

ONLINE LOCATORS: A Ten-Point Checklist

Executive Summary

A common misperception — perhaps due to the near ubiquity of locators — is that all locator applications 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 to meet the needs of both the business and the end user, failure rates can be very high, as measured by:

- Customer frustration — customers may not understand how to use the locator application, the design isn't responsive and doesn't render well on their device, or the locator provides inaccurate locations.
- Loss of business to competitors — customers who can't easily and quickly 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.

A properly designed and deployed store or dealer locator for your business can turn prospects who are conducting online searches into loyal brick and mortar buyers, increase your brand strength, and provide business intelligence to help you make better customer service, site selection, and target marketing decisions.

This ten-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.

1. Design/Locator Functionality

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

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 web searchers into in-store shoppers, then maps and driving directions help customers get to you faster and easier; and providing store hours, promotions, and other attributes motivate them to act.

Key functionality decisions include:

- **Map Quality** — 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 with roads, boundaries, and other features. You should have the option of using both street maps and satellite imagery. Although the maps are produced by a third party, they reflect your website and brand; therefore, choose a locator with the best maps.
- **Definition of “Nearest Store”** — Most store locators find the nearest store location using “as the crow flies” searches. This may be suitable for most applications. In other cases, when barriers such as rivers or highways prevent straightforward travel, the nearest store might not be the geographically closest but the one that is the shortest drive time away.
- **Search vs. Discover** — For some organizations, the best approach is to help users quickly and easily complete their task of finding your closest/best location. Other organizations may want to provide a way for users to “discover” the breadth and depth of your store network. Discuss with your vendor the differences between these approaches.
- **Driving/Walking Directions** — Driving directions make it easier for customers 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. Mobile versions of your locator should include walking directions as an option.
- **Locating mobile callers** — Choose a locator offering a permission-based service that locates mobile callers and identifies your closest store to them. There’s no need for callers to know their current address or ZIP Code. This functionality is ideal for package drop-off, restaurants, retail, and other applications that have a high proportion of mobile searches.
- **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. The locator should also be able to deliver rules-based responses, such as a helpful message or a referral and link to an online store if no physical stores are found in the area.
- **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.

- **Trip Planning** — This allows users to find all your locations along a driving route they are planning to take. For instance, all of your ATMs, restaurants, or hotels within five miles of planned route. This type of feature fosters strong brand loyalty among customers.
- **Integration with eCommerce** — Locators can be integrated with eCommerce 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.

2. Responsive To Modern Devices

The application interface is where user satisfaction or frustration begins. A responsive design that renders well on all devices—desktop, tablet, and phone—and whose features are easy to find and use is essential with so many people using mobile devices today. A responsive design can detect the type of user device and adapt the locator's interface to improve usability. The most important functionality will remain highly visible while secondary functions can be accessed through menus. Elements on screen render in a way so the user doesn't need to scroll to the right to find something.

Locators without responsive designs typically force the user to navigate confusing or counterintuitive interfaces. In addition, the maps can be hard to read, lack data, or be crowded with data or visually unappealing. These issues can cause the user to abandon your locator and seek out one of your competitors more attuned to their needs.

3. Geographic Search Capabilities

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 St).
- **Landmark/Place of Interest** — especially useful when the user does not know the street address or ZIP Code (examples: Washington Monument, Empire State Building, Dulles 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 is also referred to as polygon-based search. It allows you to identify which distributor, sales, or service territory a search is within and presents location results only for that territory. This type of functionality is essential for businesses that offer on-site service, such a tow trucks or repair services. In these situations, the location of the depot/office/facility isn't relevant.

In addition, a locator should be able to pick up GPS coordinates from a mobile device or detect location from a desktop computer if the web browser provides location data, all while respecting user privacy options. This ability will speed up the search process by reducing the amount of information the user must input into the locator in order to get search results.

