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A GUIDE TO CONVERSATIONAL SEARCH AND QUERY VARIANTS

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

We've said it before and we'll say it again, voice search is growing and it is now a cornerstone of forward-thinking search marketing strategies. As brands and businesses raise their game in terms of search performance, it is vital that they understand some of the nuances that really boost this type of search query.

Over the coming eBook we'll look at conversational search, compound queries and implicit queries, and see how these considerations can be the difference between high organic search performance and disappearing in the search engine results pages (SERPs).
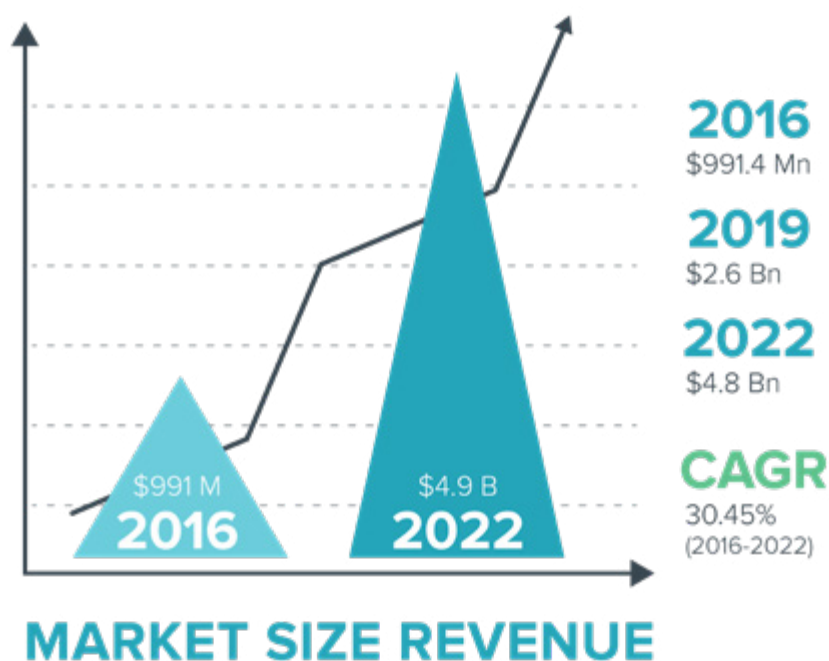
WHAT IS VOICE SEARCH?

Voice search, also called voice-enabled search, allows the user to use a voice command to search the Internet, or a portable device. Currently, voice search is commonly used primarily in 'directory assistance', or local search.

In a broader definition, voice search provides the answers to a query by taking the keywords from that query based on the most relevant information on the Internet. Example platforms that allow this include, Google Voice Search, Cortana, Siri and Amazon Echo. Given that voice-based systems are interactive, such systems are also called open-domain question answering systems.

UNDERSTANDING THE SCALE OF THE VOICE SEARCH MARKET

The rise in the popularity of voice search means that as Google and the other search engines evolve, so too will the businesses and brands that find their content on them. Those who are looking to get ahead and stay ahead of the competition will need to ensure that there is a clear shift in focus towards accommodating this strategy.
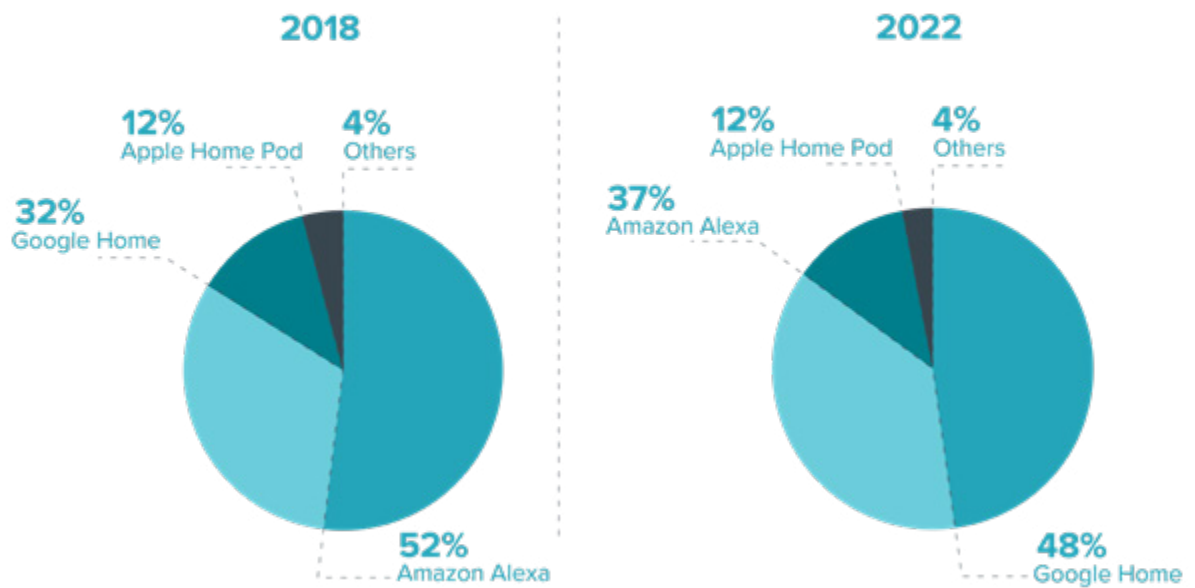
If we look at some of the headline figures related to the sales, growth and projected growth of the voice search market it is clear to see why there is such importance placed on this area of the industry.

