

By Matthew A. Perosi

Google Business View: A Great Online Marketing Tool with High Security Risks

A few years ago, Google undertook an extremely ambitious project to extend its Street Mapping technology, allowing retail businesses to create virtual walk-throughs of their stores. The businesses taking advantage of this "Google Business View" virtual tour technology are reporting more engaged customers and higher sales.

When the Business View virtual tour is added your store's Google+ Local page, it will also appear throughout many of Google's services. The most obvious benefit is how the virtual tour appears in Google Search Engine Results Pages (SERP). Whenever someone uses the words "in," "near," and "near me" in a Google search, a list of local businesses will appear. The business list also appears whenever a keyword and a town name are searched for together. Specifically, the search queries "jewelers near me," and "jewelry stores in Totowa NJ" will trigger the local business list.

The local business list shows limited information, but you can see more by hovering over each business name to expand an extra hidden panel on the right side of your browser window. This "Knowledge Graph" area is where the Business View will appear as an extra tile labeled "See Inside." There are very few things you can do to help directly boost the effectiveness of your organic business listing in the SERP, and this is one of them.

The goal of Business View is to increase your in-store foot traffic, and some businesses are attributing their 20% foot traffic increases to their Business View virtual tour. Other than Google Search, you can also attract more attention by publishing your tour on your website, share it on Facebook, and send it in an email.

Website visitors are more likely to stay longer on your website after viewing the virtual tours. Historically, those longer visitors eventually become paying customers.

Google designed Business View to be an exciting tool, but they don't provide any security guidelines for using it. Although I've mentioned several potential benefits, these virtual tours also create a huge exposure risk that needs to be mitigated.

The first jewelry store virtual tour I found in early 2014, clearly showed the location of the safe and the security system. Although I was impressed that this jeweler was tapping into new technology, the amount of exposure was too high. I called upon Michael Briant of Skydas Group International to review the security issues with this specific tour and with the Google Business View concept in general.

Although Briant realized the business benefit immediately, he also notes "that thieves and robbers can conduct pre-robbery surveillance without ever setting foot inside." The challenge for jewelers is how to properly use the Business View feature while minimizing risk.

Photo by Matthew Perosi, GTP. Used with permission from Schroth & Lorenson Jewelers



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The best way to mitigate your exposure is to take these three precautionary measures during the virtual tour photo shoot.

- 1 Close off all doors and hallways that lead to your back office and non-customer areas. Hang a temporary curtain using a tension rod if you don't have a door. By blocking the camera's view of those these areas of the store, you can generally hide the true size of the store, where the back door is, the safe location, and where employees might be working in the back rooms.
- 2 Protect against what Briant refers to as "inadvertent disclosure of the retailers normal customer base." The photographer needs to avoid taking photos while customers are in the field of view; otherwise a robber will now how to mimic the look of your customers without raising suspicions.
- 3 Identify all cameras, motion sensors, and panic buttons to the photographer and ask them to use the Google blur tool to obfuscate them from the virtual tour. Normally the photographer would only use the blur tool to hide faces and license plates, but it can also be used to hide sensitive information. By blurring the components of your security system, you are able to conceal any features that might otherwise reveal the type of security system you have.

From a security point of view, these virtual tours seem to expose the store to great risk, but as Briant says, "the virtual tour can be used as part of an effective marketing and sales strategy. The best advice that I can give is to look at the images that you are capturing from a bad guys point of view. Would you be able to use the info to successfully rob the store?" By hiding sensitive store information from the tour, you are forcing the robber to conduct pre-robbery surveillance by physically walk through your store, during which time, Briant says, "the business owner has the opportunity to intervene by spotting this behavior as it occurs."



Only officially trained Google Trusted Photographers (GTP) can create the virtual tour for you. Although Google freely provides the online software and mapping technology to make the virtual tour work, you will have to pay the professional photographer for their photography service.



To get firsthand experience with this topic, I ambitiously applied for and passed the training to become a Google Trusted Photographer. Google's application process is very tough and they also require special camera equipment in order to meet their quality control standards.

The Business View tour is created by taking a series of photographs using the camera and tripod placed at several locations around your store. You will need to identify your security system to the photographer during their initial walk through of your store so they can choose locations that will help conceal secure points of interest.

I found that it's quite difficult to complete a photo shoot in fewer than four hours when they are being done during a normal business day, even though Google estimates that it should take no more than two hours. There's a considerable amount of time required to hang curtains, close doors, and work with staff and customers to keep them out of the shoot. Then it takes additional time to blur out the individual sensitive elements from the tour. Because of the extra time needed, you should expect that a professional photographer will charge a higher service fee to create the virtual tour for you.

The cost for these virtual tours will range from \$400 for a small store to up to \$2000 for larger stores with more than 20 tripod locations. Most of the shoots I've worked on so far required 16 tripod locations with a cost of about \$1200.

The Google Business View is an exciting online marketing tool that I'd like to see many jewelers using, but only if the risks I've mentioned above are mitigated. However, this article does not include all of the more trivial security concerns that Michael Briant helped me identify, so feel free contact me at matt@jwag.biz and I'll be happy to provide you with those additional details that you can share with your local Google Trusted Photographer.



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Matthew Perosi reports the latest Internet trends and methods that are most relevant to the jewelry industry in his 5-day per week newsletter, available through jwag.biz. Tap into the more than 1,100 free newsletters to guide you towards better usage of websites, social, and mobile. Matthew invites your feedback and questions at matt@jwag.biz or 973.413.8211. Many questions from TRJ readers have turned into great newsletter topics.