

Best Practices for Voice Search and Position Zero Optimization Strategies



Best Practices for Voice Search and Position Zero Optimization Strategies

by Kent Lewis

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MOBILE DEVICES HAVE TRANSFORMED THE WAY we connect and communicate. As a marketer, I'm particularly intrigued by the convergence of mobile, local and voice search as highly-targeted marketing channels. Our phones and other personal devices contain artificial intelligence-powered personal assistants (Siri, Alexa, Google Assistant, Cortana, Bixby, etc.) which, enhanced by machine learning, can connect users with timely answers to questions, recommend products or services or facilitate purchase. The good news with voice search and position 0, is that they provide an opportunity for smaller companies to play in a crowded and competitive space: the top of search results. Unfortunately, there is only one winner. In this article, I underline the importance of mastering voice search and position 0 rankings, as well as outline best practices for winning the coveted pole position known as position 0.

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A bit of background on the opportunity that is voice search and position 0 on Google may provide helpful context. According to Hitwise, nearly 60 percent of searches are now performed on a mobile device. According to Google, 55 percent of teens and 41 percent of adults use voice search more than once a day. Eighty two percent of mobile users search for local businesses. Fifty percent of mobile visitors who perform a local search will visit a store within one day, with 18 percent of local mobile searches leading to a sale within a day. The data tells us your customers and prospects utilize mobile (and other personal devices) to search for and purchase products and services via voice. If your business, local or otherwise, is not building a strategy to harness this growing trend, you will be left in the dust.

What is Voice Search?

In short, voice search allows you to ask questions of your home assistant or personal device that it searches the web and provides the result that it feels is the best answer to the query you provided.

This is not to be confused with the Google product, Voice Search, although it does the same thing, but only for Android devices. While many questions are informationally-oriented (directions, statistics, etc.) there are opportunities for brands to provide a single answer currently provided by devices like Google Home, Apple iPhone and Amazon Echo. In 2016, 20 percent of Google searches and 25 percent of Bing searches originated from voice. ComScore/ Campaign predict voice search will constitute half of all searches by 2020. People are using voice search for a variety

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of searches as well, with an estimated 22 percent searching for local content and information, according to a 2016 Internet Trends Report. As a career search marketer, I'm going to focus a majority of my article on Google-powered searches, as the search engine currently controls a clear majority of the global search market.

The origins of Google's voice search capability dates to algorithm updates like Hummingbird, RankBrain and Caffeine, which helped create a Knowledge Graph consisting of human and AI-powered answers to the World's most common questions. Semantic search, as it became known, demonstrated tremendous potential in supplying accurate results from deep content, yet voice recognition still needed improvement. Initial efforts to understand vocal queries and commands were challenging and lackluster. In 2012 the word-error rate of vocal requests was over 20 percent, but now it's lower than 8 percent. As the assistants improve understanding of intent behind questions, they also improve the accuracy of resulting answers.

When it comes to voice search, users want direct answers, instead of a set of links to more information common in text searches. Essentially, you're having a conversation with your device as if they are a human 'oracle.' As a result, marketers must treat voice search as a conversation, where they provide content (typically answers or recommendations) based on the context provided in the question itself. Most voice search queries focus on the 5 W's + 1 H: who, what, when, where, why and how. Specifically, the most popular leading phrases in voice search are who, how and when. For example, 23 percent of Americans adults use voice search while cooking, according to North-

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star Research. That implies searchers are looking for recipes or preparation tips in real-time.

Voice searches are different than traditional text-based searches in one major way. Since most searches are phrased as questions, they are typically longer. On your laptop, you might type 'movies nearby' whereas in voice search, you might ask 'what movies are playing tonight near me?' The net result is that content and context (aka semantic search) are replacing traditional search-optimized keywords and phrases. See the chart below from Neil Patel as an illustration:



Later in the article, we will touch on best practices for voice search optimization. Before we do that, however, let's get a better understanding of Position 0.