2016
$991.4 Mn

2019
$2.6 Bn

2022
$4.8 Bn

CAGR
30.45%
(2016-2022)

$991 M
2016

$4.9 B
2022

MARKET SIZE REVENUE

Looking at the top level figures, a recent study shows that at the end of 2016 the market for smart speakers stood at around $991 m (£778 m). This was projected to rise to $2.6 bn (£2.04 bn) at the end of 2019 and $4.8 bn (£3.77 bn) by the end of 2022. All of this represents a CAGR (compound annual growth rate) of over 30%. This is a figure that will continue to rise with full market coverage or coverage to mobile phone levels achieved by 2025.

SMART SPEAKER HOUSEHOLD ADOPTION 2017-2022 IN US & UK
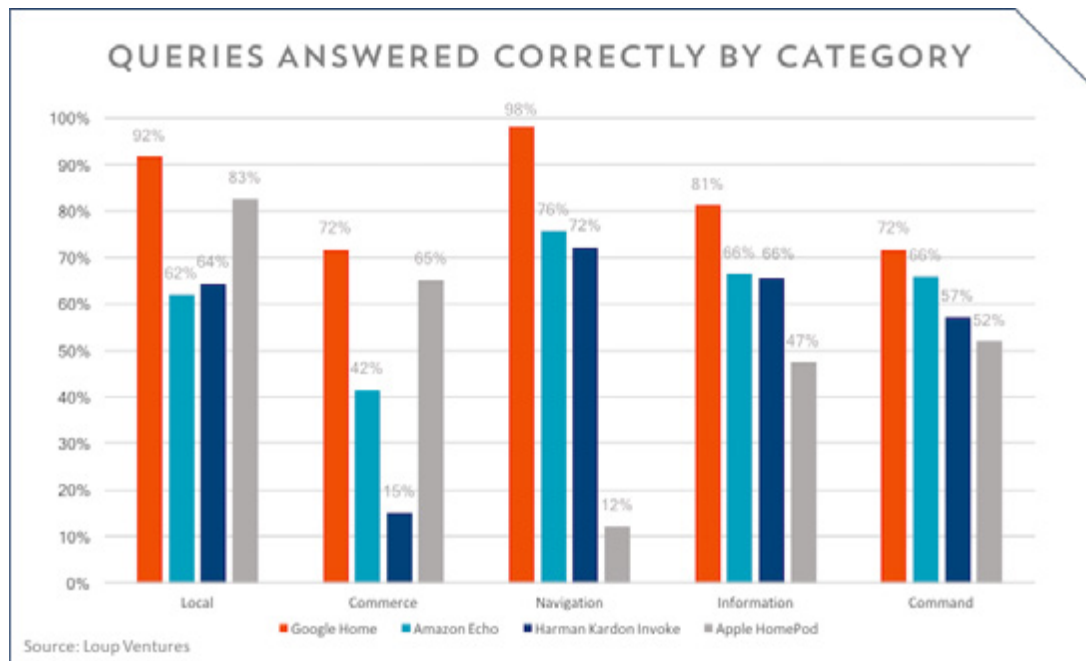
US 55%
UK 48%
US 13%
UK 10%
2017
2022
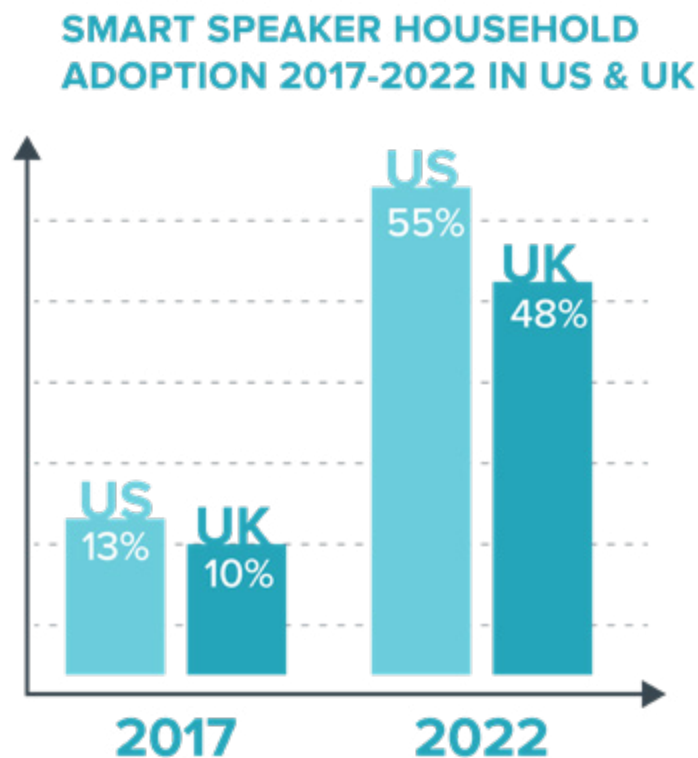
Interestingly there is a huge divide in the market share at present. Global figures suggest that Amazon is the current market leader but if we need any further proof that optimising for Google is vital it in displayed in the below chart. Google is expected to become the market leader in terms of the voice search technology that we buy; over the next four years they will increase market share by 16%.

