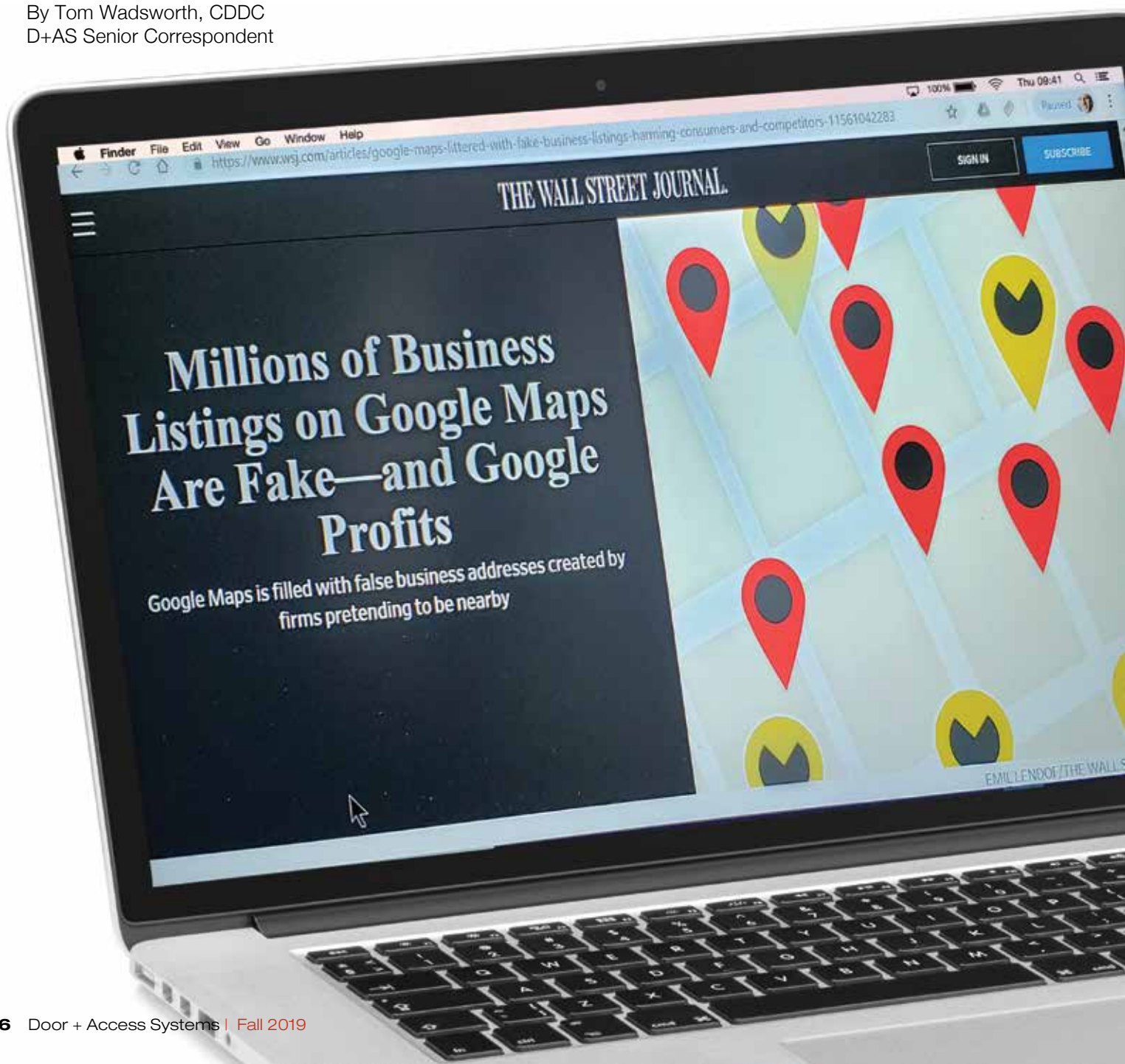


Wall Street Journal exposes millions of fake Google Map listings

Garage door industry plagued by problem

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The garage door industry has taken another hit in the news media, thanks to the garage door repair scammers. But this hit might result in some positive change for our industry.

On June 20, 2019, the Wall Street Journal (WSJ), one of the top three newspapers in the United States by circulation, published this story online: “Millions of business listings on Google Maps are fake—and Google profits.” The same story, by Rob Copeland and Katherine Bindley, was published in its print editions with this title: “Google maps filled with false listings.”

