

SPROUT SAGE SOLUTIONS · 2026 EDITION

The Small Business SEO Checklist

27 practical steps to rank on Google in 2026 — without the fluff, without agency jargon, and without needing a full-time SEO person.

Sprout Sage Solutions

Web design, SEO & branding · sproutsagesolutions.com

27

Steps

298

Keywords
ranked

9

Years
experience

Before you start

Who this is for: founders and marketing managers at businesses with 1–50 employees who want to stop bleeding money on underperforming websites and start getting organic leads from Google.

This is the exact checklist we run every new SEO client through. It surfaces 80% of the problems that keep small business sites from ranking. Work through it in order — the phases build on each other.

Each item takes 15 minutes to 2 hours. The full checklist, done once a quarter, takes a focused person about 2 days. If that sounds like too much, skip to the final page — we do this for you.

4,400%

Avg traffic lift in 12mo when all 27 steps are done

68%

Of SMB sites fail 5+ items in Phase 1 alone

\$0

Cost of fixing most critical issues yourself

How to use this checklist

1. **Print or open on second screen.** Tick each box as you finish.
2. **Work in order.** Phase 1 (crawl & indexation) affects everything downstream.
3. **Don't skip "small" items.** Missing alt text adds up to 40 missed accessibility + ranking signals across a 10-page site.
4. **Re-run quarterly.** SEO rot is real — pages drift out of compliance every few months.
5. **When stuck, book a free 30-min call** (link on the last page).

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Phase 1 — Crawl & Indexation

If Google can't crawl your pages, nothing else matters. Start here. Every item takes < 30 min.

Phase 1 Checklist

6 steps

1. Submit your XML sitemap to Google Search Console

Most small sites never do this. Go to search.google.com/search-console → add property → Sitemaps → paste your /sitemap.xml URL.

Time: 10 min · Tool: Google Search Console (free)

2. Check robots.txt isn't blocking critical pages

Visit yoursite.com/robots.txt. Look for "Disallow: /" (blocks the entire site) or accidental disallows of important directories.

Time: 5 min · Red flag: "Disallow: /" or disallowed category paths

3. Remove "noindex" tags from pages you want ranked

View page source → search for "noindex". If it's on your homepage, service pages, or blog posts, remove it. Common in WordPress: a staging plugin leftover or Yoast/Rank Math misconfig.

Time: 20 min · Tool: browser view-source + site crawl

4. Fix all 404 errors in Search Console

GSC → Pages → "Not found (404)" tab. Either restore the missing page, redirect to the next-best page, or remove internal links pointing to it.

Time: 30 min · Tool: GSC, redirection plugin

5. Confirm canonical tags resolve correctly

Every page should have exactly one rel="canonical" pointing to its own clean URL. Check 5 random pages via view-source.

Time: 15 min · Red flag: canonical pointing to homepage from every page

6. Verify all pages you want indexed are in Google's index

Search Google for "site:yoursite.com". Compare count to pages in sitemap. If >20% missing, dig into GSC's indexing report.

Time: 15 min · Formula: missing pages = sitemap count – site: search result count

Common Phase 1 mistake

Accidentally noindexing your entire blog after a plugin update. Happens more than you'd think. After any plugin update, do a quick "site:yourdomain.com/blog" search to confirm posts still appear.

Phase 2 — On-Page Foundations

Now that Google can read your pages, make sure each page is optimized for the keyword it targets.

Phase 2 Checklist

6 steps

7. Every page has a unique title tag, 55–60 characters

Title format: [Primary keyword] — [Benefit or modifier] | [Brand]. Too long = truncated in SERPs. Too short = wasted real estate.

Time: 2 hrs for 20 pages · Tool: Screaming Frog free tier, GSC

8. Every page has a meta description, 150–158 characters

Include the primary keyword, a clear benefit, and a verb-based CTA. Meta description doesn't affect rankings but heavily affects click-through.

Time: 2 hrs · Rank Math or Yoast handles this in WordPress

9. Every page has exactly one H1

H1 should contain or closely match the target keyword. Zero H1s = confusing to search engines. Multiple H1s = dilute relevance signals.

