FREE DIY PLAYBOOK

The Small Business SEO Playbook

SEO marketing for small business, step by step. Get found on Google without hiring an agency.

- A 30-day action plan, one task a day
- Checklists, worksheets and templates
- Built around free tools

SmallBiz Marketing
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How to use this playbook

SEO (search engine optimization) is the work of helping the right people find your business when they search on Google, Bing, Apple Maps and AI assistants. For a small business, it is the closest thing to free, always-on advertising: once a page ranks, it keeps bringing in visitors without a cost per click.

This playbook is the complete do-it-yourself path. It is written for owners and small teams, not SEO specialists. Every chapter ends with a short checklist, and the last pages give you a 30-day plan you can follow one task at a time.

Who this is for

- Local service businesses: contractors, salons, clinics, cleaners, studios, repair shops
- Small shops and professional practices that want more customers from Google
- Anyone who has a website but gets few calls or form inquiries from it

What you need before you start

- A website you can edit yourself (Wix, Squarespace, WordPress, Shopify or similar)
- A free Google account to set up Search Console and Google Business Profile
- About three hours a week for the next month

> HOW WE WROTE THIS
> Everything here is the same process the SmallBiz Marketing team uses when we build and grow sites for clients. We left out tactics that only work for big brands with big budgets.

The order matters

Most owners start SEO in the wrong place, usually with a blog post or a new tool. The fastest results come from fixing the foundation first. This playbook follows that order:

1. Make sure Google can find and read your site (setup and technical basics).
2. Decide which searches you want to win (keywords).

3. Give each of those searches a page that answers it well (on-page SEO).
4. Show up in local results and maps (Google Business Profile and citations).
5. Earn trust from other websites and customers (links and reviews).
6. Publish helpful content on a steady schedule (content).
7. Measure what works and do more of it (tracking).

Chapter 1: How SEO actually works

Search engines do three jobs. They crawl the web to discover pages, they index those pages so they can be retrieved, and they rank the indexed pages for each search. Your job is to make each of those three steps easy for your site.

Crawling and indexing

If Google cannot find or read a page, nothing else matters. Pages get discovered through links (from your own menu and pages, and from other sites) and through your sitemap. Google Search Console shows you exactly which of your pages are indexed and which are not, and why.

Ranking

Google uses many signals to rank pages. For small businesses, a handful matter most and are within your control:

- Relevance: does the page clearly answer what the person searched for?
- Quality and helpfulness: is it original, specific and written for people rather than for search engines?
- Trust: do other sites link to you, mention you and review you? Do you show real experience?
- Page experience: does it load quickly and work well on a phone?
- Location (for local searches): how close you are, how complete your Google Business Profile is, and how well-known you are locally.

The 4 types of SEO

You will hear SEO split into four areas. This playbook covers all four, in plain language:

Type	What it means	Examples
On-page SEO	What is on each page	Titles, headings, content, internal links, images

Off-page SEO	Signals from other places	Links, mentions, reviews, directory listings
Technical SEO	How the site is built	Speed, mobile, indexing, sitemap, security
Local SEO	Showing up nearby	Google Business Profile, maps, local citations

How long does SEO take?

Expect early movement (more impressions in Search Console) within a few weeks of fixing the basics, and meaningful traffic over three to six months. Competitive searches take longer. SEO compounds: the work you do this month keeps paying off next year, which paid ads never do.

> REALITY CHECK
> Nobody can guarantee a #1 ranking. If someone promises it, walk away. What you can control is doing the right work in the right order.

Chapter 1 checklist

- [ ] I understand the difference between being indexed and ranking
- [ ] I know which of the 4 types of SEO my site is weakest in

Chapter 2: Set up your free SEO toolkit

You can do excellent small business SEO with free tools. Set these up on day one, because some of them need a few days to collect data.

Tool	What it does	Cost
Google Search Console	Shows your searches, rankings, clicks and indexing problems	Free
Google Business Profile	Your listing on Google Maps and local results	Free
Google Analytics 4	Shows visitors, sources and conversions	Free
Bing Webmaster Tools	Search Console for Bing (also powers some AI search)	Free
PageSpeed Insights	Tests speed and mobile experience	Free
Google Keyword Planner	Search volume estimates (needs a Google Ads account, no spend required)	Free

Set up Google Search Console

1. Go to search.google.com/search-console and add your website.
2. Verify ownership. Most website builders (including Wix) can connect it for you from their SEO settings.
3. Submit your sitemap (usually yoursite.com/sitemap.xml).
4. Wait a few days, then open the Performance and Pages reports.

Open Google Search Console

Set up Google Business Profile

If customers visit you, or you visit them, you need a Google Business Profile. It is how you appear in the map results that sit above the regular results for most local searches. Claim it at business.google.com and complete every field.

Claim your Google Business Profile

Chapter 2 checklist

- [ ] Search Console is verified and my sitemap is submitted
- [ ] Google Business Profile is claimed and verified
- [ ] Google Analytics 4 is installed
- [ ] Bing Webmaster Tools is set up (you can import from Search Console)

Chapter 3: Choose the searches you want to win

Keyword research sounds technical. It is really just writing down what your best customers type into Google, then checking which of those searches are worth a page.

