Voice Search Technology Benefits Small Businesses

Is your business ready for “voice search”? In this column I will share with you this topic that caught my interest because it has implications for your small business. SCORE staff periodically puts together content regarding small businesses and this was completed recently by Bridget Weston Pollack, Vice President of Marketing & Strategy at the SCORE Association.

If you think back to the formative days of voice search, a query for “What to plant in my garden,” might have returned a search for “Robert Plant and Soundgarden.” As frustrating as it was to conduct a proper voice search, people kept using it, undeterred.

The continued use of voice search paved the way for some truly remarkable technology and led to the rise of mobile assistants like Siri, Cortana and Alexa, as well as smart speakers like Amazon’s Echo, Apple’s HomePod and Google’s Home. These innovations have forced Silicon Valley to refine voice search technology, and while it’s still not perfect, it is right more often than it’s wrong.

With more people using it than ever, no other sector has benefitted more from voice search than small, local businesses. In fact, the surge in voice-search popularity has had a profound effect on the way people interact with local businesses online.

If your small business’s website isn’t optimized for voice search, you could be missing out on more web traffic, greater awareness and ultimately, more customers.

It’s All in the Numbers. If you’ve ever used voice search, you already know how easy it is to use. It’s quicker than using your smartphone keys, and you often don’t even have to unlock your device to get the answers you need. The technology is so ubiquitous, most people don’t even give it a second thought.

The statistics are astonishing. Consider this:
• 58% of consumers have used voice search to find local businesses in the last year
• 46% of voice search users use it to find local businesses on a daily basis
• 28% of voice search users search for local businesses once a week
• 76% of smart speaker users perform local searches at least weekly
• 27% of users visit the website of a local business after making a voice search

Not surprisingly, the largest segment of society using voice search to find local business information over the last year is those who fall within the 18 to 34 age range (76%). Interestingly, however, the 35-54-year-old crowd isn’t that far behind, with 64% saying they’ve conducted a voice search in the past year. Just 37% of the 55 and over population said they have used the feature in that time frame.

What are they looking for? While it might seem like finding the hours of operation or the location of local businesses would be the most popular uses for voice search, the data tells a different story. Most people are using voice search to:

• Make a restaurant reservation (54%)
• Find the prices of a local business’s products or services (46%)
• Discover products a local business sells or offers (41%)
• Learn which products a local business has in stock (40%)
• Book a medical or beauty appointment (35%)
• Buy directly from a business (32%)

Those surveyed indicated they use voice search mostly to find information about these industries:

• Restaurants/Cafes (54%)
• Grocery Stores (41%)
• Food Delivery (35%)
• Clothing Stores (32%)
• Hotels/Bed & Breakfasts (30%)
For anyone operating within these industries, this information should be eye-opening. Experts predict that voice search will only continue to grow, which means business owners will need to find new and better ways to adapt to the trend.

Preparing Your Website for Voice Search: It’s all well and good to know the statistics, but how can you make that information actionable?

It helps to understand how voice search differs from typed search engine searches. If you were looking to learn who the CEO of Google is, for example, you might type in “Google CEO” to get your answer. If you were using voice search, you would probably ask the question, “Who is the CEO of Google?” While either query will get you the answer, these two search queries are different, and the search engines treat them that way.

Perhaps the most important way voice search differs from text search is that voice searches are three times more likely to be locally based.

So, if you want to optimize your website for voice search, here are three best practices to keep in mind:

1. Use natural language and multiple-word keywords when developing new content
2. Add questions and answers to your website so search engines will be able to better match your content to the queries
3. Make sure your location, hours and phone number are on your website and in all search engine directories (such as Google My Business and Bing’s Places for Business).

Dean L. Swanson
Southeast Minnesota SCORE
c/o Rochester Area Chamber of Commerce
220 South Broadway, Suite 100
Rochester, MN 55904
www.seminnesota.score.org/
*Dean is a volunteer Certified SCORE Mentor and former SCORE Chapter Chair, District Director, and Regional Vice President for the North West Region