

Voice-based search: Act now to be heard

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Think your current SEO tactics are enough to get you organic search traffic? With voice search gaining traction, the game is about to change.

The rise of voice-based smart speakers such as Amazon's popular Echo and Google's Home is exciting for consumers, but a potential nightmare for marketers. And so too the broader move away from text-based input towards the chat-friendly nature of a whole host of commonly available voice assistants, including Siri (Apple), Cortana (Microsoft), Assistant (Google), Alexa (Amazon) and now also Samsung's Bixby.

The way we search changed

There are two reasons for this, having to do with how people use voice to search, and the way these searches are displayed, or read aloud in the case of stand-alone speaker units such as the Home and Echo.

A typically typed search in Google probably looks something like this: "waterproof camera"; short and sweet since it takes effort to type. Voice searches on a smartphone are completely different: "I'm looking for a waterproof camera that is cheap and can post directly to Facebook". Longer and more colloquial, the difference holds major implications for Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) strategies, since the data Google is looking for changes.

Not the usual first page

How voice-based results are displayed also differs. Search for "Best pizza restaurants in Johannesburg" and Google's Assistant shows you ten picture-based results that scroll to the side. These are all organic, with no pay-per-click advertising options available (which raises questions about Google's monetisation strategy, a different story altogether).

On the speaker-based assistants such as Home, it gets even trickier, with only the first result read, with an option to go through the rest if you want to spend the time to do so. This holds significant ramifications for people who rely on the customers using search in order to find them. It reemphasises the fact that if you don't rank on Google's top results, your business is going to suffer, and even more so in future.

How to get voice ready

What to do about this new voice-based search paradigm shift?

First, get mobile ready, plus speed up your site. According to Google, more than 50% of all searches occur on mobile, and voice is responsible for [20% of all searches](#) in the Google app. While a fastidious Google already penalises sites that are not mobile-friendly, there is also an emphasis on how quickly your page loads. On mobile, if your site doesn't pull up in three seconds, users will move on to the next. Therefore, the first consideration for anybody who wants to capitalise on voice search, is to ensure that their page adheres to the Accelerated Mobile Pages (AMP) standard. AMP allows your site to load incredible quickly, and once Google sees you are optimised, it will reward you for the effort. It is non-negotiable for brands, and if you don't do it now you will be left behind.

The second consideration is closely related to the way people search through voice and the SEO strategies needed to capture organic search. The type of content that companies have on their websites needs to be better optimised to conform to lengthier voice-based questions. This involves publishing long-form content, possibly in a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) format, where there are explicit questions with detailed answers. Put yourself in the shoes of a customer doing a

voice-based search and make sure you have content that can cover potential questions. If your website can show Google it is a good source of information on the topic they are interested in, it will significantly improve your chances of featuring in voice search.

Finally, people are more inclined to use voice search while on mobile when looking for local businesses or services. Mobile's strong conversation rate means they *want* to buy, and 80% of searches result in a sale according to a [study](#) from Neustar. This means you need to optimise your site to appear in location based search, so configuring and verifying your Google My Business account is key. Make sure you can be found on Google Maps and encourage people to leave reviews, both on Google's platforms and other social media.

Alongside this, there are more technical search configuration components to look after, including schema markup. This code for the backend of your website ensures that further information is displayed in search results. For example, items you are selling can include shipping time, more specific prices and further descriptions of the products. Schema markup can enhance Google click-through rate, and can also improve search ranking.

The future is voice

The importance of voice-based search must not be underestimated, with Gartner [predicting](#) that by 2020, 30% of web browsing sessions will be done without a screen. While a number of companies still receive a convenient amount of traffic through Google's current organic search results, this will dry-up when the use of voice becomes even more convenient and usage surges.

If your organisation depends on Google for sales or good quality leads, invest the time now to look at what's happening in voice and reimagine the way you can go about your SEO. Doing so ensures the shotgun seat on the voice-based search bandwagon.

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