How does Google rank web pages in the different types of results that matter to the real estate world?

When searching Google, a great variety of different listings can be returned in the SERP (Search Engine Results Page). Images, videos, news stories, instant answers and facts, interactive calculators, and even cheeky jokes from Douglas Adams novels (example) can appear. But for real estate professionals, two kinds of results matter most -- traditional organic listings and local (or "maps") results. These are illustrated in the query below:

Local (Maps) Results

These listings can only appear when Google has location data about a relevant business in Google Places. The rankings are based on a number of location and business factors like name and category relevancy, location, popularity, citations, and more (unique from the ranking algorithm Google uses for traditional web listings like those below).

Organic Results

These listings can come from any page and site on the web. They are ranked by Google's traditional organic listings algorithm, and lean on factors like link popularity, authority, content quality, and many others.

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Many search results that Google deems to have local search intent display a map with local results (that Google calls "Places") like the one above. On mobile devices, these maps results are even more common, more prominent, and can be more interactive, as Google results enables quick access to a phone call or directions. You can see that in action via the smartphone search below (for "Denver Real Estate Agents"):
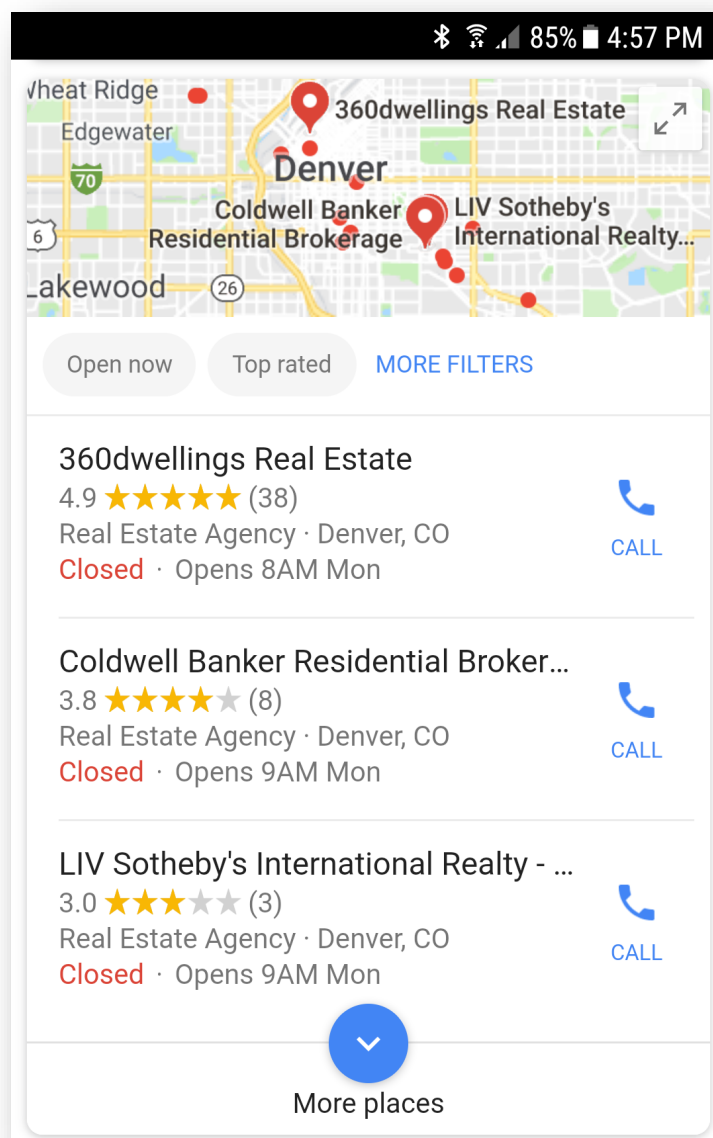
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Real estate professionals seeking to rank in Google's results should pay careful attention to the types of results produced for the queries in which they seek to rank. Why? Because Google uses two very different sets of criteria to determine what can rank in each of these. For example, in order to be in Google's local/maps results, it's crucial to have a listing in Google My Business, a service the search engine offers enabling local businesses to claim or create their "Place," provide information to Google (like business name, address, category, hours, phone number, etc), and then potentially appear in maps results for relevant queries (as well as see and manage information like reviews and search popularity). Google's traditional, organic listings have no such requirements and while they offer a tool with valuable data (Google Search Console), participation isn't required to appear.