2018

12% Apple Home Pod
4% Others
32% Google Home
52% Amazon Alexa

2022

12% Apple Home Pod
4% Others
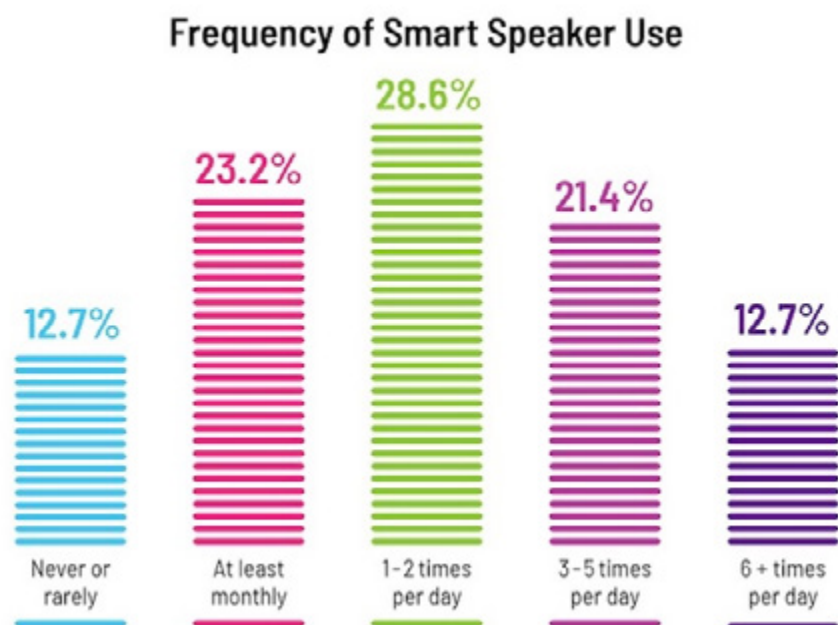37% Amazon Alexa
48% Google Home

This is again reflected when we look at the proportion of voice search queries that were successfully answered. The five main categories for a voice search or query, with example questions are:

- **Local** – "Tell me the name of the nearest train station to my location."

- **Commerce** – "How much is a train ticket from (station A) to (station B)?"

