

THE DIRECTOR

AUGUST 2020

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Searching Out Loud

What the changing nature of online search means for funeral homes.

BY WELTON HONG

Digital marketing experts spend a whole lot of time talking about search. It's a simple term, of course, and outside the context of promoting small businesses such as funeral homes, it doesn't appear to mean a lot. Within that context, however, it does.

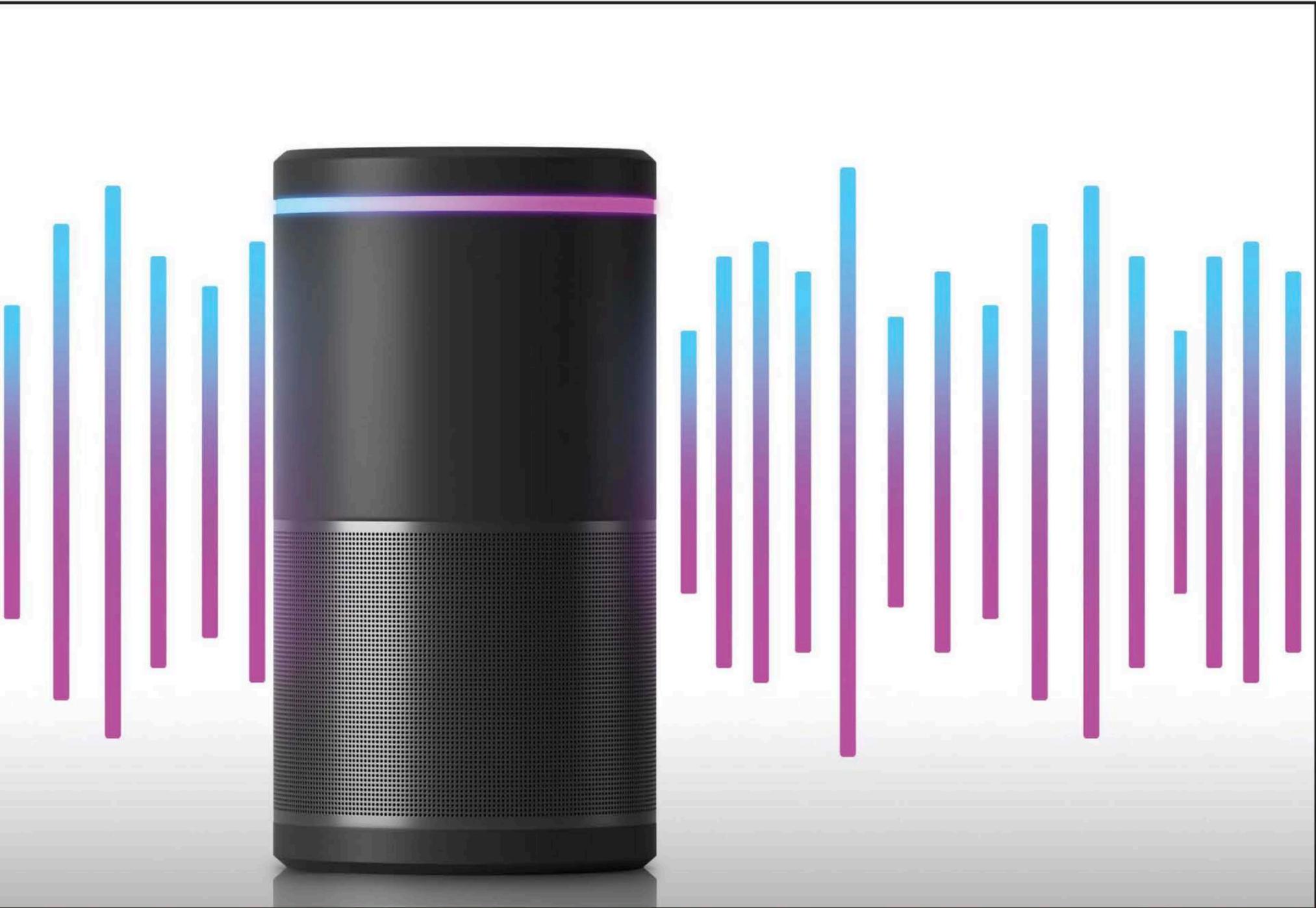
Search is the process by which people find the information they're looking for. When they need to choose a funeral home, whether for an immediate need or prearrangement, what do they

do? They search. (Keep in mind that people currently in their early to mid-50s right now most likely used a personal computer in their life as young adults, possibly even as teenagers.) Even people in their 50s and 60s rarely turn to print directories anymore; they do their searching on the internet.

