

WHITE PAPER

VOICE SEARCH

The impact on SMB websites

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PART 1: INTRODUCTION

Search is changing. It's as simple as that. The days of opening your browser, loading your preferred search engine and typing in your search query will soon be a digital relic. In today's fast-paced world, voice technology is gaining terrain at high speed. It is nearly always accessible for consumers - from the smartphones in our pockets to the digital voice assistants we have installed in our cars and homes, and it is becoming a bigger and bigger part of our everyday lives.

Businesses have also been taking notice and to adapt to the growing popularity of voice technology amongst consumers, marketers are shifting focus from traditional search engine optimization (SEO). The new focus for big businesses is to create content strategies that ensure their brand is featured in voice search queries.

So what does this mean for small- and medium-sized businesses (SMBs) and their websites? This white paper tackles the important question of how voice search impacts the online presence of SMBs and how to tackle it head on. It also explains how Mono's approach in leveraging structured data on SMB websites can help ensure that digital presence of small businesses is not only optimized for voice search and online data consistency, but also provides a foundation for evolving technologies of the future.

PART 2: UNDERSTANDING VOICE SEARCH

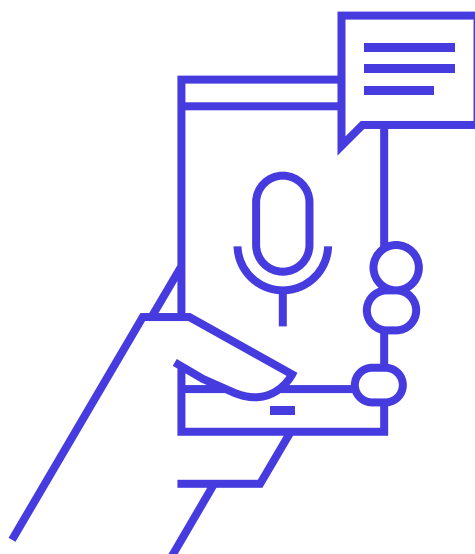
2.1 WHAT IS VOICE SEARCH?

Most of us have tried voice technology in some form or another. From asking Siri about the weather today or asking Alexa for the latest news, voice search gives users the ultimate convenience of using their voice to prompt a command or question, and get an answer in return in just a few seconds without actually touching a device.

From a technical perspective, voice search leverages both voice recognition technology and natural language processing algorithms to decode and understand a user's search query (delivered by voice) to find a matching answer on the internet, which can be relayed back to the user. To succeed, search engines need to try to understand the actual intention of a search, determine which content is available, and then they need to match the 'intention' of the search with the best result (relevant and quality content).

The search intention can be summarized as the total sum of many different factors. Some important examples are:

- Location of the user - for example: Los Angeles
- Time of day - for example: 8-9 am, 3-4 pm
- The type of query - in this case: voice query



The most notable difference in voice search, compared to traditional search, is that on devices with digital voice assistants (like Alexa or Google) only one answer is given to a search query. The choice of a results on the search engine result page (SERP) no longer exists, and voice search therefore relies extra heavily on finding authoritative and structured content in order to be able to correctly and accurately respond to the user's search query. Google voice search combines the input from the search query with knowledge of:

- Indexed quality content on the web: Gathered by crawling websites for structured content and evaluating the quality/trustworthiness of websites based on various ranking parameters
- Context of the search query: Uses language models to aggregate data on the context of words in search queries, making it easier for digital assistants to understand different ways consumers may phrase the same search query
- Which destinations are popular: Determined on traffic, reviews and big data analysis, helping digital assistants understand what consumers qualify as helpful¹

We tried asking a Google Home device



What is voice search?

According to Wikipedia, Google Voice Search or Search by Voice is a Google product that allows users to use Google Search by speaking on a mobile phone or computer, i.e. have the device search for data upon entering information on what to search into the device by speaking.

Clearly no product promotion there, right? All joking aside, this is a perfect example that highlights why optimizing your digital presence for voice search is critical. Voice will continue to be an important way for businesses to build a strong digital presence and leverage the opportunity to promote their brand in voice search queries.

