

STUDY REVEALS FAKE GARAGE DOOR LISTINGS RAMPANT ONLINE

Industry scammers manipulate Google Maps

By Vicki Jones, Editor

If you think the garage door industry has been inundated by fake business listings on Google Maps, we now have a study to prove it.

A study examining Google Maps listings for garage door repair companies in five randomly selected U.S. cities was conducted in March 2020, and the results are alarming.

The alarming results

The Google Maps study focused on non-paid local results/map listings for “garage door repair” searches for five randomly selected U.S. cities: Aurora, Colo. (Denver area), Colorado Springs, Colo., Overland Park, Kan. (Kansas City area), Seattle, Wash., and West Chester, Pa. (Philadelphia area).

Search results of the five cities generated a total of 334 Google Maps listings. Of the 334 listings examined and documented, approximately 70% were fake, according to the study.

Seattle had the highest number of fake listings: 84% were fake, and 16% were legitimate. Aurora had the lowest percentage of

that the garage door industry is clearly on Google’s radar.

On June 8, 2020, Google My Business (GMB) Product Expert Ben Fisher tweeted that thousands of new fake listings in the garage door industry had appeared in just a few days. Fisher tagged Danny Sullivan, the official Google search liaison, who replied, “Yes, we’re looking into reports.”

On June 9, on the Search Engine Roundtable website, Barry Schwartz wrote an article, “Google investigating garage door spam,” stating that Google would investigate the complaints of Google Maps spam associated with garage door installation and maintenance companies.

On June 26, Joy Hawkins, another GMB Product Expert, posted on Twitter, “Garage door spam on Google Maps is out of control.” She shared a garage door search result in which 80% of the results were fake listings.

Sullivan responded to

Hawkins on Twitter the same day, saying, “I think we should see some improvements to better deal with this coming in the very near future.”

His response is a clear acknowledgement that Google is aware of fake garage door business listings in our industry. However, it is not clear how or when improvements will come.

When we asked a Google spokesperson, “Can you tell us when we might see these improvements?” They said, “We have nothing to share at this time.”

“We constantly adapt and refine our technologies and techniques to detect and remove fake listings, rolling out improvements as quickly as possible,” they added.

Aurora, Colo.
Colorado Springs, Colo.
Overland Park, Kan.
Seattle, Wash.
West Chester, Pa.

= **70%
Fake**

fake listings with 32%. Colorado Springs was next lowest with 57%, while 77% of listings for both Overland Park and West Chester were fake.

An ongoing study of garage door listings in the southern California area is also being conducted. As of July 2020, 350 listings had been examined and, so far, the number of fake listings is extremely concerning.

The semi-good news

What is Google doing about it? Thanks to years of being in the spotlight, studies like this one and other recent articles and posts indicate



A SHORT HISTORY OF EXPOSING SCAMS IN THE GARAGE DOOR INDUSTRY

For almost two decades, the garage door industry has received national media attention for deceptive practices and customer abuse.

Garage door scammers have been repeatedly exposed on dozens of national and local television programs since 2002. In these programs, hidden-camera investigations have caught garage door repair scammers taking advantage of customers.

Door + Access Systems magazine's award-winning cover story, "The Worst Garage Door Company in the Nation" (fall 2015) also helped shine the spotlight on scams afflicting our industry. This article prompted national warnings from the Better Business Bureau and from other high-level investigations into deceptive tactics used by garage door repair companies.

In 2017, the Dallas Morning News notified Google about hundreds of garage door-related websites that had violated Google policies. Within weeks, Google cracked down on garage door businesses and required that all ads for garage door companies in key markets pass the advanced verification process.

In June 2019, the Wall Street Journal published a story exposing millions of fake business listings on Google Maps. And guess what? The article opened with a story about a customer who had been scammed by a garage door company using a fake business listing.

So, despite multiple television reports and articles, our industry still appears to be plagued by scammers. This time the culprit is fake listings on Google Maps, and according to this recent study, we have more than our share of "bad apples."

