VERNDALE

Voicify

VOICE SEARCH & THE EVOLUTION OF THE MODERN SERP

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As is tradition in the tech world, there's rarely ever time to adjust to one major innovation before the next one is upon us.

It probably feels like yesterday when you were reading predictions about the rise of mobile search due to the increasing popularity of smartphones – predictions that have since come to fruition. By 2017, almost 60% of web traffic [1] came from mobile and tablet combined, and that breakdown can be even more extreme for local businesses and organizations in certain industries. As a result, companies have been forced to revamp their digital strategies, dedicating significant portions of their budgets to providing users with a quality mobile experience.

Although mobile dominates the search landscape today, voice search looks poised to take the throne. According to Comscore, 50% of all searches will be voice-based by 2020 [2] , and voice shopping is expected to grow to a more than $40 billion industry [3] in the U.S. and U.K. by 2022.

But before you start investing in voice search – and potentially repeating the mistakes many companies made during "Mobilegeddon" (more on this to come) – it's important to understand how we got here in the first place. Similar to most prominent trends in search, voice didn't just arrive out of the blue; it's a tale of technology evolving quickly, users adapting to that new technology, and search habits changing in the process.

And, in many ways, these changes can largely be traced to one company: Google.

[1] https://www.brightedge.com/resources/resources/research-reports/mobile-first-57-traffic-now-mobile

[2] https://www.forbes.com/sites/jaysondemers/2018/01/09/why-you-need-to-prepare-for-a-voice-search-revolution/#6b2b130934af

[3] https://techcrunch.com/2018/03/02/ voice-shopping-estimated-to-hit-40-billion-across-u-s-and-u-k-by-2022/

[4] https://www.brightlocal.com/learn/voice-search-for-local-business-study/

[5] https://alpine.ai/voice-search-trends/

HOW GOOGLE CHANGED THE GAME ... AGAIN

Google's initial plunge into voice search happened more than seven years ago when they bought Motorola for $12.5 billion. At the time, the search giant likely already had plans in place for – or at least hopes of – voice search, but they didn't have the software or an algorithm in place to support it. Plus, most searches back then were keyword-centric, which meant user behavior needed to shift entirely for voice search to become more common.

And shift it did. According to a BrightLocal study, nearly 60% of consumers have used voice search to find local business information in the last 12 months [4] , while Alpine.AI estimated that there were over 1 billion voice searches made in January 2018 alone [5] .

Millennials have been gravitating to the new technology at an even faster rate, with over 60% using voice-enabled technology weekly and almost 40% using it daily [6].

So how did we get here? There are a handful of major events that pre- and post-date Google's acquisition of Motorola that have helped shape of the modern search engine results pages (SERPs).

Understanding how the SERP has evolved may help you better understand how to adapt your customer experience strategy to account for the rise of voice.

