A complete guide to -

voice search optimization

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Introduction

In 2014, Andrew Ng, the founder, and lead of the Google Brain Deep Learning project predicted "In five years' time, at least 50% of all searches are going to be either through images or speech". Today, we are a witness to how voice technology has changed the way we interact with our devices. It has set the foundation for our expectations of how we search for information online.

If you think about it, when Siri, Cortana, or Google Assistant first showed up on your mobile devices, the idea of speaking to your smartphone might have seemed like a fun little activity to put artificial intelligence (AI) to the test.

For instance, if you asked Siri, "Hey Siri, what is the meaning of life?", you'd probably get "I Kant answer that. Haha!" or "All evidence to date suggests it's chocolate" for an answer.

We've all been there. We've asked these virtual assistants questions we didn't expect a computer program to answer. We only wanted to have some fun and then get on with whatever it is we were doing.

But things have changed. The use of voice assistants is now an everyday experience in our lives. Popular devices such as Amazon Echo, Google Home, and Apple's HomePod are always ready to answer our questions or complete a task.

Chapter 01

Voice search — where did it all start?

The essence of voice search technology is to tap into the human need for convenience. While the research and invention of voice assistants and devices date back to 1877, the first big breakthrough came in 1952, in the form of **Audrey**, Bell Labs' Speech Recognition System. While this novel machine could only understand the digits 0-9, it was the first known instance of a machine that could exhibit the capacity to understand human speech.

Unlike Audrey, a decade or so later IBM created a machine named Shoebox that could understand more than just digits. It could not just understand human speech but also process speech to run exercises. For example, if an operator gave it a command saying "three plus two plus 1 minus four, total," Shoebox would print out the correct answer "two".

And so, one after another, newer machines with more capabilities were built until today where we have a line up of powerful voice assistants that enable voice search.

Voice search — a dialogue system

Voice search is essentially a dialogue system — quite an improved and much-advanced one. What is a dialogue system anyway?

A dialogue system is a kind of computer setup that is intended to engage in 'dialogue' with a human. This computer system can use various methods of communication such as text, speech, even gestures as signals (both input and output).

One of the constant components of a dialogue system is the dialogue manager. It analyzes the semantics and manages the dialogue strategy.
Another important component of the dialogue system is automatic speech recognition (ASR). It is used to feed input signals to voice search devices. Some of these systems include text-to-speech (TTS).

Activating a virtual assistant is not always necessary to initiate a voice search. The moment the device has the required input, it quickly detects the language in which the search query has been made. The keywords in the search query are captured and the device answers with the relevant information.

Some devices with screens may even display the results while most devices speak back to the user. This conversation or 'dialogue' style of interaction is what popularized voice search.

The voice search revolution

We are in the middle of a 'voice search revolution'.

45%
of adults and 55% of teens use voice search daily

20%
of all Google mobile queries are voice searches

35x
Voice search has grown since 2008

25%
of all Windows 10 desktop searches are done via voice

65%
of Google Home or Amazon echo owners "can't imagine going back

50%
of all searches are voice searches

3.7 times faster
Users find that searching using voice is 3.7 times faster and more convenient than typing

There are two key factors driving the growth of voice search so quickly — faster innovation through word recognition accuracy and a constantly increasing use of mobile devices. Additionally, the impressive growth of Artificial Intelligence (AI), Machine Learning (ML), and Natural Language Processing (NLP) has elevated voice recognition. These technologies power up voice-based apps to understand and mimic human speech with unmatched accuracy.

Voice is transforming search behavior

Voice has changed how people search for information

There are two ways in which voice search is changing how people are looking for information.

