Are we all about to change the way we search?

The emergence of single-answer engines and AI chatbot search is shifting the search paradigm, making way for what could be a radical overhaul.

Overview

Over the past three decades, internet users have looked to search engines to efficiently find the information they seek. Short queries, mostly one- to three-words[1], produce quick reference results – lists of links to websites and SERP features that the engine thinks will satisfy the searcher's intent.

At GSI, we have recognized a trend developing over the last several years. Longer, question-format search queries are becoming more and more common.

In our own research of more than 20,000 question-format search queries, we've seen 50% growth in volume over the past four years. It's counter intuitive, but we believe we know why it's happening and expect that it may be about to take off to an even greater extent.

The Drivers of Question-Format Search

The initial growth of question-format search terms was likely attributed to the emergence of search engine result page (SERP) evolutions such as "People Also Asked" prompts. Broad adoption of voice assistants almost certainly contributed as well – nearly 50% of U.S. households now own at least one smart speaker[2], and essentially all smartphone users have access to a virtual assistant.

Smart speakers and mobile-based virtual assistants facilitate natural language, spoken questions even if their ability to answer them well has thus far been generally poor. The recent introduction of a new version of Microsoft's Bing incorporating OpenAI's GPT chat technology and the coming Bard-enabled Google will likely add fuel to the fire.
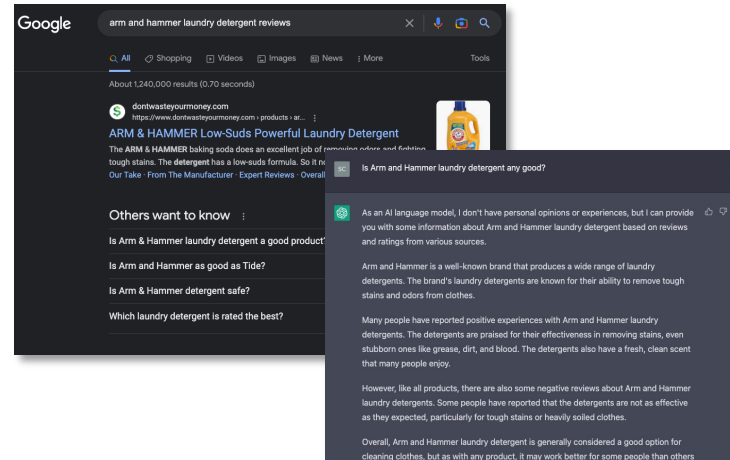

Key Takeaways

- **Popularity of question format search queries appears to be increasing**
  - o **To date, driven by SERP features and voice assistants**
- **AI chatbot search could drive further growth**
- **Technologies behind AI chatbot search appear primed to bring new life to voice search**
- **AI chatbot search has potential to impact traditional search conventions, but likely not in a significant way for some time**
- **Future is uncertain, but prepare now:**
  - o **Thoroughly understand the current landscape and your brand's place in it**
  - o **Double down on evidence-based content strategy, foundational technical SEO and structured mark up**

The rapid rise in popularity of ChatGPT[3] indicates that **there is likely a large appetite for this type of service among the Internet-using public.**

These large language model (LLM) chatbots interact with users more like smart human assistants every day. They encourage prompts in the form of questions and then return narrative answers and suggest additional questions you might ask to learn more. The new Bing mobile app even enables users to ask questions verbally and receive spoken as well as text responses. One imagines that similar technology will find its way into smart speakers in fairly short order.
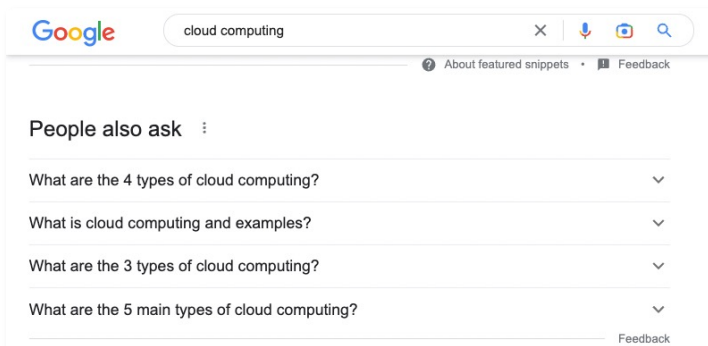
Question-Format Search Expanded with Introduction of "People Always Ask, Smart Speakers and Digital Assistants
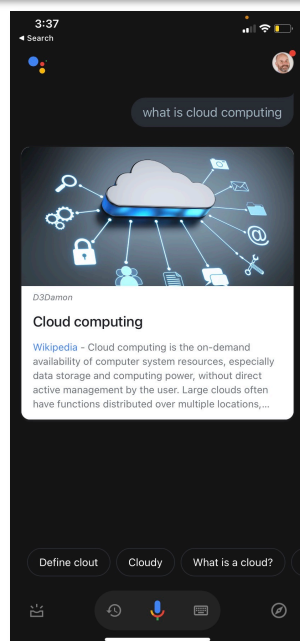
The Implications and Concerns