The article opens with the unfortunate experience of 67-year-old Nancy Carter of Falls Church, Va. After finding her garage door to be “stuck,” she used Google Maps to find and call a local garage door repair company.

As the WSJ reported, she later learned that the repair company had “hijacked the name of a legitimate business on Google Maps.” The tech “fixed” her problem for \$728, which was nearly twice the cost of previous repairs. Plus, the repair was “so shoddy it had to be redone.”

It's all about Google Maps

But this story is not about the problems of garage door repair scammers. It's about the problems of Google Maps and how they affect the garage door industry.

“Google Maps ... is overrun with millions of false business addresses and fake names,” said the Journal's report.

The garage door industry has known about this problem for years. So how did the WSJ find out about it?

WSJ reporter Rob Copeland shared the background to his story in a July 3 podcast. He said he discovered the problem when he went to Mountain View, Calif., to visit Google's headquarters. Before heading to Google, he did a Google Maps search for personal-injury attorneys and found 12 in Mountain View. Since he had rented a car, he took the time to actually drive to all 12 offices.

He was stunned to find that *only one* of these offices was real. Many of the fakes were located in strip malls, office buildings, or construction sites. (The fake listings were used to solicit phone calls.) After he arrived at Google's offices and reported his experience, Google apparently fixed the problem quickly. As he reported in his story, “the fakes vanished.”

Lesson #1: Google can do something about this problem. But it helps when the Wall Street Journal reports the problem to Google.

11 million fakes/day

“Hundreds of thousands of false listings sprout on Google Maps each month,” Copeland reported, citing expert sources. “Google Maps carries roughly 11 million falsely listed businesses on any given day.”

How does this happen?

WSJ reporter Katherine Bindley, co-author of the story, found some answers. She located a company in Hanover, Pa., that “can place as many as 3,800 fake Google Maps listings a day.”

As Bindley noted in the July 3 podcast, she visited that company and learned that it has another staff of 25 in the Philippines. That's where they generate the fake listings, charging \$99 for one phony listing and up to \$8,599 for a 100-pack.

I don't think Google understands how bad the problem really is and how much it's hurting legitimate businesses.

She reported that Hanover company to Google, who replied that they were investigating its operation. Amazingly, shortly thereafter, tens of thousands of the listings disappeared.

Lesson #2: Google can do something about this problem. But it helps when the Wall Street Journal reports the problem to Google. (Yes, this is the same as Lesson #1.)

Google responds

On June 20, Google posted an article on its blogsite, directly responding to the thrust of the WSJ article. The post, titled “How we fight fake business profiles on Google Maps,” was written by Ethan Russell, the product director for Google Maps.

Russell attempted to put the problem in perspective by noting the massive size of Google. He said, “Every month we connect people to businesses more than nine billion times,” adding that Google gets millions of contributions each day, such as new business profiles, reviews, and star ratings.

At the same time, Google is acutely aware of “business scammers (who) ... use a wide range of deceptive techniques to try to game our system,” he said. “As we shut them down, they change their techniques, and the cycle continues.”

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Fighting the problem

“We take these issues very seriously,” he said. Google is fighting the problem by using ever-evolving manual and automated systems. Russell wouldn’t share details about those efforts, saying that doing so might actually help scammers.

On the positive side, Russell noted Google’s progress on this matter in the last year alone. He said that Google took down more than 3 million fake business profiles, noting that “more than 90% of those business profiles were removed before a user could even see the profile.”

He also said that Google partially relies on users to report fake business profiles. More than 250,000 of the deleted fake business profiles were reported by users, he said.

Google also disabled more than 150,000 user accounts that were found to be abusive. Russell said that this represented a 50% increase from 2017. It wasn’t clear whether the increase was due to improved monitoring by Google, increased scammer activity, or perhaps both.

Lesson #3

It was also noteworthy how quickly Google responded to the WSJ article. Russell’s response was posted on June 20, *on the same day the Journal’s article appeared in print.*

Lesson #3: Google can do something about this problem. But it helps when the Wall Street Journal reports the problem to Google.