- Voice search keywords are significantly longer than text-based searches
- Voice searches are more conversational

This has an impact on how you design your SEO strategy for voice — how you do keyword research and on-page SEO. More of that in **Chapter 4**
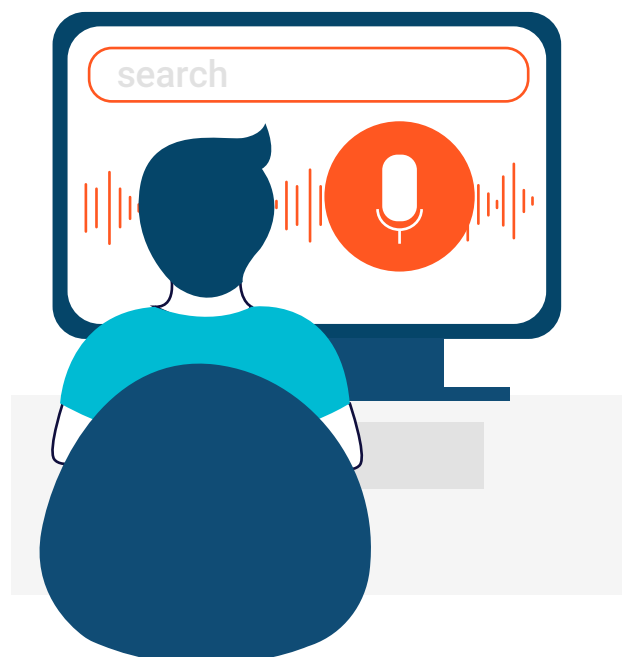
Voice has changed where people search for information

Since voice search is more convenient than a text-based search, it is used more often. **Google reports** that "near me" searches have grown by 500%. People are not looking for a generic piece of information; they are looking for precise answers to their search queries. And you'd be surprised to learn that people are using voice search in the most **unlikely places.**

In What Environments Do People Use Voice Commands?
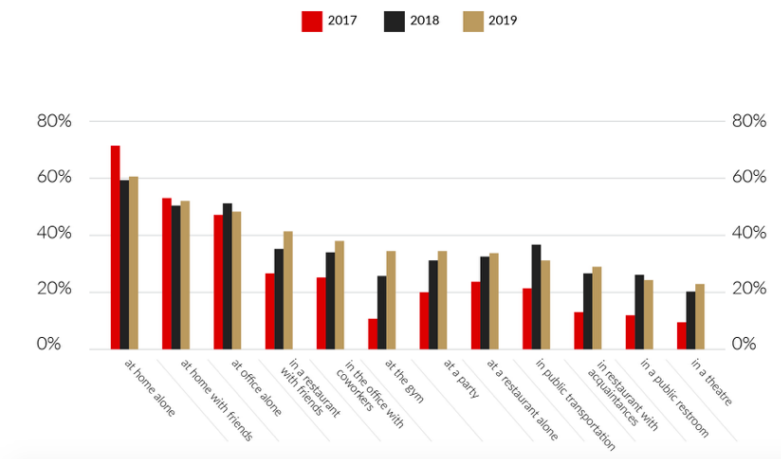
> Google reports that "near me" searches have grown by 500%

Voice has changed how people get search results

Google is transforming from a search engine into an answer engine. Due to SERP features such as Knowledge Graph and Featured Snippets, organic clicks have **dropped by 37%.** You no longer need to visit a website to find an answer to your search query because of Google's answer-focused technology. Search engines are applying the same idea to voice search results as well; within seconds your voice device will speak the answer back to you.

Consumer benefits

Though voice search is similar to traditional search, it comes with its own set of benefits for your business and consumers.

Speed

Voice search returns quicker results than traditional web search. This means less effort and more accurate information for the users.

Convenience

There is the added convenience of merely giving a voice command and then getting the results you need instead of thinking about the right keywords to use.

Adaptability

You know how we human beings spoke before we could write? The use of voice commands is naturally authentic; it taps into our inherent need for reciprocity.

Language agnostic

Voice technology enables a language-agnostic search. When people are speaking and not typing, they can search using words in any language.

