

Voice Control Forces Marketers to Think Differently

Shift focus from promotional messaging to true utility

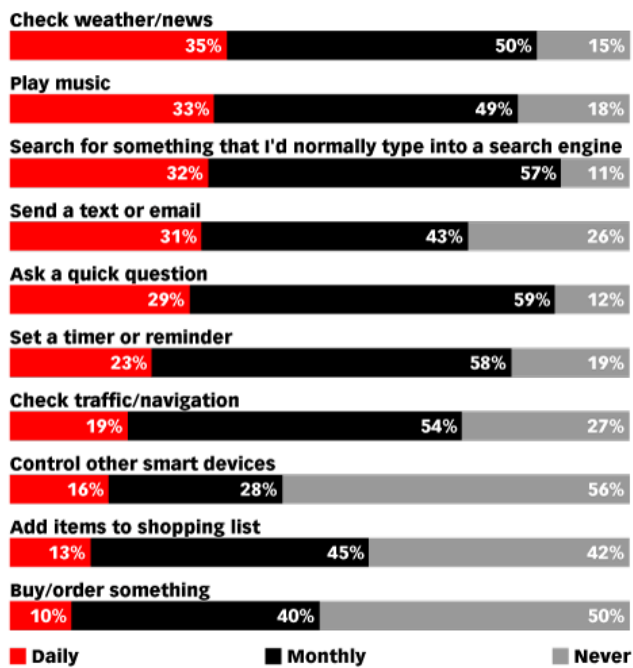
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Victoria Petrock

Consumers are becoming more comfortable using voice assistants, smart speakers and other voice-activated devices for a variety of everyday tasks. Research conducted in the US by **PwC** in February 2018 found that searching for information, playing music, sending messages and shopping were among the activities conducted by large percentages of voice assistant users.

Frequency with Which US Voice Assistant Users Conduct Select Activities via Voice Assistant, Feb 2018

% of respondents



Note: ages 18-64

Source: PwC, "Consumer Intelligence Series: Prepare for the voice revolution," April 2018

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As this reliance on voice-first communications grows, so too does interest among brands. Companies in all industries are experimenting to figure out how these new communication channels can help them interact with their target audiences and build brand engagement in more personalized and frictionless ways.

Voice, however, is unlike anything that's come before, which is forcing brands to think differently about how they design their campaigns. Rather than using traditional "push" messaging, they must work harder to make brand interactions useful and valuable—or they risk becoming irrelevant. While best practices for voice are still evolving, eMarketer's latest report, "[Marketing Beyond the Screen: Using Voice Technology to Boost Brand Engagement](#)," delves more deeply into these market dynamics and describes some concrete steps for getting started with voice control.

The biggest change is that voice-first technology requires marketers to design auditory interactions, without screens or keyboards. "When you

do a visual search on a desktop or a mobile phone, you're presented with multiple choices or answers to your query," said Allen Nance, CMO at Emarsys. "But when you do voice, you're pretty much getting whatever answer the device—or the company that owns the device—thinks is the right answer."

What's more, it's not yet possible to buy sponsored ads or keywords to improve the chances of being that one result. Instead, marketers must use trial and error to optimize content and try to organically appear in "position zero" (aka the "featured snippet" or "answer box" in a Google search).

According to Christopher Lundquist, vice president of strategy and consulting at SapientRazorfish, this "changes how marketers can work" and is further complicated by differences in how search engines like Google and Bing process queries, source information and prioritize results.

Voice devices also differ from other channels in that advertising is still very limited, and there are no ad networks or large-scale monetization models to work with. Even as brands clamor **for more paid opportunities**, voice platform companies—including Amazon and Google—are treading cautiously for fear of alienating users with invasive or inappropriate messaging.

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DOUG ROBINSON
CEO OF FRESH DIGITAL GROUP

In the absence of advertising, a growing number of brands are experimenting with third-party applications (called “skills” for Amazon Alexa, “actions” for Google Assistant and apps on other platforms). These enable users to do everything from creating grocery lists, finding recipes, and getting beauty tips, to listening to music, scheduling appointments, controlling smart-home devices and meditating.

The most popular of these fit organically into daily routines, save time, and make people’s lives easier or more enjoyable. “Consumers are dying for use cases and utility that make their lives better. These devices aren’t only getting smarter, they’re able to add more value to people’s lives,” said Doug Robinson, CEO of Fresh Digital Group. “It’s now up to brands and marketers to figure out what the utility is. Where are we playing a role? How important can we be in that day-to-day role to where we become a part of the habit and add the value that consumers are looking for?”

“From a discovery standpoint, consumers are still trying to figure out what to do with these devices, which offers an amazing opportunity for marketers to guide them to voice applications and provide utility value that they need every day,” Robinson added. “It’s really just a race to see who can take advantage of use cases that drive more consumer engagement with their brand.”

In the latest episode of "Behind the Numbers," eMarketer's Victoria Petrock talks about some of the ways marketers are currently experimenting with voice control. "Behind the Numbers" is sponsored by Mower.

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