# NEWSLETTER

Malta Media

The long list of changes, upgrades and tests of google my business (GMB) in 2019

Secure Your
## WORDPRESS
Site By Updating Your
## PHP

WORDPRESS

Pay Per Click (PPC) Updates For
## January 2020

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# 1 THE LONG LIST OF CHANGES, UPGRADES AND TESTS OF GOOGLE MY BUSINESS (GMB) IN 2019

Google My Business (GMB) has become an important part of local businesses. Google is less keen than ever on third party citations and off-page signals and is now relying heavily on content in GMB for ranking.

GMB made several headlines with a host of updates, which would be too vast to cover in one article. With four major Google Algorithm updates, there was at least one major local algorithm update in addition that tied to neutral matching.

Following is a summary of most of the updates and changes that happened in GMB this year, along with a few that are strictly not related to GMB.

**January: Messaging, SAB flow, Virtual office rules**
- Google's **abandonment of SMS-based messaging** drove owners and agencies to message exclusively through the Google My Business app as Google began emphasizing messaging in the GMB profile.
- For service-area businesses, Google **introduced** a new sign-up flow that begins with a question about whether the business has a store or an office and sends the user down a SAB-specific path if the answer is no.
- Google also provided **guidelines** to understand who is eligible to create a GMB page for a virtual office. In simple terms, on-site staffing is a must.

**February: Map Reviews, AR directions, Join waitlist**
- Google **introduced** a feature enabling hotel operators to directly enter their check-in and check-out times in Google My Business.
- Google also tested augmented reality walking directions in Maps and **rolled them out** extensively in August, but they still haven't proven to be fruitful ten months later.
- The company also made **replying to reviews** in Google Maps easy by allowing business owners with verified GMB listings to reply on the desktop instead of asking them to use the GMB dashboard or Mobile App.
- Google also **introduced** the "join waitlist" feature, which is a part of Reserve with Google whose functionality is provided by DineTime. Users have to input party size to receive updates on the status of their wait by texts.
- The Search Engine Giant also announced the launch of their new **spam report form** for Google My Business and Google Maps related spam.

**March 2019: Duplex rollout, Core update and SAB addresses disappear**

- Google introduced the **Duplex restaurant reservations** over the phone for Pixel users in 43 states in the U.S. and later broadened the capability to Android phones & iPhones.
- For service-area businesses, Google **removed** business addresses from the GMB Profile.
- The company also began running **tests** for auto-generated posts featuring reviews.
- Although not local, Google's **March Core Update** affected some local businesses and their customers. We didn't notice any major change for our clients though.

**April: Assistant local results, GMB paid services survey**

- Business Listings that **appear** in Google Home or Google Assistant search results are drawn from Google Guaranteed Listings or listings certified by partners Porch or HomeAdvisor.
- Google Posts **enabled** businesses to promote reviews as well as testimonials in a new form presented as "Suggested Posts."
- Google also **surveyed** small business owners to understand how much they can pay for monthly subscription fees that include a host of enhanced features and services of Google My Business, to which there were mixed reviews.

**May: Popular dishes, food ordering, and CallJoy**

- CallJoy automated customer service and call intelligence capabilities were **introduced** by Google for the SMB market for $39/month. The service and its capabilities were then upgraded in November.
- 'End-to-end' **food ordering** was brought to Google Assistant, Google search and Maps via partners, DoorDash, Postmates, Delivery.com, and others.
- Google also began to **showcase** a carousel of "popular dishes" on local restaurant pages in which selections are generated by machine learning.

**June: Mapspam and Shortnames**

- The Wall Street Journal **published** an article on fake listings on Google search and maps. The search engine giant later **countered** with a post on how it fights local spam.
- To encourage more local businesses to claim profiles, Google added various **new GMB features and tools** and also offered new branding and promotional capabilities.

**July: Get a quote and place topics**

- Google **rolled out** a new "Get a quote" button in local knowledge panels for some businesses that had opted-in GMB messaging.
- It also **tested** "place topics", basically tags, themes or keywords taken from machine learning using reviews. Note: Place topics only appear when there are enough user reviews on the GMB profile.