Start with your services and places

Most small business searches follow a simple pattern: a service plus a place, or a problem plus "near me". Write down every service you offer and every town or neighborhood you serve.

Pattern	Example
Service + city	bathroom remodel Pleasanton
Service + near me	emergency plumber near me
Problem question	why is my shower leaking
Cost question	how much does a new roof cost
Comparison	quartz vs granite countertops

Check what Google already shows

Search each phrase yourself. Look at what ranks: if the results are business service pages, you need a service page. If they are guides and articles, you need a helpful article. If they are maps, Google Business Profile is the priority. Match what Google rewards.

Use your own data

After a few weeks, Search Console shows the real searches people used to find you. Sort by impressions and look for searches where you appear on page two (positions 11 to 20). Those are your fastest wins.

> PRO TIP
> Small businesses win on specific searches, not broad ones. "Kitchen remodeler in Walnut Creek" brings fewer searches than "kitchen remodel", but the people searching it are ready to hire, and you can actually rank for it.

Worksheet: my priority searches

My top 5 services:

The towns and areas I want more work in:

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5 questions customers always ask me:

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3 searches I want to rank for first:

Chapter 4: Build pages that rank

Every important search deserves one page that answers it better than anyone else. This is on-page SEO, and it is where most small business sites fall short: one "Services" page that lists everything in a few lines.

One service, one page

Give each main service its own page. A page about "tile repair" and a page about "shower installation" can each rank for their own searches. A single page trying to cover both usually ranks for neither.

The on-page essentials

Element	What good looks like
Title tag	Service + city + brand, under about 60 characters. "Tile Repair in Folsom, CA – Stonecrest Tile"
Meta description	One or two sentences that make people want to click, under about 155 characters
H1 heading	One per page, says plainly what the page is about
Opening paragraph	Confirms the service and area in the first two sentences
Body content	Answers real questions: process, timing, price factors, what is included
Proof	Photos of your work, reviews, credentials, guarantees
Internal links	Links to related services, projects and your contact page
Call to action	A clear next step on every page

Write for people first

Google has said for years that it rewards helpful, people-first content. In practice that means: answer the question fast, be specific, show your own experience (photos, examples, numbers from your own work), and skip filler. A 600-word page that answers the question well beats a 2,000-word page full of fluff.

Location pages without spam

If you serve several towns, a page per main town can work well, but only if each page is genuinely different: local projects, neighborhoods, travel times, local permit notes. Copying one page and swapping the city name is a pattern Google is good at ignoring.

Chapter 4 checklist

- [ ] Each main service has its own page
- [ ] Every page has a unique title tag and meta description
- [ ] Each page has one clear H1
- [ ] Pages answer the top customer questions
- [ ] Every page links to related pages and to my contact page

Chapter 5: Fix the technical basics

You do not need to be technical to cover the basics. Website builders handle most of it. Your job is to check for the few problems that block rankings.

The technical checklist

- [ ] The site loads over https (a padlock in the browser)
- [ ] It works well on a phone: text readable, buttons easy to tap
- [ ] PageSpeed Insights shows no major problems on your key pages
- [ ] Your sitemap is submitted in Search Console
- [ ] The Pages report in Search Console shows your important pages as indexed
- [ ] No important page is set to noindex by mistake
- [ ] Images are compressed and have descriptive alt text
- [ ] There are no broken links on your main pages
- [ ] Old URLs redirect to the new ones after a redesign

Test a page with PageSpeed Insights

> COMMON MISTAKE
> After a redesign, old page addresses stop working and rankings drop. Before you change any URL, set up a 301 redirect from the old address to the new one.

Structured data, briefly

Structured data (schema) is code that tells Google facts about your business: name, address, hours, reviews, services. Many builders add basic schema automatically. It helps Google understand you; it is not a ranking shortcut.

Chapter 6: Win local search and maps

For most local businesses, the map results are where calls come from. Three things drive them: relevance (does your profile match the search), distance, and prominence (how well-known and well-reviewed you are).

Complete your Google Business Profile

- [ ] Primary category is the most specific one that fits your main service
- [ ] Secondary categories added for other core services
- [ ] Services listed with short descriptions
- [ ] Hours, service area and website link are correct
- [ ] At least 10 real photos of your work, team and premises
- [ ] A post every week or two (offers, projects, updates)
- [ ] Every review gets a reply

Keep your name, address and phone consistent

Your business name, address and phone number (NAP) should match exactly everywhere: your site, Google, Bing Places, Apple Business Connect, Yelp, Facebook and industry directories. Inconsistent listings confuse both customers and search engines.

Reviews

Reviews influence both rankings and whether people choose you. Ask every happy customer, make it easy with a direct link, and reply to every review, good or bad, in a calm and helpful way.

> PRO TIP
> Ask at the moment the customer is happiest: the day the job is finished or the product is delivered. A short text or email with your direct review link works better than a general request.

