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*The Future of Search*

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Have you ever started a question with “Hey Google,” “Hey Siri,” or “Alexa?” Have you ever been to a restaurant you discovered on TikTok? Have you ever asked an AI chatbot a question? If so, then you have contributed to the transformation of how consumers, younger generations especially, are seeking and consuming information. For the first time in a long time, the future of search could take many different paths.

For over 20 years the search experience has remained consistent, engines have come and gone but the fundamentals have remained the same. But, for the first time, alternatives to traditional search are being offered: voice, TikTok, and even AI. Search has always been an important aspect of the consumer journey; therefore, it's important to navigate changes, capitalising on opportunities and avoiding threats. Here's what you need to know:

**FUTURE OF VOICE SEARCH**

Digital assistants have been widely accessible since 2011 when Apple launched Siri, one of the first voice recognition systems able to maintain a conversation with a user.<sup>1</sup> Since then, voice search has grown with offerings like Amazon Echo and Google Assistant appearing in homes, helping answer questions audibly when users' hands are full in the kitchen. In fact, 50% of the US population uses voice search daily, and the number of standalone voice assistants is predicted to reach 8 billion in 2023.<sup>2</sup> Voice search has also made information more accessible to those with disabilities, and safer for those who want answers when driving. Slang Labs, a Google-backed start-up, is transforming e-commerce as we know it with its CONVA tool, or conversational in-app voice assistant. CONVA provides “smart and highly accurate multilingual voice search capabilities inside e-commerce apps,” facilitating a seamless shopping experience for non-English-speaking consumers to use apps with only an English interface.<sup>3</sup> Voice search's impact isn't limited to consumers—voice search is playing a more serious role in the workplace at Walmart with its Ask Sam app that uses voice search technology to assist employees with information like work schedules, inventory, and prices.<sup>4</sup>

**AI'S INFLUENCE**

The rise of AI also has potential to dramatically change existing voice assistants like Amazon Echo and Google Assistant from “glorified clock radios” to technology with advanced artificial intelligence, the original goal of Amazon's Alexa that has not progressed accordingly.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Embedded Computing Design, 29<sup>th</sup> October 2020, [Link](#).

<sup>2</sup> Oberlo, 28<sup>th</sup> January 2023, [Link](#); Entrepreneur, 7<sup>th</sup> February 2023, [Link](#).

<sup>3</sup> CXO today, 28<sup>th</sup> February 2023, [Link](#).

<sup>4</sup> Forbes, 9<sup>th</sup> November, 2021, [Link](#).

<sup>5</sup> Financial Times, 4<sup>th</sup> March 2023, [Link](#).

“Fundamentally, this technology will enable that breadth and flexibility and complexity that has not existed with the previous generation of voice assistants. I think there will be a renaissance.”<sup>6</sup>

*- Adam Cheyer, Siri Co-creator*

As AI improves and becomes more relevant in the daily lives of consumers, voice search could follow suit, transforming the way consumers search not just for simple answers but for aid in complex decisions such as in the travel industry.

## **THE AI RACE & DEBATE**

In 2023, AI has taken the world by storm and threatens to revolutionise search as we know it. OpenAI's ChatGPT gained 100 million users in its first two months after its release in late November 2022, earning the title as the fastest growing web app ever.<sup>7</sup> Microsoft, an OpenAI shareholder, launched its AI enabled search engines in February of this year, integrating ChatGPT into Bing and Edge. Google followed suit shortly after, announcing its own AI chatbot, Bard. However, both chatbots experienced setbacks when Bing's chatbot engaged in a disturbing conversation about love and taking over the world and Bard revealed an inaccurate detail about the James Webb Space Telescope in an ad.<sup>8</sup> This race is far from over, and so is the debate surrounding the ethics of these AI chatbots. Educators fear AI will become homework machines, professionals question the future of the job market, and marketers wonder how AI will be financed with or without ad revenue, to name a few debates.

## **TIKTOK AS A SEARCH ENGINE**

TikTok's popularity is ever increasing, famous for its addictive algorithm and short, stimulating videos that are especially appealing to the limited attention spans of Gen-Z, which make up 60% of TikTok users.<sup>9</sup> TikTok specialises in its never-ending “For You” page that knows users' preferences and interests better than they do. In light of its growing popularity, TikTok has taken on a new role in the daily lives of younger generations as their go-to search engine for entertaining, digestible, relevant information.

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<sup>6</sup> Financial Times, 4<sup>th</sup> March 2023, [Link](#).

<sup>7</sup> WARC, 1<sup>st</sup> March 2023, [Link](#).

<sup>8</sup> New York Times, 16<sup>th</sup> February 2023, [Link](#); Business Insider, 8<sup>th</sup> February 2023, [Link](#).

<sup>9</sup> Forbes, 20<sup>th</sup> July 2022, [Link](#).

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The TikTok search experience stands out by allowing ‘sneak peaks,’ making it a brilliant format for experiences like going to a restaurant or venue or using a new product.