TIMELINE OF MAJOR SEARCH EVENTS

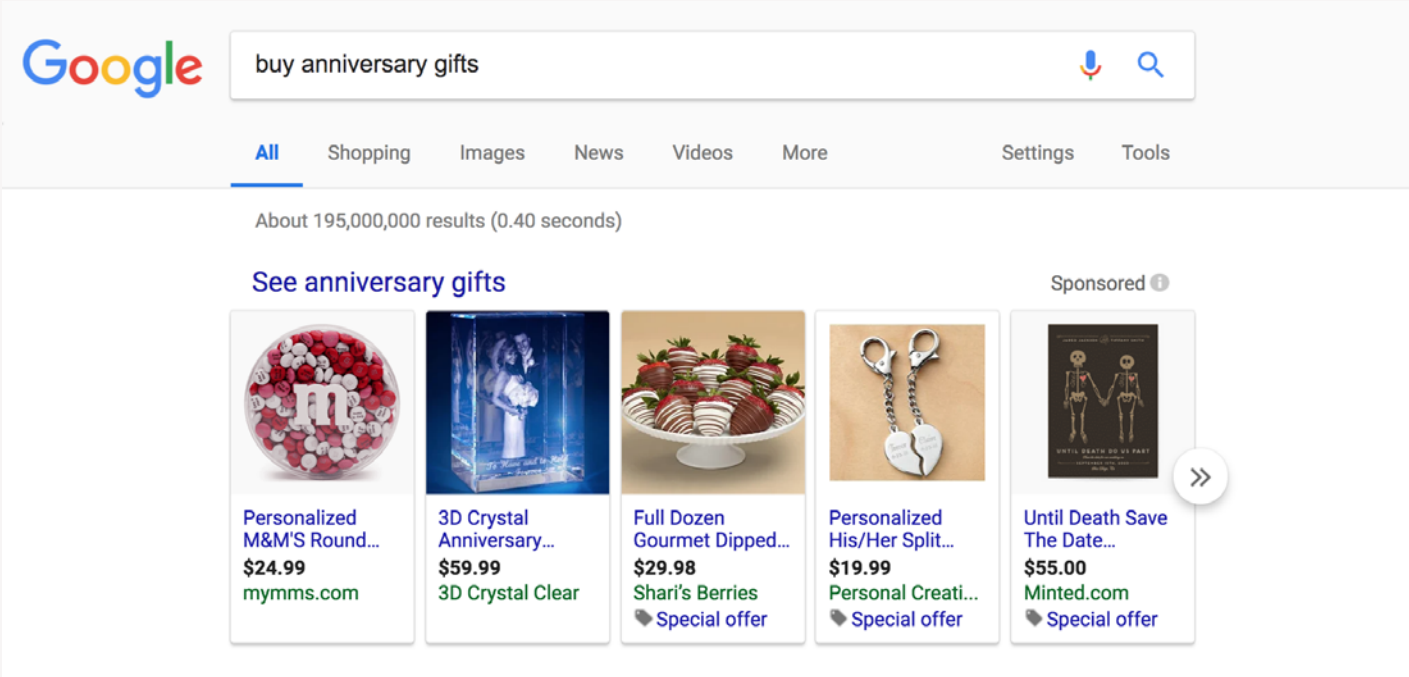
FEBRUARY 2011 – APRIL 2012:

Google cleans up its search results by rolling out its Panda and Penguin updates, which were aimed at cracking down on thin content and spammy link practices.

Google also made its purchase of Motorola between the time of those two updates, which likely paved the way for two monumental developments: releasing their own smartphone and developing their own voice software. Both items have had major implications on the modern SERP, which we'll come back to later.

MAY 2012:

Google Shopping [7] is introduced, where paid listings would be prominently placed in the SERP for product-related searches. In many ways, Google Shopping was a precursor to structured data, which has had – and continues to have – a significant impact on the modern SERP, including voice search results.



[7] https://searchengineland.com/google-shopping-%E2%80%93-the-balance-between-old-new-129011

SEPTEMBER 2013:

The Hummingbird update was considered to be "a complete overhaul of [Google's] core algorithm." Hummingbird marked the culmination of the switch from keyword-based search to semantic search, where Google attempted to return the most relevant results based on a user's intent.

