



Hey Google: Voice Search and Customer's Path to Purchase

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Keyword: Voice Search, Path-To-Purchase, Customer Journey, V-Commerce

The internet, currently is impacting society in numerous ways and to some extent it can be stated that it is one the most important things in day to day life. One of the most critical use of this technology is “searching”. Search is a critical component on the e-commerce website, especially since on-site searchers are over 200 percent more likely to convert to sale than a user casually browsing (New Research Reveals, 2018). In the world of search, a disruptive technology, Voice Search is slowly but surely gaining traction. Voice is redefining the meaning of “mobile,” and it is way beyond smartphones and tablets, and some of them don’t even have screens such as Amazon Echo and Google Home (Ebeid, 2018). In a similar vein, customers are enthusiastically adopting voice technology, with 74% of them stating that text-only search is insufficient for finding the products they want (Voice Technology As, 2018; Yu, 2018). This change in customer behavior has led to “*Voice Commerce*”, which is projected to explode over the next few years, from \$2 billion in 2018 to more than \$40 billion by 2022 (O’Brien, 2018). Thus, it is imperative that the industry understand how and when customers are using voice search, especially since voice technology is reshaping customer digital interactions and the path to purchase. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine customers’ path-to-purchase by mapping their journey and creating a customer journey map.

Customer use of Voice Search: Increasingly, customers are enthusiastically adopting voice technology and see themselves using it more frequently, and for a broader array of tasks, especially shopping with 36% planning to increase their voice purchases in the next 12 months (Voice Technology As, 2018). Voice device (e.g. Amazon Echo, Google Home) ownership has gone up, especially as these devices are going mainstream and shopping behaviors are changing with 41% increase in using the device to shop (Connecting With Shoppers, 2018). Gradually customers are starting to use virtual assistants at the beginning of their path to purchase, before switching to screen-based devices and while voice isn't replacing the shopping trip, it is replacing the shopping list (Silverman, 2018). In fact, 65% of customers who own a voice device cannot imagine going back to the days before they had a smart speaker (Yu, 2018). Thus, as a retailer it is critical that they understand how and when customers are using voice search.

Voice Commerce (V-Commerce): Voice commerce is booming with sales reaching \$1.8 billion in 2017 in United States and predicted to reach \$40 billion by 2022 (Yu, 2018). Voice commerce is attractive to customers as it offers both convenience and personalization (Silverman, 2018). For retailers, voice commerce allows them to leverage the strengths of voice shopping by recommending products they know their customers have already bought and rated highly as well as that interact directly with customers several times a day (Connecting With Shoppers, 2018);

Silverman, 2018). Thus, it can be predicted that voice commerce has the potential to be a game changer for ecommerce and hence the retail industry.

Customer Journey Mapping: Technology is changing the path to purchase, requiring brands to examine and evaluate their marketing models (Hunter, 2018). Voice search allows retailers to engage more meaningfully with their audience at each stage of their purchase journey (Yu, 2018). Hence, it can be stated that, if retailers want to remain relevant and continue to reach customers, optimizing their assets for voice search queries will become absolutely crucial (The Ultimate Guide To, n.d.). This proposed research will suggest a potential customer journey for voice search strategy.

Customer journey mapping can be defined as “visually illustrating customers’ processes, needs and perceptions throughout their interaction and relationship with a brand” (What is Customer, n.d.). Customer journey maps are always sequential and provide a context for what is occurring at each moment. A customer journey is a sequential representation of customer’s direct and indirect contacts with a product, service or brand (Meyer & Schwager, 2007). These interactions could potentially be either positive, negative or neutral experience (Berry, Carbone, & Haeckel, 2002). The various phases within the customer’s journey can occur in both digital as well as physical channels (Meyer & Schwager, 2007) and each of these phases can be influenced by past experiences and by one or more touch points during each phase, which influences the future experience (Micheaux, A., & Bosio, B. (2018) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Customer Journey Mapping



Conceptual Framework: The conceptual framework will be adapted from Stein, & Ramaseshan (2016), study that examined the elements that encompass customer experience touch points*. A qualitative research approach, using a sequential incident technique, will be employed. The sequential incident technique (SIT) is a qualitative interviewing technique that is used to benchmark a process by enabling the collection of incidents perceived by customers during the service delivery process (Stauss & Weinlich, 1997). SIT employs story-telling approach, thus enabling respondents to use their own words when describing and evaluating all events they recall with regards to any service encounters. This technique is capable of measuring cognitive assessment of service encounters (Bitner Booms, & Tetreault, 1990), analyze the emotional content in narratives of critical incidents (Grace, 2007) as well as elicit thoughts and feelings customers have in a service experience (Gremler, 2004).

Methodology: Data for the proposed study will be collected through interviews and diary studies. Interviews have been proven successful in allowing respondents to share information in the way it is stored in their memories, generally as stories, they can self-interpret the experience providing deeper meanings to their action (Schank, 1995; Weick, 1995). Diary studies have been found to be successful in examining a long-term process, such as the customer journey, as

customers may not recall all the steps involved in the process (Chase & Dasu, 2001). Information gathered will be analyzed using content analysis. Content analysis has been established to be useful for providing support to existing theories as well as examining new patterns that can then be used to assist in formulating new theories (Kolbe, & Burnett, 1991).

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