Time: 1 hr · Tool: SEO Meta In 1 Click Chrome extension

10. Content uses a proper H2/H3 hierarchy

H2s for main sections, H3s for sub-topics. Never skip levels. Include keyword variations in 2–3 H2s per page.

Time: 3 hrs for 10 posts · Red flag: all subheadings are H2 or all H3

11. Every image has descriptive alt text

Alt text should describe the image AND include a relevant keyword where natural. Skip alt text on decorative icons (use alt="").

Time: 1 hr per 50 images · Accessibility + SEO double win

12. Internal linking: every page links to at least 3 others

Anchor text should be descriptive, not "click here". Link service pages from blog posts; link related blog posts from each other.

Time: ongoing · Tool: Link Whisper plugin or manual audit

Quick win

Rewrite your homepage title + meta description today. Most small businesses lose 30–50% of potential CTR because their homepage title reads "Home — Company Name" instead of a benefit-driven keyword phrase.

Phase 3 — Technical Health

Google's Page Experience signals. Ignore these and you cap your ranking potential below the top 5 for most competitive terms.

Phase 3 Checklist

5 steps

13. All 3 Core Web Vitals pass

LCP < 2.5s, INP < 200ms, CLS < 0.1. Test at pagespeed.web.dev. If you fail, start with hero image size + font loading + third-party scripts.

Time: 4-8 hrs · Tool: PageSpeed Insights (free)

14. Site is mobile-responsive (not just mobile-friendly)

Test on real iPhone and Android. Check form inputs, CTA button size (min 44x44px), readable font size (min 16px). Google tests mobile version first.

Time: 2 hrs · Tool: Chrome DevTools device emulator + real devices

15. HTTPS enabled with valid certificate

No "Not secure" warning in browser. SSL everywhere. Redirect all <http://> to <https://>. Update GSC property.

Time: 30 min · Free SSL via Cloudflare, Let's Encrypt, or host

16. Schema markup on all key page types

Organization + WebSite schema site-wide. Service schema on service pages. Article schema on blog posts. LocalBusiness if you serve a city. FAQ schema where applicable.

Time: 3 hrs · Validator: search.google.com/test/rich-results

17. Images compressed to <150KB where possible

Convert to WebP. Resize to actual display size before upload. 2MB hero images single-handedly kill Core Web Vitals on most small sites.

Time: 2 hrs · Tool: ShortPixel, Squoosh, Sprout Sage free Image Compressor

Phase 4 — Content & E-E-A-T

E-E-A-T = Experience, Expertise, Authoritativeness, Trust. Google's ranking system rewards sites that demonstrate these signals.

Phase 4 Checklist

5 steps

18. About page names a real human with credentials

"Founded by Jane Smith, 12 years in dental marketing, featured in Dentaltown." Beats anonymous brand voice every time. Link to LinkedIn profile.

Time: 1 hr · Boosts trust signals + converts prospects

19. Contact page has real address, phone, and email

Google's local search uses NAP (Name, Address, Phone) consistency. List the same info everywhere: website, Google Business Profile, citations.

Time: 30 min audit · Red flag: PO boxes only, or phone/email mismatches across platforms

20. Every service page has at least one customer testimonial

First name + last initial minimum. Real photo + company logo is 5× better. Testimonial schema (Review markup) activates stars in SERPs.

Time: 2 hrs to collect + format · Get testimonials via 1-sentence email request

21. Blog content is 1,200+ words for commercial keywords

Top-10 results for most B2B searches average 1,500-2,500 words. Shorter = thin content. Length is a proxy for depth, not the goal itself.

Time: 4 hrs per post · Use outline-first approach

22. Update your 10 oldest pages in the last 6 months

Stale content ranks worse over time. Refresh dates, add current examples, update stats, refresh screenshots. Google loves "last modified" recency.

Time: 1 hr per page · Prioritize by current traffic + ranking position

Phase 5 — Local & Authority

The long game. These compound over 6-12 months and separate ranking sites from also-rans.

