Will Google Home Hub ever become a useful local search tool?

Smart speakers have boomed in popularity. Amazon recently reported that its Echo Dot was the best selling product globally during “cyber weekend.” We don’t yet know how smart displays are doing, though Google’s Home Hub has probably sold well. According to a product listing on eBay, the Google Home Hub is the top-selling product in its smart speakers category.

Not realized as a marketing channel. Though smart speakers

have been widely adopted and lots of Americans own them, that hasn’t translated into all the promised marketing use cases — at least so far. People are using them to listen to music, check the weather, turn off lights; but I don’t see these devices driving much search volume. (Nobody has revealed search volume data for these devices.)

Early surveys about smart speaker usage seemed to suggest that large percentages of people were already doing local searches on smart speakers. Research from Edison Research and NPR reported, for example, that 36 percent of survey respondents had looked up restaurants or local businesses using a smart speaker. If that’s true, it’s unlikely to be a persistent, recurring behavior.

There’s also some reason to doubt how broadly the survey data can be extrapolated to the overall population. Yet much of the voice search optimization discussion anticipates the day when smart speakers and smart displays are routinely used for search and local search.

Inferior local user experience. I have about 10 of these devices at home. And when I use them for local lookups, it’s mainly to ask about store hours. The reason I don’t do more is that the user experience is significantly inferior to what’s available on smartphones and desktop computers. That’s to be expected on Google Home, but not as much on its smart display Home Hub.

Right now if you do a local search on a Google Home or Home Hub, you’ll get a list of businesses in a category (e.g., Hotels, Mexican restaurants). Google Home will read individual business names. You can also get directions sent to your phone. You can call businesses, which is great in theory but less useful in practice because of poor audio quality.

Google Home Hub will also do these things but offers more visual content: a horizontal carousel of basic business profile information and star ratings. My question is: what keeps Google from making available all the rich data that exists within Google My Business? It doesn’t seem to be a technical problem.

The missing content. Why aren’t the profile pages on Home Hub virtually identical to those available on the smartphone or PC? In nine out of 10 cases, local queries yield the same results that appear on smartphones in the same order. Why can’t you interact with more layers of local content, such as images, in-depth reviews and so on? This content on Home Hub would make it a lot more useful and create a virtuous cycle of local search usage, which Google could eventually monetize.

There’s also more work to be done on the smart speaker-

smartphone relationship. Beyond its database, this is one of Google's key advantages over Amazon, which doesn't have an installed mobile user base. To the extent that Google can create a rich cross-platform experience – initiating a search on Home and enabling follow up on the smartphone – it will create a kind of moat that Apple and Amazon will find it hard to overcome.

The bottom line is that without functionality and content that's at least as good as a smartphone, Google Home and Home Hub will never realize their local search potential. How much does Google see that potential and want it to be realized?

About The Author

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