1) Google, 2018, google.com/search/howsearchworks/algorithms/

2.2. WHY IS IT SO POPULAR?

The launch of the digital voice assistant Siri by Apple in 2011 catapulted voice search into the mainstream, mass market. Today, all smartphones come pre-installed with some form of digital voice assistant, and according to a study by Google,² 41% of adults and 55% of teens are using voice search at least once a day.

Today's popular voice assistants & digital devices

	Apple Siri	Google Google Assistant	Amazon Alexa	Microsoft Cortana
Launched	2011	2016	2014	2014
Voice command	Hey Siri	Hey Google	Hey Alexa	Hey Cortana
Devices	iPhones, iPads, Mac computers, Apple Homepod	Google Pixel smartphones, Google Home devices	Amazon Echo, Sonos speakers	Integrated with Harmon Karmon Invoke

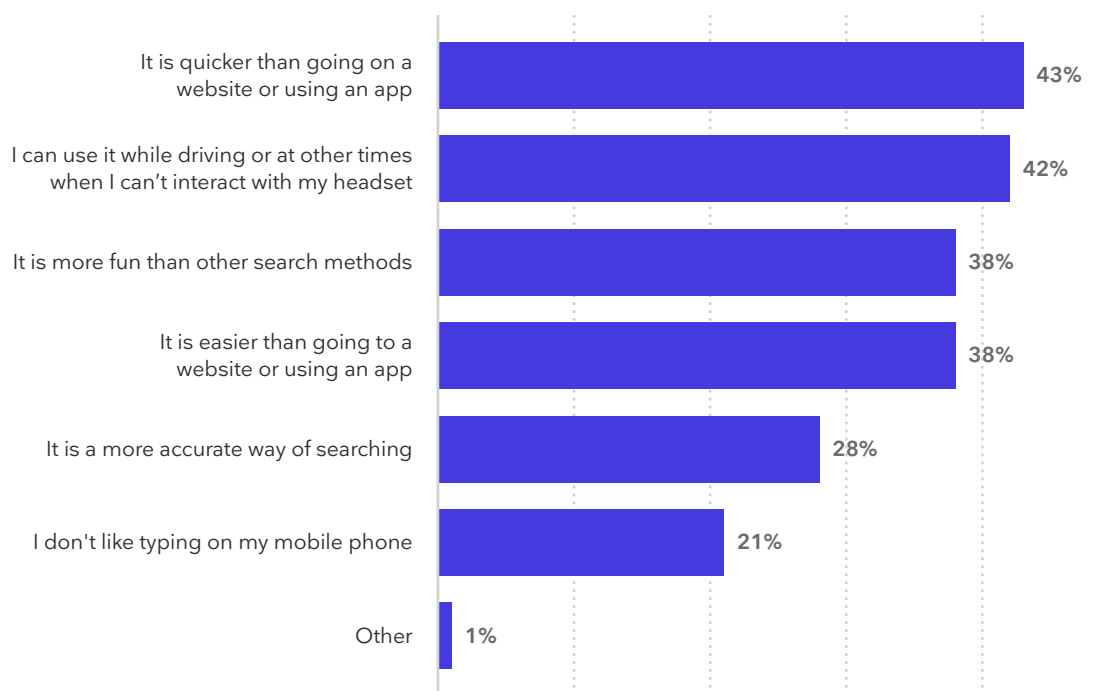
Other popular digital voice assistants include Samsung's Bixby, Alibaba's Tmall Genie, Baidu's Xiaoyu Zaijia (Little Fish), Xiaomi's Xiao Ai and JD.com's LingLongDingDong

Did you know?
 The majority of digital voice assistants have a female voice. According to studies, consumers find female voices more welcoming and understanding.

2) Google, 2014, googleblog.blogspot.com/2014/10/omg-mobile-voice-survey-reveals-teens.html

It's really no surprise that voice search has been adopted so quickly, as it is fast and easy to use. Leveraging voice as a medium for technology has not only made it more natural for users to integrate technology into their lives, but according to a study by Stanford University,³ it is also faster - as humans can speak to digital voice assistants three times faster than they could type the same search query.