Business benefits

The question now turns to — **why voice search** for businesses? In today's digitally connected world, businesses need to ensure that they can be found by customers through every possible channel or platform. Companies that don't include voice search as part of their business strategy run the risk of losing prospects, sales, and revenue.

Voice search is a new model of customer communication

It's important for you to consider voice search as a new means of communicating with your customers and target audience. Brands that are forward-thinking have begun to adapt their content to voice search.

Voice search is a new way of marketing and advertising

Conversational search or voice search is quickly becoming a key area of interest for marketing teams. Brands that are implementing voice search as part of their marketing strategies are seeing tremendous success in driving more traffic to their digital profiles and websites and more navigation requests to their locations. If you want to put your brand in front of your customers, you need to be present where your customers are — you need to optimize your answers, content, and information for voice search.

Additionally, advertising models are being shaped by user experience. In order to meet the new demands and preferences of customers, you will need to go from text ads to voice ads, from clicks to answers and actions.

In short, brands will now need to focus on:

- Keywords that are more likely to lead to customer interactions around your product
- Consider what kind of questions users are likely to ask next
- Potential conversations or dialogues regarding your brand or product that the user and voice assistant may engage in

Chapter 02

The impact of voice search on various industries

The impact of conversational search has been immense. Various industries and business functions are embracing this innovative technology to improve operational efficiency, reduce business costs, and improve sales. Voice search has encouraged companies to think about how they can increase brand awareness and loyalty by answering customers' search queries in the simplest way possible. Termed "the next billion" by the **Wall Street Journal**, the possibilities for voice technology and voice search are endless.

Let us explore the ways in which various industries are leveraging voice search to achieve their business goals.

Banking and financial services

'Hey Alexa, can I create a checking account in Chase bank near me?'

Alexa might not pull up your bank's website or relevant information if your website loads at a snail pace. Additionally, the rise of smart speakers affected the way consumers look for financial information. People are specifically searching for branches that offer specific services such as mortgage appraisals and financial advice to ATM locations.

Voice agents such as Siri and Google Assistant can parse and process searches in real-time, making voice searches faster than typing out queries.

Since search is a powerful driver of customer acquisition for the finance industry. Banks and finance companies should consider optimizing their website content for voice search as a top priority. As a bank, you can lose opportunities or potential customers to competitors who provide rich data and optimize their website content for voice search. If you haven't done that yet, now would be the right time.

At Synup, we frequently get asked by companies whether it is necessary to modify their existing website for voice, extensively. The answer is both yes and no.

If your goal is to drive more web engagement or increase traffic to your website using search, then it is necessary that you include more long-tail keywords, question phrases, and their variations in your content. Regardless of what happens to voice search in the near future, these efforts will not go wasted as long as users depend on search engines for information.

Healthcare

To deliver positive patient care, hospitals and health care services are implementing numerous technologies. In the previous chapters, we've seen how rapidly consumers are using voice search to find information. It should come as no surprise that **19.1 million people** have turned to their voice assistants for healthcare questions in the past few years.

In fact, according to a **study**, 65.9% of voice search use cases are focused around local search. For health care service providers, this means a large majority of patients are searching for a doctor, a healthcare provider, or even just a local clinic via voice search.

Voice search opens a realm of new possibilities for medical organizations. It appears that consumers are comfortable using voice search to ask a wide range of healthcare-related questions.

Many healthcare brands are taking steps towards appealing to and assisting users. For example, brands such as Mayo Clinic, Atrium Health, and American Red Cross are introducing Alexa skills.

Deloitte and Libertana are other examples of brands that have done extensive research on the impact of voice search and voice assistants on older adults and long-term patients and found valuable medical use cases. Older people find it difficult to look for medical information on computers or mobile devices. Voice search removes this barrier. Older patients can simply talk to a device as they would to a medical assistant and find the answers they need easily.

