

ONLINE LOCATORS: A Five-Point Checklist

Executive Summary

A common misperception — perhaps due to the near ubiquity of locators — is that all locators are alike. This is far from true. The company that implements a locator under this misperception is taking a significant risk. If the locator is not designed with the needs of both the business and end user in mind, failure rates can be very high.

A properly designed and deployed store or dealer locator for your business can turn online browsers and telephone callers into brick and mortar buyers, and provide business intelligence to help you make better customer service, site selection and target marketing decisions. This five-point checklist will help you make an informed decision about what type of online locator is right for your business, and whether or not your current locator is meeting your business objectives.

Online Locators: A Five-Point Checklist

Store, dealer and office locators have become essential applications on business and consumer Web sites. Retailers, hotels, banks, insurance companies, restaurants and other businesses use locators to help drive customers and prospects to brick & mortar locations to obtain services, shop and buy. Wireless service providers use coverage locators to help consumers understand coverage around their locations.

In addition, locators are excellent for promoting brand and increasing visibility for a business. However, a common misperception — perhaps due to the near ubiquity of locators — is that all locators are alike. This is far from true. The company that implements a locator under this misperception is taking a significant risk. If the locator is not designed with the needs of both the business and end user in mind, failure rates can be very high as measured by:

- Customer frustration — customers may be unable to understand how to use the locator application or the locator provides inaccurate locations.
- Loss of business to competitors — customers who can't find what they are looking for will turn elsewhere.
- Lost opportunity to gain business intelligence — information obtained from the locator can be used to gain intelligence about customers, prospects, trade areas, market penetration and more, leading to better business decisions.

This white paper addresses a five-point checklist to evaluate a locator for your company:

1. Locator Functionality
2. Search Capability
3. Location Data
4. Technology Integration
5. Passive vs. Active Locators

This information will help you make more informed and better decisions about what type of locator is right for your business, and whether or not your current locator is meeting your business objectives.

1. Locator Functionality

Functionality refers to what the locator will do for the end user. Will the locator provide a list of nearest locations? Offer maps? Driving directions?

Each of these functions should be considered in relation to the purpose of the locator. For example, if your company has locations throughout the country (or globally) and the primary purpose of the locator is related to promoting brand and increasing visibility, you may not need driving directions to each location.

On the other hand, if a major objective of your locator is to turn online browsers into in-store shoppers, maps and driving directions help customers get to you faster and easier.

Key functionality decisions include:

- **Maps** —The vast majority of locators provide maps showing your business locations in relation to the user's location. The visual display of a map makes it easy for users to orient themselves and quickly compare the proximity of your locations to their location. Maps should be high-quality, visually appealing and up-to-date. The maps you choose reflect your Web site and company.
- **Definition of 'Nearest Store'** — Most store locators find the nearest store location using "as the crow flies" searches. This may suffice for most applications. In other cases, when barriers such as rivers or highways prevent straightforward travel, the nearest store may not be the geographically closest but the one that is the shortest drive time away.
- **Driving Directions** — Driving directions make it easier for online browsers to make the trip to your stores. The quality, accuracy and usability of driving directions can vary greatly. Ask your vendor about the source of their routing data and how routes are calculated and displayed.

- **Speech/IVR** — Integrating locator functionality into your call center using speech recognition or an Interactive Voice Response (IVR) can save you considerable money by reducing the number of incoming calls that must be answered live. It also provides an additional way for customers to find your locations when they are not online.
- **Locating mobile callers** — A permission-based service to help mobile callers identify your closest store. The application can locate the caller and direct them to the nearest store. No need for the caller to know their current address or ZIP Code. Ideal for package drop-off, restaurants, retail, and others.
- **Store Information** — Customers seeking your locations are also usually seeking a specific product or service. A locator should be able to return information on products and services offered at each location, hours of operation, phone numbers and other information relevant to customers.
- **Trip Planning** — This allows users to find all your locations that are along a driving route they are planning to take. For instance, all of your ATMs, restaurants or hotels within five miles of planned route.

2. Search Capability

The type of search capability you offer users depends in large part on two factors:

- Number of locations
- Density of locations

For example, if you have many locations and a high density of locations (a fast food restaurant chain or bank ATM network), you may want to offer a more precise level of search capability, such as street address or intersection. For fewer locations or locations spread far apart, broader search criteria such as ZIP Code or city might be appropriate.

The following are search options your vendor should offer:

- **Street address** — user inputs specific street address and ZIP Code and/or city (example: 2720 S. River Rd. 60018)
- **Intersection** — a search initiated by intersection is especially helpful for mobile users who are not at a specific address or not entirely familiar with their surroundings (example: 5th Ave. and 42nd Street)
- **Landmark/Place of Interest** — especially useful when the user does not know the street address or ZIP Code. (examples: Washington Monument, Empire State Building, Los Angeles International Airport)

- **ZIP/Postal Code** — probably the most common search criteria; all matching locations within a given ZIP Code or closest to the ZIP Code are returned in response to a search.
- **City/State/County/Country** — varying levels of search criteria depending on the number and density of your locations.
- **Search within Territory** — largely transparent to the user, this capability allows you to identify which distributor, sales or service territory a search is within and present location results only for that territory.
- **Phone Number** — allows the user to search for locations within an area code or area code and exchange (examples: 847, or 847-299)

Strangely enough, the search interface presented to users seems almost an afterthought on many locators. Yet the interface is where the road to user satisfaction or frustration begins.

