How to optimise for voice search

NEON

Introduction

Voice technology has quickly become a major part of the digital marketing landscape, but there are few answers to the core questions marketers should be asking: what exactly is it, what does it do and how can businesses take advantage?

That's why we here at Neon have undertaken a research project aimed at actually testing voice technology out.

The first part was our Introduction to Voice Technology, and now in this second instalment, we've gone even deeper, aiming to understand specifically what businesses need to do to stand the best chance of 'ranking' for voice search through Google and Microsoft devices.

Our findings repeatedly led us to the same thing: the importance of rich results.

Our methodology

We selected three verticals that we believe can benefit from voice technology. We then created a range of questions, some based around travel, some around fashion, some around tech/electronics.

We wrote 500 in total.

Within each sector batch, we asked a range of question types with different prefixes: what, where, why, who, will, are, can, do, how.

For example:

- ***Are animals allowed on flights?***
- ***Can I travel to Ireland without a passport?***
- ***Why won't my laptop connect to wifi?***
- ***Which iPhone has the best camera?***
- ***How to alter a sequin dress?***
- ***What clothes suit women with wide hips?***

Our testing took place on Google web search on desktop, Google Assistant voice search, Bing web search on desktop and the Cortana app on desktop. For all devices, we aimed to understand a handful of things.

- ***Similarities between web and voice***
- ***The performance of normal and rich results***
- ***The frequency of different types of rich results***

Bing and Cortana

We'd originally considered undertaking a straight comparison of Bing and Cortana and Google and Google Assistant, as we felt this would provide a compelling insight into these technologies and how they function.

However, it became clear that Cortana works in a dramatically different way to Google Assistant.

While both Assistant and Cortana are built around their counterpart search engine (Google and Bing respectively), they use that foundation differently. Google Assistant seems to draw the information from the Google search engine and deliver it through Google Assistant.

Cortana can do that too (via the info card functionality) but often simply directed us to the Bing search engine so our experience was very similar to what would have happened had we simply opened up a browser and accessed bing.com.

KEY LEARNING

Cortana repeatedly drives users through to Bing to deliver its results.

Success through Cortana therefore is tightly bound to success on Bing.

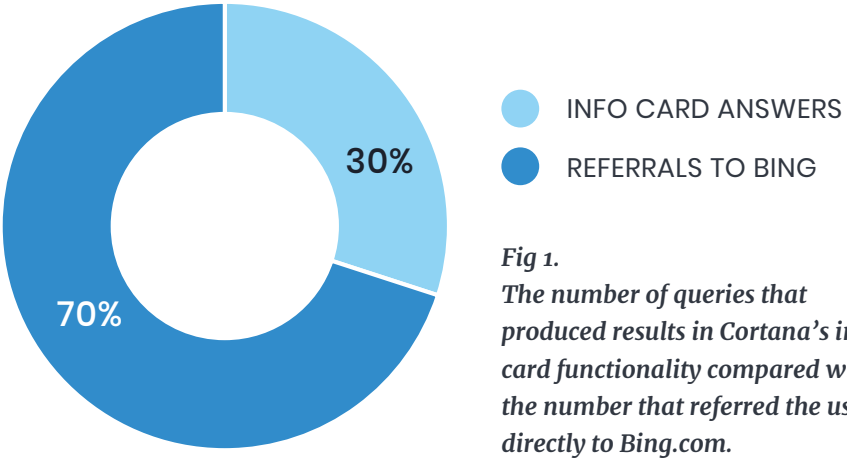


Fig 1.
The number of queries that produced results in Cortana's info card functionality compared with the number that referred the user directly to Bing.com.

A straight comparison of the Google and Microsoft technologies is therefore irrelevant. Analysing the number and type of rich results Cortana produced would not offer any real insight into voice search, only Bing.

However, the stats we found relating to Bing are worth reporting in more detail, as we discovered that normal search results are far more prevalent than rich results: 67% versus 33%.

Meanwhile, of the 33% of rich results, the majority (around 20%) were featured snippets, with the rest being made up primarily of image and video rich results.

Google and Google Assistant

Voice Search vs Web Search

As noted, understanding the links between voice search and traditional web search was key. We wanted to know if there were any commonalities in the results – and therefore the way to optimise.

As we predicted, there were similarities but also a significant number of differences.