- **Navigation** – "Tell me how to get to the nearest train station."

- **Information** – "What time does the next train leave (station A) that gets to (Station B) before 8am?

- **Command** - "Set my alarm for 7am"

For these categories Google (specifically Google Home) came out top in terms of best servicing the query, highlighting their focus on this area of search.

QUERIES ANSWERED CORRECTLY BY CATEGORY

Source: Loup Ventures

Google Home | Amazon Echo | Harman Kardon Invoke | Apple HomePod

Not only is the sale of smart speakers on the rise but the actual frequency of their use is also climbing. The below chart shows a representation ok how often these devices are currently used.

Frequency of Smart Speaker Use

Never or rarely	At least monthly	1-2 times per day	3-5 times per day	6 + times per day
12.7%	23.2%	28.6%	21.4%	12.7%

This is all possible thanks to conversational search and the way we interact with AI and how machine learning has progressed.

WHAT IS CONVERSATIONAL SEARCH?

Conversational search is the bridge between human and computer interaction. It is the way in which a user searches for the answer to a query on a search engine using phrases more adept to the spoken word. This type of search can be in a written format or spoken to an assistant or other platform that allows voice search.

The main principle is that a user can ask a question in sentence format, and that device can respond with a full sentence. One element of conversational search is that the technology can analyse all of the words in a conversational search query, rather than picking out specific keywords.

An example of this would be a user typing in a search similar to this: "Volkswagen Golf top speed", and having the following answer returned: "the top speed of a Volkswagen Golf is 120mph."

WHAT ARE COMPOUND QUERIES?

A compound query is the process of submitting a search query and receiving an answer from Google before submitting another query which will correlate with the first and allow Google to learn from it to provide a better answer.

Google will use cues and prompts from the initial search in a machine learning format to make sure that it is offering the best possible answer. The reason that this happens is that the latest generation of searchers are using both newer technologies and a longer, more conversational form of search.

With the invention of Google assistants and those on smartphones such as Siri, conversational search is fast becoming the search norm.

To help understand compound queries a little more, and to ensure that they are being used to best effect, it is vital to break the topic into two distinct areas – intent revision queries and chained queries.

Intent revision queries

These types of query reflect everything that we have mentioned in the past about machine learning.

These types of search mean that in order to get the most comprehensive answer a user does not have to start a search again but can edit or revise their initial search.

An example that is widely used when it comes to this type of search is as follows: A user starts by asking "show me cookbooks", then revised the response with a second query of "show me the vegetarian ones" which inherently refers back to the previous query thus preventing a second, entirely separate search.
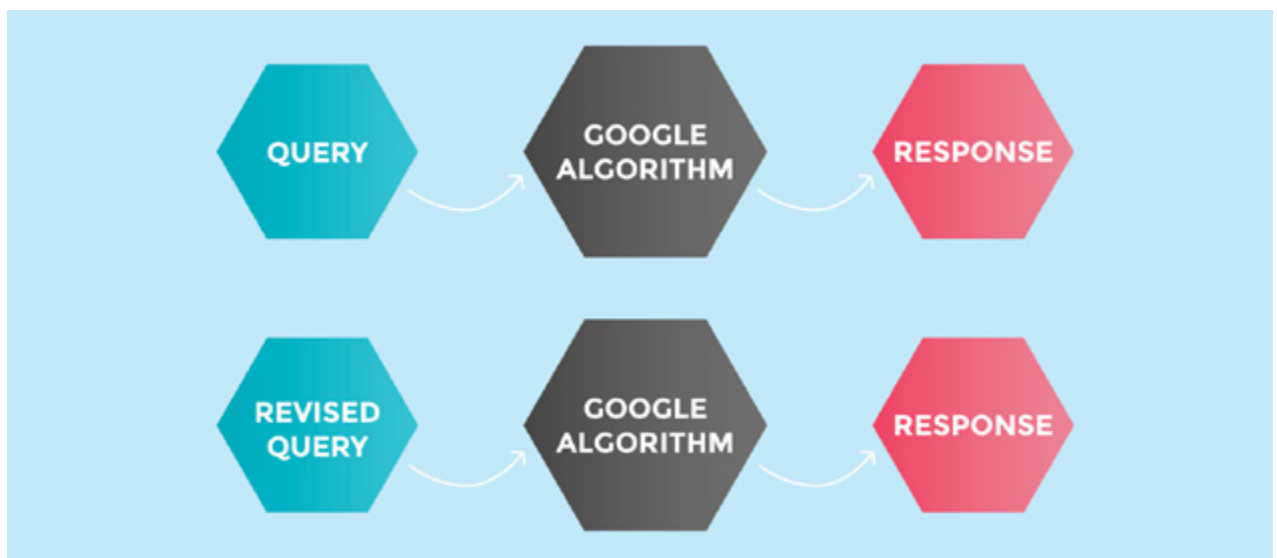
Chained queries