Some locators present confusing or counterintuitive interfaces, force the user through multiple screens, or present a dead-end to the user if no search results are found. In addition, the maps can be hard to read, lacking data or crowded with data, or downright ugly.

Make a commitment to implement an easy-to-use locator that presents search options and results logically and offers appealing, easy-to-read maps with intuitive tools to move around on it.

3. Location Data

The location database needs to be accurate and complete. This database is used for geocoding address information. Geocoding is the process of assigning latitude/longitude coordinates to address or other geographic information, allowing locations to be placed accurately on a map. The location database is important to several locator processes:

- **Geocoding your business locations** — All of your business locations are geocoded ahead of time. Lat/long information is stored for each business location. A location database with inaccurate or out-of-date data may result in your locations appearing in the wrong place on the map. This would frustrate users and reflect poorly on your business. You should also look for the ability to easily add or remove geocoded locations as your business expands or consolidates.
- **Geocoding user locations** — This function is performed “on the fly.” As users input their location by address, ZIP Code or other criteria, the locations are geocoded and analyzed in relation to your business locations to find your nearest locations to them. Again, inaccurate or out-of-date location data may result in the user’s address not being found or placed in the wrong location.

When conducting research for a locator, ask your vendor about the vintage of their location data. Find out how often it is updated and what percent of addresses are accurately matched. Also, if you have international locations, find out to what extent your vendor can provide location data for other countries and regions of the world.

If you currently have a store locator, you should check the accuracy of your existing locations as well as test a number of newer addresses to see if your locator can find them. If some of your existing locations appear in the wrong place on the map or some addresses cannot be found, the location data behind the scenes may be questionable.

4. Technology Integration

There are several ways to deal with integrating a locator on your Web site. The most important thing to keep in mind is to look for a vendor that offers a range of programming and integration options so that you do not have to change or compromise your technology standards in order to implement a locator.

One fundamental decision to make is whether to keep the locator application in-house or have your vendor host it for you. The answer will depend on your own resources and IT model. Strive to work with a vendor with flexibility in this area. You should be able to have the application built using common Web programming standards, or be able to build it yourself.

On the other hand, it makes the most sense for the map data, routing information, driving direction and search calculations, and geocoding database to be hosted by your vendor. This way, your vendor is responsible for keeping the data updated and accurate, and for providing the necessary storage for extensive amounts of geographic data.

5. Passive vs. Active Locators

The passive vs. active locator issue is often overlooked by companies because they may not know the extraordinary potential locators have for providing business intelligence.

The difference between passive and active locators is this:

- **Passive locators** — Provide the classic “find the nearest” store functionality and may provide maps, directions and trip planning. They are passive because they do nothing else with the user’s location other than provide these answers.
- **Active locators** — Offer the functionality of passive locators and in addition log the user’s input location and allow it to be used either in real-time or later for analytical purposes. Here are some examples how user information can provide business intelligence:
 - **Real-time offers** — You can attach geo-demographics to user locations as they are input into the locator system. Along with store location information, you can present specific offers based on the customer profile created.

- **Customer Profiling and Site Selection** — User locations can be logged and later used for analytical purposes to profile customers based on geo-demographics and correlate those profiles to purchasing patterns. This information can be used to identify new, potentially profitable areas to place additional stores where people with similar profiles live.
 - **Trade Area Analysis** — User locations can be recorded to determine where customers are looking for you. This information will help you examine the extent of your trade areas, identify underserved or saturated markets, and help improve site selection and target marketing offers.
 - **eCommerce** — Locators can be integrated with eCommerce systems such as hotel reservation systems. For example, once users find a hotel in their selected area, they can be taken directly to reservation and booking.

One significant advantage of implementing an active locator is that you are using information you would be collecting anyway, yet are gaining tremendous additional benefit in terms of business intelligence. Speak with your vendor about their expertise in application such as demographic analysis, customer profiling, site selection, trade area analysis and eCommerce.

Conclusion

A properly designed and deployed store or dealer locator for your business can turn online browsers and telephone callers into brick and mortar buyers, helping to increase revenue and provide a greater degree of customer service and satisfaction. In addition, a locator is one of the most frequently used customer-facing applications on your Web site or phone system. Its appearance and functionality reflect your business and brand.

SpatialPoint has identified a five-point checklist to help you understand the key issues around deploying a locator and, ultimately, to help ensure your locator fully meets the needs of your business, customers and prospects.

SpatialPoint has years of expertise in online locators and all phases of mapping and location technology. We have helped build and deploy locators for many leading companies including Marriott, T-Mobile, Sam Goody, US Bank, GMAC Insurance, Ingersoll Rand and many other companies committed to superior customer service.

For more information, please call toll free 866.846.5900 or visit us on the web at www.spatialpoint.com.