Granted, that's not exactly breaking news. I've been preaching the importance of embracing online search for some time now.

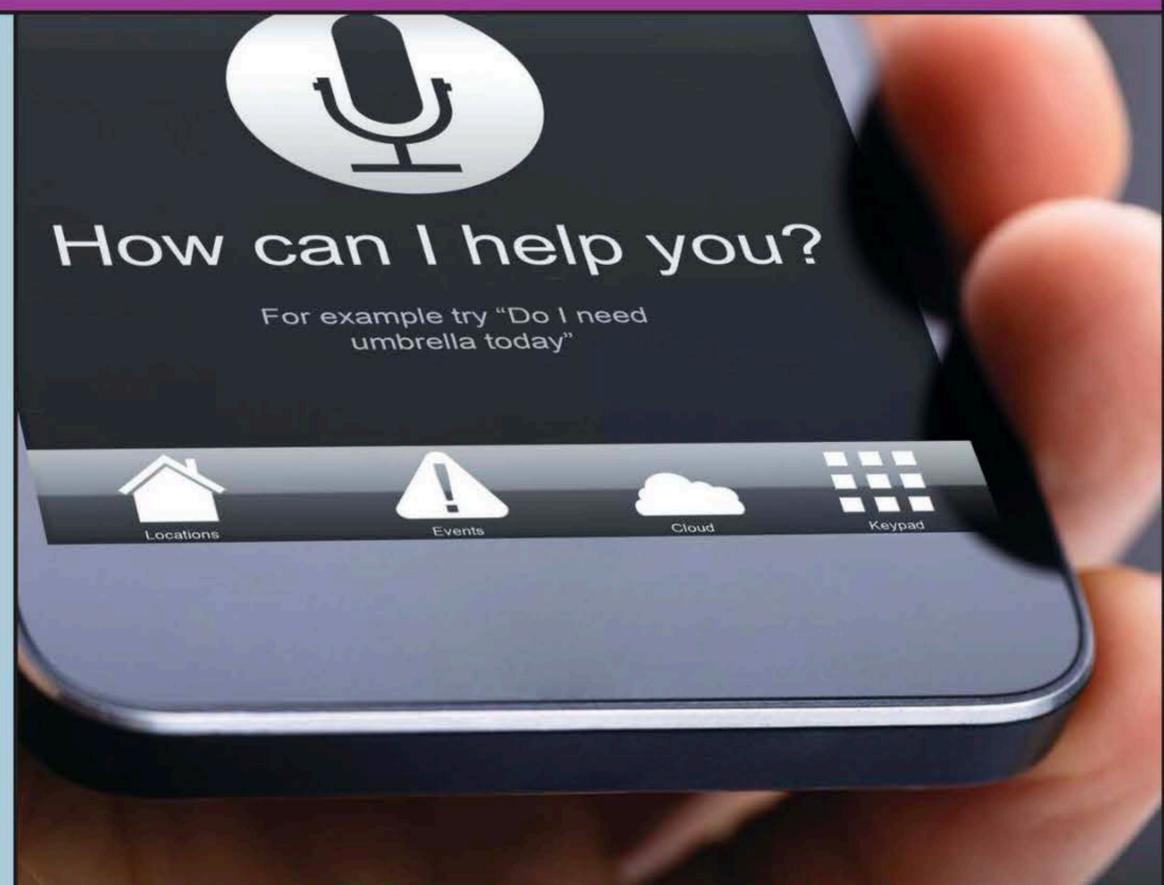
Adoption has grown rapidly over that time. According to a June 2019 Pew Research Center report, more than half of people age 65 and older (53%) own and regularly use smartphones. (It's safe to assume that rate has ticked up a few percentage points since the survey was taken.)

In 2020, the core matter isn't whether older people search the internet for services such as deathcare because there's no question they do. Now, it's how



they search, and that's where real surprises arise.

What image first comes to mind when you envision someone, particularly a middle-age or older adult, searching online for at-need and preneed services? If you see someone sitting in front of a desktop computer typing on a standard keyboard, you're already a bit off track. Yes, many people still use desktop computers, but their use has plummeted over the past decade.



Today, older adults find it more convenient to search on a laptop, tablet or smartphone. There's no need anymore to be stuck at a desk with a wired connection. That's why mobile marketing has become so imperative.