Top voice search usage reasons



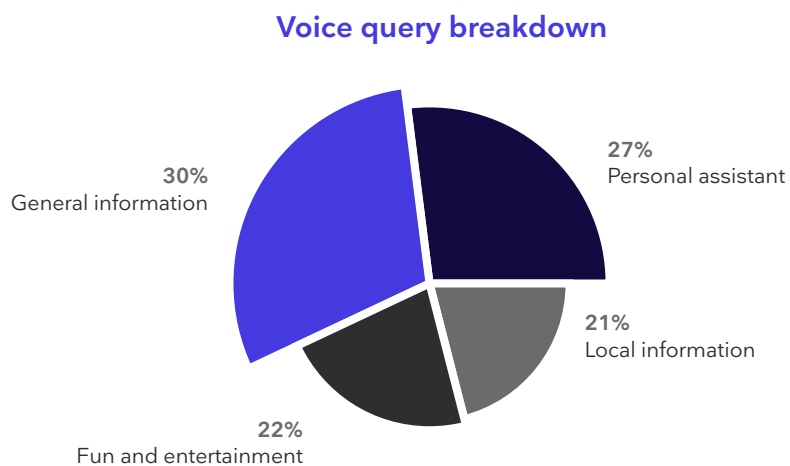
Source: Statista 2015

Humans are simply more comfortable talking, and 53% of people who own a voice-activated speaker even say it feels natural talking to it⁴ and 41% of voice speaker owners even feel it's like talking to a friend or another person. Ultimately, it's easier and it's more fun, as key statistics from the 2015 survey Statista⁵ indicate.

3) Stanford University, 2016, hci.stanford.edu/research/speech/ 4) Google, 2017, thinkwithgoogle.com/data-gallery/detail/talking-to-voice-assistant/ 5) Statista, 2015, [statista.com/statistics/467725/top-voice-search-usage-reasons-worldwide/](https://www.statista.com/statistics/467725/top-voice-search-usage-reasons-worldwide/)

How consumers are using voice search

So with the proliferation of voice search amongst consumers, what are they actually searching for? One study found that consumers use voice search queries for:



Source: SoundHound, 2015 via KPCB 2016 Internet Trends Slide 124: kpcb.com/blog/2016-internet-trends-report

While there are a lot of statistics out there highlighting different percentages of consumers using voice search for one thing or another, it does point to the fact that users may be asking digital voice assistants to help them with more diverse, and in some cases much more specific tasks, such as:

- General information searches that include: Daily news, weather, recommendations, addresses, directions
- Personal assistant searches that include: Researching products, purchasing products, setting alarms
- Local information searches that include: Finding a specific kind of shop or restaurant nearby, movie times
- Fun and entertainment searches that include: Looking up facts, jokes, podcasts, music

2.3 WHY SHOULD IT MATTER TO SMBs?

Big businesses are already investing heavily in voice search, ensuring that they are present in voice search query answers, and also for example in the form of advertisements and sponsorships for news read by voice assistants. With limited time and budgets, small businesses are often the last to adopt digital marketing tactics, so how do they compete with big businesses that have already invested? Should they optimize their digital presence for voice search? Is it really worth the time and effort?

The answer is YES.

The Voice Search For Local Business study by BrightLocal⁶ found that 46% of consumers use voice search to find local business information on a daily basis, and after getting information about local business via voice search:

- 28% of consumers call the business
- 27% visit their website
- 19% visit their location
- 18% continue to do more research on the business

Voice search as part of the customer journey

The numbers indicate that voice search truly is part of the customer journey and as consumers interact more with small businesses through voice, the more actions they seek to be able to take directly via voice. The same study found that:

- 46% would like to hear local businesses' prices in voice search results
- 41% would like to find out which products and services a local business sells or offers
- 40% would like to find out which products a local business has in stock