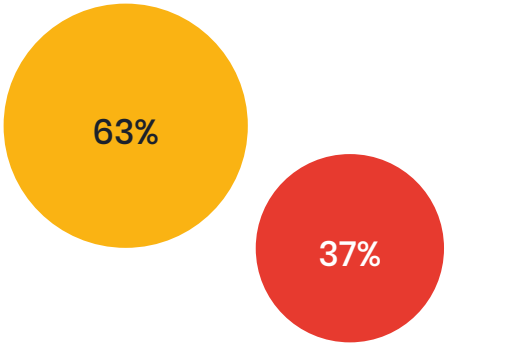


Fig 2.
The number of queries that produced the same results versus those that did not produce the same results across Google web search and Google Assistant voice search.

The 37% of different results is only likely to grow over time. As voice technology is refined, it'll become more attuned to the finer points of the voice activation experience and continue to move away from the web search experience.

Drilling down further into the specific verticals, we found that fashion and travel searches served the highest number of common results, with tech/electronics bringing up the rear.

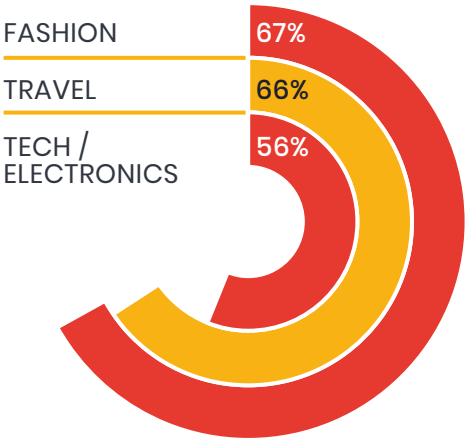


Fig 3.
The number of queries that produced the same results across travel, fashion and tech/electronics verticals on Google and Google Assistant.

KEY TAKEAWAY

At the moment, voice and web search have enough commonalities for a strong web strategy to have a beneficial impact on voice. However, as the technology is refined, that's likely to change and businesses will need to consider a unique voice search strategy tailored to the demands of voice activation and the various devices that use it.

The Different Types of Search Results

In recent years, search engines have started offering 'rich results' as well as regular 'blue links' results.

If you've seen a result in a little box at the very top of the search results (known as a featured snippet) or a range of questions other people have asked about the subject you've searched for (known as 'People Also Asked'), you've seen a rich result.

We wanted to put rich results to the test and understand if and how they impact voice search results. So we monitored the number of 'Normal Search Results' (anything that's just a blue link) and 'Rich Results' (anything else) we were served.

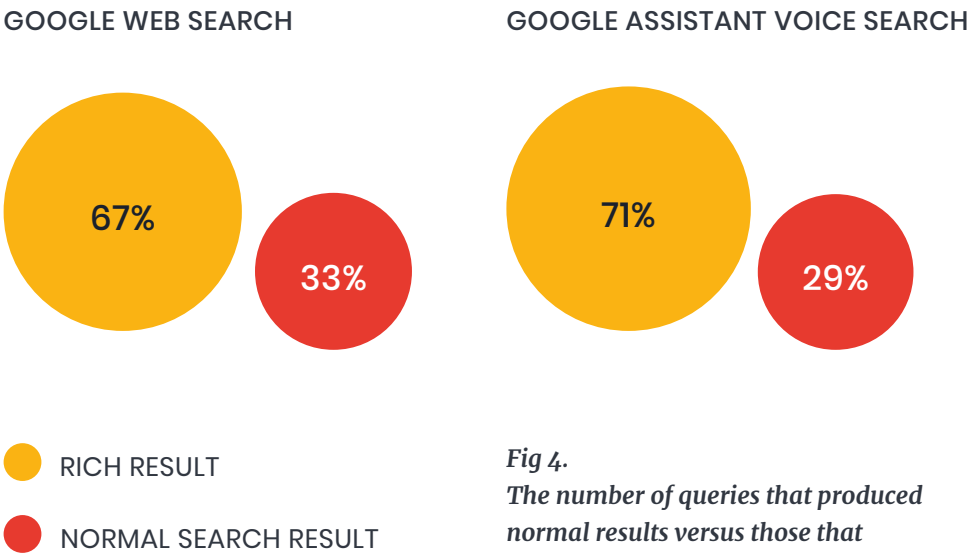


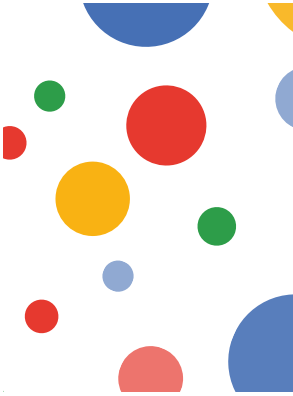
Fig 4.
The number of queries that produced normal results versus those that produced rich results across Google web search and Google Assistant voice search.