These searches work in a similar way, but, instead of revising the initial query, the user can instead run additional queries around the same topic.

An example of this would be if a user first asked "on which continent does France sit?", they could then follow that with a chained query, such as "what is the capital?". This is not revising the query, but it is dependent upon having asked the first query.
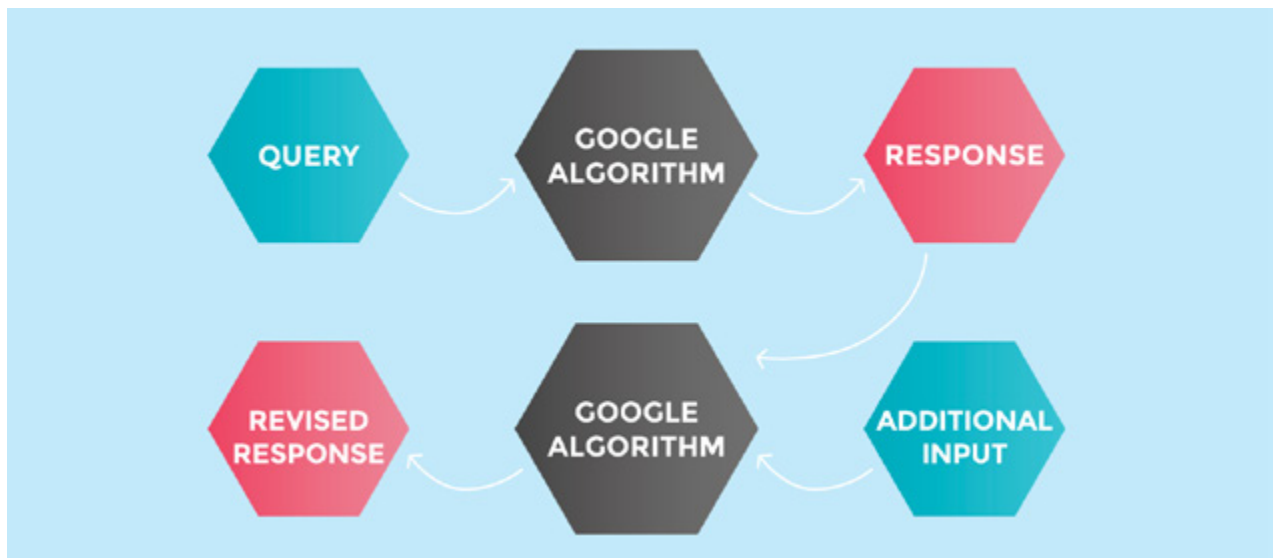
Implicit queries

Initially, when a user typed a query into Google they expected that the search engine would match the words directly from one to the other. These matches represented and displayed the search results best placed to deliver an answer. This is very basic, early-format, search and as Google and others have gotten more refined implicit queries have become more prominent.

A good example of this would be if a user was to conduct a basic or 'explicit' search and type in something like "restaurants" they would have originally been shown the webpages and documents that ranked best for that term.

Now however, it is possible to get an 'implicit' query that looks at other data and allows for a better result.

The implicit aspects of the 'restaurants' query therefore can include:

• Which device is being used?