If you are a website owner, a very real concern is that these chat-enabled search engines will begin answering questions that currently drive users to your site. Think of a Google rich snippet that sources from several sites instead of one and then largely obscures the sources of the information. Traffic could suffer as could the association between your brand and the content being researched. High funnel or "learn" type content seem particularly vulnerable in this scenario. But let's not get ahead of ourselves.

AI chatbot-enabled search engines are in their infancy. What we see and experience in them today is almost certainly not what we'll see in the future.

**Several issues have the potential to slow broad adoption:**

- **Accuracy** | As a user, if you can't trust the results you get from AI-chatbots, will you still be inclined to use them? Traditional search results from Google or Bing are well understood by users. The transparency and relative impartiality inherent in them engender trust.[4] Conversely, examples of AI-chatbot fueled results being factually inaccurate are all over the media. It's an inherent problem of LLMs and one that will take time, investment, and dedication to resolve, if it can be resolved. The introduction of GPT-4 greatly improved GPT's accuracy, but there is still real discussion amongst search and AI experts as to whether chatbots based on large learning models are even a good fit for search engines.[5]

- **Cost** | Producing AI-chatbot query responses is much more computing-intensive than generating traditional search results. Reports indicate the associated cost is as much as ten times greater, though predictions suggest that cost could be reduced relatively quickly.[6]

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- **Privacy & Security Concerns** | Privacy and security are omnipresent issues in the digital space and AI-chatbots introduce several ethical and regulatory concerns. For example, Europe's GDPR regulations are a potentially huge obstacle to an LLM such as GPT due to the potential of it capturing and using personally identifying information. Additionally, there are concerns that malicious actors will exploit the capabilities of these chatbots to amplify the effectiveness of phishing and social engineering attacks.[7] These could slow or even stall the adoption of search engine-based AI-chatbots.

- **Monetization Models** | This is where the rubber meets the road, particularly for Google. Alphabet, Google's parent company, earned $162 billion from paid search in 2022. That's almost 60% of Alphabet's total revenue. Google will be loath to kill its golden goose by disrupting its market-dominant search model, but Microsoft is attempting to do just that. It has forced the hand of its rival by pushing GPT-powered Bing into the market quickly without much concern for potential revenue disruption.[8] Several other search engines are also incorporating GPT- or other AI chatbot-powered features, including Neeva, You and Perplexity Ask. How this all plays out is yet to be seen, but monetization models may end up playing a major role in adoption and development of what search looks like for users and brands in the coming months and years.

What to Do?

While AI-chatbot-driven search is getting a lot of media and social media attention right now, actual use of it is very limited relative to traditional search. **For the moment, GSI recommends doubling down on current best practices to maintain and grow the value of your online properties:**

- Ensure your website is built on a sound technical foundation.