The danger of fake listings

The large number of fake garage door business listings uncovered by this study is a thorny problem for customers. As fake listings increase and persist, more consumers may fall victim to garage door scammers.

Legitimate garage door companies are also at risk. Multiple listings from deceptive or unlicensed companies can flood the search results and negatively affect the ranking of honest companies. When only three of the top 10 search results are legitimate companies, honest dealers may never get noticed by consumers searching for a garage door company.

What constitutes a "fake" listing?

According to Ben Fisher, a Google My Business listing is "fake" if it's created with the intent to gain a better ranking by posting a local location that does not exist. Examples of false locations are virtual offices, locations in the center of a road or field, or a location that is identical to that of another business.

Often, fake listings include a business name that contains keywords designed to outrank other legitimate listings (e.g., Best Bright Garage Door Repair of San Diego) and/or that may not be in compliance with GMB guidelines. While they could represent

legitimate businesses, most fake listings also come with keyword-stuffed names.

If you call the number associated with one of these listings, and they answer with a different company name, you can assume it is a fake listing that was posted merely to generate leads, said Fisher. However, if a business address is registered with the Secretary of State, a contractor's license, or the Better Business Bureau, the company at that address is most likely *not* fake.

Legitimate home businesses

Not all legit garage door companies operate out of a storefront or office. GMB Product Expert Tom Waddington said, "A home-based business can still be eligible for a single Google My Business listing. However, to be in compliance with Google's guidelines, the physical address should not be displayed on the listing unless there is visible signage at the location and the business serves customers there during stated business hours."

If these guidelines aren't followed, the listing may be suspended. "Honest garage door companies concerned about abuse on Google Maps should make sure their own listing is in compliance to avoid issues," added Waddington.

Gather evidence

If you report a fake listing to Google, Waddington recommends presenting evidence to back up your claim. It's not enough to just say, "This is a fake listing."

Fisher said that when reporting to Google, mention that the (fake) business lacks a license (if required by your state). If a listing cites a specific address that is false, provide photos of that address from a valid source like Google Maps. If you call the company, be sure to write down what name they answer with, added Fisher.

Power of reporting

Reporting fake listings can help. If Google receives many reports of a particular fake listing, they are more likely to do something about it.

"It's definitely not as easy to get fake listings removed as it should be," said Waddington. "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."

The Google spokesperson said they make it easy for people to flag policy-violating content—like fake listings—for review and removal by providing the Business Redressal Complaint Form at <http://bit.ly/googlereaddressal>.

Waddington said that to report a fake listing, start by using the "suggest an edit" feature on a map's listing. Then use this form to report listings that are fraudulent or misleading.

For help completing the form, look online for Fisher's article, "How to use Google's spam redressal form to level the local playing field" at <https://bit.ly/HowRedressal/>. Fisher can also assist with removing a potentially fake listing in your area (for a fee). Visit his company website at www.steadydemand.com or review Google's guidelines at <http://bit.ly/GMBGuidelines>.

It takes a village

This new Google Maps study amplifies a problem that plagues our industry. It reminds us that everyone must help mitigate the negative effects of fake listings on our industry.

"Each day, Google Maps gets 20 million contributions, from reviews and ratings to photos and listings. The vast majority of these contributions are relevant and accurate," the Google spokesperson told D+AS.

"In 2019 alone, we removed more than 258,000 business profiles that were reported directly to us."

"We know a small number of bad actors try to game our platform by adding fake business listings," they told us. "While fake business listings are a small percentage of the overall business profiles on Google Maps, we take

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the issue very seriously and monitor closely for scams, especially as it relates to sensitive business types such as garage door services.”

It is also up to the garage door community of honest door dealers, consumers, and manufacturers to be diligent about reporting potentially fake listings.

If you learn how to detect fake listings and take the time to report them, you can help protect customers and promote honest door dealers.

HOW TO SPOT A FAKE LISTING

Fisher urges honest door companies to learn the telltale signs of a fake listing, but he said “the simplest method to determine a fake from a real listing is to Google the street view of the address and see if that business is actually there.” He also said that Melissa.com is a useful tool to help verify if an address is real.