• The user's location

• The user's language (of search)

• The user's search history

• Which browser they are using

As we move forward hyperlocal search **and various tools will allow the search engine to see:**

• The users method of transport

• Which side of the road they are on

• How fast they are moving

• Other appointments – syncing to calendars etc

Understanding where Google pulls the answers from, and the decisions that it makes in terms of what to display based on data and its wider knowledge, is vital. Over time we can expect the number of implicit searches to become the social norm as displayed below.
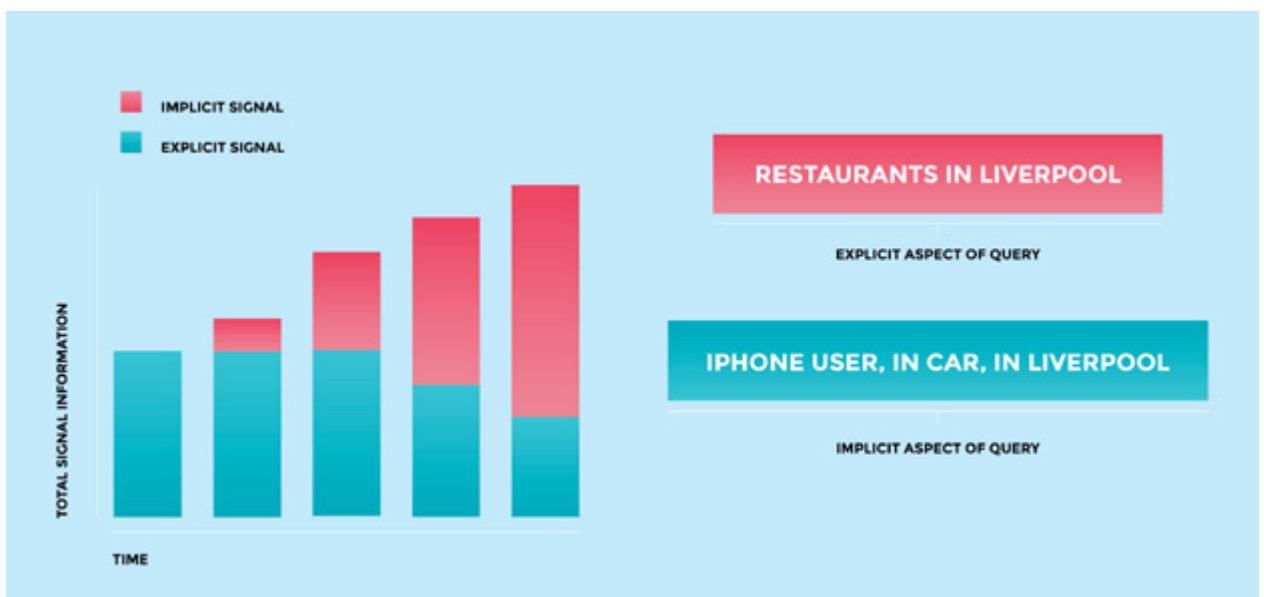
Chained queries

As well as preparing for voice search it is also imperative that you make sure your site and its content meet SEO best practices.

These include optimising your webpages for:

- Page speed

- Mobile compliance

- Great content that answers people's questions and solves problems

- Use natural language that answers a user's question

- Optimise local pages through Google My Business and other online directories

- Solid site hierarchy

- Site authority

- XML sitemap

- Navigation is easy to follow

- Local reviews

- Images with alt tags

- Respond to reviews

- Secure website by installing an SSL certification

- Schema markup

FINAL THOUGHTS

Unlike text search, voice search is not just direct – but often colloquial. If businesses and brands can adapt for this and understand how people speak and search then they are without question heading in the right direction.

There will be a natural leaning from the user to move towards a longtail search approach as they use voice search. This is the nature of a query in question format and although language will change this approach won't.

Businesses therefore need to be at the top of their game if they are to succeed. They need to listen and incorporate machine learning in order to best service the queries they receive and to constantly test to make sure that they remain one step ahead.