Chapter 7: Earn links and mentions

Links from other websites act like recommendations. For small businesses, a few relevant local links matter far more than many random ones.

Good link ideas for small businesses

- Local chamber of commerce and business association memberships
- Suppliers, manufacturers and partners who list installers or stockists
- Local news, community blogs and event pages (sponsorships, charity work)
- Industry directories and professional associations
- Customers who are businesses themselves (case studies, testimonials)
- Helpful guides on your site that other people want to reference

> AVOID
> Never buy links in bulk or join link schemes. They break Google's spam policies and can get your site demoted. If a link would exist even without SEO, it is the right kind.

Chapter 8: Publish helpful content

Content is how you rank for the questions people ask before they are ready to hire. It also gives other sites something to link to and shows Google your experience.

What to write about

- The questions customers ask you on every call
- Costs and what changes the price
- Comparisons: materials, options, approaches
- Before-and-after projects with real details
- Mistakes to avoid and how to choose a provider

A realistic schedule

Two good articles a month beats eight rushed ones. Each article should link to the service page it supports, and that service page should link back.

Content checklist

- [ ] Each article answers one clear question
- [ ] It includes something only we know: our photos, process, examples
- [ ] It links to the related service page and to our contact page
- [ ] The title and description are written to earn the click

Chapter 9: Track what works

SEO without measurement is guesswork. Check these numbers once a month and write them down so you can see the trend.

Metric	Where to find it	What it tells you
Impressions	Search Console	How often you appear in results
Clicks	Search Console	How many people visit from Google
Average position	Search Console	Roughly where you rank
Leads from organic search	Analytics or your form inbox	Whether SEO brings business
Profile calls and directions	Google Business Profile	How the map listing performs

Monthly SEO tracker

Month	Clicks	Impressions	Leads	Reviews
Month 1				
Month 2				
Month 3				
Month 6				

Your 30-day SEO plan

One task a day, about 20 to 40 minutes each. Weekends off.

Day	Task
1	Set up Search Console and submit your sitemap
2	Claim or check your Google Business Profile
3	Install Google Analytics 4 and Bing Webmaster Tools
4	List your services and service areas
5	Search your top 10 phrases and note who ranks
6	Pick 3 priority searches
7	Rewrite your homepage title and description
8	Write titles and descriptions for every service page
9	Fix headings: one clear H1 per page
10	Expand your most important service page
11	Add photos and alt text to service pages
12	Add internal links between related pages
13	Run PageSpeed Insights on your top 5 pages
14	Check the Search Console Pages report for errors
15	Complete every field in Google Business Profile
16	Upload 10 real photos to your profile
17	Check your name, address and phone on 5 directories
18	Claim Bing Places and Apple Business Connect

19	Send review requests to 10 recent customers
20	Reply to every existing review
21	List 10 local link opportunities
22	Contact 3 of them
23	List 10 customer questions for articles
24	Outline your first article
25	Write and publish it
26	Link it to and from the related service page
27	Post an update on your Google Business Profile
28	Write down this month's numbers
29	Find page-two searches in Search Console
30	Improve the page for your best page-two search

Common mistakes to avoid

- Targeting broad searches you cannot win instead of specific local ones
- One services page for everything
- Copy-pasted city pages with only the town name changed
- Changing URLs in a redesign without redirects
- Ignoring Google Business Profile and reviews
- Buying links or cheap "SEO packages" that promise guaranteed rankings
- Never checking Search Console, so problems go unnoticed for months

FAQ

Can I really do SEO myself?

Yes. The basics in this playbook cover most of what small businesses need. Hire help when you run out of time, compete in a crowded market, or need technical fixes beyond your website builder.

Is SEO worth it for a small business?

For most local and service businesses, yes, because people search on Google before they hire. The work compounds, unlike ads that stop when you stop paying. It is less useful if your customers never search for what you sell.

How much does SEO cost?

Doing it yourself costs time rather than money. If you hire, an Ahrefs survey of 439 SEO professionals (updated 2024) found $501 to $1,000 a month was the most common retainer, and local SEO averaged about $1,557 a month. Our SEO Budget & Hiring Playbook covers this in detail.

Does AI search change SEO?

AI answers in Google and chat assistants still draw on websites that are clear, trustworthy and well-structured. The same fundamentals apply: specific, helpful pages, a complete business profile and consistent listings.

Glossary

- Crawl: when a search engine visits a page to read it.
- Index: Google's library of pages it can show in results.
- SERP: search engine results page.
- Title tag: the clickable headline shown in Google results.
- Meta description: the short summary under the title in results.
- Backlink: a link from another website to yours.
- NAP: name, address and phone number.
- Local pack: the map results with three businesses.
- Noindex: a setting that tells Google not to show a page.
- 301 redirect: a permanent move from one URL to another.

Keep going

More free DIY playbooks from the SmallBiz Marketing team:

The Keyword Research Playbook

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

Want it done for you?

The SmallBiz Marketing team builds fast, search-ready websites and sets up Google for small businesses. Get in touch through our contact page and tell us what you need.

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