Consumer experience with healthcare use cases on voice assistants - Sept 2019

72.9%
Ask about illness symptoms

45.9%
Ask about medication information

37.7%
Find a hospital, clinic, urgent care, etc.

37.7%
Research treatment options

29.4%
Ask about nutrition information

28.2%
Find a doctor, physical therapist or other provider

16.5%
Shop for medications, pricing, etc

15.3%
Schedule a visit to a doctor or hospital

15.3%
Provide care for a relative

14.1%
Connect to a health device or tracker (eg: Blood pressure unit, Fitbit, etc)

11.8%
Ask about health insurance options or coverage

7.1%
Receive health or wellness coaching

4.7%
None of these

source: **Voicebot.ai**

Retail and E-commerce

At the start of e-commerce, consumers were willing to type text queries. However, they are less willing to do so these days — all thanks to the availability of voice search. Consumers no longer need to search around the aisles in a retail store or sift through countless product pages on the e-commerce stores. It is what retail brands are redesigning their digital services calling them 'frictionless retail'. The ease of purchasing a product only increases its desirability to the market. Consumers tend to turn away from products that are difficult to purchase.

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By driving a customer into the product page directly, you not only make their buying journey easy but also enable them to get relevant information about the product and customer reviews.

There is already a large customer base that is consuming voice data. **Studies** show that by 2022, voice-enabled shopping is expected to grow from $2 billion to $40 billion in the US alone.

Voice search is pushing retailers to think about search differently. Retailers have begun making the switch to voice search as a complementary measure to drive sales. Most often, voice search marketing channels are positioned next to pre-existing marketing approaches. This way retailers have the best possible chance of making a sale. Some of the more popular niches within the retail industry that have leveraged voice searches include electronics, low-value groceries, and homeware.

> "
> Studies show that by 2022, voice-enabled shopping is expected to grow from $2 billion to $40 billion in the US alone.
> "
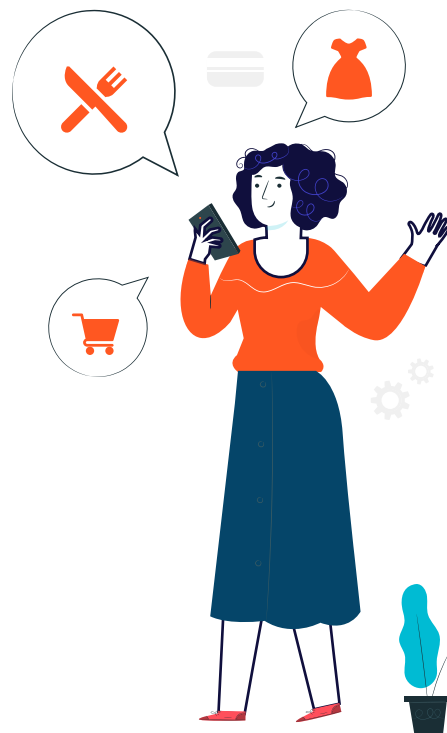
Hospitality

The online travel industry (OTA) is acutely aware of the role of voice search in travel bookings and how it will define the way consumers browse and book hotels. Consumers today expect (read as: demand) seamless travel planning experiences. They want to be able to quickly search and book hotels through voice search using their favorite digital voice assistant.

Voice search is transforming the hospitality industry in two key ways:

Booking process

We have already seen how there is a rise in the use of smartphones and mobile devices when people look for information. This user behavior is well demonstrated in the hospitality industry. Travel consumers use voice search to research and book their holidays using their smartphones, making the entire experience a streamlined interaction, particularly for last-minute hotel and travel bookings.

Personalized experience

Right now, OTAs are designed to provide mass results. Though this allows consumers to browse and compare hotel options, scrolling through hundreds of search results is a time consuming and tedious process.

With voice search, the results are refined, providing consumers with just the information they are looking for. This offers users a more curated and personalized selection of search results. If done right, the hotel or hospitality service company can drive traffic to their website and improve their conversion rate.