The good news is: Google is intensely aware of the problem, and they openly solicit your help in identifying these false listings. If you are plagued by competitors who are using these tactics, you can submit your evidence at <http://bit.ly/googleredressal>. Another option is to solicit the services of a Google Product Expert (see story at right). ■



Advice from a Google Product Expert

For several years, Google has identified Tom Waddington as one of 13 “Google My Business Product Experts.” Waddington has studied hundreds of Google listings for garage door businesses in the last few years. Even though his focus has been on other industries, he says that he still checks garage door-related searches regularly “because abuse is so rampant there.”



Waddington

When you saw that the WSJ said that millions of business listings on Google Maps are fake, what was your reaction?

I was interviewed for that article, so I wasn’t surprised by the title. They asked several people involved in local search for an estimate on the number of fake listings. My estimate was likely on the high end. I’ve seen so much abuse on Google over the past few years, I probably think it’s worse than most people do.

Just due to the sheer volume of listings on Maps, there’s going to be millions of fake ones. Even if the percentage of fake listings might be considered low, I don’t think it’s acceptable, and I don’t think Google is putting enough resources to try to improve it.

When you submit a problem of a fake business (on Google Maps) to Google, what is your typical response from Google?

It really varies, and there are different ways to report. It’s definitely not as easy to get fake listings removed as it should be. Plus, listings that get removed will sometimes get reinstated or replacements will get created, so you have to keep pushing back. It’s a never-ending game.

When a garage door business contacts you about the problem of fake Google listings, what do you recommend?

Google recently changed the way to report fake listings. You now use the “Business Redressal” form: <http://bit.ly/googleredressal>. The form is oddly named and not very user-friendly. You won’t hear back on whether Google took any action or not, but it is the process now.

I recommend gathering a lot of evidence to back up your claim. It’s not enough to just say, “This is a fake listing.” Take the time to explain why you think the listings are fake and provide evidence. If a listing claims to be located somewhere, and you know they’re not, provide photos.

You should also get familiar with Google My Business guidelines (<http://bit.ly/GMBGuidelines>). Then provide evidence showing how the fake listings are in violation of those guidelines.

The WSJ article notes that Google paid for a 2017 academic study by the University of California San Diego, which concluded that only 0.5% of local searches yield questionable results. Are you familiar with that study?

Yes. When Google first posted about the study on April 6, 2017, I thought that they meant to post it five days earlier (April Fools' Day). Mike Blumenthal, another Google Product Expert, expertly identified all the flaws in that study (<http://bit.ly/BlumenthalFlaws>).

I don't think Google understands how bad the problem really is and how much it's hurting legitimate businesses. The chances of performing a search that will lead to spurious results will, of course, vary greatly depending on what exactly it is you're searching for.

When it comes to garage door companies, the majority of searches will lead to a fake listing. The fake listings may not always be in the first three map results on the initial search, but clicking through to view more map listings will lead to fake listings way more often than not. ■



The history of Google and garage door scammers

The 2017 crackdown

- Oct. 19, 2017 → After the Dallas Morning News sent Google a list of hundreds of websites that violated its policies, Google killed hundreds of ads for Garage Door Services (aka GDS, Neighborhood Garage Door Service, et al.).
- Oct. 31, 2017 → Google debuted the Google Guarantee badge of trust for garage door repair companies. The program would require extra screening for garage door businesses, such as background checks, before Google would allow them to advertise.
- Nov. 15, 2017 → Google AdWords notified garage door companies that their ads would stop running in January 2018 unless they passed the advanced verification process. Google's reason: "We've identified a number of fraudulent garage door service businesses who use false identities on Google." ■

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Gaming the Google system

Phony doors for phony listings

Google often requires businesses to produce photographic or video evidence of a “real” business. However, some slippery garage door businesses have learned how to game Google’s system.

In 2018, Door + Access Systems did an investigation of company photos of some garage

door businesses that appeared on Google Maps. The photos below had obviously been doctored to give the impression of a real business.

In reality, *no garage door business existed anywhere in the office buildings at the listed addresses*. In other words, these photos were used to make Google Maps users think the

business was legitimate, enticing them to call the business for service.

The phone numbers on these doors are all connected to Neighborhood Garage Door Service, the nationwide business that we exposed in our award-winning cover story, “The Worst Garage Door Company in the Nation” (fall 2015). ■

We found this doctored door photo on 14 different Google listings nationwide. Google considers such deception to be a violation of its “untrustworthy behavior” policy.

