

How to define your content for Google with structured data

Date : January 30, 2015



Law firms now have a greater ability to explain the purpose of their website's content in a language that search engines can easily interpret.

In early January, Google [announced](#) it was expanding support for structured data markup with the addition of new syntax and several new use cases. In conjunction with the announcement, Google released a new [Structured Data Testing Tool](#) and updated its documentation and policies covering structured data markup.

The Structured Data Testing Tool will allow webmasters to validate their code, detect errors and cleanly display structured data items on a web page. And Google's expanded support for JSON-LD syntax will help firms define even more website elements, increasing the contextual clarity of important page content.

The new use cases Google supports include:

- Logos
- Business contact information
- Social profile links
- Event rich snippets and increased support for events in knowledge graph results
- The [sitelinks search box](#), which displays a website search option directly in a search result

listing

What is structured data?

Structured data is a method for labeling page content in a way that is universally understood by major search engines, including Google, Bing and Yahoo. Structured data pairs a label with a value, like “organization” with “contact information” or “event” with “date,” which clarifies content and helps with page indexing.

Structured data allows for multiple levels of description. For example, an organization could be defined as a LocalBusiness, then further delineated with labels like address, department, founder, review and many others. Events can be given times and locations, and creative works, like an e-book, can be assigned a potential action, like download. Even the type of content can be defined; you can tell Google whether a page contains an article or an answer to help direct searchers.

Structured data defines rich snippets — the pieces of code that direct items like star reviews or publication dates or [video](#) thumbnails to appear in search results. With the right syntax, a search result listing can be structured to stand out and draw attention away from competitors’ listings.

Why use structured data?

1. Structured data markup provides much needed context for search engines. People understand page meaning naturally, but search engines — while they have made great strides — must still perform complex calculations to interpret intent and context.

Google released its Hummingbird [algorithm](#) in 2013, and with it changed the way search queries are interpreted. Rather than focusing on single keywords, Google is looking at context and trying to understand why a specific user would type a particular query. Google’s immense store of user data helps it produce a different set of results for two people, depending on location and online behavior, even if they are searching for the same keywords.

Hummingbird also helps with conversational searches by looking at search phrases as a whole and trying to produce better results for the types of questions a human might ask naturally. For example, one might ask, “What is the closest family law attorney to me?” rather than saying, “Family law attorney San Francisco.” Using structured data allows Google’s algorithm to better parse your content and understand its contextual meaning.

2. Results with [rich snippets](#) garner higher click-through rates. Results with star reviews, [images](#) or other structured information stand out. Google refers to this as “Enhanced Presentation” in results. Early research shows that these results do on average receive more clicks than their non-enhanced counterparts. Rich snippets allow you to tell Google exactly what you want people to see in your result, rather than letting the search engine decide on its own which meta data to pull and display. This level of control can be used to your firm’s advantage.

According to [a study](#) performed by Searchmetrics, over a third of Google search results include rich snippets supported by [Schema](#) (structured data) markup, but only .3 percent of websites use this markup. Using structured data may not directly correlate with higher search result placement, but it does make it easier for Google to return relevant results.

How can the new syntax help attorneys?

While Google does not yet support all JSON-LD syntax, it indicated in its announcement post that it was working to add more support in the future. What does this mean for law firms? Currently, it means you can define your logo, social profiles and events and specify contact information in greater detail, which is important for [local](#) search. In addition, JSON-LD code does not have to be placed directly in page html, making it possible for pages to be lighter and more streamlined.

Here are some specific examples of how law firms might use structured data markup:

Define your business: Define your firm as a local business, then add sub-categories like “professional” and “attorney.” Give Google your hours, specify your founding date and outline the types of payment you accept. Add a photo, review and telephone number. Make it easy for Google to show searchers who you are and how to reach you.

Showcase events: Define a seminar as an educational event and include start times, end times and specify your firm as the organizer. Structured data even allows you to define an age range, should your seminar be appropriate for a specific group of individuals. You can also define potential actions a user might take, like registering for the event and provide the url for registration.

Promote creative work: The CreativeWork attribute supports many descriptive items. If you upload an e-book, for example, you can use Schema markup to define the book name, author and publish date. You can also list reviews or create an offer involving the book. As with events, you can specify potential actions, like download, and define the download url. Videos can receive the same treatment, by defining the potential action as watch and giving the [video](#) url.

Become an authority: If Google sees that searchers click on your results often for answers to specific questions, it may incorporate your page content into the Knowledge Graph. Write useful content, and tell Google through structured data on what pages you are providing answers. Knowing your target client base and understanding how they research attorney services will help you proactively provide the answers they are looking for.

Google may not yet support JSON-LD syntax for all of these properties, but it never hurts to get ahead of the game with your online marketing.

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