Chapter 03

When you put your customers first and design your services around creating a dialogue with your customers, you realize that your brand is competing in a world driven by new user behavior. Consumers no longer think in terms of search results but in terms of voice experience. Voice search offers brands across various industries the opportunity to build a strong connection with their users.

If you want your users to trust you, you need to have a much deeper understanding of the users' search behavior. The way you approach content needs to evolve in parallel to user behavior.

Why your brand needs a voice strategy

Advantage of making the first move

Voice search is here to stay. Although still in its early days, the technology is adopting quickly. You can still build a strategy before you miss the competitive edge. This gives you an edge over your competitors.

Voice search interfaces are designed to show only one search result. By establishing your strategy early you can position your brand and its content at the top of voice search results. It also signals your brand agility and how you are always on the lookout to meet your customers where they are.

For example, **Starbucks** has an app that allows its customers to order their favorite drink and pay in advance using voice. Customers can now get their dose of caffeine using voice cues. This is a great marketing strategy and works brilliantly well because it simplifies the buying process for customers.

A new dimension in your customer engagement

Until recently, brands have been limited to text and visual engagement strategies through websites, videos, and social channels. Voice search now opens up a new dimension within your customer engagement strategy. Customers can now engage with your brand using voice, making it easier for them to find your business.

For example, **KFC** is throwing voice search into their data analytics processes to learn more about what its customers want. An uptick on people ordering a specific combo meal using voice search might nudge executives to set a discounted price on this meal for a limited time. This not only increases sales but also strengthens the customer's emotional attachment to the brand.

The only voice strategy you will ever need

While people think that the rise of voice search will end SEO as we know it, we, like many SEO experts, have strong reasons to believe that voice search is only changing the digital marketing landscape for the better. So, it's important that you have it on your radar.

A good way to kickstart your voice optimization strategy is to check for voice readiness. You can use a **voice search readiness** tool that lets you see how your brand information shows up on voice searches for common questions. Based on these results, the tool generates a voice readiness score for your brand and recommends best practices to optimize your content for voice search. Easy isn't it?

1. Optimize for featured snippets

A **voice search study** found that 70% of all answers from voice search were returning with a SERP feature of which 60% of them were returning a featured snippet. A featured snippet is a piece of information that comes from a third-party source that Google displays at the top of its organic search results; it provides attribution to the original source.

Google displays only rich answers to provide the user with a quick and concise answer and the best search experience.

Imagine this — what will happen if your content is not the top choice in a search result? Your answer will not be read as an answer to the voice search query. Hence, you need to ensure that your content ranks at position zero. This automatically makes your content the top choice for voice search results.

Tips to optimize for featured snippets:

- It's important to do your keyword research. Tailor your content to address question-type search queries.
- While you're at it, don't forget to check out the "People also ask" section.
- Write using the infamous journalist's inverted pyramid style. Begin by answering the key aspect of the queries and then go on to add supporting details for the rest of the content.
- Formatting is as important as your keyword research. A featured snippet can come in various formats - paragraph, list, or table. Format the content based on the type of featured snippet you're after.
- Stick to the optimal word count. Most featured snippets are 40-50 words long.

2. (Re)structure your content for voice search

As you know, voice search is more conversational than traditional search. Hence, it's necessary that you revisit your content and how you have structured it. The goal of this exercise is to improve your content and its layout to make it more voice-search friendly.

A study by **Backlinko** shows that Google prefers to show short and concise answers to voice search queries which are typically only 29 words long. Include headings that match the search queries and keep the content short.

Consider including frequently asked questions (FAQs) on your web pages and blogs. This is a great way to ensure that the necessary keywords are included in the content. Remember to keep the answers short. An FAQ-style format makes it easy for

Google to retrieve content from your website and display it as a featured snippet.

