

## Real Live Voice as the Next Killer App

By: David Walsh

The growth of voice-controlled assistants like Siri and Alexa show that the human voice is still the most convenient way for humans to interact with machines. Last year, Amazon Echo evolved from a science experiment to an in-home phenomenon with over seven million devices in households. Following on the success of Echo, Google Home launched in 2016, creating a huge market for voice-first devices.



This is just the tip of the iceberg. In the near future, we'll witness hundreds of millions of consumers interacting with machines using conversational voice in intuitive ways. This goes way beyond Interactive Voice Response (IVR) menus and into many more realms, introducing us to the sophisticated and connected relationship between humans and machines.

Today, using only your voice, you can unlock your car, play music, dim the lights, order Thai food, plan your route to work, and catch up on the latest news.

Visionaries now are talking about advancements such as virtual friends for the aging population, who are able to hang out with mom during the day and share stories while also attending to her basic needs and organizing help from humans as necessary. Personalized home assistants with real voices and personalities will be hired "as a service" and conversational personal devices will remind you to eat less, move more, and "just breathe".

A voice-first device is an always-on, intelligent piece of hardware where the primary interface is voice. [VoiceLabs](#), which provides Voice Experience Analytics, the most widely used Analytics service for Amazon Alexa and Google Home developers, says that while hardware encapsulates the consumer experience, those form factors are nothing without intelligent software.

"The artificial intelligence assistants guide consumers on what is possible and how to interact, provide a core set of capabilities, then hand-off experiences to third-party applications to extend the experience. The third-party applications take care of consumers and enable them to interact with the brands and services they know and love. Finally, the ecosystem services bolster the applications, and make the ecosystem flywheel turn to provide additional value to all."

This sector is growing rapidly. In 2015, there were 1.7 million voice-first devices shipped. In 2016, this number jumped to 6.5 million devices shipped. VoiceLabs predicts there will be 24.5 million devices shipped in 2017, leading to a total device footprint of 33 million voice-first devices in circulation.

The market is competitive, with companies like IBM leading for years with its Watson cognitive computing engine, increasingly being connected to voice services for enterprises. For example, enabling contact centers to serve consumers more efficiently – letting go of traditional IVR which only frustrated consumers, and delivering a "humanized voice" solution.

With all the automation, the self-service menus, the "webification" of contact center and support applications, why is the human voice – human-to-human – still valuable?

Sometimes, you just need to speak to another [live human](#). And even if you don't need to, you want to. Which is why visionary developers are not dismissing real time voice conversations between human beings. Instead, they are orchestrating a combination of voice-first and "human-first" applications.

Marchex recently published a provocative report on this topic. The [2015 Click-To-Call Commerce Mobile Performance Report](#) focuses on innovations in e-commerce - another massive growth market - and predicts a surge of innovation in real live human interactions designed to help brands sell more products. The report states:

*“Why are calls more valuable than clicks? A call connects a merchant with a prospect in the flesh – or nearly in the flesh. There is no separation of miles and pages of inscrutable content and Internet ether.*

*The customer is right there, on the line, asking questions. Old-fashioned salesmanship has an opportunity to blossom. You can take the caller by the hand, and lead them down the sales journey path to that magical destination called The Close.*

*What’s more, calls made from mobile phones are exciting because the customer is typically not tethered to a PC or laptop at home or work. They’re very likely on the move. They could be near your store. Or in your store! Mobile calls are goldmines, representing prospects who are thinking about your business, possibly within physical range of making a purchase and, most importantly, are available for old-fashioned person-to-person communication, persuasion and deal-closing.”*

The art of persuasion, in real time, through live human interaction is a personal connection. It is an emotional intelligence that has not yet been replicated in “bots” and may never be – because even as technology is evolving, so is the human mind and consciousness. (We who created the bots may always end up being slightly more clever than they are). While marketers understand and deploy “click-to-call” from mobile apps, there has been little data available to quantify how these voice calls convert into revenue.

According to a 2015 BIA/Kelsey Advisory forecast, Americans spent more than \$1 trillion in click-to-call commerce. In 2016, there were approximately 93 billion consumer-to-business phone calls from smartphones. This is expected to grow to 162 billion by 2019.

Those click-to-call sessions work in a variety of ways, but what brands are finding is that when the applications understand when to route an inbound voice call to an expert, consumers are thrilled.

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A simple example is Watson’s handling of a voice call. Watson can respond immediately with accurate information (“your next available flight leaves at 3 PM”), and can respond intuitively by routing that click-to-call to a live expert (“I’m connecting you to an agent who can provide more options”) if the bot discussion doesn’t go well.

This is not a new form of IVR. It is a new form of dispatching considerate, intelligent service at less cost to the business, and with a higher level of customer satisfaction.

By the time that live agent speaks with another human, they have all the information in front of them. This includes “coaching tips” based on the tone of voice and sensed level of frustration from that harried traveler who just wants to figure out how to get home as quickly as possible.

Some voice applications using click-to-call mean small businesses can skip the IVR lines and simply connect to a prospect for a friendly conversation -- and closing business in minutes with a

new customer without that customer ever having to dial a phone number.

I strongly recommend reading this report as it provides real life data showing that the real live human voice as a part of our existence and e-commerce may, in fact, turn out to be the next "next killer app" -- even as billions of dollars are being poured into "the bots". I am certainly not opposed to bots. But I am also not opposed to the ongoing potential of the human voice and the humans who connect with each other to move through life conveniently – and connectedly.