BREAKING DOWN
THE BASICS OF
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First things first, what in the world is a SERP? Put simply, a SERP—or search engine results page—is a page of answers that's returned to a user following a query into a search engine. This definition, though accurate, is a bit dry. Let's use a real-life example that you'll quickly recognize.

You type a keyword or phrase into a search engine. Let's say you search "best pizza in Los Angeles" in Google. When returning results, Google factors in the authority and relevance of each website to determine which sites are going to be most helpful for you, the searcher. Because SERPs are customized based on each user's browsing history, social media activity, location, etc., your pizza joint results are likely to be different from mine—even if we're both searching in L.A. at precisely the same time. A little creepy? Yes. Useful? Yes!

As a consumer, you probably don't think much about what happens once you hit enter on a search for dry cleaners in your area. You just want your shirts laundered. But, as an up-and-coming savvy digital marketer, you must familiarize yourself with the fundamentals of the SERP. Why? Because SERPs are highly valuable real estate opportunities for directing high-volume traffic to your site and, by extension, boosting your sales. You want to capitalize on those opportunities for the best online visibility.

Google dominates the search market, so we're going to continue using it in this discussion. Though the Google search page is comprised of a variety of search result types that accommodate different industries and objectives, there are several consistent components that are industry-independent and, therefore, indispensable to you.
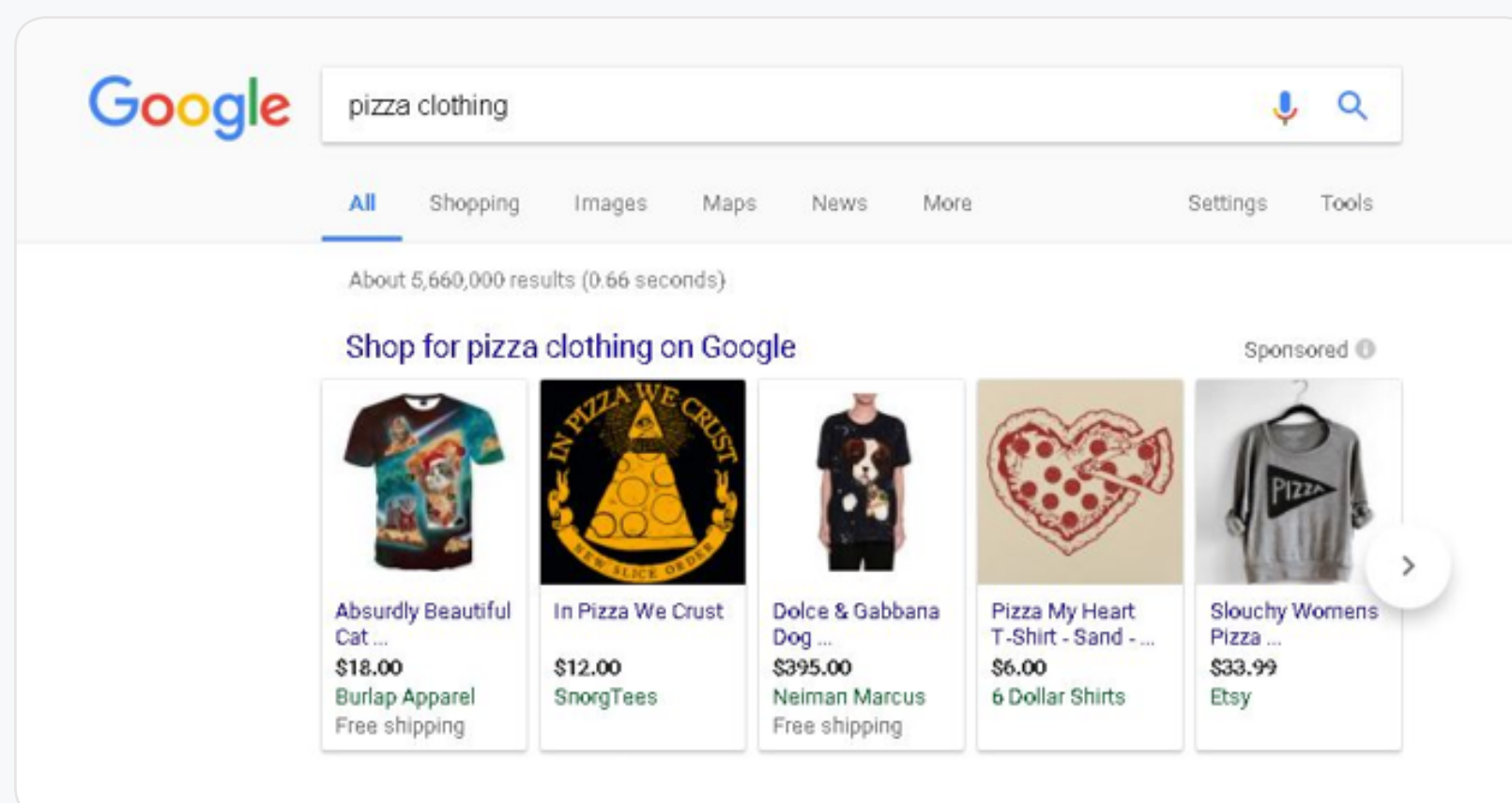
PAID SEARCH RESULTS

