

SMALL BUSINESS SEO CHECKLIST

2026 Edition — Built for Real Budgets & Real Results

THIS IS NOT A THEORY DOC. This is a battle-tested checklist from 10+ years of building small business SEO. Work through it in order. Each section builds on the last. Skip nothing in Week 1.

THE 90-DAY TESTING FRAMEWORK

Don't do SEO. **Test SEO.** Every action is an experiment with a hypothesis, a timeline, and a kill switch.

PHASE	TIMELINE	FOCUS	SUCCESS METRIC
Phase 1: Foundation	Days 1–14	Fix critical errors. Set up tracking. Claim GBP.	0 critical errors. Health score 85+.
Phase 2: Content Velocity	Days 15–60	Publish 2 optimized pieces/week using AI briefs.	8+ pieces published. 20% of keywords move.
Phase 3: Optimize & Validate	Days 61–90	Update positions 5–15. Measure ROI vs. time spent.	+15% organic sessions. 1+ customer from organic.

WEEK 1: THE NON-NEGOTIABLE FOUNDATION

Do these first. Everything else is wasted effort if these are broken.

■ Claim & verify Google Business Profile

Fill every field. Add 10+ photos. Write a keyword-rich description. This is your #1 local SEO asset.

■ Install Google Search Console + submit sitemap

Free. Essential. Shows what queries bring traffic, indexing issues, and Core Web Vitals.

■ Install Google Analytics 4

Track organic traffic, conversions, and user behavior. Set up before you optimize anything.

■ Run a full site audit (free tools)

Use Screaming Frog (free, 500 URLs) or Ahrefs Webmaster Tools (free). Fix ALL critical and high-priority errors first.

■ Ensure HTTPS everywhere

No padlock = no trust = lower rankings. Most hosts offer free SSL via Let's Encrypt.

■ Check mobile usability

Google is mobile-first. Test at search.google.com/test/mobile-friendly. Fix every error.

■ **Test page speed (PageSpeed Insights)**

Target: mobile score 70+. LCP under 2.5s. Compress images, enable caching, lazy-load below-fold content.

■ **Verify robots.txt isn't blocking important pages**

Use GSC URL Inspection tool. Common mistake that makes entire sections invisible.

■ **Set up NAP consistency baseline**

Document your exact Name, Address, Phone. This exact format must match everywhere online.

WEEK 2: ON-PAGE SEO & TECHNICAL FIXES

Fix the foundation before you build the house.

■ Write unique title tags (50–60 chars)

Every page. Include main keyword + location (if local). Example: 'Plumber in Austin | 24/7 Emergency Service | ABC Co'

■ Write unique meta descriptions (150–160 chars)

Compelling, keyword-rich. These don't rank you—they get the click. Treat them like ad copy.

■ One H1 per page, descriptive

H1 = page topic. Include your primary keyword naturally. Never duplicate H1s across pages.

■ Proper heading hierarchy (H1 → H2 → H3)

Structure like an outline. Helps Google and humans scan. Use keywords in subheadings where natural.

■ Optimize all image alt text

Describe the image for accessibility AND SEO. 'plumber-fixing-leaky-pipe-austin-tx.jpg' beats 'IMG_001.jpg'.

■ Clean URL structure

Short, descriptive, keyword-rich. No numbers or symbols. /emergency-plumber-austin/ beats /page-id-247/?cat=5

■ Add LocalBusiness schema markup

JSON-LD on your contact/location pages. Tells Google your NAP, hours, services. Use Google's Rich Results Test to verify.

■ Add FAQ schema where applicable

Boosts chances of rich snippets and AI Overview citations. Structure with question headings + concise answers.

■ Fix broken links (404s)

Screaming Frog finds these fast. Broken links kill crawl budget and user trust.

■ Set up canonical tags

Every important page needs a self-referencing canonical. Prevents duplicate content issues.

WEEK 3: LOCAL SEO DOMINATION

If you serve a geographic area, this is where you win or lose.

■ NAP consistency across top 10 directories

Match your baseline exactly. Yelp, Bing, Facebook, Apple Maps, BBB, Chamber of Commerce, industry-specific directories.

■ Create location pages (if multi-city)

One unique page per city you serve. Include local landmarks, local testimonials, city-specific service details. Never duplicate content.

■ Set up review generation system

Ask every satisfied customer. Text or email within 24 hours of service. Aim for 2–4 new reviews/month consistently.

■ Respond to ALL reviews within 48 hours

Positive and negative. Personalized, not canned. This is a ranking signal and builds trust.

■ Post weekly on Google Business Profile

Updates, offers, events, photos. Treat it like a social feed. These expire—consistency matters.

■ **Add products/services to GBP**

Complete listings with descriptions, prices, photos. Increases map pack visibility and conversions.