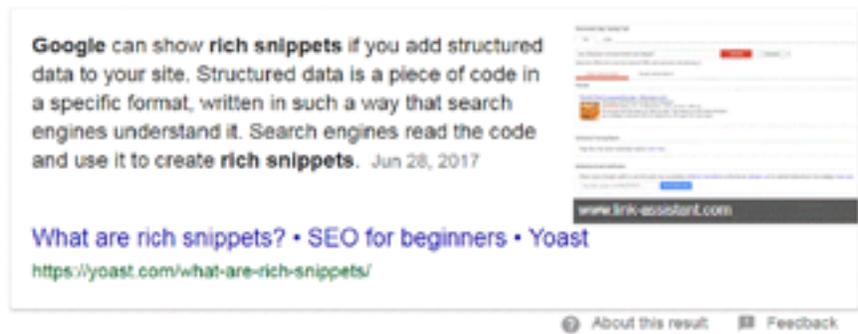
What is Position 0?

Position 0 is another way to describe rich snippets that appear in Google's 'Answer Box' or 'Instant Answers,' which appear above organic search results when the query is commonly phrased as a question.

Ironically, a search for 'what is position 0?' does not trigger an Answer Box itself, but a related search for position 0's underlying technology does: 'what is a rich snippet?'. See the result below, which appears above the organic listings:

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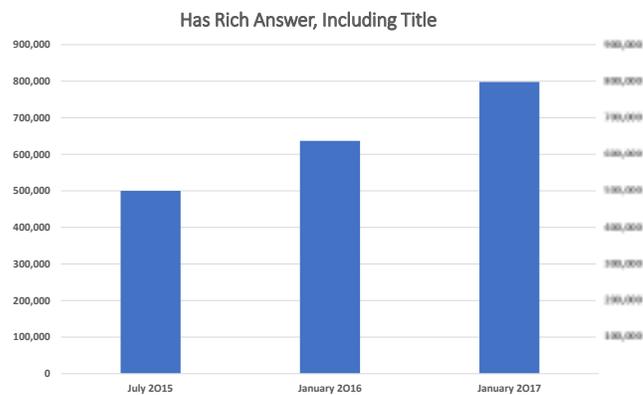
The objective for marketers is to own position 0 aka the Answer Box. Google’s Answer Box is powered by Google’s Knowledge Graph via rich or featured ‘snippets.’ ‘Featured snippet’ boxes appear at the top of Google’s search engine results pages – or SERPs – in four common formats: paragraph, bulleted list, tables/charts or less commonly, embedded images. As a result, it is essential to know which format is most relevant to your target search queries and optimize accordingly. More on that later.

You may have noticed the section below Google’s Answer Box, known as the ‘People Also Ask’ or ‘Related Questions’ box. This secondary box contains questions related to the initial query. Although Related Questions are not as dominant position-wise, they are appearing nearly as often as featured snippets and provide answers for up to four related questions. These questions can provide insight into new opportunities to rank for target position 0 results for your brand and are worth attention.

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Essentially, rich snippets provide an opportunity to own specific search phrases, even outranking competitors in the coveted #1 organic search position. This is important, especially if your website lacks the inbound links and domain authority of your competitors. Position 0 is also important because it powers voice search as the only answer to common questions. Growth of rich snippets/position 0 in search results has grown significantly in the past few years, as outlined by this chart:



Not all devices or personal assistants are created equal, however. In an older study by Stone Temple Consulting involving an analysis of 850,000 queries, Google served a rich snippet-powered direct answer (position 0) nearly 20 percent of the time. In comparison, Microsoft's Bing served direct answers only 1 percent of the time. In a more recent larger Stone Temple study of 1.4 million Google queries, nearly 30 percent of results triggered position 0 results. Position 0 results are typically short and sweet. The average featured snippet is only 54-58 words in length.

Beyond common question modifiers, there are topics that lend themselves to generating position 0 results. These include: health, financial, mathematical, time, transitional, status, requirements and DIY processes.

