. The cadence that survives at scale is smaller and more mechanical than most content calendars: one new photo set per location per month (exterior, interior, team, completed work), one post per location every two to four weeks, and a services list reviewed quarterly against what the location actually sells or performs. Anything more ambitious than that tends to get skipped after the second month once the person responsible has other priorities.

Services listings deserve specific attention because they directly shape what shows up when someone searches a specific offering. Google surfaces suggested services based on category, and businesses can add custom services when the suggested list does not match what they do — but custom names cannot include pricing, phone numbers, or promotional language, and violations get auto-rejected. A quarterly review catches services that were added once and never updated, or a location that started offering something new six months ago and never added it to the profile.

The unmanageable version of this cadence is one built around a shared spreadsheet nobody owns. The workable version assigns one person per region — not per location — responsible for a fixed number of location updates each month, with a simple tracking sheet showing last-updated dates per location so gaps are visible before they become six-month gaps.

05

What Google actually asks for during a suspension appeal, and how to avoid needing one

A suspended or disabled profile stops appearing in Search and Maps until it is reinstated, and Google's appeal process asks for documentary proof that the business is real and located where the profile says — not a written explanation of why the suspension was a mistake. Acceptable evidence includes business registration documents, a business license, tax certificates, and utility bills showing the business name and address. The appeal form itself has a hard constraint worth knowing before starting one: once opened, it must be submitted within 60 minutes or the evidence will not attach to the appeal, so gather every document before beginning the form rather than mid-appeal.

The single most common cause of suspension for legitimate multi-location businesses is a mismatch between what the profile claims and what a manual reviewer can verify — an address with no real signage, a business name that does not match storefront branding, or a name padded with extra description. Google's guidelines are specific that a business name must match its real-world name exactly, with no taglines, no keyword-stuffed service descriptions, no location qualifiers, and no marketing language folded into the name field; violating this "isn't permitted, and could result in the suspension of your Business Profile," in Google's own wording. Multi-location businesses face an added consistency requirement: every location must use the same name unless the real-world business itself varies its name by location, and locations offering the same services should share the same primary category.

Reducing suspension risk before it happens means treating the name and address fields as fixed, low-risk data rather than places to optimize: enter the name exactly as it appears on the sign and paperwork, keep the address matched to a location with genuine signage (service-area businesses without a public storefront should remove the address field entirely), and avoid batch-editing names or categories across many locations at once, since a wave of similar edits is itself a pattern automated review systems flag.

06

New location rollout checklist

A new profile is most vulnerable to suspension and to being indexed incorrectly in its first weeks, because there is no history of consistent signals yet for Google to weigh against a mistake. The rollout sequence below treats each step as a gate — nothing proceeds until the prior step is verifiable, not just completed.

Step	Owner	Gate to pass before moving on
Confirm legal business name matches signage and licensing exactly	Location manager	Name on the profile draft matches the storefront sign and the business license character-for-character
Set primary and additional categories against actual services offered	Regional operations lead	Every category chosen maps to a real, currently offered service — none added speculatively
Enter address or configure service area	Location manager	Address verified against a real, signed location, or address hidden with service areas set by city/postal code if no walk-in storefront exists
Complete Google verification (postcard, phone, email, or video as offered)	Location manager	Verification confirmed complete in the dashboard, not just requested
Assign access: primary owner (company account) and managers	Regional operations lead	Primary ownership sits on a company-controlled account, not a personal one; agency or contractor access set to manager only
Upload initial photo set and configure services list	Location manager	At least one exterior, one interior, and one team or work photo live; services list reflects opening-day offerings
Add to the regional freshness and review-response tracking sheet	Regional operations lead	Location appears on the shared tracker with a last-updated date before it goes live in marketing materials

07

What this playbook does not fix

None of the above repairs a business whose name, address, or phone number is wrong or inconsistent on the directories, citation sites, and old listings that sit outside Google's own system. A profile can be perfectly configured on Google and still lose trust signals if a data aggregator, a legacy Yelp listing, or an old chamber-of-commerce directory shows a previous address or a slightly different business name. That inconsistency has to be found and corrected at the source — through the individual directories, data aggregators, or a citation-cleanup process — because Google's own profile settings have no authority over what a third-party site displays.

It also does not fix a business that is genuinely difficult to find or to be served by. If a location sits down an unmarked service road, if phone lines are routinely unanswered, or if the business cannot actually keep up with the demand a well-optimized profile would send its way, better profile management surfaces those problems faster rather than solving them. A polished, accurate, well-maintained Business Profile earns the click and the call; what happens after the call is answered is an operations problem, not a listings problem, and no amount of category or review-cadence discipline substitutes for fixing it.

Key Takeaways

- Primary ownership should sit with someone who will still work at the company in two years, not with the agency or employee doing the day-to-day edits.
- A wrong primary category is a visibility problem before it is anything else — audit category assignment against actual services, not against what looks impressive.
- Set a written response-time target for reviews and a named owner for escalations, or negative reviews sit unanswered until a customer or a lawyer notices.
- A suspended profile needs documentary proof of the business, not a better explanation — registration, license, or utility records tied to the exact listed name and address.
- Profile optimization cannot repair inconsistent NAP data sitting on directories you do not control, or fix a business that is genuinely hard to reach or serve.

Sources

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