The greater prominence on Google Assistant compared to web search is down to the very nature of the technology. Rich snippets deliver one single answer that Google is essentially 'recommending', rather than a multitude of them that the user has to pick from.

As voice devices can only offer one result, rich results are a natural source to pull from.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Rich results are a critical part of a voice optimisation strategy because of the way voice search works. Simple, short answers are easy for the technology to deliver, and that's exactly what rich results offer.



The Different Types of Search Results

Drilling deeper into our verticals, travel searches produced more rich results through web search than voice search, but the stats flipped in the other two verticals.

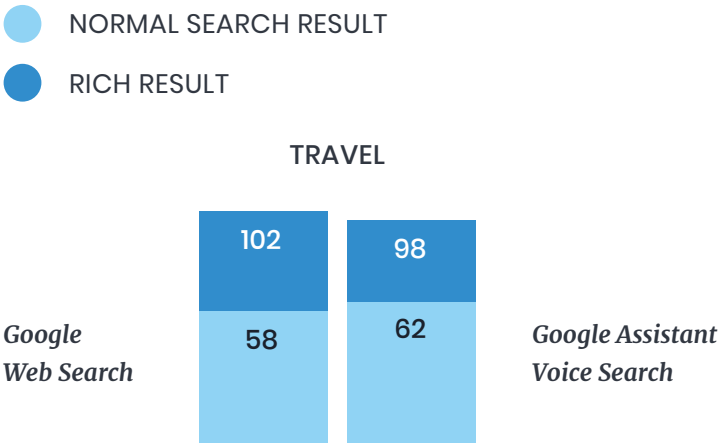


Fig 5.
The number of queries that produced normal results versus those that produced rich results across Google web search and Google Assistant voice search in the travel sector.

KEY LEARNING

Cortana repeatedly drives users through to Bing to deliver its results.

Success through Cortana therefore is tightly bound to success on Bing.

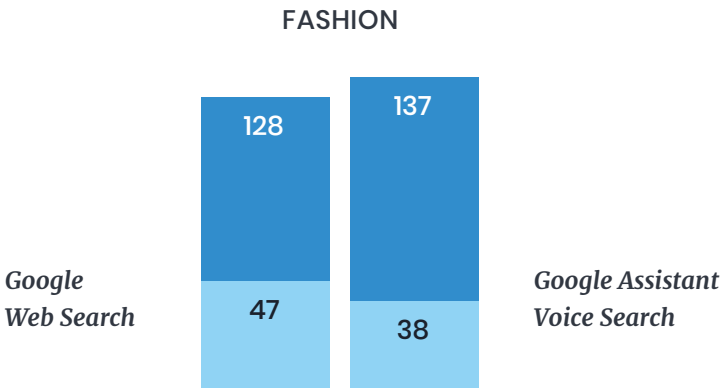


Fig 6.
The number of queries that produced normal results versus those that produced rich results across Google web search and Google Assistant voice search in the fashion sector.

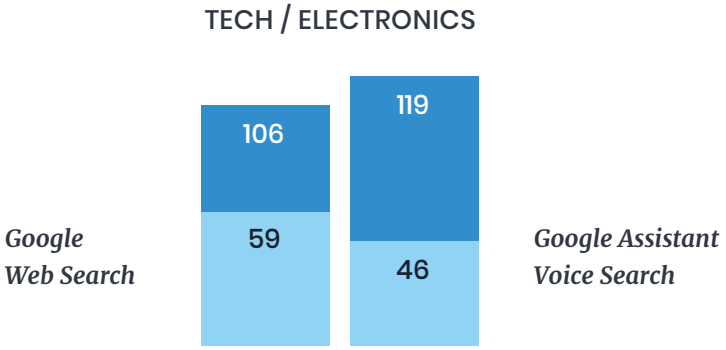


Fig 7.
The number of queries that produced normal results versus those that produced rich results across Google web search and Google Assistant voice search in the tech/electronics sector.

The Types of Rich Results

Looking for more granular insights, we also kept a close eye on the exact types of rich results that were being served. By doing so, we could not just understand the role rich results play in voice search, but also the importance of the different forms of content that feed these results.

We wanted to know if, for example, video content was served more than image content, or if maps were served whenever we asked a question based around geography.