Paid search, often referred to as pay-per-click (PPC), it involves advertisers who pay to have their ads highlighted on the SERP. With Google, there are two kinds of paid search ads that may appear: text ads and shopping ads.

Text ads appear at the very top of the results as well as the very bottom of the page, and they're easily identified by an "Ad" icon.

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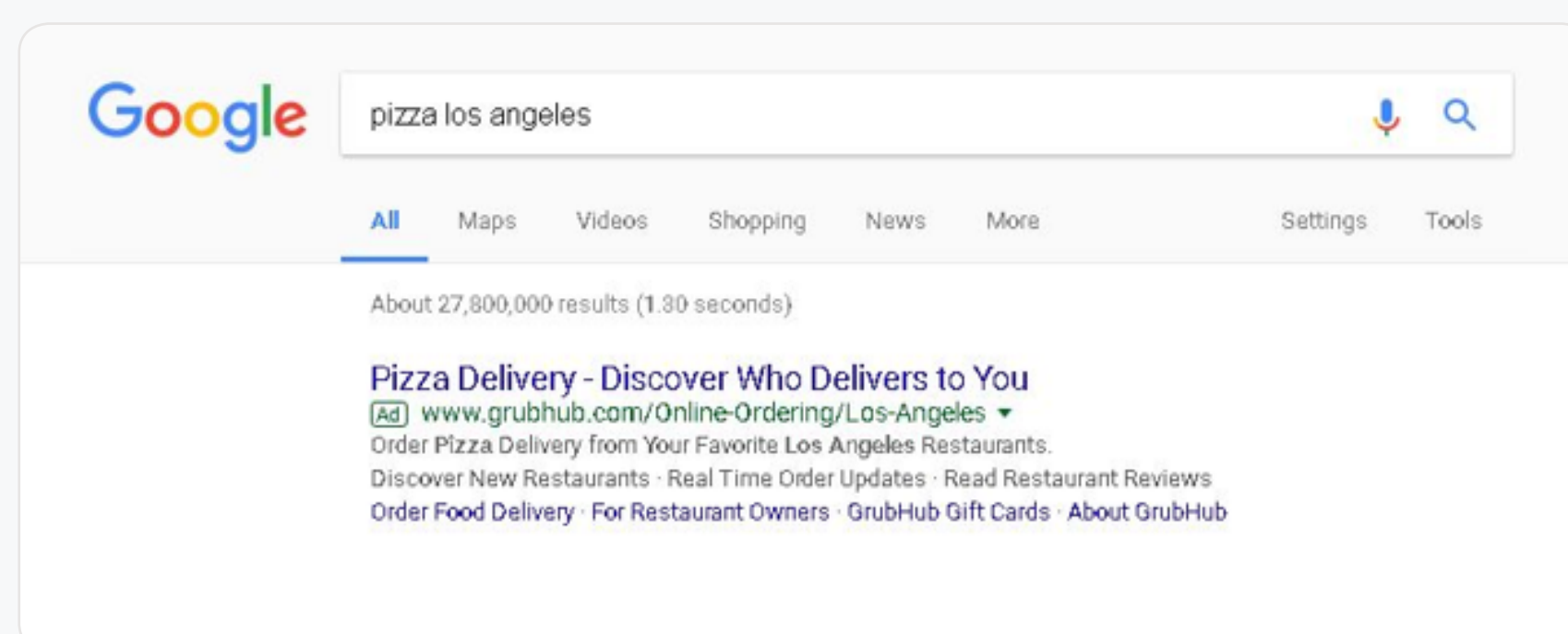
Shopping ads appear in a row at the top of the page or on the right-hand side of the search results. If you're uncertain whether you're viewing a paid ad, look for the word "Sponsored" to confirm.