**August: Carousel pack, bulk reviews, Google Screened**

- A **horizontal carousel** was also tested to replace the local pack in mobile results.
- GMB added **support** for hotels to update services and amenities details, appearing in Search and Maps.
- Google also **introduced** bulk review management to allow businesses to view reviews for multiple listings at once and reply to them for multiple locations.
- Google **announced** the testing of "Google Screened." The program is directed at professional services but is currently limited to a few verticals in markets.
- As part of Local campaigns, Google also **tested** competitor ads in local business profiles.

**September: Post highlights, food ordering opt-out**

- Google Post **highlights** start to show up in the Local Pack and Local Finder, although the posts have no impact on ranking.
- Google **enabled** local restaurants to opt-out of third-party food ordering and delivery, which proved to be highly unpopular.
- Another **Core Algorithm Update** was launched, which had an impact on local marketers. Again, this one didn't have any major impact on our client rankings.

**October: Search by photos, Incognito Mode for Maps**

- A new "search by photos" option was **introduced** in mobile results which appear as a module in SERP that opens a larger page of an image with star ratings.
- Google **implemented** several promised privacy controls for users that included Incognito Mode for Google Maps, voice control to delete Google Assistant search activity and auto-delete for YouTube history.

**November: Local algo update, follow local guides, no more phone support**

- A local guides follow feature was **introduced** to enable Google Maps users in multiple cities to follow local guides and see local recommendations of places and things to do.
- Toll-free phone support was **discontinued** for Google My Business. Users are now required to fill out a form and request a call back which slows response times.

**December: Review carousels, auto-Posts, choose an area**

- Google started showing **carousels** with local reviews (and Q&A content) on local business profiles, whenever relevant to the search query & has enough "high-quality reviews."

- It also began **creating posts** automatically from GMB posts, but these posts cannot be deleted by the business owner.

- Google **displayed** a "request quotes" button in local results. Only available to businesses participating in the Local Services Ads (LSAs) program and that have passed "Google Guaranteed" background checks.

- A test for the "choose area" **feature** was conducted that enabled mobile users to refine their search area below a city level as well as allow businesses to designate a large metropolitan area (MSA) as a service area than smaller areas.

**Local SERP continues to evolve**

Many of the above changes have impacted local marketers, but certain developments are more important than others. Google is using machine learning extensively to improve the relevance and auto-generate content for uses that vary by query and context.

Keep reading for upcoming updates in the local search world.

# 2 GOOGLE NOW DISPLAYS 'REQUEST QUOTES' BUTTON ABOVE MOBILE LOCAL RESULTS

Looks like Google is out to test another new feature on local results. Last month, a 'Request Quotes' button made a sudden appearance above the local pack on mobile.