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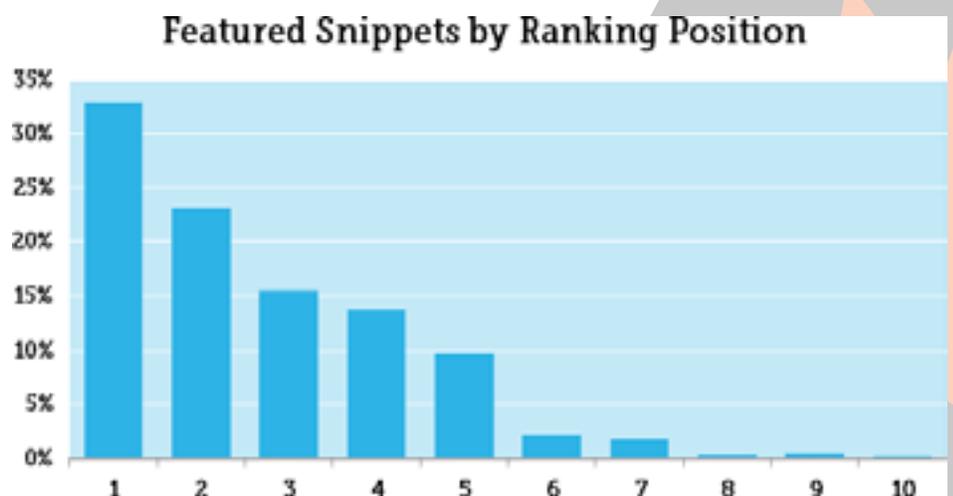
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Conversely, some topics do not lend themselves to optimization by brands, primarily because Google's Knowledge Graph has already curated answers. These topics include help, facts, shopping, images or video (for now). However, subjective queries (i.e., "best" or "reviews") which generate position 0 results, have increased dramatically in the past year or so.

On the downside of voice search and position 0, your site must rank organically on page one to be considered to power the Answer Box. Conversely, the good news is that you have an opportunity to be featured in position 0 even if your website ranks tenth on page one. Once you achieve position 0, you will now have two organic results in targeted search queries. According to research, roughly one-third of results are powered by the top organic listing, yet you have an equal or greater opportunity to power position 0 if your site ranks in position two through five. Positions six through ten rarely rank, so the goal is to get your site to rank 'above the fold' in position five or higher for your target queries. The chart below shows probability of owning position 0 based on position in the SERPs:



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Why should I care about voice search and position 0?

Marketers living off-the-grid the past few years might ask why they should care about voice search and position 0. In case the article hasn't adequately addressed that question thus far, let's get it out of the way now. First and foremost, voice search is a game-changer for brands with a local footprint or significant brand credibility. Voice searches on Google are 3 times more likely to be local-based and 30 times more likely to be action-oriented than text-based searches. Consumers looking for 'pizza nearby' or 'how to remove a wine stain' can now be engaged by Domino's, Papa Murphy's, Tide or Gallo wines, should those brands convince Google they have the best answer for those queries in position 0.

Initially, marketers were concerned that the Answer Box would decrease click-throughs to websites. Instead of decreasing click-through rates, however, position 0 results can have an opposite effect. In February of 2016, HubSpot conducted a study of high-volume keywords showing that ranking #0 produced a 114 percent boost in click-through rate (CTR). You can also learn how one site experienced a whopping [516 percent jump in traffic via position 0](#). In fact, featured snippets in position 0 have an 8.6 percent click-through rate, eroding the top organic search position, according to ahrefs.

More importantly, Position 0 results generated via voice search can be farther down the sales funnel, towards transaction (also known as voice commerce or v-commerce). Echo alone will account for \$7 billion in voice transactions—or vcommerce—per investment firm

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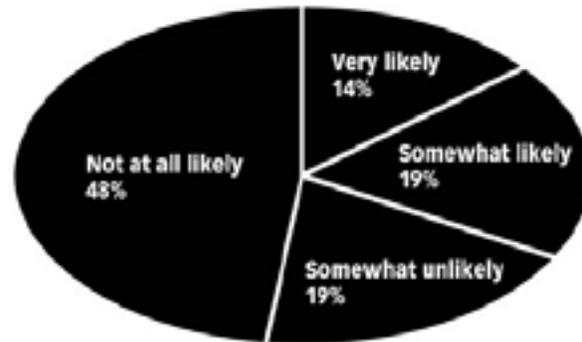
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Mizuho Bank. According to a March 2017 study by eMarketer, 33 percent US internet users are somewhat or very likely to make a purchase via voice-enabled speakers:

Likelihood that US Internet Users Will Make a Purchase via Voice-Enabled Speakers, March 2017
% of respondents



Note: ages 18+; in the next year
Source: Walker Sands Communications, "Future of Retail 2017," July 12, 2017

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www.eMarketer.com

The value of achieving a position 0 result is significant. According to a 2016 STAT Search Analytics study factoring in average equivalent CPC based on search volume, the estimated annual value for owning position 0 for 'virtual desktop' related-phrase was over \$2 million. Whether your objective is awareness, thought-leadership, leads or sales, owning position 0 should be a high priority for your brand in 2018.