Though organic search results (those that have earned rather than paid for ranking) get clicked on more often than ads, Google's paid search ads can provide great returns when they're well managed in Google AdWords.

LOCAL RESULTS

When a user searches for a local business, service, or product, Google responds with either a local pack or a Knowledge Graph—both managed in Google My Business.

The local pack is connected to Google Maps, which displays a snippet of a map alongside three local business listings, which are dependent on the location of the person searching.
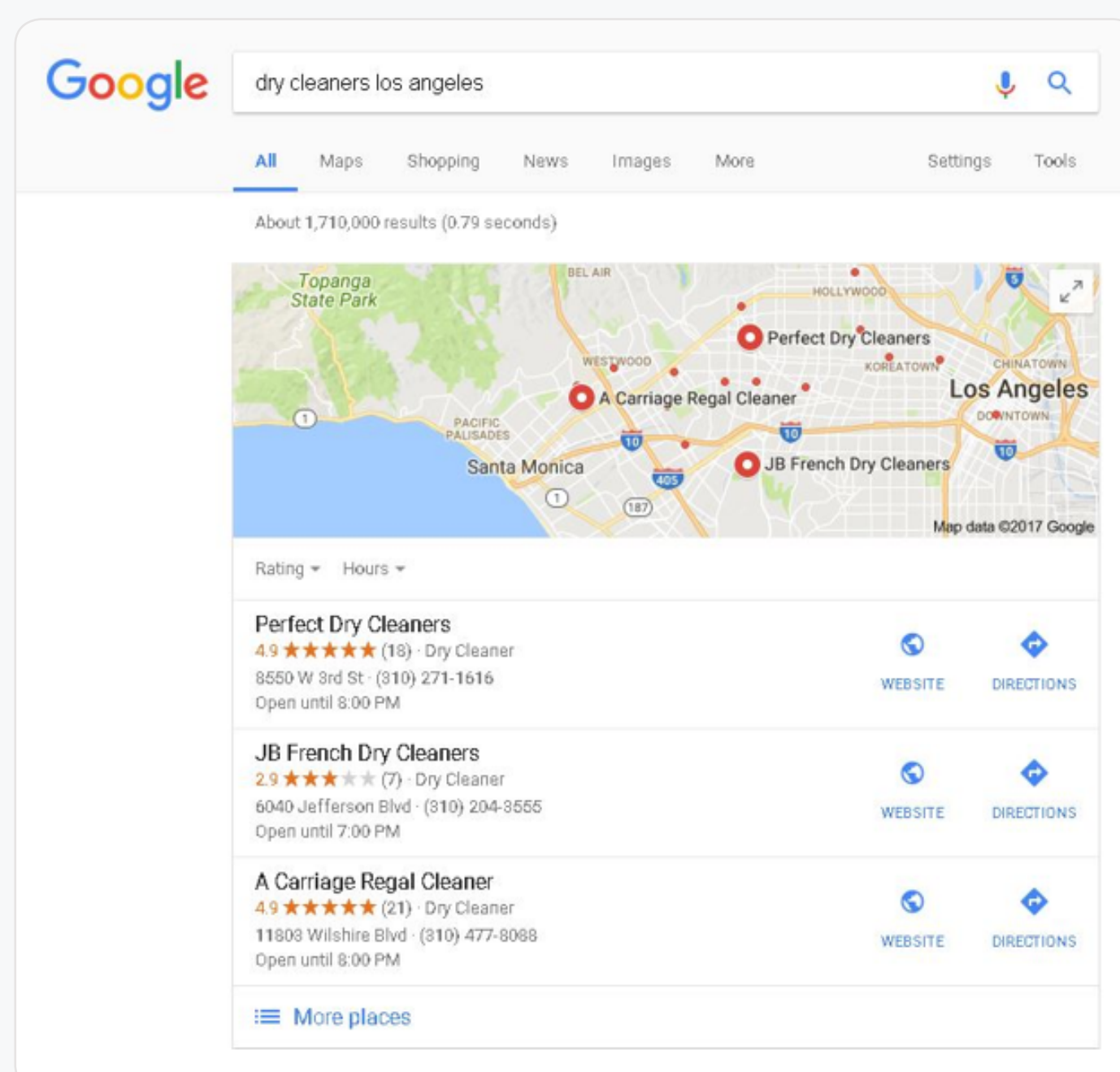
