Optimizing for position zero: The future of voice search

It’s still early days in the world of voice search, and yet already this new type of device and search engine use is – according to comScore – expected to account for up to 50 percent of the global search market next year. That’s a major shift in consumer behavior in only a few short years.

Digital assistants are becoming increasingly prominent in our homes and on mobile devices, and their ubiquity will only increase.

But where exactly is the brand play in voice search? How developed is the opportunity, and what specific strategies do brands need to apply to benefit from this trend? Let’s take a look at the current state of affairs and, more importantly, where things will go in the next few years.

The current focus on position zero

When you hear marketers talk about voice search today, you probably hear a lot of talk about Position Zero, also known as the featured snippet. This is the content that Google offers in the top search results position in hopes of directly answering a search query. In the desktop and mobile screen worlds, the top content is followed by a host of other search results. In the world of voice search, position zero is everything – the only information that will be relayed to the

user. As such, especially for businesses, getting to position zero has become the new imperative. Exactly how to do that, however, is still an open question.

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As with all things in the search space, best practices for optimizing for position zero are going to evolve over time. But businesses looking to be a step ahead when screenless search becomes the new norm are focusing on a few key areas:

- Relevance through data: Being the most relevant for a given voice search is all about giving the search engine what it needs to tailor response for the user – a user whom the voice assistant knows intimately. The more context offered, the higher the likelihood that a digital assistant will pair your business with a potential customer. For example, if you're a restaurant, this means ensuring the engine can find accurate information on digital profiles regarding not just location and hours, but also customer ratings and reviews as well as details like whether you're pet-friendly, offer patio dining, feature gluten-free options, and more.
- Feed the featured snippet: If you want to be the featured snippet to a given query, make sure your website and profiles provide complete, succinct answers to the questions most likely to lead people to your business. This could be within the first paragraph of a blog post, in an FAQ on your site, or in various other areas of content.
- Prioritize schema: This is SEO 101, but it's even more important for voice search. Make sure your site is following an agreed-upon structure for how search engines read content, as organized via Schema.org.

While these basics can help businesses increase their

relevance for voice search today, we've only seen the beginning of what voice search will mean for digital marketing efforts in the future. How will this transformative shift play out over the next few years?

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Despite the rise in voice search behavior, the business models that will evolve around this opportunity are still emerging. Right now, the biggest tech players in the world – Google, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft, and Facebook—are investing deeply in voice search for three reasons:

- Voice search represents a core technology that can extend across business lines.
- It represents a transformative user experience that reduces friction and moves people away from screens.
- Voice search represents a major new way of tapping into emerging markets like India and Southeast Asia, where mobile devices and behaviors are overwhelmingly dominant.

Big tech is investing in voice search for the above reasons, but they're not really monetizing it yet. That's going to change in the next couple of years, and when it does, an industry and vendor community will spring up around their monetization models quickly, just as we saw with SEO and SEM in the past.

When the realm of voice search and voice advertising takes shape, it will be the brands that are experimenting now that are poised to win. Now is the time to test and learn,

regardless of whether businesses are able to reliably demonstrate the ROI of their efforts today. Every minute invested in better understanding emerging voice search behaviors and opportunities, particularly as it relates to how a brand's target audience is using voice search, will pay dividends in the voice-dominated future.

There's no question that voice will rule the future of device interactions. The only question is whether your business will emerge as an early leader in this space in the coming 24 months – or whether you will be forever playing catch up.

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