How do I optimize for voice search?

Keep in mind that the following optimization strategies will only maximize your opportunity to own position 0, but if your website doesn't already rank for the target term, you have a zero chance of owning the Answer Box. In order to ensure your website ranks on page one for target phrases, download a copy of our [SEO white papers](#) and read the related resources in our [Insights section](#). Once you've optimized your site based on best practices, read the rest of this article.

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With an understanding of what voice search is and why it's important for brands to leverage, let's touch on best practices for optimizing your website to play in the emerging space. The most important concept to master when developing a voice search strategy is that modifiers provide essential context that can help frame up your content to address initial awareness through interest and action. The chart below illustrates where common modifiers sit in the sales funnel:



With this concept in mind, be sure to structure your content to answer common search queries on the target topic. A good starting point is to talk with your team (sales, marketing, customer service and product development) to identify relevant queries. Start with the 5 W's, but don't forget other modifiers like best, top or easy, which are gaining in popularity. When filtering possible questions, keep the conversational nature of voice queries in mind, and factor in the long-tail, which implies long and detailed questions. The more specific the query, the more likely you are to be able to optimize for and own it. Once you've compiled a list of possible queries, conduct searches to see which terms are generating Answer Boxes and which do not. For those that generate an Answer Box, you can reverse-engineer the current position 0 snippet to gain insights into why and how they are ranking.

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The research and discovery process can be quite intimidating, so I recommend utilizing a host of free and low-cost tools to facilitate. Leverage keyword research tools, some of which include voice search and position 0 data, including: [MOZ Keyword Explorer](#), [Rank Ranger Keyword Finder](#), [Rank Tracker](#), [ubersuggest](#), suggested search [Keyword Tool](#) and of course, [Google AdWords Keyword Planner](#) and [Google Search Console](#). Use [Faq Fox](#), [StoryBase](#), [Blog-SearchEngine](#), [HubSpot Blog Topic Generator](#) and [Answer The Public](#) to identify topical content ideas and common questions (then add in the filler words like 'to' and 'the' to maximize relevance to common questions from text search). For research and ongoing tracking, consider using [SEMrush](#), [STAT Search Analytics](#) and [Searchmetrics Suite](#).

The next step is to build out content on your website around the target questions. The benefit of optimizing for voice search is that it will help you rank in regular (text) search results as well. Beyond restating and answering the question succinctly on the target page, be sure to incorporate the most relevant keywords in the page URL, title and H1 tag. STAT found that featured snippet URLs included an exact match query in the tag 21 percent more often than regular results. To maximize ranking relevance, utilize [schema markup](#) and [structured microdata](#). Don't forget to optimize for mobile user-experience (layout & speed) while keeping location in mind (geography of searcher). In fact, if your business is local in nature, be sure to claim and optimize your [Google My Business](#) listing, as voice search will recommend top ranking local search results.

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How do I optimize for position 0?

Voice search and position 0 are related, but not the same. Voice search relies on position 0 to provide a concise answer to questions. Position 0, however, is a more expansive opportunity, as it encompasses voice and text search results. As a result, optimizing for position 0 is complex, nuanced and highly competitive. The optimization process for position 0/Answer Box is akin to website SEO. The most effective optimization strategy for position 0 can be simplified into this equation: KISS + MIFF = success. Keep it simple, stupid. Less is more, especially since you only have 40-55 words to work with. Most important facts first. Answer the question quickly and succinctly and you will have the highest probability of owning position 0. As I've shared in the past, the [three key elements of any search engine optimization \(SEO\) strategy are Content, Code and Credibility](#). Position 0 optimization is no exception.

The first step, like voice search optimization, is to determine which keyword phrases/queries are ideal opportunities for your brand. The second step is to identify which queries currently generate an Answer Box and which do not, utilizing the tools mentioned in the previous section. If a position 0 exists, reverse-engineer the current result to improve your ranking page and displace it. If it does not, then you must follow a more complicated process to convince Google the question is worthy of an Answer Box. Typically, the queries that are best candidates for position 0 results are higher-volume, longer-tail searches. Google's People Also Ask (typically appearing under Answer Boxes) provides additional suggestions.