4. Search with Attributes

The locator should offer not only geographic searching capability, but also give users the option to search for and filter results by attribute information based on their preferences. Examples include finding stores that are open 24-hours or that offer specific services and/or products, have handicapped access, provide drive-up services, and other attributes that are important to your business and your customers. This functionality is crucial for businesses that offer a variety of store types and services.

5. Location Data, Geocoding and International

The location database and the map set from your vendor must 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 your store 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 and the 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.” When a user inputs their location by address, ZIP Code or other criteria, it is geocoded and analyzed in relation to your business locations to find your nearest locations. Again, inaccurate or out-of-date data from your vendor may result in the user's address not being found or placed in the wrong location.

- **International** — If your business has international locations, ask your vendor if they provide location data and additional language support (such as map labels, user input, and driving/walking directions) 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.

6. Administrative Tools

Your locator should include easy-to-use administrative tools allowing you to manage all of your store locations. Ask about the following functionality:

- The ability to geocode your locations in one pass (batch mode), automatically geocode any new locations added to the database, and delete locations.
- Manually adjusting a location by moving its pushpin symbol on the map (and saving that new location).
- Support for downloading and exporting your location database.
- Remembering changes made via the admin tool and reapplying those changes when data is re-uploaded.
- Quickly showing what locations are not geocoded and therefore will not be mapped.
- Support for different roles, giving access to only the data that a user role has rights to.
- Track changes/audit trail at the individual location level.
- Ability to support a Single Sign On (SSO) environment.

7. Location Analytics

Locators have extraordinary potential for providing business intelligence. While the classic “find the nearest” store locator and may provide maps, directions, and trip planning, it does nothing else with the user’s location.

On the other hand, a locator offering analytics will 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:

- **Demand and Supply** — User locations can be recorded to determine where customers are looking for you. You will be able to identify any areas where demand for your services or products is greater than the supply, if users are searching from an area where you have no convenient location. You can also identify saturated markets.
- **Real-time offers** — You can attach geo-demographics to user locations. Along with store location information, you can present specific offers based on the customer profile created.
- **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. You can use this information to identify new, potentially profitable areas to place additional stores where people with similar profiles live.

One significant advantage of having locator analytics is that you are using information you would be collecting anyway (user locations) to gain tremendous additional benefit in terms of business intelligence. Speak with your

vendor about their expertise in applications such as demographic analysis, customer profiling, site selection, and trade area analysis.

8. Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

Your locator should have features that make your locations discoverable by search engines. Furthermore, your locations should be able to be fed directly into search engines. Store names, location names, and attributes such as store inventory/product names should appear as text that can serve as keywords for enhanced SEO.

9. Hosting and Monitoring

There are several ways to integrate a locator on your Web site. The most popular and cost-effective way is to have your vendor host your locator application in the cloud. In a cloud deployment, your vendor will maintain and update the application, maps and location data, helping to free up your IT resources for other projects. The right vendor will make sure you always have the most up-to-date maps and location data available.

However, cloud hosting doesn't work for every company. 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 or IT model in order to implement a locator. Whether your vendor builds the locator application or you build it yourself, the development environment should support common Web programming standards.

However a system is deployed, you should make sure the system is monitored for uptime and functionality – with notifications of issues to the right people.

10. Security and Compliance

Unless you want competitors or other third parties collecting your store location information (through screen swipes, data mining, and other techniques), you'll need a locator and a vendor that offer security and compliance features to protect your data. Look for a vendor with the capabilities to meet the myriad of regulatory requirements that financial institutions now demand. Also look for a system that can monitor IP addresses and limit the number of searches performed from them.

Conclusion

A properly designed and deployed store or dealer locator for your business can turn prospects browsing online 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 website. Its appearance and functionality reflect your business and brand.

SpatialPoint has developed this ten-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, Visa, T-Mobile, 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, email info@spatialpoint.com or visit us on the web at www.spatialpoint.com.