



How can I help you?

# VOICE SEARCH ON THE RISE

BY WELTON HONG

In old science fiction movies and TV shows that took place in the (then) far-off future, characters often made things happen just by talking to computers.

If you were Buck Rogers or Star Trek's Captain Kirk or Alien's Ellen Ripley, you were accustomed to gaining information and making things occur simply with your voice.

Which surely seemed exciting to viewers, who could hardly get their own kids to do their chores without asking them about 150 times.

Voice commands don't always work great with kids. They might work okay on a well-trained dog. They certainly don't work at all with cats, because cats will never do anything you tell them to do. And they definitely won't stop doing anything you want them to stop doing. Because cats are cats and cats will never change.

But some things have changed. Specifically, we've been able to get computer-powered devices to execute commands for several years now. And over the past year or so, these devices have skyrocketed in popularity.

I'll dig into that a little more in a moment, but I'm probably overdue to note how this relates to your funeral home marketing.

Essentially, it's critical for business owners in 2019 to understand that consumers now interact with their world in very different ways than they did before.

Before computers became ubiquitous in American homes, we got information about business services from directories such as the printed Yellow Pages and through spoken word of mouth.

Then desktop computers became popular, and once 24/7 internet service became widespread, many people learned about products and services over the internet.

Over the last several years, mobile technologies have become convenient and affordable, earning widespread adoption across every demographic. We can get information and even act on many things just by using our smartphones and tablets.

Voice search has become massively popular over the past couple of years, as virtual personal assistants such as Google Assistant, Apple's Siri, Microsoft's Cortana, and Amazon's Alexa have seen widespread adoption among everyday consumers.

If someone needs immediate information on death care services, she can simply ask a device (often called a "smart speaker") on her kitchen counter for that info.

In just a couple of seconds, the device spits out the info. Some newer devices even have screens to display the information. And many now let you do Wi-Fi calling as well.

So picture this: Lucy is at home, making breakfast, when she gets a call that her mother has died. Her mother didn't have a plan in place, and it's Lucy's responsibility to make arrangements ASAP.

Literally while still making breakfast, Lucy can ask her device for "funeral homes near me." The device relays info on several options. If it has a screen, Lucy can even see them on the list. Lucy decides on one and tells the device to call that funeral home. It does. Lucy speaks to someone at the home and begins a conversation to make arrangements for her mother.

All in just a minute or two. All while still making breakfast.

Yes, that is how some people are getting things done right now. And that's just going to keep growing over the next couple of years. Voice control is becoming incredibly powerful in how people interact with their world.

You're probably used to this from the remote control for your television cable or satellite provider. Most remotes now have voice search. Just ask for "movies starring Julia Roberts" or "free action movies" or "Hawaii Five-O" and the computer in your cable/satellite box pulls it right up. It's just like that, except devices such as Google Home let you do much more.

So what does this mean to you? Well, you've known for years that to drive internet visitors to your business, your funeral home website must be optimized for search. That was what we can generally call "desktop optimization."

Over the past several years, mobile has overtaken desktop for search. Google now prioritizes the user's mobile experience over the desktop one. So we've worked with our clients to focus on mobile optimization.

And now there's voice. It can't be ignored. To take full advantage of the possibilities with voice search, your website needs to start adding voice optimization to the process.

That doesn't mean it's time to forget all about desktop or mobile optimization. Desktop remains important. Mobile is even more important. But voice absolutely must be considered, because there's a rapidly growing trend of users searching by voice.

The 2018 holiday season had lots of smart speaker devices on sale to the public. Commercials saturated the airwaves showing people controlling all sorts of things by just speaking to a device.

Just think about it: The American consumer will always choose the most convenient way of doing something, as long as it's affordable. As smart speaker systems have dropped in price and gained in utility, more everyday Americans have opted in.

Amazon Echo devices let people immediately order products just by speaking to them, using the Alexa intelligent voice search feature.

Need something immediately? Just tell your Echo. If you have Amazon Prime Now delivery service where you live, the item you need will arrive at your front door within a couple of hours. Talk about convenient. And Apple, of course, is doing the same thing with its Siri voice search. Siri users can search just by talking to their Apple watches now.

Of course, death care is a completely different industry than retail. But that doesn't mean it's immune from technological advances such as voice search. This is the way business gets done now.

So should you optimize for the desktop, mobile, or voice experience? You really need to do all three. Many consumers have a "cross-device journey," beginning their research on one device and eventually completing it on another.

That's another reason you need to optimize for desktop, mobile, and voice. But as far as priorities, mobile remains number one for now. Keep in mind that:

- 80 percent of internet users own a smartphone
- By 2019, mobile advertising is expected to represent 72 percent of all U.S. digital ad spending
- 57% of users said they wouldn't recommend a business with a poorly designed mobile site

But don't let too much grass grow under your feet in getting ready for voice search. Being prepared now puts you in the catbird seat as voice search surges in popularity. **FBA**

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