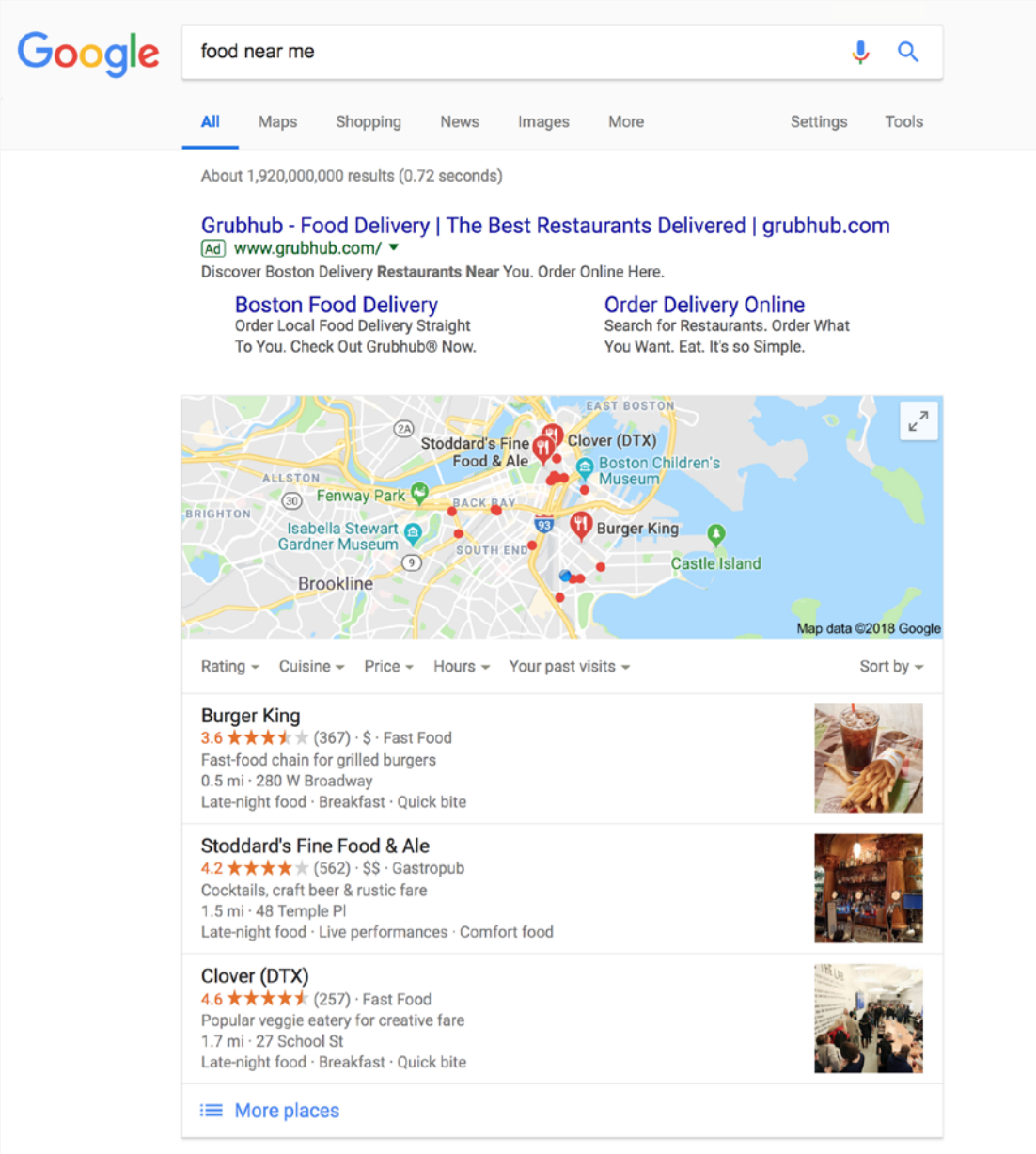
This was a dramatic shift in the search landscape that rendered keyword-stuffing strategies obsolete. Google's algorithm became far more sophisticated at anticipating and understanding users' questions – even if they only searched for a fraction of that question – and it's only gotten better at returning results that provide the best answers.

Hummingbird had a tertiary impact on local SEO as well, since understanding a user's physical location is needed to be able to return relevant, semantic results for queries with local intent. But the major overhaul of local search didn't take place until...

JULY 2014:

Google's update to its local search algorithm, known as Google Pigeon [8] , had a major impact on local search results and how those results appeared in the SERP (i.e. the local packs).