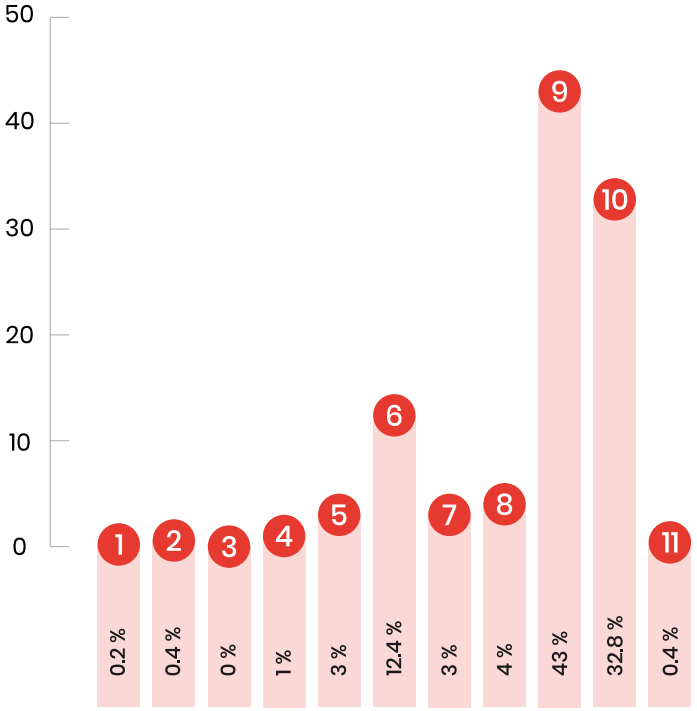


Fig 8.
The types of rich results produced across Google web search

Key

1. *Dictionary definition*
2. *Carousel*
3. *Knowledge graph*
4. *Local search result*
5. *News Article*
6. *Map*
7. *Images*
8. *Video*
9. *Featured snippet*
10. *Normal search result*
11. *Rich card*

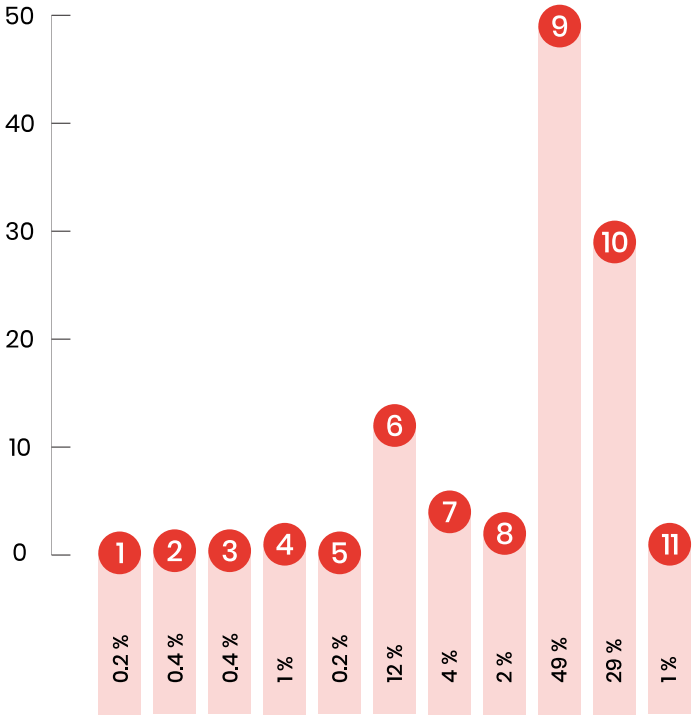


Fig 9.
The types of rich results produced across Google Assistant voice search.

The Types of Rich Results

Maps, images and videos all feature, but on both web and voice search, featured snippets are the most regularly used rich results by an overwhelming amount.

Featured snippets are the boxes seen at the very top of the search results for certain queries. They offer a link to a relevant website and feature a segment of the text that's deemed most relevant.

Featured snippets proved particularly popular in the tech/electronics and fashion verticals, where 62% and 47% respectively of the questions we asked returned featured snippets. This is likely fuelled by the more information-driven nature of these verticals, as users search for insight into everything from their new laptop to which colours go together.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Featured snippets are well-suited for voice search, which can speak a portion of the featured snippet as its result. Optimising for featured snippets makes life easier for the voice agent, as well as for the user, and will likely deliver strong organic click through rate for a business.

Thanks for Reading

If you need any help understanding the rich result or voice search landscape, feel free to get in touch with the details below. We'd love to chat about how we can help your business grow.

Email: **hello@weareneon.com**

Tel: **0161 507 3900**

Web: **weareneon.com**

NEON