Request Quotes Seems to be a Part of the Messaging Feature in GMB

The 'Request Quotes' button appears to be in line with Google's efforts to make Google My Business (GMB) an engagement platform. First **spotted** by Tom Waddington, this new feature allows users to simultaneously request quotes from multiple businesses, provided they all have messaging enabled.
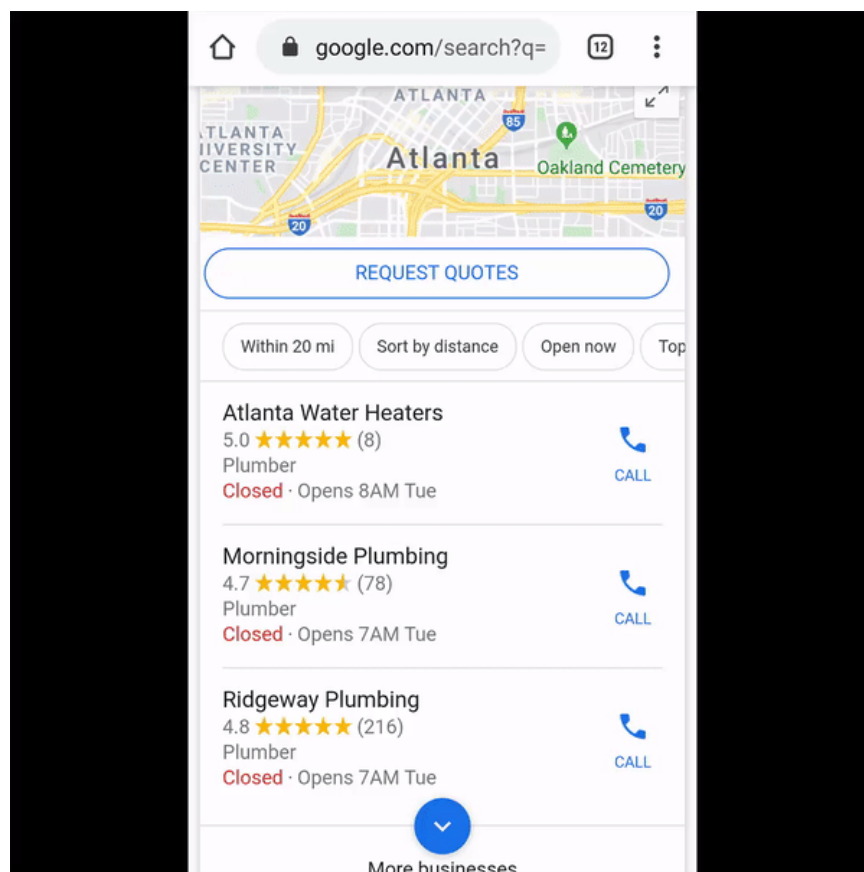
*Image Source: https://twitter.com/tomwaddington8/status/1206789908603559937*

While any listing can appear in the initial 3-pack, messaging has to be enabled for a business to appear in the results that come up after tapping the 'Request Quotes' button.

**Final Takeaway**

As of now, it is not very clear whether Google has already launched this feature or if it is still in test mode. However, what we do know is that besides enabling messaging within the GMB app, it is also important that the quote requests are replied to within 24 Hours. Failure to do so may lead to deactivation, for not being able to keep up with the responses.

# 3 SECURE YOUR WORDPRESS SITE BY UPDATING YOUR PHP

Managing a WordPress site? Make sure you review what version of PHP your site is running on.

As of December 2019, around **62.2% of WordPress sites** are running on outdated, prior to 7.2 version of PHP. These sites are vulnerable to hacking.

The safest PHP version that you should be using is the current revision, 7.4 or version 7.3.

So what exactly is PHP? "Hypertext Preprocessor is a server-side scripting language designed for Web development, and also used as a general-purpose programming language." To put it simply, a lot of sites are built on PHP programming language. All WordPress sites in particular.

The prime reason why you need to update your PHP is that the versions prior to 7.3 are no longer receiving security patches, without which your site becomes extremely vulnerable to hacking.

**Final Takeaway** - Considering the fact that only 37.7% of websites are on PHP version 7.3 or higher, chances of you having to deal with this issue are greater, at least on one of the sites that you manage.

When you log in to your WordPress dashboard, you will see a warning message which is a clear indication to update your PHP version.
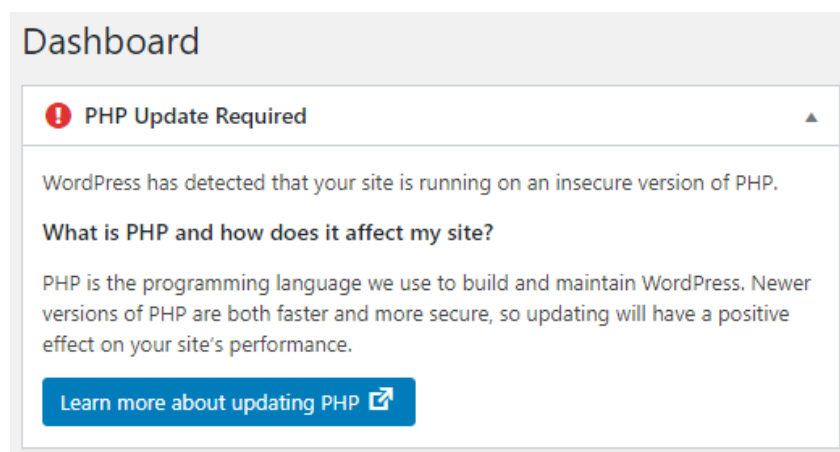