[8] https://searchengineland.com/google-makes-significant-changes-local-search-ranking-algorithm-197778



That impact can still be seen today, particularly since users are including "near me" or other localized phrases in search queries more often. According to an analysis by Google of search trends in 2017 versus 2015, mobile searches have shown increase of:

- ***MORE THAN 150%*** *FOR "___ NEAR ME NOW" SEARCHES*
- ***OVER 500%*** *FOR "NEAR ME" SEARCHES WITH VARIATIONS OF "CAN I BUY" OR "TO BUY"*
- ***AND 900+%*** *FOR "NEAR ME TODAY/TONIGHT" QUERIES*

APRIL 2015:

"Mobilegeddon" was the name given to Google's mobile-friendly update, during which mobile-friendly pages received a boost in rankings.

Google alluded to mobile-friendliness becoming a ranking factor as early as 2013 following their purchase of Motorola, so this update was essentially a push for late adopters to start taking their mobile experiences seriously. By the time this algorithm update went into effect, mobile searches had already surpassed desktop.

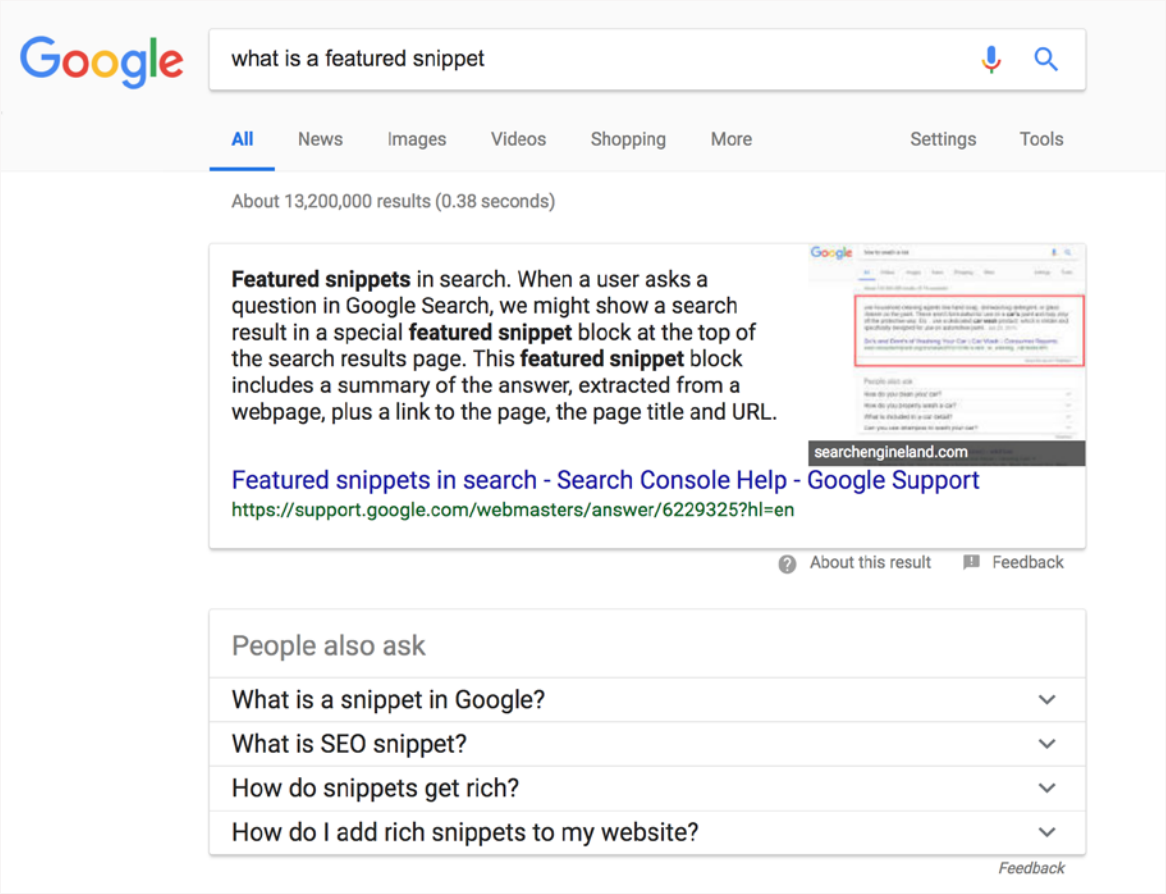
This emphasis on providing users with a quality experience across devices is ongoing even today, with Google (slowly) in the process of rolling out its mobile-first indexing.