Alternatively, you can use a **voice search optimization tool** to speed things up. All you need to do is enter the questions, relevant answers, and embed the auto-generated schema code directly into your website. And voila! Just like that, you are ready to be found on voice search.

> " **PRO TIP:**
> Use pointers to break your content down into bite sizes pieces of information to help you rank better for voice search. "

3. Take a conversational approach to content

Here's a quick checklist that you can use to help you understand user intent:

- What kind of question keywords are people using?
- What is their conversational style?
- What kind of questions is being asked the most?
- What kind of answers is best suited for these queries?
- Which answers are performing better than the search results being displayed?

To truly understand user intent, it's best to take a data-driven approach to the answers for questions in the above-given checklist.

Remember speech is emotional

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Of course, users want to know where your company is located or what kind of products you stack on your store shelves. But they are also looking to get things done such as booking a movie ticket, scheduling a doctor's appointment, or purchasing a product from your store.

Move beyond providing passive information and aim to enable users to take a specific action in an engaging way.

4. Improve Content Readability

Apart from being simple and concise, your content should be readable (by a machine). However, in the pursuit of writing voice-search optimized content, we often forget to factor in readability. According to a **study**, scoring an 8 on the Flesch Kincaid Grade is recommended to optimize the readability of your content for voice search.

Here are a few tips to help you improve content readability:

- Use shorter sentences (but we already know that!)
- Reduce jargon, acronyms, and "insider" words
- Use active voice
- Turn complex points into simple phrases
- Stay on point
- Use the **Hemingway App**

5. Target Long-Tail Keyword Phrases

We all know that, when optimizing for search engines, one of the key areas of focus and research is keywords. For voice search optimization, you need to extend this focus to long-tail keywords because voice searches are longer than text-based searches due to their conversational style.

More importantly, long-tail keywords convey intent. For example, a single keyword such as "Macbook service" is not the same as "Where can I get my Macbook serviced?". It makes it easier for search engines to show more accurate search results.

Now, it wouldn't make sense to create separate content targeting long-tail keywords for voice search. It is impractical and not scalable. Content creators can instead focus on building long-form content that can seamlessly accommodate long-tail keywords. You can also include strong long-tail keywords in headlines which makes it easy to find on search engines.

Tips to research for long-tail keywords

It's a common practice for SEO experts to check for Latent Semantic Indexing (LSI). But how do you find the right long-tail keywords that best suit your website?

- Use the autocomplete results on Google to identify relevant long-tail keywords.
- Use the "People also ask" section on Google.
- Make use of Google AdWords' **Keyword Planner** to generate more ideas for relevant keywords, both short and long.
- Do a little competitor analysis to examine what other businesses in your industry are using.
- Identify and use fillers along with long-tail keywords as part of your research

6. Leverage Google My Business Listings

We've already discussed how people use voice for "near me" searches. The key factor that determines whether or not your brand ranks for these searches is your Google My Business listing.

Google My Business listing is a way in which Google allows you to manage your businesses and connect with customers across its platform. It's a smart way to let Google know where your business is located. So, when a user asks Google to display businesses similar to yours in their locality, your business may rank for that query.

Make sure that you include your business' name, address, and phone number in your listing. You also need to pick the right business categories and provide the area codes. For example, if you are running a beauty salon, do not pick cosmetology as your business category. You can also add information related to special offers, the latest news about your business - any information that will make your business stand out.

Sometimes, you may have more than one business, and managing their listings can be difficult. You can use **tools to manage your Google My Business listings** all in one place, automate your local marketing efforts, and improve visibility of your brand. Such tools often come packed with real-time analytics and suggestions that help you grow your business.

> " **PRO TIP:**
>
> Improve your local SEO by targeting local keywords. "

Add local business schema to your website

When Google crawls your website, its web crawlers may sometime find it difficult to get data about your business such as where you are located, how many customer reviews you have, what your business is all about. A **local schema** tells the search engine where to find all of this information, using 'identifiers'.