We cannot know everything about how Google chooses to rank its results, but many of the factors are public, well known, tested, and provable through experimentation. The lists below are almost certainly incomplete (because Google would never reveal every element they use in ranking, nor how they weight these in their algorithms), but they cover the most important and well-proven aspects of appearing and ranking highly in the two types of result sets:

Important Ranking Elements for Local (Maps) Results

- The quality and quantity of other websites that link to the business' website (generally believed to be one of the most important factors in local rankings, and traditional results too)

- Signals that come from a Place's Google "My Business" (GMB) Listing such as:

    * Use of the searched-for keyword(s) in the business title

    * The location of the business and its proximity to the searcher or the geography they've searched

    * The category (or categories) used for the GMB Listing

    * Whether the listing in Google is "verified" (more about that process from Google here)

    * The business name, address, and phone number in the GMB Listing matching the name, address, and phone number found on the business website (a mismatch can lead Google to trust the listing less, and rank it lower)

    * The age of the GMB Listing (listings that have been around longer may earn more trust in Google's eyes)

    * Photos associated with the GMB Listing (Google has just begun accepting videos for the My Business Listing pages as well, and these may one day contribute to rankings as well)

    * Links from around the web that point to the GMB page

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- Whether the physical address of the business is in the searched-for city
- The quality and consistency of the citations across the web for the business (citations in this context mean websites that mention the business' name, address, phone number, business details, and/or website, though a follow-able link does not necessarily need to be present)

- The quality and quantity of Google reviews for the business

- The quality and quantity of third party reviews for the business (on sites like Yelp, TripAdvisor, Houzz, and others)

- How often Google's searchers choose to click the listing in the real estate and whether they click "back" to the results page to select another listing or remain on the site to solve their query

- Potentially other factors as noted in this survey on local rankings

Important Ranking Elements for Traditional, Organic Web Listings

- Use of the target keyword in important parts of the page's content, such as the title element, headline, in the body content, the URL string, etc.

- Whether the page's content helps solve the searcher's question or problem -- pages that Google perceives to earn high ratios of engagement may outrank those whose visitors from search quickly click the "back" button and choose another result (an important reason to make your pages load quickly, display beautifully on all devices, and provide the information visitors are seeking)

- The quality and quantity of links that point to the specific URL and to all the pages on the hosting website (e.g. for mysite.com/seattle-real-estate, both the links around the web that point to that particular page and to any pages on mysite.com are important in Google's rankings)

- The anchor text of the links that point to the page and website (e.g. if many other sites link to mysite.com/brooklyn-real-estate with anchor text like "Brooklyn Real Estate" Google is likely to perceive that page to be more relevant for that query and related terms). Anchor text is composed of the words and characters that make up a text link from one location on the web to another (in the case of linking images, the alt attribute of the image is considered to be the anchor text)

- The domain name of the host website, e.g. SantaFeHomes.com may be considered relevant to the query "Santa Fe Homes" (this helps many small and lesser known websites to rank for their own brand names)

- The presence of relevant words and phrases in a page's content relative to the search query performed, e.g. pages with words like "home prices," "house values," "real estate market," "Orleans Parish," "Louisiana," "Lake Pontchartrain," "Creole Cottages," and other terms and phrases Google has determined to be relevant to a query like "New Orleans Real Estate"

- Potentially other factors as noted in this document