2016:

It's hard to put an exact date on the origin of featured snippets since Google actually started experimenting with answer boxes as early as 2013. But 2016 is the year Google confirmed that featured snippets had been fully adopted into the SERP, and they've only expanded their use since then. "People also ask" questions started appearing shortly after, and the evolution to the modern SERP was largely complete.

(Spoiler alert: According to a 2017 study by Stone Temple, about 30% [9] of Google searches return featured snippets, and they'll likely be the driving force behind the answers given to voice search queries.)

Featured snippets can take on different shapes and sizes, ranging from paragraphs to lists to tables. They've also placed added weight on the use of schema, a simple code that many of the top search engines created in collaboration with one another. Incorporating schema markup into your overall strategy will allow search engines to better understand your website, increasing the chances of your site appearing in featured snippets for relevant search terms – and thus being the answer given for voice queries.



[9] https://www.stonetemple.com/featured-snippets-new-Insights-new-opportunities/

FEBRUARY 2016:

Google launches its Accelerated Mobile Page (AMP) initiative, an open source platform that aimed to make content load in less than 1 second for the user. Those that adhered to it found themselves in the beginning of the next level of structured data, which has had implications on voice since devices, neuro-linguistic processing, and data processing all benefit from a global structure – the lack of which is arguably a hurdle for voice machine learning.

To date, AMP has been the most widely adopted among publishers who generally have to post several articles per day, adding to their already enormous digital footprint (nytimes.com has about 8.7 million indexed pages, for instance). AMP has allowed them to meet these requirements while also providing their users with a better experience on mobile.