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One way to identify which pages on your site are best candidates for position 0, is to look at your high-performing pages in analytics. You can also conduct a Google search using “site:yourdomain.com ‘question’” as a starting point. The easiest content to optimize for position 0 includes questions and answers, including Q&A and Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs). Blog posts and interviews are also excellent candidates for optimization. The good news is that Google is very adept at parsing out any content in HTML, even if it doesn’t contain schema markup. Similarly, your questions do not have to contain modifiers like the 5 W’s, as those are implied in the search query.

Once you’ve identified your target query and associated results page, it’s time to optimize for position 0. Start by mapping the most appropriate format for the Answer Box. Paragraphs are ideal for standard answers and are most common. If an answer involves multiple elements, a list format may be best. For a recipe or other process, an ordered list is likely most appropriate. STAT found a 41 percent higher rate of ordered lists on featured snippet URLs (vs. unordered). Lastly, tables or charts are ideal when communicating complex or comparative data. If you’re not sure which format is best, look at similar searches or test different formats over time.

As mentioned previously, the objective is to answer the query as efficiently as possible, which requires you to ‘get to the point’ with content on your target pages. That said, it is also important to provide additional details and other background information lower on the page to maximize probability of ranking, as outlined in the graphic below:



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Advanced Optimization Techniques

To understand the value of a position 0 listing, match your Google Search Console click-through rate (CTR) data with the keywords for which you have featured snippets, especially over time. As you optimize existing content on your site, it's critical to use 'proof terms' which are words or phrases that must be used when discussing the specific topic. Also consider re-optimizing high-performing pages for position 0, as they often have the greatest potential. For example, HubSpot ranked better for position 0 result with a #5 organic ranking for a term than when it ranked #1 organically.

As outlined previously, ranking for position 0 is all about creating content that directly answers the query, in the proper format (paragraph, list or table), incorporating proof terms, adding additional content and internal links (especially to higher-ranking pages). Test less common modifiers than the 5 W's as well, including terms like 'cost' which can appear frequently in specific types of snippets. When writing copy on your pages, target an 8th grade reading level, which appears to be Google's ideal for position 0. Keep in mind you can optimize to answer

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more than one question, as long as the questions are related contextually. Lastly, when optimizing for the lower-funnel ‘where’ questions, remember to incorporate copy that facilitates purchase and optimize PPC ads to maximize real estate and carry through on the brand promise.

The Future of Voice Marketing

Expect bigger and better from voice marketing moving forward. In 2017, 24.5 million voice-first devices were estimated to be shipped (up from 1.7 million in 2015). Voice search volumes will continue to increase, and position 0 results will continue to improve in relevance. Expect to see more local results, transactional commerce and media formats like images and video in position 0 moving forward. Marketers must prepare for a multimedia voice experience, as devices like Amazon’s Echo Show touchscreen generate results that can be seen, not just heard. Outside of search commands, there are other lucrative opportunities for brands, in terms of creating voice apps, skills and related products, thanks to enhancements in artificial intelligence, natural language processing, chatbots and augmented reality.

Americans prefer talking with smartphones vs. standalone devices like Echo or Home, so we’re still in the infant stages when it comes to voice apps and skills. According to VoiceLabs, only 30 to 50 percent of conversational interactions are successful today. Many of the voice apps available today are gimmicky (think Second Life in 2004). For example, only 10 percent of the 350,000 consumers that participated in Patron’s Cocktail Lab originated from the associated Alexa Skill. The most exciting aspect

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of developing voice apps is the ability to integrate tracking and pull insights from analytics not currently available directly from Google and Amazon. While only a small percentage of voice skills are branded today, look for significant (and intelligent) growth in the coming years.

Voice search and position 0 create tremendous opportunities for brands not only to own competitive terms as an “expert” but to double visibility in highly desirable organic search results. By following the optimization strategies outlined in this article, you have an opportunity to take a leadership position in the search landscape. If you don’t have a [Voice Search Optimization Strategy](#), we can help. Make sure your digital marketing strategy factors in voice search and position 0 optimization, so you will have a voice with consumers in 2018.

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- [How to optimize for voice search](#)
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