Some suspicious things to look for:

- The same company name is used on multiple listings.
- The same phone number is used on multiple listings with different business names.
- The company’s URL is a free Google My Business website (e.g., <https://anytime-garage-door-repair-chula-vista.business.site>) rather than a specific company website.
- When you call their number, they answer with a different business name than the website referenced on the listing.
- The listing uses a phony street address.

About the study

The study was funded by Precision Door Service and conducted by Ben Fisher and Tom Waddington, two of only 15 people in Canada and the U.S. who are considered Google My Business (GMB) Product Experts. The two have extensive experience battling garage door repair companies that abuse Google policies.

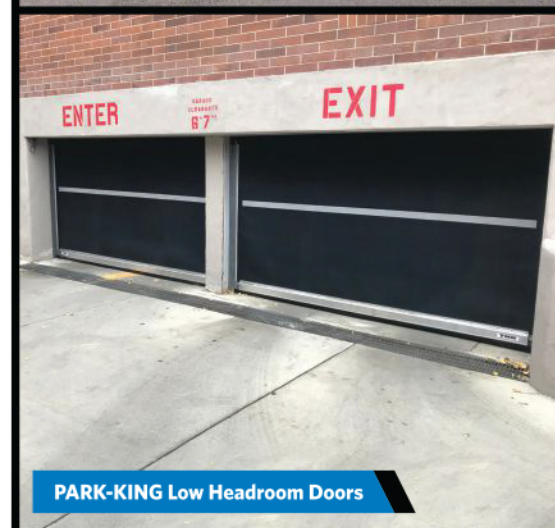
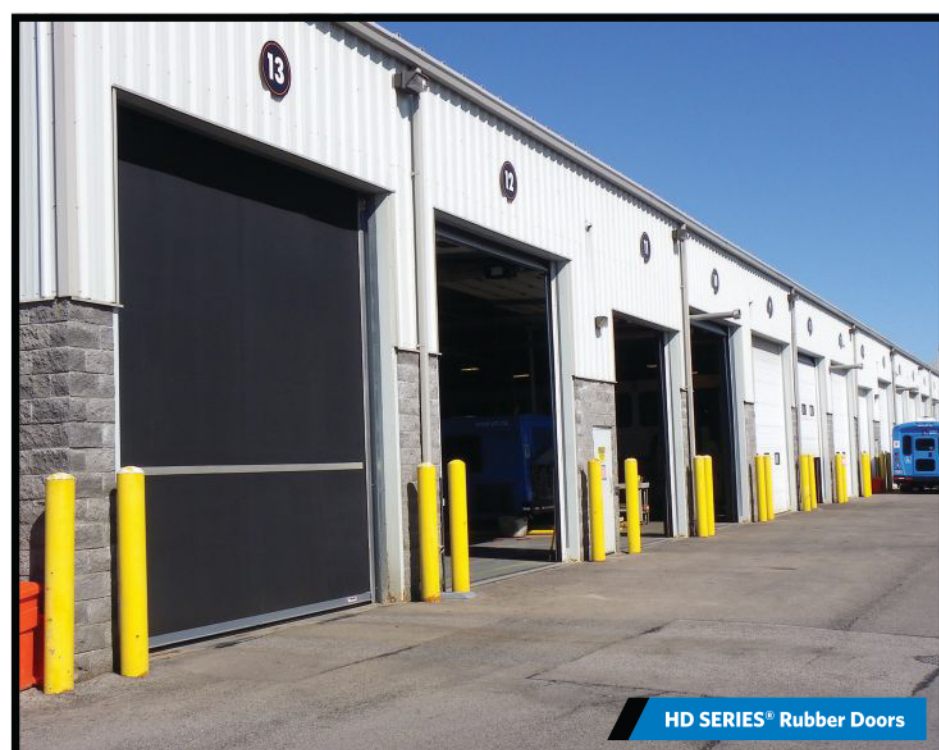
Fisher and Waddington documented all map search results for each of the selected cities and then researched each listing to determine which were real and which were fake. ■



Fisher



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