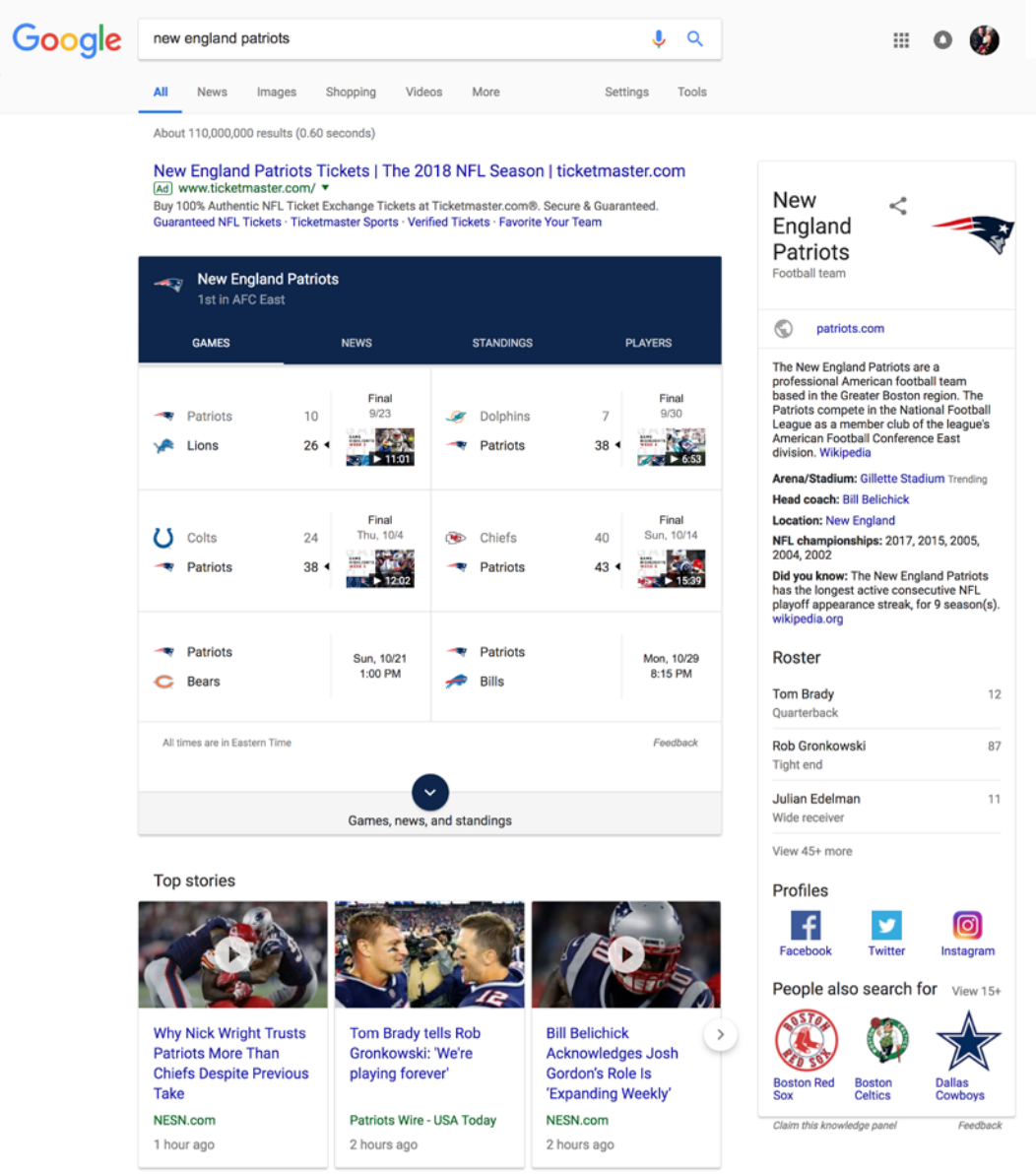
FEBRUARY 2018:

Google begins rolling out "multifaced featured snippets," or SERPs that include multiple featured snippets. According to STAT, early indications are that multifaceted snippets [10] are showing up for broader search terms that could have multiple intents, while a single featured snippet will show up for more targeted queries such as questions.

[10] https://getstat.com/blog/we-dipped-our-toes-into-double-snippet-serps/

TODAY:

Google has continued to refine the elements listed above. The result is a variety of types of SERPs, which vary based on the user's intent, the device they're using, their physical location, and many other factors.



In some ways, the search landscape is more complicated than it's ever been. But there are many ways in which you can use these changes to your advantage, particularly with the data you now have at your disposal.

WHY SHOULD YOU CARE ABOUT VOICE SEARCH?

If featured snippets, local 3-packs, and shopping feeds are the result of Google's algorithm overhaul, the cause can be traced to three main occurrences:

1. Hummingbird, which paved the way for semantic search and motivated users to start thinking about searches as questions rather than keywords.

2. Mobile searches overtaking desktop, which had enormous implications for local SEO and helped pave the way for voice search (think Siri).

3. The rise of voice search, which has been leading to users explicitly asking questions.

At this point, you're probably wondering, "Why should I care about the history of the SERP? How does this tie into my CX strategy?"

To start, it should be a cautionary tale not to repeat the mistakes of the past. When having a mobile-friendly site became a necessity – both because mobile searches overtook desktop and because Google explicitly stated it was a ranking factor – many companies did not get it right the first time. The reason for this was often twofold: they waited too long to start taking mobile seriously, and by the time they did, they were left scrambling to create a mobile experience that was "good enough" to meet Google's standards.

