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leaving their home. The virtual tour, an extension of Google Maps Street View, gives business owners the ability to showcase their space online with 360-degree panoramas and close-up photos.

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Patti Danforth tells about a customer who comes into her deli in Aspinwall, Pennsylvania, to buy grits.

“This gentleman came in, he saw these grits online, and he's become a very good customer of ours,” said Danforth, owner of Feast on Brilliant.

The customer did not find the grits by browsing through a list of products served up in an online search. He was able to walk through the store and browse items on its shelves — the benefit of technology Google Inc. is introducing in Pittsburgh and elsewhere.

Google Maps Business View allows people to step inside and tour a building without leaving their home. The virtual tour, an extension of Google Maps Street View, gives business owners the ability to showcase their space online with 360-degree panoramas and close-up photos.

Danforth said her customer could not find the grits, which came from a manufacturer in North Carolina, anywhere in Pittsburgh.

“He found them on our virtual tour — it's the way to get your name out there now.”

Google has linked Business View with its Street View product. Street View allows people to take a virtual stroll down a street from their home computers or mobile devices. With Business View, they can travel the last few feet, entering a building to look around without actually going inside.

The technology could be attractive for businesses that want to showcase their

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Though Business View is just getting noticed in Pittsburgh, Google began offering it in 2012 when it started a program to train and certify local photographers to produce and publish the virtual tours, product manager Soufi Esmaeilzadeh said.

“We now have thousands of businesses each month coming online with their virtual tour, and over 250,000 globally,” she said.

'More visibility and more rich media'

ProFromGo, a South Side Internet marketing company, is working with Google to sell the service in the Pittsburgh area. ProFromGo takes the pictures and produces the final video to Google standards.

“The business owner wins because they get more visibility and more rich media on Google — it's a marketing tool,” said Chris Vendilli, the owner of ProFromGo. “And Google wins because it has more data about the businesses out there, which helps them sell more ads.”

Certified photographers like Vendilli set their own rates based on the size of the business and the number of panoramas. Vendilli said his prices range from \$400 for a small business with a limited number of panoramas, to \$700 to \$1,000 for medium-sized businesses to \$1,500 or more for large businesses. No fees go to Google, Esmaeilzadeh said.

Pat Molyneaux, who runs Molyneaux Carpet and Tile, a family-owned chain of seven stores in the area, is in the process of producing virtual tours for each one. Tours for Robinson and Mt. Lebanon stores are now online.

“It's pretty expensive; it will cost me about \$25,000 when it's all said and done,” Molyneaux said. “But we try to always stay head of the curve in marketing, and we

believe that this Google Business View is ahead of the curve.”

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products and services. You see something like this and you wonder what's next, Guskey said.

'An introduction to what they can see'

Robert Vertes, vice president of sales and marketing of Vangura Surfacing Products in North Huntingdon, which displays more than 100 color samples of stone countertops in its large showroom, said the virtual tour has given customers a new reason to drive to its showroom.

“It's an introduction to what they can see here. Before, they didn't understand why they should drive here from Bethel Park or Upper St. Clair,” Vertes said. “It's opened a door for us, especially with the high-resolution images.”

Scott Kerschbaumers, owner with his wife, Eva, of ESSPA Salon in Aspinwall, said a customer from Buffalo visited the spa on a business trip to Pittsburgh, using a gift card purchased online by her husband after seeing the virtual tour.

“When you go to a spa, there's an ambience, an atmosphere. You have smells, you have visuals — an enticing atmosphere that you can't find anywhere else,” Kerschbaumers said. “You really want to get across every aspect that makes you special and unique and give them a reason to choose you. We've had several guests mention the virtual tour is why they chose us.”

There is little concern over security for businesses that offer a virtual tour, said Google's Esmaeilzadeh.

“The imagery available on Business View is no different from what people can see when going into the location themselves or when viewing images that are already widely available on real estate and directory sites,” she said.

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