

New voices in voice-led tech

Issued by [Dentsu](#)

3 Apr 2019

Should we be optimising for African languages? Yes, says Jaco Lintvelt, managing director at iProspect and AMNET Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA).



Only a quarter of Africans have access to the internet, but SSA is seeing the strongest growth globally, according to the latest statistics from the International Telecommunications Union.

This leaves marketers with the key question: should we be optimising our content and campaigns for a wider variety of African languages to better address consumers' needs?

Before we can really answer that question in an African context, let's have a look at what voice search really means.

Voice search and voice tech

Voice search, in layman's terms, allows the user to use a voice command to search the internet or a portable device.

Voice technology lets users interact with their devices by talking rather than entering inputs through a physical or virtual keyboard. Over the last couple of years, millions of people have begun having conversations with microphone-enabled devices. This technology is fundamentally changing the way we use our devices, often in ways we didn't expect.

Perhaps the biggest driver in the uptake of voice activation globally is that it taps into natural behaviour in the form of speech to serve the user's needs. As humans, we learn to talk before we can type. We can speak more words per minute than we can type. Spoken word is our go-to communication method.

Voice search and usage locally

Unfortunately, Google haven't yet released official statistics around the usage of voice search in South Africa or the broader SSA region.

The fact that official numbers are not available does not take away from the fact that this natural evolution is definitely on the cards, thanks to strong mobile penetration in SSA markets. The mobile phone is the primary device for accessing the internet and SSA's smartphone penetration already stands at 33% – significantly higher than the 15% recorded in 2014.

Market analysts predict this will double by 2025.

According to research by the Pew Research Centre, South Africa boasts 51% smartphone penetration, which contributes significantly to the country's online figures. SA is the only country in the SSA region where at least half the population is online, says the Pew Research Centre report.

The other five countries sampled have less than 40% penetration: Ghana (35%), Senegal (34%), Nigeria (32%), Kenya (30%) and Tanzania (13%).

Although SSA has the lowest smartphone penetration compared to global counterparts, the outlook is favourable in terms of growth, and mobile voice search is sure to feature.

Turning up the volume on voice search

Brands that want to develop the most personalised experiences in the future should definitely be thinking about producing local content that incorporates local languages and design.

Our consumer findings show that brands need to be delivering utility in the most relevant manner with a focus on the conversational. This means that brands need to pay particular attention to four key dimensions:

1. Data: understanding where the opportunities lie.
2. Content: getting content right for conversation as well as copy.
3. UX: new brand experiences require new usability thinking.
4. E-commerce: getting ready for full e-commerce adoption.

Opportunity ahead

Looking to the future, it will become key for SSA brands to develop for African languages across the entire digital customer journey, from the first search right through to the checkout process when making an online purchase. Even if voice search is not linked so much to the e-commerce experience at first, it will be used more broadly by people when performing online searches for services and products, and this gives African marketers a good opportunity to capitalise on.

From the various research pieces conducted by iProspect in APAC, EMEA and the Americas, it is clear that voice search is here to stay. It's natural, it's personal, it's everywhere and it is definitely changing brand communications for the better.

The population of SSA is on track to reach 1.2 billion people by 2020. Even if voice search is not on everyone's radar right now, brands that consider the opportunities in voice tech will ultimately win the battle for the consumer.

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