- Employ evidence-based opportunity identification and content execution strategies to ensure the content you have aligns with your customers' interests and needs. Search data remains one of the most durable signals you can utilize to understand your market and model your content strategy.
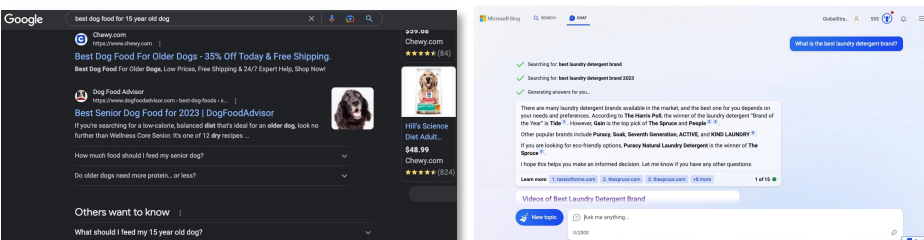
The same query in Google and Bing Chat Search produce significantly different results. Note that sites footnoted as sources for Bing Chat Search results typically mirror top traditional Bing search results.

While it is still unclear what SEO activities will be most valuable in maximizing your brand's visibility in an AI chatbot-search environment, a few things stand out as immediate needs:

- **Understand Who is Talking About Your Brand** | The answers given by AI-chatbots typically aggregate information from multiple sources into a single answer. In the current iteration of Bing, website sources are cited as clickable footnotes while ChatGPT does not cite sources at all. This introduces the opportunity for errant information surfacing in the answers. **GSI advocates analyzing chat search results to identify "who" is providing information related to your brand and building action plans to assert control over those narratives.**

- **Monitor the Impact to Your Brand** | Assuming use of AI-chatbots in search continues to grow (possibly a big assumption), brands will need to pay close attention to the impact this behavior change has on your brand's association with topics critical to its business as well as on traffic to your websites. Two immediate actions should be taken:

  o Conduct regular Brand Health[9] studies to identify areas where your brand is gaining or losing ground relative to competitors, understand the factors at play (AI-chatbot search or other internal and external factors) and guide activities critical to ensuring your brand retains customer interest levels required for its success.

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o   Monitor traffic from organic search to your content. This has always been a measure of performance for organic search but becomes increasingly important if AI-chatbot search gains a critical mass, displacing traditional search to a notable degree. Of course, many factors can impact organic traffic to your content, but identifying areas where AI-chatbot search may be capturing traffic that formerly flowed to your sites may be critical to taking appropriate strategic actions to ensure ongoing business performance.

- **Implement Structured Markup** | Already very valuable in traditional search, the clear coding nature of this type of content is likely also beneficial for AI-powered chatbots that are ingesting the content of your websites and attempting to make sense of it for the benefit of users. Remember, searchers are increasingly using question format in their queries, making intent very clear. Searchers using question-format queries want to know something specific. Structured markup can give your site an advantage in becoming the answer source for many of these questions whether the interface be traditional search results or AI-chatbot answers. GSI advocates amplifying efforts to implement the various types of structured markup appropriately across your sites. There is no downside, regardless of how this new development ultimately shakes out.

GSI continues to actively explore this new evolution of search and develop solutions that will help our brands survive and thrive across all facets of search. We will report on new developments and capabilities as they emerge and invite you to engage with us to explore how your brand can best position itself for success now and in the future.

Resources

[1] https://www.statista.com/statistics/269740/number-of-search-terms-in-internet-research-in-the-us/

[2] https://www.comscore.com/Insights/Blog/As-Smart-Speakers-Evolve-So-Do-Consumers#:~:text=Between%202011%20and%202014%2C%20smart,%2C%20behave%2C%20and%20even%20shop

[3] https://www.livemint.com/news/chatgpt-becomes-fastest-growing-app-in-the-world-records-100mn-users-in-2-month-11675484444142.html

[4] https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-023-00423-4

[5] https://dl.acm.org/doi/fullHtml/10.1145/3498366.3505816#BibPLXBIB0058

[6] https://www.reuters.com/technology/tech-giants-ai-like-bing-bard-poses-billion-dollar-search-problem-2023-02-22/

[7] https://www.information-age.com/chatgpt-vs-gdpr-what-ai-chatbots-mean-for-data-privacy-123501570/

[8] https://www.ft.com/content/2d48d982-80b2-49f3-8a83-f5afef98e8eb

[9] GSI proprietary capability

[10] https://developers.google.com/search/docs/appearance/structured-data/intro-structured-data

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