FREE DIY PLAYBOOK

The Keyword Research Playbook for Small Business

Find the searches your customers actually type, and pick the ones you can win.

- Free tools only
- Keyword worksheet and priority scorecard
- Real small business examples

SmallBiz Marketing
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Why keywords come first

Every page you build for SEO should be aimed at a search someone actually makes. Keyword research is how you find those searches and decide which are worth your time. Skip it and you end up with pages nobody searches for, or pages aimed at searches you can never win.

For a small business, keyword research is not about finding the biggest numbers. It is about finding the searches made by people who are ready to buy from a business like yours, in the area you serve.

What you will have at the end

- A list of 30 to 60 relevant searches
- Each one matched to a page on your site (existing or planned)
- A short priority list of the 5 to 10 searches to work on first

Chapter 1: Understand search intent

Two searches can contain the same words and want completely different things. Intent is the reason behind a search, and Google ranks pages that match it.

Intent	What the person wants	Example	Page that fits
Hire / buy	A business to do it or a product to buy	roof repair near me	Service or product page
Research	To understand options or costs	how much does roof repair cost	Guide or article
Compare	To choose between options	metal vs shingle roof	Comparison article
Navigate	A specific business	smith roofing reviews	Homepage, reviews, profile

> QUICK TEST
> Search the phrase on Google. If the top results are business pages and a map, it is a hire search: build a service page. If they are articles, it is a research search: write a guide.

Chapter 2: Brainstorm your seed list

Seeds are the plain words that describe what you do. Write them down before you open any tool.

Five sources of seed keywords

1. Your services and products, in the words customers use (not trade jargon).
2. Your towns, neighborhoods, counties and region.
3. The questions customers ask on calls, in emails and at estimates.
4. The problems that make people look for you ("leaking", "broken", "outdated").
5. Your competitors' service pages and menus.

> PRO TIP
> Customers rarely use industry terms. A remodeler might say "wet area waterproofing"; the homeowner types "shower leaking into ceiling". Use their words.

Worksheet: seed list

Services (in customer words):

Places I serve:

Problems customers come to me with:

Questions I answer every week:

Chapter 3: Expand the list with free tools

Google itself

- Autocomplete: type a seed into Google and note the suggestions.
- People also ask: the question boxes in the results.
- Related searches: the list at the bottom of the results page.

Google Search Console

Once your site has been live for a few weeks, the Performance report lists the real searches that showed your pages. This is the most valuable keyword source you have because it is your own data.

Google Keyword Planner

Gives rough search volume ranges. You need a Google Ads account, but you do not have to run ads. Treat the numbers as directional; local searches often show low volume even when they bring real jobs.

Google Keyword Planner

Google Trends

Shows seasonality, for example when people search for "gutter cleaning" or "tax preparer" in your region, so you can publish before the busy season.

Google Trends

Paid tools (optional)

Tools like Semrush and Ahrefs give volume, difficulty and competitor keywords in one place. Both offer limited free access. They save time, but you can do everything in this playbook without them.

Chapter 4: Judge which searches to target

Score each search from 1 to 3 on four questions. Work on the highest totals first.

Question	1 point	3 points
Relevance: do we offer exactly this?	Loosely related	Exactly what we sell
Intent: is the searcher ready to buy?	Just learning	Ready to hire
Winnability: who ranks now?	National brands	Small local sites
Value: what is a customer worth?	Low-ticket	High-ticket or repeat

How to judge winnability without paid tools

Search the phrase and look at the first page. If you see other small local businesses, directory listings or thin pages, you can compete. If the whole page is national brands with long, detailed guides, start with something more specific.

Go long-tail

Longer, more specific searches ("bathroom tile repair in Roseville" rather than "tile") have fewer searches but much higher intent and less competition. Most small business wins come from long-tail searches.

Chapter 5: Map keywords to pages

Each important search needs one home on your site. Group very similar searches together and assign the group to one page. Two pages chasing the same search compete with each other.

Search group	Target page	Exists?
kitchen remodel + kitchen remodeling + kitchen renovation (city)	/kitchen-remodeling	Yes
kitchen remodel cost (city)	Blog: kitchen remodel costs	No
quartz vs granite	Blog: quartz vs granite	No

Worksheet: keyword map

Search group	Target page	Exists?	Priority

Chapter 6: Use keywords on the page (naturally)

- Put the main phrase in the title tag, H1 and first paragraph.
- Use related phrases and questions as subheadings.
- Answer the question fully; do not repeat the phrase over and over.
- Use the phrase in the URL when you create a new page (keep it short).
- Link to the page from related pages using descriptive link text.

> AVOID
> Keyword stuffing, writing the same phrase again and again, makes the page worse for readers and does not help rankings. Write naturally and cover the topic well.

Chapter 7: Find quick wins in Search Console

1. Open Performance > Search results and turn on Average position.
2. Filter positions greater than 10 (page two and beyond).
3. Sort by impressions, highest first.
4. For each relevant search, open the page that ranks and improve it: answer the question better, add the phrase to headings, add photos and internal links.
5. Check again in four to six weeks.

> PRO TIP
> A search where you already sit at position 11 to 20 is usually the fastest win on your whole site. Google already thinks you are relevant; you only need to be a bit better.

14-day keyword plan

Day	Task
1	Write your seed list (services, places, problems, questions)
2	Collect Google autocomplete and People also ask ideas
3	Pull Search Console searches from the last 3 months
4	Check volume ranges in Keyword Planner
5	Search your top 20 and note intent and competitors
6	Score each search with the scorecard
7	Group similar searches
8	Map each group to a page
9	List pages that need to be created
10	Pick your top 5 priorities
11	Update titles and H1s for those pages
12	Find page-two searches in Search Console
13	Improve the best page-two page
14	Save your keyword map and set a monthly review

FAQ

How many keywords should a small business target?

Start with 5 to 10 priority searches and a map of 30 to 60. It is better to own a few searches than to chase hundreds.

Should I trust search volume numbers?

Use them for comparison, not as exact counts. Local and niche searches often show low volume and still bring valuable customers.

Do I need a page for every keyword?

No. One page per group of closely related searches.

Keep going

More free DIY playbooks from the SmallBiz Marketing team:

The Small Business SEO Playbook (start here)

The On-Page SEO Playbook

The Technical SEO Checklist Playbook

The Content & Blogging Playbook

The Links & Citations Playbook

The SEO Tracking & Reporting Playbook

The SEO Budget & Hiring Playbook

All free DIY playbooks

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