It is often said that in voice search if you aren't in position 1 then you are nowhere, as this is the 'rich snippet' where the majority of voice searches are taken from.
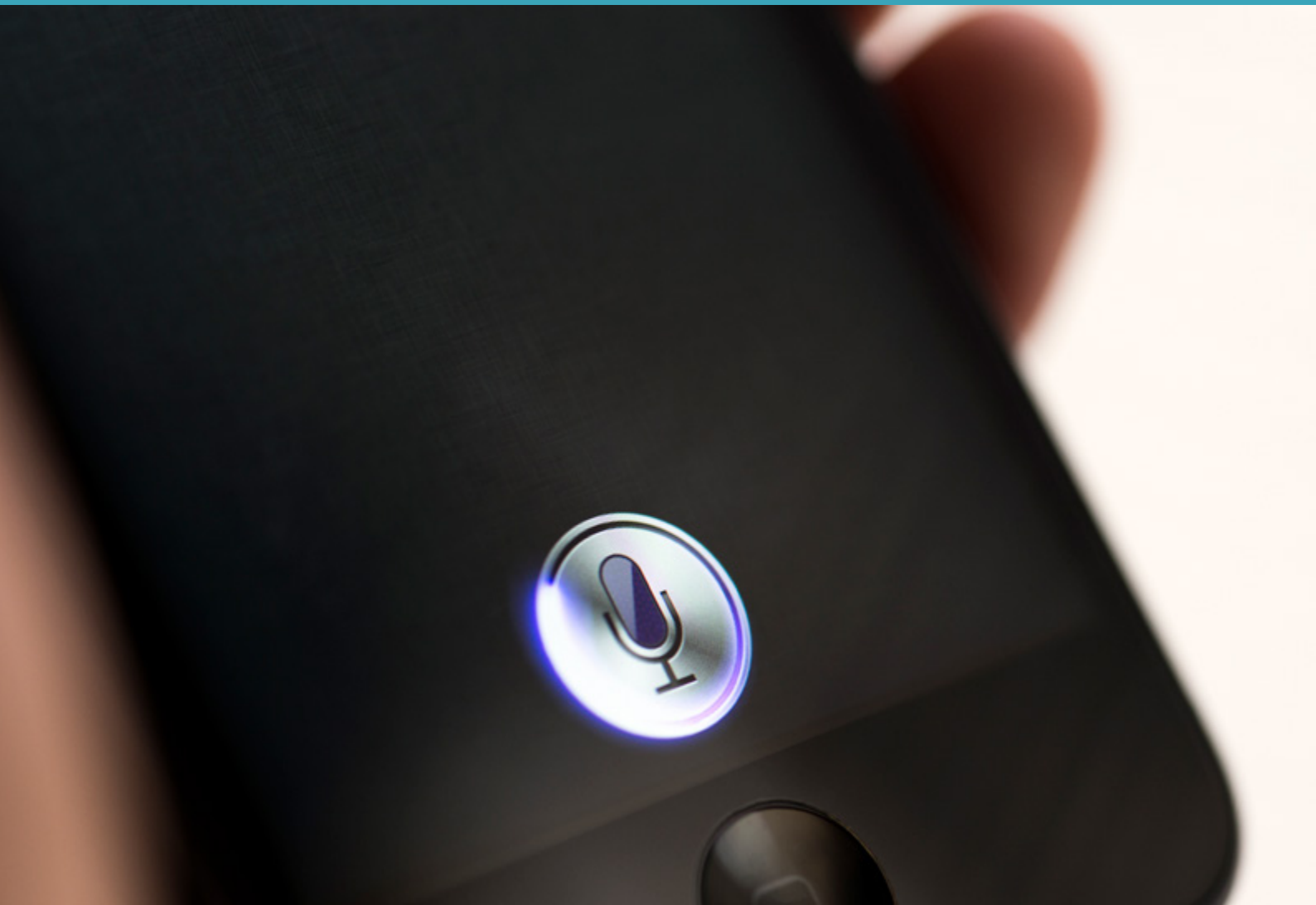
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ABOUT US

Located in North West England, Click Consult is a multi award-winning search marketing agency with a focus on organic (SEO) and paid search (PPC), with over 70 professionals employed and with a portfolio of over 60 clients from across the UK, Europe, Americas and Australia.

Click was named Search Agency of the Year 2018, adding to its long list of other awards and accolades, and also ranks within both RAR's and Econsultancy's 'Top 100 Digital Agencies', and Prolific North's 'Top 50 Digital Agencies'.

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Blog
Click Consult regularly posts actionable insights on its blog – dealing with all aspects of search marketing. From technical SEO to PPC, content marketing and Analytics advice, the Click Consult blog has something for everyone of any ability.

eBooks
Click Consult produces in depth eBooks on aspects of search marketing on a regular basis, dealing with the latest best practices, changes to standard practices, methods of improvement and more.
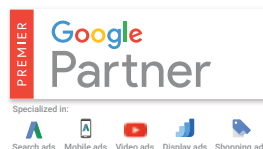
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Sometimes what you need is a quick point of reference about complex subjects. Thanks to its team of highly talented designers, Click Consult is also able to distil its vast experience into easy to understand visual content.

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