

The Places Project: A Guide for Youth and Volunteers

In our technology-driven and technology-enthralled society, a web presence is almost essential. Businesses have long known that accessibility is important, and today web accessibility is key to the success of businesses, organizations, and entire communities.

Youth tend to be early and enthusiastic adopters of technology, sometimes to the dismay of older generations. Too often perhaps, the potential of youth to use their technology expertise to help their communities is overlooked. But youth can simultaneously “play with gadgets” and be productive. And they can engage online and face-to-face at the same time.

Through The Places Project, young adults help put their communities on the map--literally. Youth select one of two tracks to serve their community within their comfort level and ability:

1. Helping businesses and organizations to update Google profiles (appropriate for high school students), or
2. Posting photos of the community on Panoramio (appropriate for junior high or high school students).

Youth/Adult Partnerships

The Places Project is also a great opportunity for youth to interact with other organizations and leaders in the community. A partnership with a business or civic organization can lend credibility to the youth’s effort and help them reach local businesses and organizations. Examples of potential partners include

- chamber of commerce
- downtown merchants’ association
- economic development council,
- Rotary club.

Benefits to Youth

- Positive use of technology to serve the community
- Additional computer and interpersonal skills
- Introduction to various industries and business types—a broader career horizon

Benefits to the Community

- Up-to-date business and organization listing online
- Photos showcasing the community on Google Earth and Google Maps
- Youth taking ownership of valuable assets—web presence and the community itself

Updating Business Listings

Business and organization listings can be updated two ways:

1. Individuals not connected to the business or organization can submit some information, including photos, to Google.
2. Business owners or authorized representatives can publish more detailed information and even videos through Google Places.

Unauthorized persons should NOT make changes to a business account in Google Places (<http://www.google.com/places/>). Youth are encouraged to edit profiles *with* business owners. The youth can provide information to help the business owner to set up a free Google Account and update the profile. If the youth actively help to enter data, they should get the business to complete a data and authorization form and sign the authorization. A business/organization authorization form is provided through The Places Project at <http://communities.tamu.edu>. The signed form should be kept by an adult leader in case a business or organization has concerns about their listing. And it goes without saying that only data provided by the business or organization should be entered online. If the business does not have a computer available to enter the data, the youth may wish to use a laptop or iPad (keeping in mind the cost constraints of their data plan) to enter data with the business owner.

Youth should let business owners and organization representatives know that they will likely be contacted by Google either via phone or postcard to validate the changes to their listing. They will then be able to make future changes from their account.

If a business does not want to create a Google account to access Google Places but wants to be included in the project, the owner should complete and sign a data and authorization form. The youth should enter the data through the public side of Google, in the presence of the business owner or organization representative if possible. Who knows, they might just interest the business owner in the technology! It is preferable to use a group e-mail address for which an adult leader has the log-on information. This provides a level of safety for the youth and the businesses in case a concern about accuracy or authorization arises. Adult supervision of data entries and log-on information also provides continuity as students graduate and move on.

If a business is interested in the project but does not have time to participate now, youth should leave the instructions, project contact information, and the data/authorization form with them. No, the business owner doesn't need authorization, but s/he may wish to think about the data before signing in to Google. If someone is not interested in the project, youth should thank them for their time and leave promptly. Youth are advised not to update such businesses as part of this project, even on the public side, without authorization. No, it is not against Google's terms, but it is against principles of honor and respect. Students may need to contact civic officials for authorization and information to update locations like libraries or museums.

Technical Instructions for Entering Business/Organization Listings

To add or edit a listing on Google Places, a business owner or organizational representative will need to be logged into a Google account. A free account can be created at <https://www.google.com/accounts/NewAccount>. Google recommends using an e-mail address that reflects the businesses' web domain if applicable (their example: if the business's website is www.google.com, they might use you@google.com). Google also recommends that, if the owner would like other people to be able to update business information, a shared address be used (e.g., info@google.com).

To enter business data, go to Google Maps at <http://maps.google.com/> and search for the business by typing the business name and city/state into the search box. Click the business name in the left panel of the screen to pull up information about the business. Select Edit this place (the public side) for basic editing options or select Business owner? from the top blue bar to provide more comprehensive information or to suspend or remove the listing. If the owner has not logged into Google, s/he will be asked to do so. This option allows the business owner and the youth to see what information comes up about the business prior to updating the profile.

Alternatively, go to Google Places at <http://www.google.com/places/>. Click Get Started under Get Your Business Found on Google and enter the business's Google account information. Indicate that you would like to add a business. Enter the business main phone number and click Find business information. Fill in the information about the business and add photos or videos.

The business owner will be contacted by Google via phone or mail to approve and publish the listing. They will then be able to update the listing in the future.

Adding Community Photos

Business photos may be added from Google maps by locating the business, clicking the entry at the left of the map, and then clicking upload a photo. Businesses can indicate if they are interested in having a photo of the business. If the youth take photos, they should be e-mailed from the group's e-mail account to the business owners (another reason to collect that data) so the owners can post them to their profile. Youth may also take photos on the spot while business owners are filling out the data and authorization sheet. They can then help businesses to upload them during the site visit. If the youth have completed profile information on the public side of Google, they may enter photos there. Youth are advised to publish photos of businesses only if approved by the business owner.

Youth may also upload community photos using Panoramio (www.panoramio.com). Photos that meet Panoramio's guidelines (e.g., advertising and people are discouraged) can be published to Google Earth. Some photos are selected for Google Maps as well. These photos are tied to geographic coordinates (location) but not to businesses so photos of parks, historical

monuments, etc. are appropriate. GPS-enabled devices can be used to take photos, but photos also can be located on the map manually. Panoramio's instructions are easy to follow.

Tips for Success

- Partner with a business or civic organization.
- Publicize The Places Project prior to meeting with business owners/organization leaders. This may be done through partner organizations, e-mail blasts, postcards (see <http://communities.tamu.edu> for an example), or other methods.
- Visit businesses in teams of two or three for your safety. Consider bringing along an adult leader.
- Look and act professional and courteous. You are the face of your club and as well as the face of the community's future.
- Use technology on the spot. Help the business or organization set up an account on their computer or demonstrate technology by using your iPad to update information. (Just don't sacrifice accuracy—typing business info on your smartphone probably isn't smart.)
- Be familiar with and adhere to the rules governing use of the technology (e.g., Google, Panoramio).
- Do not disclose passwords or other confidential information you may hear or see. It is polite to turn away when someone is entering their password into a computer.
- Exercise good judgment in uploading photos. Again, you represent you, your club, and your community.
- Enter data into the public portal through a group e-mail address for which the password is held by an adult leader, such as a club manager or county agent. This will ensure continuity as young adults graduate and move on. It will also maintain control over the process and a layer of security for both the youth and the businesses/organizations.