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10 Things You Need to Know About Mobile Search

– Michael Fitzgerald, CIO

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Think search is locked up on desktop computers? Think again. The mobile phone is in the early stages of becoming a major new platform for search. [Emarketer projects](#) more than 400 million people will conduct searches from mobile phones this year, netting some 221 million in search-related revenues. ([More on mobile advertising.](#)) Revenues should more than double by next year, driven mostly by increased usage (emarketer projects just over 20 percent user growth). (And check out our [Mobile Resource Center.](#))

While such revenue numbers are tiny compared to PC-based searching, they represent a big change for companies, for a number of reasons:

1. It's more personal than any technology we've seen before.

Partly that's because people carry their cell phones with them in the same fashion as they do their wallets. That should mean the cell phone lets companies personalize their messages to customers in new ways. Already, one of the main reasons companies use technology is to tailor their sales efforts to their customers. But personalization remains a challenge. Mike McCue remembers working at Netscape in the early 1990s and thinking, "We really have to figure out this personalization thing". Netscape's effort fell short, as have many other personalization efforts since then, because the Internet is not a personalized platform. But McCue, founder of Tellme, a voice-driven search engine.

2. It could be the biggest tech phenom ever.

Personalization is an obvious reason to find the cell phone search market attractive. There are about a billion other reasons to find cell phones intriguing. IDC says that's how many cell phones will likely be sold worldwide in 2008—versus probably just over 300 million PCs...

3. People will search differently on cell phones.

The difference between Internet search and mobile search looks to be substantial. For starters, almost by definition, people who use their cell phones to search are probably on the go or will be soon, based on their search results. The two main categories of mobile search right now are those who want to buy something immediately, and those who are looking for a place, says [Greg Sterling](#), who runs the local mobile practice at Opus Research in San Francisco. ([Read our Best BlackBerry Shortcuts.](#))

So it's location-driven. That penchant for action makes the cell phone search market a huge opportunity for business, but an opportunity that is also a huge challenge.

4. There is no [Google](#) for mobile search.

Not yet, anyway. Of course, Google itself may come to dominate mobile search in the way it does desktop search. But right now, search on the mobile phone is not the monolithic thing it is on the computer, where you primarily have Google and a few other search engines with lots of little niche technologies.

That's in part because there is not yet a well-developed market for mobile search. The results paradigm is probably



different—it's even less useful to get a million results on a mobile phone than it is on a PC. As McCue notes, "All the search algorithms need to be reworked to give you three results max."

How to charge for advertising is also not clear—although if mobile phone searches do tie in more directly with sales, that will probably cost more than comparable advertising on the desktop.

That market may be different—more local and more specific than Internet search. "It's pretty hard to monetize a search for Justin Timberlake, or to do complementary or ad-based kinds of advertising," says Craig Hagopian, the executive vice president and CMO of V-Enable, which, like Tellme, is a voice-driven search engine. Also, phones have built-in GPS devices, so search engines have a pretty good idea that if you're searching for a store from your phone, you want the one nearest to you.

There is one form of mobile search that resembles today's computer-based Internet search: Wireless Access Protocol (WAP). About 5 percent of sites support WAP, which aims to bring the Web-browsing experience to mobile-phone screens. But it is certainly not the primary way people search on mobile phones.

5. Your business can't expect to give the same old search response.

Sterling notes that mobile search will yield things like product searches from stores as customers comparison shop. Customers may also use these searches to check for product availability—the Nintendo Wii being an example of something that consumers might search for on the fly. Companies need to think about how to respond to these sorts of searches.

"That stuff is coming—the infrastructure that will support this is substantially already built," says Sterling.

6. People will search by voice.

Voice-driven search is the dominant form of mobile phone search right now, and it may stay that way. For one thing, it's faster than trying to thumb-type many product names: V-Enable's Hagopian says that it takes about a minute and ten seconds to key-in a search for "coffee shop" on a phone that doesn't have a full keyboard, which is more than 90 percent of the market right now. A voice search on the same phone could take 20 seconds to kick back a result.

Most voice searches fall into that age-old category of directory assistance calls—Tellme and V-Enable both power such services for mobile phone companies, as does Nuance Technologies, a speech-recognition company. There are also free services from [Microsoft](#) (800call411) and Google (800goog411), and an ad-supported service from Jingle (800free411). These services are morphing beyond directory assistance calls, however—maps, driving directions, nearby businesses and tourist sites are among the others that people ask for from their phones. There are also startups chasing this market, like Vlingo and yap.com.

"Speech is about the only alternative to a true flat menu," says Bill Meisel, president of TMA Associates in Tarzana, Calif., which consults on speech recognition. Meisel thinks that voice is the natural way for people to search on the phone—but it will probably never be the only way.

7. People will search by text message.

SMS or text-based search is currently the second most popular way to search online, according to Opus Research. It's the way people search when they can't talk (for instance, when they're in a meeting).

Texting is also a primary way that teenagers use cell phones.

8. People will search by platform.

Downloadable applications are by far the smallest market for mobile search. Yet there's a huge array of offerings like Yahoo Go, Google Mobile, AOL's My [Mobile](#), uLocate, Zumobi, a start-up, spun out of Microsoft Research, and Nokia's Widsets. People can also download targeted search platforms to their phones, like Mapquest Navigator.

9. You need to handle all four kinds of mobile search.

This bears repeating: There are four main ways people will use their mobile phones to search: voice, text, WAP and specialized platforms. Smart companies will figure out how to support all four, how to market via all four and how to strategize for all four within their firms, particularly in retail.

Your customers want choice. If you give it to them, you may get a leg up on your rivals who don't.

10. Gear up: This is big!

Hagopian thinks that eventually, mobile search "will be a larger market than desktop-based advertising," in part because more people use cell phones than computers.

These are the "Ivery early days," acknowledges Tellme's McCue. There are already companies using Tellme to open new ways of creating business, like [Domino's Pizza](#). You can search for Domino's on your phone, and it will

show your last order on the screen, and you can say 'buy that one.' Without anything more, the order will be delivered to your door.

Mobile search went from hype to whisper in the late 1990s. But today, with wireless broadband widely available, increasingly powerful cell phones and improved search technologies, it's going to emerge. Says Opus Research's Sterling, "It's not going to take another 10 years for mobile search to be something that is a big deal."

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