The local Knowledge Graph is associated with branded searches, typically related to a particular business location. This snapshot helps searchers see relevant information about a business in one place.
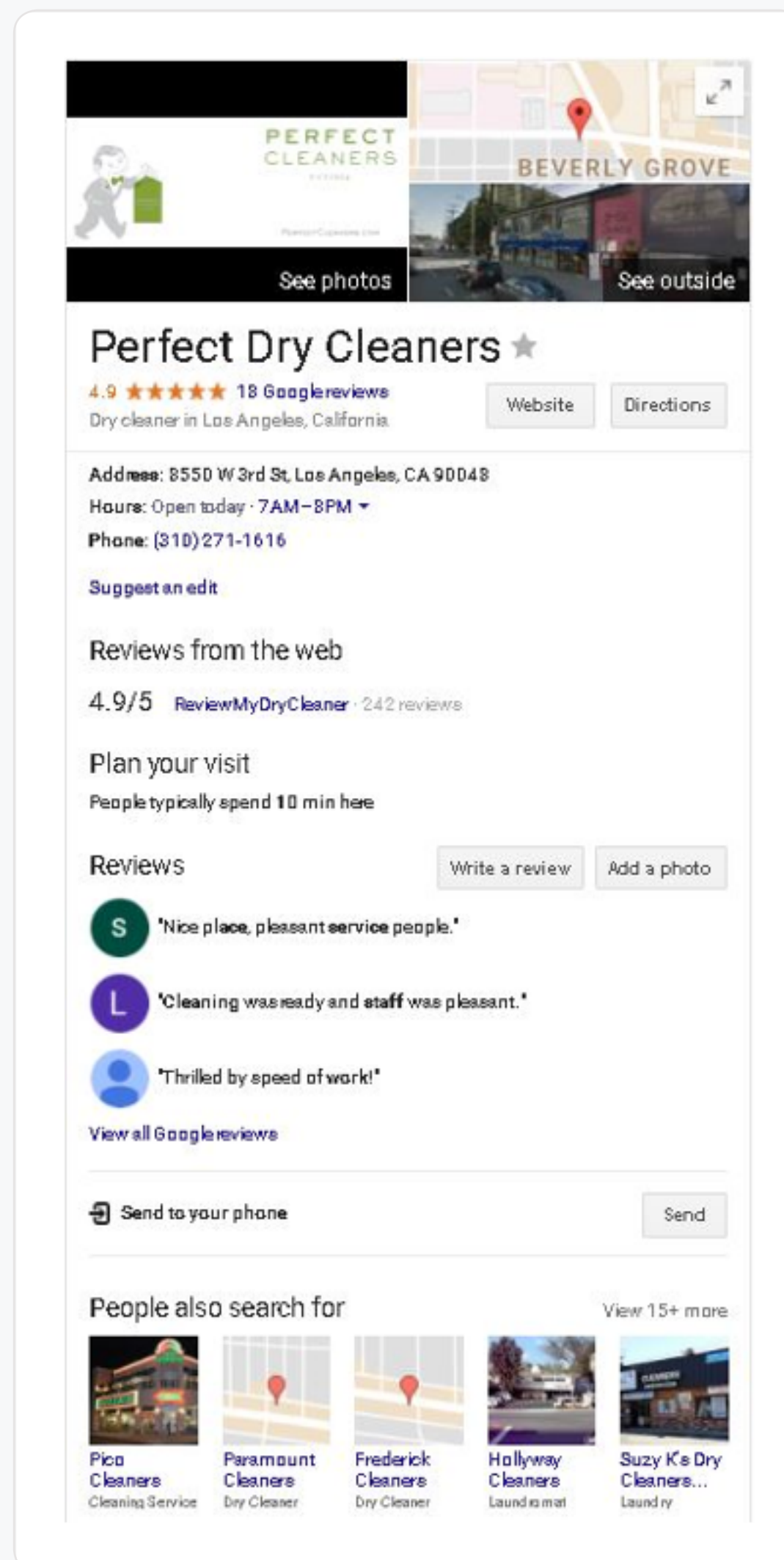
ORGANIC RESULTS

As noted above, organic results are unpaid search results that are ranked based on several factors controlled by SEO. Users click organic results over paid ads more than 9 times out of 10, which is why it's so important that your SEO strategy gets constant attention in order to rank organically.

A variety of listing formats exist, but these are the foundational elements of Google's SERP—keep them at the forefront of your mind as you build your SEO strategy.