

# TAKE A LOOK AROUND

First, Google Maps wowed users by bringing them down to street level with the Street View feature. Now with Business Photos — a 360-degree interior virtual tour — Google gives consumers a chance to take an even closer look at your business.

By Pete Mihalek

In January 2012, Google officially launched its Business Photos program — 360-degree interactive panoramas of the interiors of businesses. These panoramas can be seen on Google Maps and Google+ Local pages. They can also be embedded into your company’s website. According to Google, this interactive feature allows “customers who find you online to walk-through, explore and take a closer look at your business.”

To learn more about this relatively new feature, *Lawn & Garden Retailer* caught up with Angie Knost, an independent and Google Trusted Photographer, and asked her why Google Business Photos might make sense for your garden center.

### Why would a small business do this?

**Knost:** The virtual tour is a state-of-the-art way to attract the interest of new customers, and also to hold their attention through an interactive feature that showcases a business with the largest and most recognized search engine in the world.

The images appear on Google searches, Google Maps, and Google+ Local, and can also be easily embedded in the business’ own website and social media pages.

### For those you’ve worked with, did they have certain expectations or reasons to do this?

**Knost:** Many business owners recognize that enhancing the Google+ Local page is a very effective form of advertising.

I think the primary reason that business owners are excited to add the virtual tour to their Google listing is because they understand that most people “Google” any unfamiliar business they hear about to gather information before visiting.

Also, small business owners are keen to understand that aesthetics are immensely important; they have spent countless hours decorating, stocking and arranging their business to provide a positive customer experience, and they are proud to share the visual experience of a virtual tour that showcases their hard work, creativity and pride in their business.

### What should they expect from the process?

**Knost:** The tour can be made on a normal business day, although a day when lower traffic is expected works best. Customers’ and employees’ faces will be blurred for privacy, which is actually required by Google. This allows employees to go about their day, serving their customers, and the photographer can work around the normal activities that are going on.

The shop owner, of course, has the option to

### Interested?

Want to find a Google Trusted Photographer in your area? Want to see examples? Visit [maps.google.com/businessphotos](http://maps.google.com/businessphotos) or scan this code.



have the tour made during off hours if they do not want any blurred human activity visible in the tour. A Google Trusted Photographer uses a still camera mounted to a tripod with a special rotating head that takes 360-degree captures at various points throughout the business. The points are later stitched together into a panoramic walk-through that is interactive and can be easily navigated by the user, just like Google Street View.

In fact, Google Street View is exactly what it is — it’s the same technology, adapted for indoors. The making of the tour can take around 1 to 2 hours. The photographer will also take a series of still photos, to add to the business’ Google+ Local page. The business will receive these photos on disc and can use them in any other way they



*“People ‘Google’ any unfamiliar business they hear about to gather information before visiting.”*



Angie Knost is not responsible for the photos in this feature.



Consumers can pre-visit retailers via Google's Business Photos feature. This 360-degree virtual tour provides them a feel for the store before they take a single step out of their house.

would like — they are copyright released.

After the visit to the business to create captures for the tour and still-photos, the photographer will create your tour, upload it to the business' Google listing, link it to Google Maps if the location permits, and add the selection of still-photos to the business' Google listing. The tour goes live on Google a few weeks after the photo shoot.

### Is there a general cost associated with this?

Knost: Yes, the cost varies based on the size of the business and the complexity of the business layout or "walking paths" that a customer would follow. The price may vary for a particular size of business from city to city, as Google Trusted Photographers are all independent and set their own guidelines within certain parameters. The Google Business Photos/Virtual Tour package is

always a one-time fee (no monthly maintenance fees or per-click fees, etc). The Virtual Tour is hosted on Google indefinitely.

### In your opinion, what value does this virtual tour provide businesses and consumers?

Knost: For businesses, anything you can do to enhance your Google listing will help your business. Also, any online feature that is interactive will help your business stay in the customer's mind, and this makes them more likely to patronize your business.

For consumers, it brings a pre-visit shopping experience right into their home. It whets their appetite for an in-person visit. It helps them find unique and specialty items that they might not find in a large chain store. In a world increasingly dominated by big-box type stores, consumers are still looking for a unique and personal shopping experience, and this feature helps them find and appreciate places in their neighborhood that they may have overlooked before. **LGR**

*Angie Knost is an independent professional photographer and owner of Angie Knost Photography (www.angieknost.com). She is also a Google Trusted Independent Photographer in the St. Louis area. You can contact her at photo@angieknost.com.*

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