Again, you probably know things have been heading in this direction for some time, but here's the kicker: Much of the time, those same seniors – the people you need to interest in your services – are not typing out their searches at all. They might not even be swiping on a smart-

phone keyboard to input their searches.

They might just be speaking out loud.

Speak Up and Be Heard

We've been seeing this trend for a while now, but smart marketers know not to just jump on every trendy thing that comes along. We know that not every big internet initiative has staying power. Even Google struck out with its now defunct Google Plus social network, which struggled for

years before giving up the ghost in spring 2019.

But voice search isn't just a trendy new thing – it's gone from a cute little feature a few years ago to, frankly, massive adoption over the past 18 months or so. While it's unlikely that voice search will entirely relegate standard typed (or swiped) text input to the garbage heap anytime soon, the former's rapid ascent is not to be dismissed. It's for real, and seniors love it.

Voice search's sea change came during the 2018 holiday season when Amazon's smart speaker, the Echo Dot, was the company's best-selling product of the entire season. Other smart speakers also sold incredibly well, bolstered by a massive promotional push from Amazon, Google, Apple and other major tech entities.

Suddenly, having a device on the countertop that answered all your spoken questions went from some futuristic technology to an appliance almost as common as a toaster. (Come to think of it, with so many people eliminating bread from their diets these days, the speakers might even overtake toasters!) Sales of smart speakers remained strong throughout 2019 as well and skyrocketed again during that holiday season. Suddenly, households across America had these speakers on kitchen counters and in living rooms and even bedrooms.

Many of the newer speakers come with displays, working like a voice-activated tablet, with powerful sound and videoconferencing capabilities. For example, grandmothers could easily video chat with their grandkids across the country or on the other side of the world.

While I realize these speakers haven't yet become as ubiq-

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For those of us who grew up with phones attached to the walls in our homes, it's a pretty easy transition to speaking commands into a smartphone.

uitous as televisions, for example, there's every reason to think they will. Americans of all ages and demographics are embracing the smart home trend, which lets them control a variety of appliances and other household items with smart speakers.

Regarding the popularity of voice search itself, consider the following:

- Google sold more than eight million Google Home smart speaker devices in 2019.
- Analysts expect voice search to account for 50% of all internet searches by 2024.
- 1 in every 4 homes equipped with Wi-Fi had a smart speaker in 2018, and analysts project that to be 1 in 3 by the end of 2020.
- More than half of all smartphone users are using voice search technology in 2020.

Take particular note of the final stat. Although I made a point of noting the exceptional growth of smart speakers, in truth, more voice searches are currently being executed on smartphones than on any other device. So, while

you may not have a smart speaker in your home (at least not yet), I'm willing to bet that virtually all of you have smartphones you use regularly.

It's true that younger people have adapted to voice operations on smartphones faster than their older peers, which is a bit ironic when you consider how rarely younger people seem to use their phones as, well, phones. However, for those of us who grew up with phones attached to walls in our homes, it's still a pretty easy transition to speaking commands into a smartphone.

More Accessibility

For people who suffer from vision impairments or arthritis in their hands, speaking and listening to a device is a much easier option than reading and typing/swiping – another reason adoption has crossed demographic borders.

Recent studies have also disproved the myth that people in their 60s, 70s and even 80s are far less interested in digital technologies than younger people. There might have been truth to that 20, 15 or even 10 years ago, but

many of today's seniors are far more technophilic than might be expected.

A June 2019 Pew Research study found that screen time (time spent on traditional computers, mobile devices and TV) has increased for those in their 60s, 70s, 80s and beyond, with the rise apparent across gender and education level. In 2000, 14% of those age 65 and older were internet users; at the time of the study, it was 73%. (We can reasonably assume we're at 75% now, if not more.)

What does this mean for your funeral home? Quite simply, you need to put your best foot forward where it matters – not only in optimizing your business for online search in general but specifically for mobile and voice search.

When someone in your community has an immediate need, your funeral home must rank high on a traditional search engine results page, of course. But you also need it to appear as one of the primary options in mobile and voice searches.

If you haven't optimized your site for those technologies, you'll essentially be invisible within them, and that's a bad place to be given the vast changes we're seeing in this area.

I know it's a lot to consider. I know it is challenging to deal with how rapidly the funeral service industry is changing after so many years of predictable processes. But that's the situation, and the firms that step up and roll with the changes will come out on the other side more successful than ever before. ☰

Welton Hong is founder of Ring Ring Marketing (funeralhomeprofits.com) and author of Making Your Phone Ring With Internet Marketing for Funeral Homes (2019).