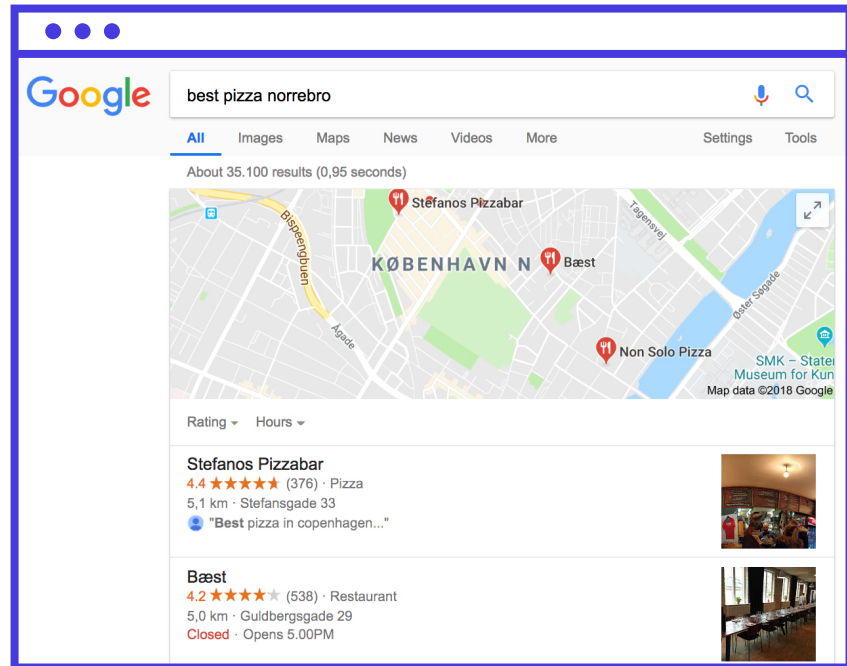
Here we can also ascertain that there is a real desire to use voice search for purchases, which again underlines the importance for SMBs to start leveraging this technology to grow their business.

6) BrightLocal, 2018, brightlocal.com/learn/voice-search-for-local-business-study/

Real-life example



Hey Alexa, I'd like to order pizza.



Wouldn't it be nice if Alexa could order from the highly-rated local Stefanos Pizzabar instead of Domino's? This shows just how important it is for local businesses to ensure their digital presence includes voice search, and that the voice-driven share of business doesn't just go to the big players.

PART 3:

STRUCTURED DATA AND VOICE SEARCH

Website content is a crucial component in providing users with a relevant search result. The claims that voice search will make websites irrelevant is short sighted and often fails to consider how the technical set up of how search queries are processed. Even more so than other types of search, voice search requires authoritative and structured content in order to give a single answer that is accurate and relevant. This makes websites' use of structured data and schema.org mark-up crucial to effectively answering voice search queries.

What is structured data?

Structured data is a standardized format that uses schema.org vocabulary and structured data formats, that marks up content so that specific web page and content can easily be identified. By using a standardized format, it is easier for search engines to classify the page content; for example, on a recipe page, what are the ingredients, the cooking time and temperature, the calories, and so on.

Structured data formats:

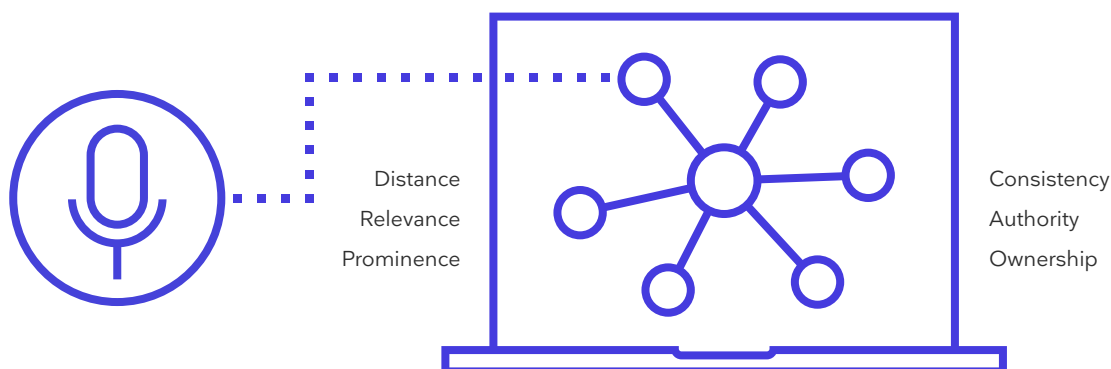
- JSON-LD (recommended by Google)
- Microdata
- RDFa