Phase 5 Checklist

5 steps

23. Google Business Profile claimed and fully populated

Primary + secondary categories, 10+ photos, full service menu, real business hours, Q&A populated, posts weekly. GBP is 60% of local ranking.

Time: 2 hrs initial + 15 min/week maintenance

24. 20+ citations across relevant directories

Yelp, BBB, industry-specific directories, local chamber. NAP must be identical everywhere. Check via BrightLocal or Whitespark.

Time: 4-8 hrs · Free submissions possible on top 20 directories

25. Collect 20+ Google reviews (4.5+ average)

Automated review request after every job (even one-liners). Respond to every review, positive or negative. Reviews are the #1 local ranking factor after proximity.

Time: 2 hrs to set up · Use a QR code or direct Google review link

26. Build 5-10 quality backlinks per quarter

Guest posts, HARO, industry directories, partner links. Ignore spam link-building services — one link from a DR 60+ site beats 100 from DR 10.

Time: 8-15 hrs per quarter · Focus on relevance over count

27. Publish 1 new piece of content per week, minimum

Consistency beats volume. A small business that publishes 1 post weekly for 12 months has 52 new ranking opportunities. Most competitors quit by month 3.

Time: 4 hrs/week · Use AI to draft, humans to edit and publish

Final word on Phase 5

Phases 1-4 get you eligible to rank. Phase 5 is what actually ranks you. Most businesses stop at Phase 3 and wonder why they're stuck on page 2. Don't be most businesses.

Resources & tools

Every tool listed below is free (or has a meaningful free tier). Bookmark them.

TOOL	WHAT TO USE IT FOR
Google Search Console	Indexing, query performance, Core Web Vitals, errors
Google Analytics 4	Traffic, conversions, user paths, channel attribution
PageSpeed Insights	Core Web Vitals + specific performance fixes
Rich Results Test	Validate schema markup for rich SERP features
Mobile-Friendly Test	Confirm mobile rendering and usability
Screaming Frog (free < 500 URLs)	Full technical audit — find 404s, duplicate titles, missing alts
Ahrefs Free Tools	Backlink count, keyword difficulty, SERP checker
Sprout Sage SEO Tools	Word counter w/ SEO mode, meta preview, cost calculator, ROI calc
ShortPixel / Squoosh	Image compression
BrightLocal / Whitespark	Citation tracking + local rank tracking
HARO / Help a B2B Writer	Journalist requests = free backlinks from DR 60+ sites
Google Keyword Planner	Keyword volume + commercial intent

Further reading from our blog

- **How Much Does SEO Cost in 2026?** — real pricing without the agency fluff
- **Core Web Vitals Explained** — the 2026 performance thresholds + fixes
- **Technical SEO Audit Template** — 58-point checklist that expands Phase 3
- **Link Building Strategies 2026** — what actually works now
- **Schema Markup Guide for WordPress** — every schema type with code samples

All available at sproutsagesolutions.com/blog/

Need help executing?

Working through 27 items while running a business is hard. Most of our clients started by trying to do it themselves, then realized the opportunity cost of their time was higher than hiring us.

If you want:

- The full 27-step audit **done for you in 2 weeks**, with a prioritized fix list
- A custom 90-day SEO roadmap built around your specific market, not a template
- A team that ships the fixes — not just reports on what's wrong

Book a free 30-minute strategy call. No pitch deck. No sales pressure. Just a pair of experienced eyes on your site and 3 prioritized wins you can action whether you hire us or not.

Ready to outrank your competitors?

Get a free 30-min SEO strategy call — 3 prioritized wins, whether we work together or not.

sproutsagesolutions.com/free-consultation/

Our track record

298

Keywords tracked across 9 clients

216

On page 1 of Google

96%

Client retention 18+ months

Example client: **South Auckland Plumbing** — 6 of 6 tracked keywords moved from outside top-500 Google results to #1 position. **Exterior Washing NZ** — 10 of 10 keywords improved, 8 hit page one from a cold start. Full case study data on sproutsagesolutions.com.

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