The rise of Answer Engine Optimization: Why voice search matters



Search engine optimization, better known as SEO, has been around since the 1990s.

More than two decades later, we still talk about optimizing for the likes of Google and Bing as ‘SEO’. The tactics may have evolved, the landscape may have changed, but the overarching principles remain the same – right?

According to Chee Lo, Head of SEO at Trustpilot, and Jason Barnard, SEO consultant at Kalicube.pro, search engine optimization is no longer the only game in town.

In a recent webinar, the two experts explained how the rise of voice search is transforming search engines into “answer engines”, which require a different strategy and set of ingredients for success. This strategy has come to be known as AEO, or “answer engine optimization”.

So how does AEO differ from the time-tested discipline of SEO? Why is it important? And how can SEOs go about optimizing for answer engines?

What is answer engine optimization?

Many of us in the industry have noted and commented on the shift by search engines, particularly Google, towards providing one, definitive answer to searches. Innovations like featured snippets and Knowledge Graph have contributed to Google’s aim of providing the answer to a search query without requiring a user to click through to another website.

Voice search accentuates this shift, with the vast majority of voice searches receiving a single answer read out by a digital assistant. On mobile, some voice searches will display a results page if there isn't a definitive answer to be found, but for smart home hub devices like the Amazon Echo and Google Home which rarely have screens, this isn't an option.

Therefore, the search engine needs to be able to provide a single answer, or none at all.



Some of the techniques required to optimize for answer engines overlap with search optimization techniques, but there are differences in the underlying mentality.

Jason Barnard emphasized that the key to answer engine optimization is in *specifics*: letting Google (or another answer engine) understand what it is that you're offering.

"It's very important to bear in mind that if Google is to give a specific answer, it needs very specific, detailed information in order to present it.

"In the example of a pizza, if somebody says, 'I would like the cheapest pizza in the area', Google needs to know what the prices of the pizzas are in the shops around. If they say, 'I want pepperoni pizza', it would be really helpful if Google knew the menu.

"And if you ask for a pepperoni pizza, and Google knows that one pizzeria does it but isn't sure if the other one does, it will present the one it *knows* offers pepperoni pizza. That's the idea of specifics."

Why is answer engine optimization

important?

AEO is not going to replace SEO, but it is becoming increasingly important for marketers to learn how to optimize for answer engines as well as search engines due to (all together now…) the rise of voice search.

Lo and Barnard cited some compelling statistics to illustrate the accelerating momentum of voice search. In the UK alone, 42% of the population uses voice search on a daily basis, up from 25% four years ago. Even more notably, the engagement with digital assistants Alexa and Cortana has seen a fourfold increase in the past *year*.



A quick straw poll of the webinar attendees revealed that 26% of those tuning in had used voice search in the past week, while 6% had used it that very day.

A further 18% had used voice search that month, while 25% remembered using it sometime in the last year. Only 25% of attendees (though still a significant proportion) had never used voice search at all.



To those of us in the industry, it might seem as though we've been discussing "the rise of voice search" for some time. Yet search practitioners are still justifiably divided on whether or not voice search is worth optimizing for.

However, if I had to make a prediction, I would say that 2018 is the year that voice search will attain critical mass. Google and Amazon have both shown that they are willing to put their full weight behind voice-controlled smart home hub technology, with Amazon pushing its popular range of Amazon Echo devices and Google announcing big developments for the Google Home at CES 2018.

Not to be outdone, Apple and Facebook have each announced their own smart home devices: the Apple HomePod, which is due to launch in the US at the end of this week, and the Portal, a smart home speaker with a screen to rival the Echo Show.

Voice-controlled devices are only going to become more prevalent, and the way for brands to be present on voice devices is through answer engine optimization.

How does AEO differ from SEO?

As I mentioned earlier, answer engine optimization (AEO) and search engine optimization (SEO) definitely overlap, and techniques that work for one will often work for the other.

AEO doesn't require you to throw out everything you understand about SEO. After all, Google and Bing are the same entities whether they're powering search on a desktop computer or on a smart home device; they just apply slightly different rules.

Chee Lo emphasized that **communication** and **credibility** are fundamental to both AEO and SEO. Both disciplines require that you communicate what your business is about, and both require you to be credible – when we talk about the importance of domain authority in SEO, for instance, what we're really talking about is credibility.

However, Lo posited that the underlying difference between AEO and SEO is that AEO is driven by **strategy**, while SEO is driven by **tactics**.

"SEO can be seen as a tactics-based approach, where you're using specific tactics to improve your online presence," he said. "AEO is more about the holistic vision."

Ultimately, marketers need to carry out both AEO and SEO in order to ensure that their brand has a presence across all devices.

“Just to be clear, we’re not saying, ‘Only optimize for answer engines’,” said Barnard. “You must continue to optimize for search engines, because desktop and mobile will continue to exist alongside the answer engines.

“However, starting to build for answer engine optimization is vital in order to survive in a world where voice will take a bigger part of the market.”

How to optimize for answer engines

With all of that established, what practical steps can marketers take to optimize their content for voice search and answer engines?

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Communicate what you’re about

Despite what it might seem, the vast amount of information on the internet is not easy for Google and other answer engines to index.

“What we often fail to understand is that information on the web is very fragmented,” explained Barnard. “It’s often inaccurate, and it’s not practical at all for a machine to digest.”

Websites are coded in vastly different ways, he explained, and ultimately Google can only rely on the information in front of it to determine what the information means, whether or not it’s accurate, and what the relationships are between different entities.



We've discussed this topic before with a piece on how to speak 'search engine' and the necessity for webmasters to "put the definition around the cow", so that Google knows exactly what it's looking at, and can interpret and serve it to users in the right way.