“You’re seeing a three-sixty view into a destination, or experience, or product. They wanted to see the makeup swatches; for bars, the thing they kept talking about was the aesthetic, the vibe.”<sup>10</sup>

*- Adrienne Sheares, ViviMae Labs, 2022*

This new way to search is revolutionary – users feel that they can trust a TikTok recommendation more than a “faceless website”.<sup>11</sup> Gen Z trusts TikTok creators to provide authentic and curated recommendations. Foresight Factory reports that 56% of consumers are interested in surprise recommendations based on their lifestyle habits.<sup>12</sup>

**BUT TRADITIONAL SEARCH IS HERE TO STAY**

But traditional search engines are not gone for good. Even though TikTok is useful for niche or entertaining searches and voice search and AI deliver fast, low-effort results, they lack the one-size-fits-all feature of traditional search engines.

“Google will continue to have the most information on how people search, understanding how they process information and human behaviour, and with their updates to create more dynamic results, they will remain the single source for pulling together information from multiple touchpoints.”<sup>13</sup>

*- Marina Glavan, Senior Strategist, AMV BBDO*

There are still important benefits of traditional search that these new methods cannot deliver. While TikTok can provide entertaining, personalised content and AI chatbots can spit out answers to complex questions, they are not suitable for thorough research. TikTok

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<sup>10</sup> Abc News, 17<sup>th</sup> August 2022, [Link](#).

<sup>11</sup> New York Times, 17<sup>th</sup> February 2022, [Link](#).

<sup>12</sup> Foresight Factory, 2022, [Link](#)

<sup>13</sup> Euronews, 5<sup>th</sup> February 2023, [Link](#).

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and AI can provide the black and white very well, but they cannot compete with the depth and breadth of the grey area that traditional search provides.

Google's incredible versatility, universality, and reliability set it apart from competitors. The most popular search engine in the world with more than 8.5 billion searches a day.<sup>14</sup> It is up to the user to choose their own adventure in complex, judgement-driven searches. 15% of all Google searches have never been searched before, and more than 50% of Google searches end without the need for a single click, proving that Google can efficiently answer even the most peculiar, unique queries.<sup>15</sup> Traditional search engines promote provide the source of their knowledge—something users value, and TikTok and AI lack. In fact, TikTok users are hyperaware of the threat of misinformation spreading on TikTok and report using Google to fact-check.<sup>16</sup>

The experience traditional search provides is also exceptionally universal. Without the need of an account or much knowledge of technology, users have access to a comprehensive dictionary at their fingertips. While TikTok, voice search, and AI are dominating search-related conversations, they cannot yet compete with some of the benefits consumers see in traditional offers: value judgement, wide variety of sources, and transparency.

Traditional search may not be going anywhere anytime soon – however, there are lessons to learn from the meteoric rise of TikTok and the predicted future of voice search. How can voice search evolve to conveniently provide answers to more complex questions? How can future search provide easily digestible and entertaining content for low-stakes enquiries? How can search foster trust and authenticity for experience recommendations?

### **HOW CAN MARKETERS NAVIAGTE THE FUTURE OF SEARCH**

In this time of uncertainty as TikTok moves into search, and AI technology opens doors for voice search, marketers should find opportunity in these changing behaviours.

“Any place where users begin searching for content through search on a regular basis is a place where marketers should be paying attention to and participating within.”<sup>17</sup>

*-Brent Csutoras, Managing Partner, Search Engine Journal*

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<sup>14</sup> Oberlo, 13<sup>th</sup> January 2023, [Link](#).

<sup>15</sup> GWI, 2nd August 2022, [Link](#); HubSpot, 9<sup>th</sup> June 2021, [Link](#).

<sup>16</sup> New York Times, 17<sup>th</sup> February 2022, [Link](#).

<sup>17</sup> Search Engine Journal, 17<sup>th</sup> June 2022, [Link](#).

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Today, voice search is typically used for results that traditional search methods can also deliver. But what if it developed to provide unique experiences? Amazon embraced this strategy with its 'Downton Abbey experience,' implemented to celebrate the release of 'Downton Abbey: A New Era.'<sup>18</sup> Users could enter the world of Downton Abbey, complete with an audio tour and Crowley family trivia. Marketers should utilise voice search in a way that makes for an engaging, interactive experience.

Users turn to TikTok for a more personalised, authentic experience, trusting TikTok creators because they feel a personal connection to them. Marketers should leverage this relationship through creator collaborations. TikTok for business reports 27% higher ad recall for TikTok-specific branded content using creators.<sup>19</sup> Consumers also choose TikTok because videos can give them an idea of what it would look, feel, smell, taste, and sound like to use or do what is in the video. Marketers can appeal to Gen-Z in the same way by using haptic imagery to help consumers imagine what it would feel like to use their product.<sup>20</sup> The future of search is going to be interesting.

## **ABOUT BBDO KNOWS**

BBDO KNOWS is a planning resource for the BBDO network.

BBDO KNOWS offers thinking, strategy, insights, and inspiration on key categories, key themes and consumer segments.

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<sup>18</sup> Focus Features, 4<sup>th</sup> May 2022, [Link](#).

<sup>19</sup> TikTok for Business, 31<sup>st</sup> January 2023, [Link](#).

<sup>20</sup> Nextech, 4<sup>th</sup> February 2021, [Link](#).