A schema works based on these identifiers. You can add a specific markup to inform the web crawler about your data and they use it to classify the data accordingly.

How do you know if your website has a schema markup? You can use **Google's Structured Data Testing Tool** to test

webpage for an existing schema. This tool automatically checks to see if you already have a schema markup on your webpage. It also tells you whether you are missing parts of the schema so that you can fix it.

Alternatively, you can also scan your webpage for schema page-wise using a **schema tool**. Such tools also generate schema mark-up data for webpages. This makes it easy for you to add local schema to your website.

7. Find the right micro-moments

Empowered by smartphones and mobile devices, today's consumers are fully capable of getting exactly what they want and when they want it. As a result, they are more impatient than ever before. Google2 has reported 150% growth in "near me now" searches on mobile devices.

But what are micro-moments?

As **Google** describes it, "Micro-moments are intent-rich moments when decisions are made and preferences shaped. In these moments, consumers' expectations are higher than ever."

There are four such micro-moments — the I want-to-know moments, I want-to-go moments, I want-to-do moments, and I want-to-buy moments. These are the moments that you can leverage for voice search.

Remember micro-moments occur on mobile devices and that's where voice search lives too. Every time a user picks up their smartphone and uses a voice search to ask for information, directions to a place, or find a shop to purchase from, you have the opportunity to put your brand or content in front of them.

By providing users with the right information in one of these micro-moments, you are easing them into your customer journey, you are nudging them one step closer to your brand.

Prepare for micro-moments by looking at what people are searching for. In order to target such high-commitment moments, you need to select the right keywords. Let's say you

use 'buy books' as a keyword in Keyword Planner, it shows a list of relevant keywords based on search volume. The keyword that represents the highest commitment is probably "buy books online". This is a keyword that you should optimize your content for.

Keyword (by relevance) ↓	Avg. monthly searches	Competition
Keywords you provided		
buy books	1K – 10K	High
Keyword ideas		
sell textbooks	10 – 100	Low
sell books online	1K – 10K	Medium
cheap textbooks	10 – 100	Low
buy books online	1K – 10K	High
we buy books	10 – 100	Low

8. Make it mobile-friendly

Recent search algorithm updates have made search engine marketing (SEM) a mobile-first ecosystem. Google now crawls and indexes mobile sites first. Soon, Google may alter its algorithms to prioritize voice-friendly results. This should come as a surprise due to the benefits and overwhelming growth of voice search.

The good news is, optimizing for each of these search experiences isn't mutually exclusive. When you optimize for voice, you automatically optimize for mobile since most voice searches actually come from mobile devices.

Let's consider the strategy of improving site speed. An **analysis** of potential voice search rank factors showed that voice search results load 52% faster than the average page. Website speed is a mobile ranking factor because users

expect faster results when they search for information on the fly. Hence when you improve page loading speed, you make the strategy valuable for both voice and search.

Let's consider another example of using accelerated mobile pages (AMP) and structured data. Using structured data makes your content more relevant for voice search. If you want to have app actions, you need to use AMP.