Check your website

Google has created a Structured Data Testing Tool, so you can check if your website is properly structured: search.google.com/structured-data/testing-tool

3.1 WEBSITES AS AN AUTHORITATIVE SOURCE

The challenge with all search is finding the most relevant and accurate information for the user. Search engines need to qualify and rank content in order to ensure the most accurate and relevant results for consumers. Thus, search engines aim to find results that are close to the user (distance), fulfill the intention of their search query (relevance) and is highly ranked (prominence). So when it comes to searches for local businesses, their proprietary business websites are the most natural and authoritative online source.



The business website is the only online real estate where a small business truly owns and controls the content (data) around their brand, unlike many other online marketing channels - for example Google My Business and Facebook Business pages. With the business information centrally structured and stored on the website, the website acts as a hub of where to find accurate information about SMBs, and can be used to drive consistency across the digital landscape.

3.2 WEBSITES DRIVE BRAND VOICE

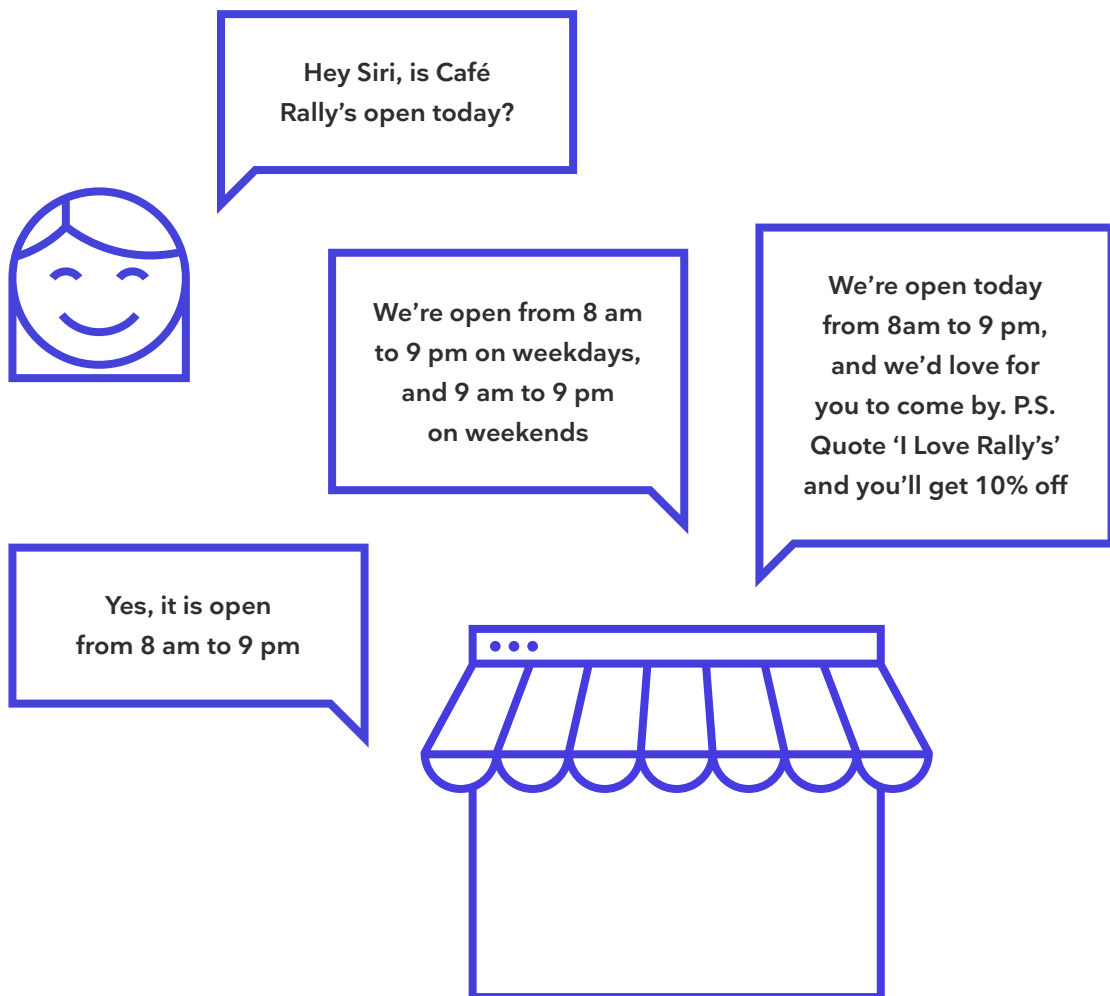
Consumers are becoming more comfortable speaking to voice-activated devices and digital voice assistants, and according to Google⁷ owners of voice-activated speakers are open to receiving all kind of information from businesses, including:

- 52% would like to receive information about deals, sales and promotions from brands
- 48% want personalized tips and information to make their life easier
- 42% want information about upcoming events and activities
- 38% want access to customer service or support

Just the same way a logo or color can visually represent a brand, the voice of brands will become more important as consumers increasingly engage via voice and build brand loyalty and recognition through voice activation.

By taking brand voice into consideration when writing website content, SMBs can ensure that their voice is heard just as loudly as the big companies. And while the incorporation of a brand's voice may still be in the future for most businesses, it will give businesses the ability to personify their brand and use it to drive more engagement from their customers.

How would you like your business to respond to a customer request?



As brand voice comes into play in voice technology, more businesses will seek to customize responses to customers. By adding brand personality and enticing customers with promotions, businesses will be able to use voice technology to drive business and brand loyalty.

7) Google, 2017, thinkwithgoogle.com/data-collections/voice-assistance-emerging-technologies/

PART 4: OPTIMIZING WEBSITES FOR VOICE SEARCH

At Mono, we're dedicated to ensuring that our platform is always at the forefront of search engine optimization, including voice search. Our focus is to ensure that website content is structured to be easily crawled and understood by search engines, as well as secure the highest level of performance in terms of load speed, mobile responsiveness, W3C validation and more.

By continually ensuring best-in-class technical standards and integrating the use of JSON-LD markup into the core of our platform, we're not only able to drive the adoption of structured data by SMBs - but also help them successfully ensure that their business website is future proof as voice search and other web technology evolves.

4.1 STRUCTURED CONTENT

Yes, content is still king. But today, content needs to be structured in order to provide search engines with quick insight into the meaning of the website's content. Mono's approach has been to ensure that best practice schema.org markup (based on JSON-LD and microdata formatting) has been seamlessly integrated into the platform wherever content is added.

Mono's use of structured data ensures that Google and other search engines can precisely and effectively understand the content on any webpage built on our platform. In addition to this, the extensive JSON-LD markup in the Mono Platform supports rich results, such as Google's Knowledge Panels, for increased visibility of the search engine result pages (SERP)

Mono's approach to structured data

Structured data is a fundamental part of the Mono Platform to ensure that an SMB's most important business information is always easily accessible for search engines. The Mono Platform currently supports a wide variety of content, including everything from opening hours to videos to payment methods, with more structured content fields being added all the time.

4.2 EDITORIAL CONTENT

- Understand your audience: Who they are (consumer segment, age, gender etc.) and how do they talk about your business (keywords)? Remember, for Google, it's a matchmaking game. By creating website content based on how a target audience perceives a business, optimizes the chances of becoming the end-destination for relevant search queries.
- Reviews build a reputation: Ensuring that small business websites have reviews that are properly marked up is important because popularity is a strong ranking factor in search engines.⁸ Reviews combined with location when searching make a stronger chance for finding a relevant result.
- Consistency is key: Having an updated address and basic company information is vital, as varying information across the internet can confuse Google (and the user) and incorrect business information may be shown, or worse - show a competing business.

“In most cases, optimizing for voice search is no different than optimizing for showing up as an Instant Answer in Google. Google often uses those results as the initial voice search result. For many businesses, one of the trickiest problems is getting Google, Siri or Alexa to understand a query for their brand name, particularly those with unusual and/or long names.