■ **Monitor GBP Q&A; section**

Proactively answer common questions. This builds a helpful FAQ directly on your profile.

■ **Geotag images before uploading**

Add location metadata to photos. Helps reinforce local relevance signals.

MONTH 2+: CONTENT, LINKS & CONTINUOUS TESTING

SEO is maintenance, not a project. Build the habit.

■ Publish 2 optimized blog posts per week

Target long-tail keywords (3+ words). 'How much does [service] cost in [city]?' beats 'plumber'. Use AI briefs to cut research time to 15 min.

■ Build topic clusters

One pillar page per core service. 3–5 supporting articles linking back to it. Internal links spread authority.

■ Update old content every 6 months

Refresh stats, add new info, improve weak sections. A small update can bring a 2-year-old post back to page one.

■ Target AI Overview / Featured Snippet formats

Answer questions directly in the first sentence, then elaborate. Use numbered lists, tables, and FAQ sections.

■ Build local backlinks monthly

Chamber of Commerce, local news, sponsor pages, partner businesses. Quality over quantity. Avoid paid link schemes.

■ Optimize for voice search

Target conversational queries: 'Who is the best [service] near me open now?' Include natural Q&A; throughout content.

■ Compress images & use next-gen formats (WebP/AVIF)

Speed is a ranking factor. Large unoptimized images are the #1 cause of slow sites.

■ Add click-to-call buttons on mobile

63%+ of local searches are mobile. Make calling you frictionless.

THE 90-DAY TESTING SCORECARD

Track these weekly. If you don't measure, you're guessing.

METRIC	BASELINE	WEEK 4	WEEK 8	WEEK 12	TARGET
Organic Sessions (GSC)	_____	_____	_____	_____	+15% minimum
Keywords Positions 1–10	_____	_____	_____	_____	+5 new
Keywords Positions 5–15	_____	_____	_____	_____	+10 (optimize these)
Site Health Score	_____	_____	_____	_____	85+/100
Critical/High Errors	_____	_____	_____	_____	0
Content Pieces Published	_____	_____	_____	_____	8+ in 60 days
Time on SEO/week	_____	_____	_____	_____	< 5 hours

New Google Reviews	_____	_____	_____	_____	8+ in 90 days
Customers from organic	_____	_____	_____	_____	1+ by Day 90

GO / NO-GO DECISION MATRIX

Day 90 is judgment day. Be honest.

CONTINUE IF:

- 20%+ of tracked keywords improved within 60 days
- 8+ optimized pieces published with traffic growth
- Tools save you 4+ hours/week vs. manual work
- Total tool cost under \$100/mo
- 1+ new customer acquired from organic search

PIVOT OR DOWNGRADE IF:

- Zero keyword movement after 60 days of publishing
- Paying for features you haven't opened in 30 days
- Time-to-publish hasn't decreased after 4 articles
- Spending more on tools than your time is worth
- Site still has critical errors after 2 weeks

BUDGET-OPTIMIZED TOOL STACKS

Pick ONE stack. Don't stack tools that do the same thing.

STACK	COST	TOOLS	BEST FOR
The \$0 Starter	\$0/mo	GSC + GA4 + Screaming Frog Free + Ahrefs Webmaster Tools + Rank Math Free	New sites, side projects, validating SEO
Local Machine	\$50/mo	BrightLocal (\$39) + Rank Math Pro (\$5) + ChatGPT Plus (\$20)	Plumbers, dentists, lawyers—any local service business
Content Publisher	\$50/mo	KeySearch (\$24) + NeuronWriter (\$23) + Screaming Frog Free	Bloggers, affiliates, small SaaS publishing regularly
All-in-One	\$99/mo	Serpstat (\$50) + Frase (\$15–45) + Rank Math Pro (\$5)	One dashboard + content workflow without 5 subscriptions
Full Automation	\$99/mo	Keytomic (\$79–99) — research → calendar → writing → publishing → tracking	Lean teams with strategy but no execution bandwidth

FINAL NOTES FROM THE TRENCHES

1. Speed beats perfection. A published blog post with an 80% optimization score beats a perfect post that never ships.

2. Local SEO is 80% consistency, 20% tactics. Post weekly on GBP. Ask for reviews. Keep NAP identical. Do this for 6 months and you'll outrank 90% of competitors.

3. Content optimization tools show ROI in ~2.4 months; technical tools take ~5.1 months. Prioritize content first.

4. If your site is slow or not mobile-friendly, no amount of SEO work compensates. Fix the foundation or rebuild before spending on tools.

5. 73% of small businesses waste \$400–\$800/year on overlapping SEO tools. Pick your stack, use it for 90 days, then evaluate. Don't tool-hop.

6. The #1 reason small businesses fail at SEO: They don't publish consistently. Not lack of tools. Not lack of knowledge. Consistency.

— Built for small business owners who need results, not theory. —