

Why brands keep getting voice wrong



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2018 was supposed to be the year voice changed how brands literally ‘speak’ to consumers, but, as Liam Brennan, Global Director of Innovation at MediaCom explains, marketers are still not getting it right.

In 2018, industry thought leaders such as [Scott Galloway](#) and [Mark Ritson](#) highlighted the growing importance of voice and the potential negative impact on brands. Although voice navigation didn’t become a ‘normed’ behaviour last year, it was certainly a big year in terms of voice tech adoption. Smart speaker sales grew 78% year-on-year, 21% of US households now own a smart speaker ([NPR/Edison 2018](#)), and 50% of that group own more than one (Amazon 2018).

What’s more, in January, [Amazon announced](#) daily users of Alexa had doubled in the last

year (estimated to be around 100m), and Google Assistant is now integrated into more than 10,000 different devices. This means Google now has a 'voice reach' of more than 1bn people (yes, mobiles are also voice devices – hello, Siri).

But, when it comes to brand successes in voice, there has been little to shout about. If you asked me to name five brands that had created memorable voice experiences – let alone get it 'right' – I would struggle.

The trouble is too many marketers are making the same mistakes with voice they've made with tech platforms in the past: they're trying to shoehorn in content or experiences made for other platforms or building one-time destinations and applications without first understanding how consumers use the tech.

Finding the path of least resistance

I recently attended CES 2019, where 'voice' integration was frequently seen in new tech. While some applications of voice tech were useful – [in-car navigation and control](#), and voice remotes for TVs, for example – many felt gimmicky, such as voice-controlled [pet feeders, smart fashion and wearables, and the infamous 'smart toilet'](#).

While brands are starting to sense the opportunity in voice, few are looking at how consumers are using voice-powered devices, or whether 'voice' is actually going to help address their business needs. Ultimately, trying to create a branded voice experience that runs counter to how a consumer behaves will end in failure.

In many ways, getting voice right is no different to cracking any other new tech platform. To do this, you need to consider three other questions first (in this order):

1. How can I make this experience 'better', faster or easier?

As with all tech, voice fits some brands better than others (e.g. brands that produce audio, entertainment or information content). This year, in the UK, Disney and Global Radio have

been placing voice ‘call to actions’ in their outdoor ads that guide people to their audio content. Disney’s ads, for example, lead with the caption “*Alexa, play Disney hits*”, while Global’s Heart radio placements tell users to “*Play Heart*”.

2. Can I use this tech to remove a barrier and enable an action not previously possible?

Voice’s ability to be an ‘extra pair of hands’ is particularly useful for times when multitasking is required. Recipe and drinks skills, eCommerce and other utility-based applications allow users to get things done faster, or when busy doing something else.

A good example is Domino’s Alexa skill, which allows consumers to re-order their favourite items or previous orders without ‘cycling through’ options – handy if you’re driving home for dinner, or [playing video games](#).

Above: The Domino’s skill commercial explains how you can order a pizza without a phone.

3. Can I use the attributes of my brand (or its assets) to create a new action on the device?

This outcome is the most difficult to achieve, but where most brands tend to start. Trying to create a voice experience that runs counter to consumer behaviours will ultimately end in failure, so understanding is key. With the right level of promotion over the long term, brands can influence behaviours, but they need to consider if the payoff will be worth their effort and investment.

Nestle introduced and promoted a new voice behaviour – getting cat owners to order its Purina cat food by voice command – by partnering with Amazon. The brand and command featured in [a co-funded commercial for Amazon’s Echo Dot device](#) and saw usage of its Amazon Alexa skills and relevant commands among its consumers increase.

Marketers need to stop thinking of voice as a “screenless screen” and rethink their approach to win in the space.

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2019: The ‘year of mobile’ for voice?

Many people will remember the ‘year of mobile’ – the half-decade or so in the late 2000s when smartphone penetration was high, but ad-spend (and the number of decent case studies) was low. That changed when consumer behaviour caught up with advertiser needs. – 4G ushered in an era of faster speeds, larger screens, and, in turn, longer ‘screen time’. This behavioural change gave advertisers a reason to shift their video budget from desktop to mobile.

Like that smartphone ‘tipping point’, the opportunities voice now provides (in terms of scale and potential impact on choice and commerce) are too large for brands to ignore. It already has the backing of two of the world’s largest tech/media/commerce companies, and as more devices are sold, consumer behaviours will continue to evolve.

Above: Amazon’s Alexa/Echo spot in Superbowl 2019. Amazon and Google are increasing media investment to promote/norm ‘behaviours’ as well as drive sales.

For 2019 to become the ‘year of voice’, however, marketers need to change tack. It’s time to stop thinking about how to ‘do’ voice and start understanding how – or even, if – consumers want to interact with your brand (and purchase your products) in this space. Only then will you know where voice fits into your wider marketing strategy.

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