

# B2B Marketers Find Their Voice

Smart-speaker technology holds growing appeal among B2B brands and organizations

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B2B marketers have long known the value of "voice of the customer." It provides a better understanding of customers' and prospects' preferences and expectations.

**B**ut now there are other voices that marketers need to adopt: smart speakers and voice technology that increasingly are wending their way from the consumer world to B2B processes.

The penetration of voice assistant technology built into smart speakers, phones, and other digital devices during the first quarter of 2019 was 36 percent among all U.S. adults, according to The **Nielsen Total Audience Report**. Eighty-eight percent of smart speaker activities included voice-initiated search for factual information, while 66 percent involved listening to podcasts.

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**Smart speakers are a new frontier for B2B marketers.**



And it's a gathering storm. According to **Mary Meeker's Internet Trends 2019 report**, the installed base of Amazon's Echo devices running its Alexa voice technology, the market leader with a **63 percent U.S. penetration**, has hit 47 million, a doubling in just one year.

"Voice is one of those trends that isn't coming from corporate IT, but rather from the consumer market," says Rainer Zinow, SVP of SAP's Business ByDesign and SAP Business One integrated ERP software

suites, which cater to midsized companies. "In business, it's being driven by the millennials who are making more and more decisions and who are thinking, 'I'm talking to Alexa at home all the time, so why can't I do it here at work?'"

Business ByDesign's voice capabilities — which the company calls a "showcase" of possibilities — are largely focused on internal users right now. For example, an accountant might ask a smart speaker for quarterly financial figures, or an account executive might request updated client sales data, and the ERP system will provide the information verbally via smart speakers.

"We're also seeing voice technology used more and more in warehouses, where a headphone-equipped worker might be notified that an order is ready for shipment or, alternately, might ask for his next task," Zinow says. "It can be either a push or pull process. We're partnering with Honeywell and its **Vocollect voice technology**, which provides voice-enabled mobile capabilities in these environments."

The process, Zinow notes, portends greater use of placing business supply orders, whether in a warehouse, in the field, or in an office environment.

## Carrying a B2B Voice

Increasing business interactions with voice technology is mirrored in a change in how people feel about using such technology around others. Perficient Digital, in its **Mobile Voice Usage Trends 2019**, notes that while most people use digital assistants at home, about 60 percent say they use the technology in the office when alone, and 35 percent use it in the office with others nearby.

Significantly, the penetration of business professionals using voice commands in a work environment with others present has more than tripled in three years. (The study did not indicate whether voice queries in the office were for personal or business purposes.)

"In the three years we've conducted this research, there has been a steady increase in people using voice commands in public places," says Eric Enge, general manager of digital marketing at Perficient Digital. "The stigma of using voice around others is going down."

There are two main areas B2B marketers should consider when deploying voice technology, says Meghan Keaney Anderson, VP of marketing at HubSpot. First, they should optimize content to be accessible through voice search as well as browser search, so that a spoken result occupies "position zero" for that query and not a dozen different options. Second, marketers need to know how people are using voice in the decision-making process.

"It's the same strategy you'd use for getting your **Google snippet** on the search page," Anderson says. "Think about the terms you can win, then create content that answers those queries in a well-structured way."

## Straightforward Questions Work Best

Anderson says optimizing for voice search means being as natural as possible and using everyday language. Artificial intelligence (AI) in its current form isn't smart enough to parse huge chunks of content, so straightforward questions and answers work best, such as, "Alexa, what are the best software choices for my business?"

To maximize this, marketers should consult with customer service reps to determine — word for word — the most common natural language requests the company receives via phone, and then optimize for variations of those queries.

But it goes further than that. The intent of a voice search is vastly different than writing a query into a search engine, Anderson says.

"We pulled a cross section of things that are being asked of digital assistants, and it was immediately obvious that voice search is more action-oriented than simply being an exploratory process," she says. "In other words, when someone uses voice search, they've already made up their mind to do something, make a purchase, for example. They know what they want and then they go to voice to order it.

"That also means when people use voice search they're further down in the sales funnel, closer to making a decision, and probably represent a higher-value sale as well," she adds.

Anderson notes that because digital assistants "learn" such personal details as past orders, preferred vendors, and price ranges — unlike browser searches, which rely on expressed terms — ordering supplies and parts can be faster and easier using voice.

If there is one stumbling block to wider voice search adoption, it would be the relative inadequacy of the results to date. Cognilytica's most recent **Voice Assistant Benchmark study**, for example, asked four different digital assistants 144 questions each and gauged their accuracy. Amazon's Alexa led the pack, but answered only 49 questions correctly, or just 34 percent. Google Voice Search came second, with 48 correct answers, followed by Microsoft's Cortana (46), and Apple's Siri (35).

"If the consumer side isn't very sophisticated and helpful, it has to be even less so on the B2B side," says Colin Colburn, an analyst with Forrester, whose similar research revealed a voice search accuracy of 35 percent overall. "I do think this will change, but it's hard to see how a B2B buyer would rely so heavily on a device they can't talk to. I see it as more of a futuristic thing, perhaps five or more years from now."

## **Skills and Actions Required**

Even though penetration rates are lower among business users than consumers, Colburn says business search results have the potential to be more accurate because they can be optimized for lengthy, natural-language queries. In addition, apps like **Alexa Skills** and

**Google Actions** can be customized to provide particular results rather than generalized search queries.

Colburn cites J.P. Morgan's **use of Alexa Skills**, which enables clients to request and verbally receive such information as the latest research from certain analysts, or specific stock information. For example, a client might say, "Alexa, ask J.P. Morgan what the price target for Apple is," and the speaker will provide it verbally.

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Morgan Stanley has a **similar Alexa Skill**, while **TD Ameritrade says** it's the first company to allow trading via Alexa or Google.

One key to voice search is that it can be highly personal in interacting with a particular voice, its inclinations, and past activities, and can even intuit future requests. That's the future, at least, and the technology is shaping up to increase in sophistication during the next few years.

"We're really just in the infancy of voice," says Amine Bentahar, chief operating and digital officer at ad agency Advantix Digital. "Companies don't yet have a chief voice officer, but a lot of SaaS (Software as a service) companies as well as medical device companies I know are starting to optimize more for voice. Brands are building Skills and Actions around questions that can be asked about specific products and services."

Bentahar notes that data from all searches are being fed into CRM and marketing automation systems. Deploying voice technology can predict when a reorder is due; as the artificial intelligence of voice technology increases in sophistication, the predictive

ability of voice will be unique to the platform.

"There will come a time where ordering products and parts alone will save an amazing amount of time," Bentahar says. "Employees can just say, 'Order it.' Eventually it will evolve to an extremely personal level."

The inevitable success of voice will lie in one simple reality, says Bentahar, that may further disrupt B2B sales and marketing: "The company at the other end of an Amazon Echo or Google Home won't be trying to sell you something you don't need. Rather, it will supply you with what it already knows you do need."

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