We were working with a car dealer a few years ago where when you asked Siri for directions to their dealership, it would send you to another dealer in another part of the city that had a similar name. We solved this problem by making sure their business information was up to date in all of the known business data sources Apple uses and then getting employees of the business to query Siri several times and “train it” as to what the correct result was.”

- Andrew Shotland, CEO of LocalSEOGuide

- Natural language: When users speak to Google, they formulate search queries differently than in writing. Therefore, ensuring that website copy is written using natural language and makes use of long tail keywords, the bigger chance of relevance it will have to a voice search query. Creating dedicated pages or blog posts based on frequently asked questions (FAQ) is a great example of natural language content.

What are long tail keywords?

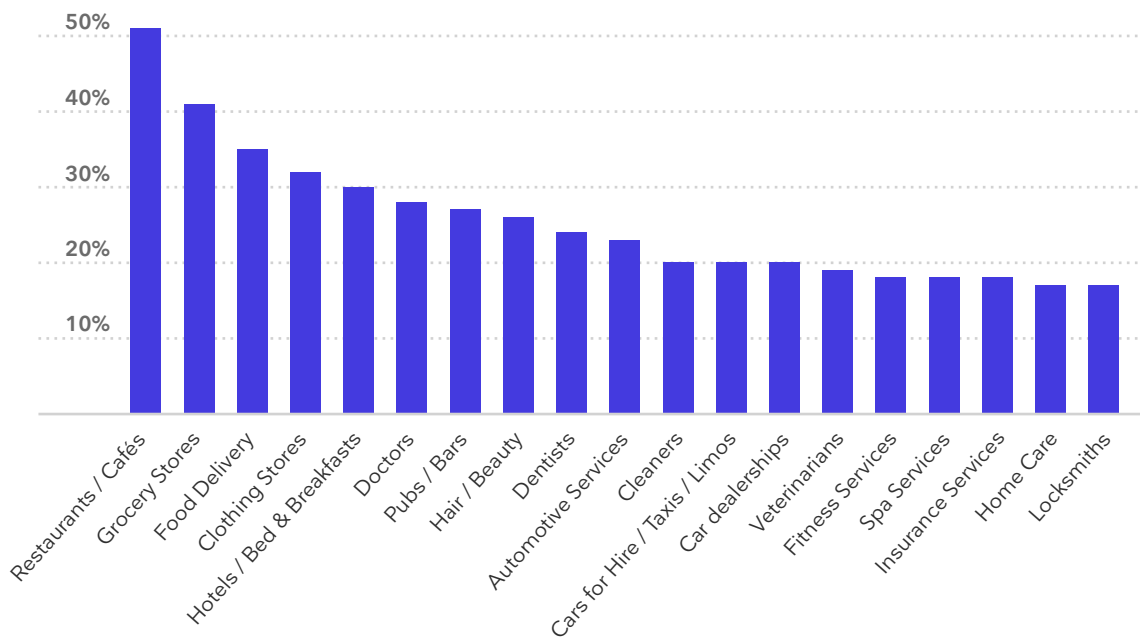
Long tail keywords are keywords that have three or more words, and are normally more specific to capture the attention of a specific target group.

8) LocalSEOGuide, 2017, localseoguide.com/guides/local-seo-ranking-factors/

PART 5: VOICE SEARCH - A NEW WAY TO DRIVE BUSINESS

Voice search will, without a doubt, have an impact on small businesses going forward. The Voice Search for Local Business study by BrightLocal has already found that they would consider using voice search for a wide variety of local businesses, such as restaurants & cafés, grocery stores, clothing stores and more.

Which business types would you consider using voice search to find?