Upon seeing the message, you need to contact your hosting company and ask them about the steps that need to be taken to get your PHP updated to version 7.3 or higher.

Although your hosting company will assist you with everything, you will have to check on all of your plugins before updating.

You can even check the version of your PHP by installing this PHP plugin. Have a look to find out where each version of PHP is in their life cycle according to php.net.

| Branch | Initial Release | | Active Support Until | | Security Support Until | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 7.2 | 30 Nov 2017 | *2 years, 1 month ago* | 30 Nov 2019 | *1 month ago* | 30 Nov 2020 | *in 10 months* |
| 7.3 | 6 Dec 2018 | *1 year, 1 month ago* | 6 Dec 2020 | *in 10 months* | 6 Dec 2021 | *in 1 year, 10 months* |
| 7.4 | 28 Nov 2019 | *1 month ago* | 28 Nov 2021 | *in 1 year, 10 months* | 28 Nov 2022 | *in 2 years, 10 months* |

*Image Source: https://www.php.net/supported-versions.php*

Updating your PHP isn't complicated. You can start by backing up your website. However, outdated plugins and themes can make it seem complicated.

**Theme & Plugin Compatibility With New PHP Versions**

At times you may find that the older plugins and older themes or the custom plugins aren't compatible with 7.3 or higher versions. Before updating your PHP, it is advised to check which ones are likely to create incompatibility issues and get them updated or replaced.

If you have a very outdated theme and are looking to update it, you will have to make certain adjustments for a more recent version. Themes that have a high risk of upgrading problems are those that use advanced editors such as Visual Composer. We have observed that these editors usually generate layout, menu, etc. problems when upgrading the theme.

To avoid facing any problems, it is necessary that you resolve any issues before upgrading your PHP version. We suggest you follow the process in the following order to make things easier.

- Delete any plugins that are not in use.
- Check if there are any compatibility issues with the plugins and themes using **PHP Compatibility Checker**.
- Consider using a different plugin in case the latest version of plugins aren't compatible with 7.3 or higher.
- Next, go to your web hosting control panel and find the PHP section where you will see the upgrade your website option.

Besides, you can always reach out to us if you get stuck at any stage! Our experienced personnel will help you out.

# 4 PAY PER CLICK (PPC) UPDATES FOR JANUARY 2020

- Facebook offline events - A powerhouse for offline conversions.
- Brad Geddes sheds light on the impact of close variants updates and the analysis and workflow necessary to maintain control and conversions.
- Make your PPC ads more effective by excluding negative audiences from your PPC campaigns.
- Now optimization score will include Display campaigns as well – so you can see and act on optimization score for Search, Shopping, and Display.
- Which audience works best for Facebook ads, broad audience or lookalike audience? Click here to find out.
- Tinuiti's 2019 Cyber Five Data & Analysis across Google, Facebook, and Amazon.
- LinkedIn releases a new feature in the interface that will make working with lead gen forms so much easier.
- In a new update, Google's been sneaking in the ability to enable image extensions, allowing advertisers to display relevant images alongside their search ads!
- Read here the result of our experiment to find image vs. video vs. carousel: Which is the best Facebook ad format?
- A perfect guide to breaking out of simple display campaigns and exploring Gmail ads.
- From January 27, 2020, message extensions will no longer be a part of AdWords and Google Ads APIs and Google Ads scripts.
- In a new move, Quora ads introduces lead generation forms for advertisers to acquire high-intent prospects.
- Everything on how the Facebook algorithm works in 2020.