This is important for SEO, but is even more crucial for AEO, where the questions that Google receives and the answers it gives in return are becoming more and more specific. Therefore, the first thing that you need to do is give it accurate information about you.

"The strategy of AEO starts with the idea of making sure that Google understands your content," said Barnard.

Two powerful tools that you can use to achieve this are **semantic HTML5** and **structured data** markup.

Semantic HTML5

Semantic HTML5, as Barnard explained it, works by dividing up a page into sections, and each section has a specific role which is identified in a standard manner. Google then knows which sections to pay attention to, and which to ignore.

Barnard has penned an essential guide to semantic HTML5 for content writers which goes into more detail about how to apply HTML5 to your content, and another guide which is aimed at developers.

Schema.org structured data markup

Schema.org markup was developed by Google, Microsoft, Yahoo! and Yandex as a universal "language" to help search engines understand content. This doesn't replace HTML coding, but works in conjunction with it.

There are three major types of schema.org markup: microdata,

RDFa, and JSON-LD. Our comprehensive beginner's guide to schema.org markup introduces each of the different types and walks through how to use them on your website.

You are the best source of information about yourself, Barnard advised; all you need to do is tell Google who you are and what you do, and be truthful. "Once Google has understood you, it can offer you as a potential answer."

Establish your credibility

The second big component of answer engine optimization is credibility. Credibility gives answer engines confidence in their results; the more credible the source of an answer, the more Google et al can trust that it is accurate and worth providing to their users.

"It's important to remember that when somebody asks a question, whether they type it or whether they speak it, they're asking for the solution to a problem, or the answer to a question," said Barnard.

"Google's aim, and Bing's aim, is to give them access to that answer, or that solution, as quickly as possible. So their aim is to put the best at the top.

"Once it's understood that you are able to provide the answer, or the solution, if it's confident that you're a credible solution, it will put you at the top."



Domain authority, the traditional marker of credibility in SEO, is now giving way to **brand authority** as Google is increasingly able to determine a brand's reputation from mentions, reviews and other markers that don't require a link.

"The idea that Google only relies on links today is false," said Barnard. "Google relies on links, still, but as long as

it’s understood who you are, it can link a mention of your brand name to you.

“And then positive feedback from clients – review platforms, but also social media. A buzz around your brand – if the buzz is positive, that’s obviously a very strong signal to Google.

“So, **understanding plus credibility equals brand authority**. If you don’t improve your brand authority, your mid to long-term AEO strategy is doomed to failure.”

No pressure, then! Fortunately, Lo and Barnard also gave plenty of tips as to how you can go about establishing your credibility in the eyes of answer engines.

Reviews: it’s about quantity as much as quality

You need to make sure the reviews of your brand are positive, but Lo noted that people also look for a brand that has served plenty of consumers, and are more likely to opt for a company with a lower rating that has twice as many reviews than a company with a high rating that has fewer reviews.



Add yourself to trusted sources

Getting a mention from a trusted source isn’t something that’s completely out of your control. WikiData, the database behind Wikipedia, is very important to Google as a credible source of information – and you can add yourself to it.

The same goes for Crunchbase, a database of innovative companies and the people behind them, on which you can create your own profile. Government websites and business associations are other, trusted sources in your niche that Google can use to confirm that you’re credible.

Niche mentions still carry weight

“You don’t need to think big” when it comes to getting mentions of your business, Barnard advised. If you can get a positive mention of your business on a website that’s relevant to your niche, that carries plenty of weight – you don’t need to be name-dropped by the *New York Times* or the BBC.

Correct inaccuracies

You should make sure all the information about your brand that you control is accurate – but you can also do something to correct inaccuracies on external websites. If someone has talked about you on a website and it’s inaccurate, you can contact them and ask them to change it.

Some quick wins for AEO

Here are some ‘quick wins’ that you can achieve with regard to answer engine optimization:

- Communicate using semantic HTML5 and structured data markup (schema.org)
- Ensure that the information you provide is corroborated by trusted third parties
- Improve your credibility through mentions, links, and reviews on:
    - Social media platforms
    - High-traffic sites
    - Authoritative sites
    - Third-party review sites
    - Relevant niche brands

Conclusion

We’ve covered a lot of ground in this article, but ultimately, there are a few fundamental points to take away.

“The single most important thing in AEO and in SEO is

communicating about your brand, protecting it and promoting it," said Jason Barnard.

Communicating what your brand does feeds into making it credible, as Google can apply credibility signals only if it understands your brand.

Barnard emphasized that improving brand authority should be the focal point of your marketing efforts, as efforts in this area will also benefit your other marketing channels.

You can check on the status of your brand authority by finding out what results Google, or Bing, returns for "opinion" searches for your brand – i.e. "[brand name] + review". Ask yourself why these results are appearing – is it because your brand is bad, or because the answer engine has misunderstood information about your brand? If so, correct it.

Google still struggles to understand brands – which means there are great advantages to be had if you can get Google to understand your brand.

"It's not a question of cheating, or gaming the system," said Barnard. "Google wants to understand, so if you can explain to it what it is you do, and that you're credible, it's very happy."

Of course, every brand believes that it is credible, but the challenge is in proving it to Google. "In order to prove that you're credible, you have to make sure that information is online and that Google has seen it."

Barnard observed that in the new realm of brand authority and answer engines, we've moved away from link-building and machine-oriented tactics, towards a "more human" world of traditional marketing strategies like press relations.

"We've gone away from creating content for search engines, and we're now creating content to create context, and create

credibility in what it is we’re doing. And I find that incredibly encouraging.”

Rebecca Sentance is the Deputy Editor of Search Engine Watch.

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As you look to expand the reach of your business to cu

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website needs to be considered. The first step of this process is domain strategy

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