In other words, they were trying to squeeze mobile into their existing digital strategies, resulting in a fragmented user experience from device to device – and ultimately a poor customer experience. The better approach? Taking the time to redefine and develop a holistic strategy, which included mobile as a major piece of the equation.

And that's exactly how you should take on the challenge of voice search.

Like mobile, voice technology isn't going away anytime soon. According to **Verndale's *Trendspots* in Voice Technology**, 85% of respondents anticipate that voice-enabled technology will be able to perform complicated or multi-step searches and commands in the future, and another 44% of millennials predicted that voice search will replace text-based search within five years.

This means you should take the time now to create a strategy around voice that's built to last. From your SEO and content strategy to voice apps, it's important to have a larger discussion about all of the potential options and technologies available before adopting a voice experience strategy that makes the most sense for your business.

The second (and more tangible) reason has to do with new data trends that have been brought about by how voice technologies are shaping search habits. Because more users are asking full questions when they search for something, there's been a corresponding increase in search volume for question-related queries. And those queries are increasingly showing up in Google Search Console, in Keyword Planner, and any other keyword research tools you may use.

In the past, we had to guess what our customers' common questions were using unscientific methods such as polls, industry research, insights from salespeople or account managers, or by inferring that information from keyword data. Thanks to the changes in search trends, we're no longer left guessing what those questions are.

So why not use this data in Google Search Console and Keyword Planner to your advantage?

Start developing blogs and content on your site around these topics. Build out FAQ pages that ask and answer those exact questions, and then work these queries into your schema strategy whenever possible. Ensure your internal site search engine can answer those questions, particularly since users may be asking them via voice in a future state. You can even use this data to arm your sales staff and marketers with information that may hit close to home when reaching out to their respective leads.

At the end of the day, it's about answering customers' questions, offering solutions to their challenges, and providing them with a great experience along the way. Let's use the data at our disposal to accomplish these goals.

GLOSSARY

Featured Snippets – A summary of an answer to a user's query that's displayed at the top of Google search results. The information in this snippet is extracted from a web page and includes the page's title and URL. There are three types of snippets: paragraph, list, and table.

Hummingbird – A major algorithm change in Google Search, which occurred in 2013. This change placed more emphasis on natural language queries (aka semantic search) and also began factoring in users' physical locations.

Mobilegeddon – A major change to Google's algorithm that's designed to give a boost in rankings to mobile-friendly sites.

Multifaceted Featured Snippets – Double-snippet SERPs, which provide multiple featured snippets for "multi-intent" queries.

Panda Update – A change to Google's search algorithm in February 2011 that aimed to reduce rankings for sites with low-quality (or thin) content.

Penguin Update – A change to Google's search algorithm in April 2012 that aimed to catch sites that were buying links or using other spammy methods for acquiring a high number of backlinks.

Pigeon Update – A change to Google's search algorithm in July 2014 that was designed to improve ranking parameters based on users' distance and physical location.

SERP – The web pages returned by a search engine in response to a keyword query.

Structured Data – Additional code that allows search engines to understand how the page should be presented within the search engines results page.

EXPERIENCE IS EVERYTHING™

ABOUT VERNDALE

Verndale is a customer experience agency, purpose-built to help marketing and technology leaders connect the dots of the consumer journey. We design and build digital experiences, and enable marketing technologies that bring brands and their customers closer together.

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ABOUT VOICIFY

Voicify is the market leader in voice experience management software that combines voice optimized content management, cross-platform deployment, and voice-specific customer insights.

The Voicify Voice Experience Platform™ enables marketers to connect with their customers by creating highly engaging and personalized voice experiences that are automatically deployed to a broad array of voice platforms such as voice assistants (Amazon Alexa, Google Assistant and Microsoft Cortana), chatbots and other services. The platform enables non-technical users to deploy feature-rich voice applications quickly and efficiently while offzering the flexibility of unlimited customization.

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