

How SEOs can master voice search now

You already know the entry-level SEO factors you need to think about constantly to make your rockstar brand visible to your audience. You've covered your keyword research, content strategy, domain authority and backlink profile. It's all solid.

But at the same time, it's 2019, and those elements won't always cut it in the same ways they did ten or even five years ago. As we prepare to enter the 2020s, digital marketers everywhere need to stay current with changing trends in the SEO space. In this post, I'm talking about the mostly untapped opportunity of optimizing your SEO for voice search.

You know voice search, that on-the-rise realm of online querying that's performed with nothing more than your voice and a virtual assistant, be it Amazon Alexa, Cortana, Google Assistant or Siri. You can buy things online, set reminders for yourself and, of course, perform searches.

I don't know anyone who denies that advanced voice search is one of the coolest pieces of technology to come out of the 21st century so far. But what does it mean for SEO going forward? Here's a statistic to give you an idea: Comscore has forecast that 50 percent of all online searches will be performed by voice search by 2020. That's a sufficient reason for any digital marketer to take pause and think. Half of all online searchers will soon be finding results using their voices.

With that in mind, ask yourself: Is your SEO optimized for

voice search? If it isn't, you may be missing out on about a billion voice searches per month. In 2017, 13 percent of Americans owned some kind of smart assistant. This number was 16 percent by 2019 and is predicted to skyrocket to 55 percent by 2022. Let's face it. Users like the convenience of interacting with the internet using only their voices and this should affect the way you do SEO.

With all of that said, here are four actionable tips for optimizing your SEO for voice search.

1. Think featured snippets

Voice queries that can be answered directly with a featured snippet almost always are. The Google Assistant specifically tries to do this wherever possible, reading most of the snippet aloud to the user. Position zero is a great place to be and digital marketers, of course, are already vying for that coveted spot. So how do you get to be the featured snippet for a voice search? How can you ensure that Google will read your site's content out loud to a voice searcher?

- First, featured snippets are not always pulled from position one. Only about 30 percent are, while the other 70 percent generally come from positions two through five. What does this tell you? It says that once you're on page one, relevance matters more than position.
- To become the featured snippet, your content should be optimized to answer specific questions. A large portion of featured snippets are related to recipes, health, and DIY subjects, but don't be discouraged just because those aren't your industries. Use SEMrush's topic research tool or the free Answer the Public tool to generate content ideas for answering specific user questions.
- Your content will be more likely to be featured in a snippet if it's presented as a paragraph, list or table.

If you go for the paragraph, try to keep it below 50 words, and make the sentences brief. You should also optimize the paragraph with your targeted keyword. Lists and tables are likely to get featured as well, since they're easy to follow logically and visually. Whichever direction you go with your content, make sure it's easy to understand and free of advanced terminology. Remember, you're going for a large audience here, and jargony content is a huge turn-off.

Combine all of these steps – getting to page one, researching one specific query and answering that query briefly and in an easily digestible format – and you'll be well on your way to getting your time in the spotlight with one of Google's featured snippets.

Once you've done that, just imagine millions of virtual assistants presenting your page's content as the best answer to a user question. That's the power of voice search-optimized SEO.

2. Optimize your content for voice search

I touched on voice search-optimized content in the previous section, but content itself is important enough to merit its own section. By this point in the existence of search engines, the best way to type a query into an engine comes as pretty much second nature to most people. We know to keep our searches concise and detailed. "Italian restaurants Scranton" is a quintessential typed query.

As virtual assistants get smarter with every voice search, however, queries are becoming more conversational in nature. A person could say to Siri, "Show me the cheapest Italian restaurants in Scranton." In response, Siri might say, "Here are the best Italian restaurants near your location." It

almost sounds like two people speaking. For that reason, optimizing content to be found by voice searchers will require you to leverage long-tail keywords such as “cheapest Italian restaurants in Scranton” rather than “Italian restaurants Scranton.”

Long-form content – as in, content with a word count above 1,800 words – is as strong in voice search as it is in traditional SEO, but it’s also a good idea to keep your sentences relatively short and not go out of control with your vocabulary. People use voice search like they talk in everyday life, so go for “reliable” over “steadfast.” You get the idea.

My final point on voice search-optimized content is, again, to use SEMrush’s topic research tool and the Answer the Public tool to find out what queries people are asking to find their way to websites like yours, and what those queries say about people’s plans at the moment. A query beginning with “what” shows someone who is looking for information, while a person with a “where” query is probably closer to acting on their intent. Use this information to your advantage when generating content for voice searches.

3. Perfect your mobile-friendliness

Most voice searches, particularly those involving some variation of “near me,” are performed on mobile devices by people on the go, people who perhaps find themselves in unfamiliar places and rely on voice searches to guide them to points of interest. It is therefore vital that you make your site as mobile-friendly as humanly possible.

If you’re lacking in the mobile-friendliness aspect, take action now. Your first job is to ensure your website has a responsive rather than an adaptive design. Responsive web pages will fit themselves to any screen, be it on a Galaxy phone or an iPad.

Then you need to work on site speed by compressing your files, using a web cache, optimizing your images, and minifying your code. It should take your mobile site no longer than five seconds to load, but aim for three to four seconds. That's the Goldilocks zone for ensuring mobile users stay with you when they select a voice search result.

4. Focus on local SEO

Finally, you absolutely must optimize your pages for local SEO if you are, in fact, a local entity. This is because 22 percent of voice searches are related to local businesses such as restaurants.

To make sure potential customers in your area can find you, you just need to follow all the normal protocols for local SEO optimization. These include using geotargeted and "near me" search terms in your meta tags and on your landing pages. You should also create separate location pages for all your brick-and-mortar spots. Finally, be sure to claim your Google My Business page and keep your business hours, phone number and address updated and accurate. Do all this, and when users voice-search for "Show me bookstores near me," they will find themselves face-to-face with your business.

The frequency of voice searches around the world is only going to increase in 2020 and as the decade continues. Voice search most certainly affects SEO, but there's no need to fear. By taking the time to follow these steps, you can stay ahead of the curve and rank as well in voice results as you do in a typical typed queries. The future is coming, and it is in every SEO's best interests to pay attention.

Opinions expressed in this article are those of the guest author and not necessarily Search Engine Land. Staff authors are listed here.

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