Source: BrightLocal 2018

Even more so, voice search poses the opportunity for SMBs to drive business through direct bookings. The same study found that:

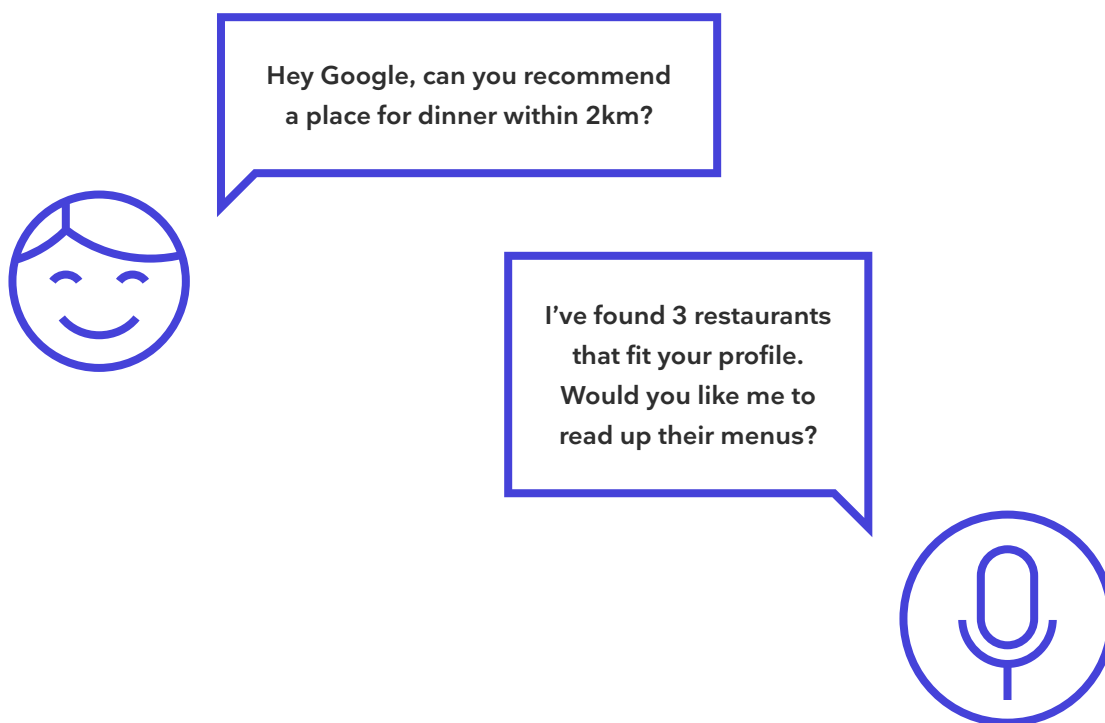
- 54% of consumers would like to use voice search to make a restaurant/pub/bar reservation
- 35% to book a beauty appointment
- 35% to book a medical appointment
- 32% to buy directly from a business

Voice search is a real and viable channel for SMBs to drive leads and convert customers. Combined with artificial intelligence (AI), voice search will empower more intelligent and personalized answers for consumers.

Voice for local search and exploration

In the future, it's also likely that consumers will use voice for local search and exploration. By leveraging data on a user's prior preferences with their voice search query, the artificial intelligence behind digital assistants will be able to recommend products, venues and experience for the individual user. As such, voice technology and other evolving web technology has the opportunity to transform local search into local exploration, and drive new business to local consumers.

The future of voice search: Boost local



Ben is 35 years old and on vacation in Paris with his wife and two young children. He is looking for a restaurant to eat at for dinner. Based on his prior restaurant preferences (affordable, family friendly, good service, minimum 4 star rating), search engines will be able to use this structured data to recommend several local restaurants for him, within his given distance range.

PART 6: SUMMARY

From the customer journey to brand loyalty, voice search has a clear impact on SMBs' marketing strategy including how they use their website.

The technology race for the best digital voice assistant is just beginning, and the use of voice technology is already having a significant impact on the customer journey. As these technologies race to win more usage, there will be a focus on making digital assistants increasingly intelligent and adding more advanced capabilities.

As digital assistants grow more complex, the use of structured data will remain an important way for search engines to find authoritative answers for voice search queries. Structured data itself will also evolve to include ever more types of data and data-driven interaction, such as scheduling, further blurring the line between what consumers interpret as voice search and digital voice assistance.

To put it simply - SMB websites need to be more advanced than ever before, making use of structured data in the website is vital to ensure small businesses succeed in being found via voice search. With the Mono Platform, small business owners can rest assured that structured data makes their website not only relevant now, but also in the future.

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