Additionally, structured data makes it easy to summarise content into easy-to-consume mobile search results. AMP optimized pages are prioritized by mobile search results, which in turn are beneficial for voice search strategy.
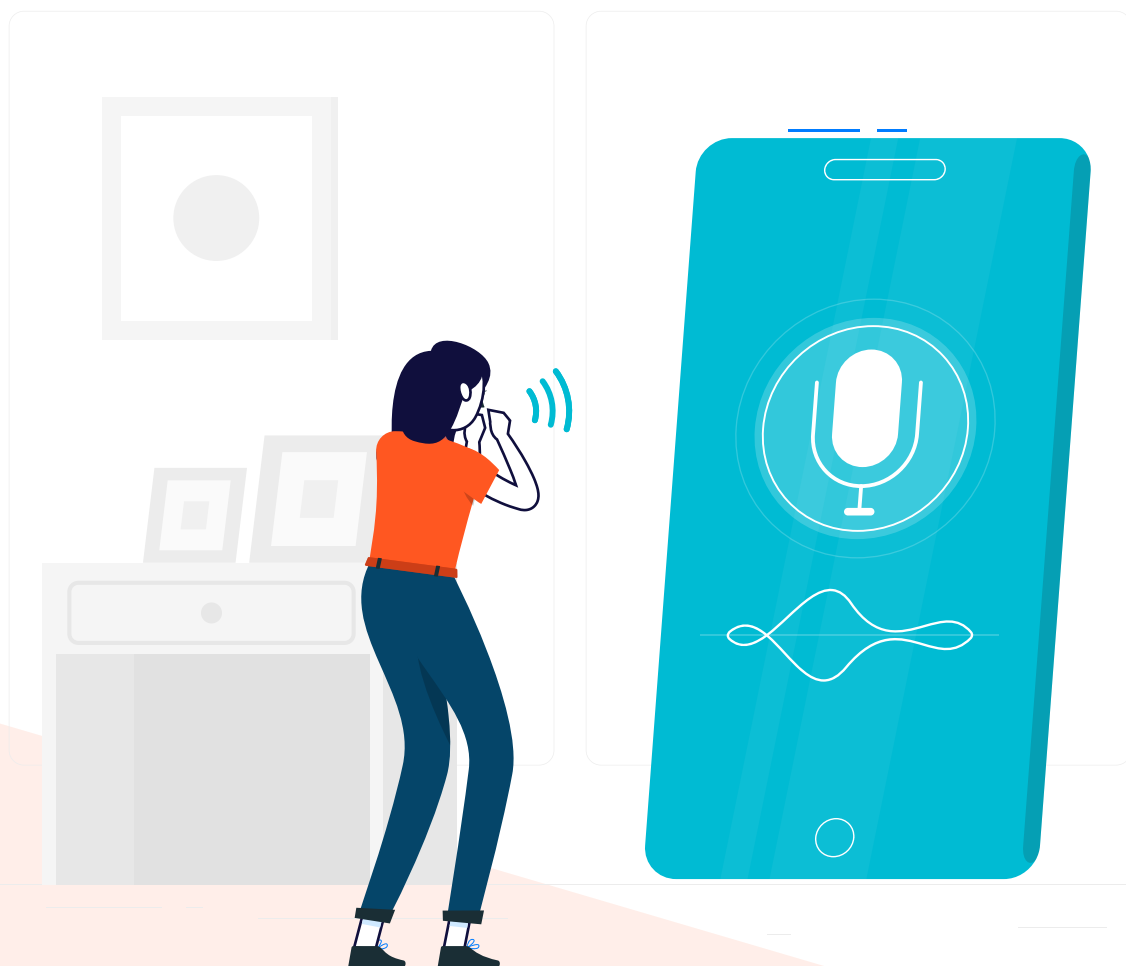
Over to you

Voice search is here to stay. If you haven't begun already, it's high time you focus on optimizing your website for voice search right away. And as voice search continues to grow, voice search optimization will be key to your SEO marketing strategies. It's better to start now and stay ahead of your competition than be sorry.

Every optimization tip we've recommended so far is meant to help you be easily found on search engines, drive more traffic to your website, improve conversion rates, and increase revenue. If you have any interesting strategies that you'd like to see included in this ebook, drop us a line at **vinoth@synup.com**

START YOUR VOICE SEARCH JOURNEY

About Synup

Synup transforms a brand's ability to deliver relevant and trustworthy business content across all of their locations, devices, and digital media channels. Brands can now analyze and optimize how consumers engage with their businesses - from reviews to reputation, videos to voice search, menus to product recommendations - with an easy-to-use SaaS platform.

+1 844 228-2852   hello@synup.com