Smart Speaker Technology

Amazon Echo/Google

Growth in use in (source You Gov)

24% of people in UK own a smart speaker, and predicted to be 16% year on year growth.

Market is still growing a big tech companies “bundle” devices and use as loss leaders to establish the product in a home.

Voice led searching, streaming of media but also the application of digital assistance with tasks.

Challenges and opportunities

**Challenges** – need digital connection, linked to one company (Amazon) and their influence and control of the data/settings

Listen to you and then influence or impact on shopping and buying.

Over reliance on voice activation searching – could we loose the ability to research and source information from a number of sources?

No matter how practical or empathetic Alexa is there are limitation in what she/he can offer – empathy

YouGov’s data underlines how security fears are one barrier to industry growth and adoption. Of the concerns people have about smart appliances, hacking/cyber-attacks come out on top, with 39% of non-owners saying this.

Over a third (36%) of this group believe the appliances are too expensive, while the same percentage have fears over data privacy.

Opportunities

Practical applications – timers and schedules for task (medication, reminders for other personal tasks that can be forgotten (Dementia)

Should be freeing us up to spend more time with the people we love and make connections to the

Convenience of voice control can make it more accessible to people

Having said that, many people are either suspicious or don’t see the need for the devices. To truly initiate a smart home revolution, prospective customers need not only to be convinced of the capabilities of the technology, but why they need it and how it can help them.

Solutions to some of the challenges

Databreaches – awareness of how to use securely?

Greater focus on the practical applications of some important task – taking medication or hydration for older people? Allowing time for more focused/people centred activity to be done.

Legitimate or trusted partners to support adoption of certain functions “Age Concern Apps”

Advocates

Practical support in home environment is helpful – cooking, solving arguments, entertaining and also schedules and reminders.

BUT always switch off at night and don’t drop in an Echo when you are on holiday – scare the pants off your kids!

The Wall Street Journal had an article not too long ago headlined, “Alexa, Can You Prevent Suicide?” Amazon’s research shows that more than 50 percent of users’ interactions with their digital assistants are “non-utilitarian” — we don’t want anything; we’re just chewing the fat. Toni Reid, the “vice president of Alexa experience and Echo devices” (!) at Amazon, told the WSJ the company was “surprised” that people were having so many conversations with their Alexas; right from the start, “Customers treated Alexa as a companion, someone they could talk to.” They ask her for her favorite color (infrared, FYI); they ask her to marry them. And they share information about themselves. They tell Alexa they’re depressed, or say they’re thinking of suicide. Amazon quantifies these last sorts of conversations as “sensitive topics” and has crafted “manual responses” for them (assuming, of course, that you frame your suicidal ideation in an Alexa-acceptable way).

On the other hand. In November, the Inquirer reported on how Inglis House is working with Amazon to install specially programmed Echos in the apartments of dozens of disabled people, who are using the devices to help them live independently. The article told how such a version of Alexa lets Richard Bernard, who has the movement disorder dystonia and has trouble speaking in sentences, direct her with single words.

**LAST YEAR, AMAZON** provided the data from a suspect’s Echo to police who were investigating the murder of his friend. While Alexa is programmed to record only after she’s given her keyword, the devices “often record accidentally in response to non-keywords,” according to Business Insider. Brrrrr. Oh, and Business Insider also says that Echo devices “record audio from a few seconds before, during and after” hearing one of these keywords. Which, um — HOW THE HELL DOES IT KNOW TO START RECORDING BEFORE IT HEARS THE KEYWORD, HUH? How does it do that?!? Alexa is recording all the time. I know she is. I feel it in my bones. Wasn’t I gob-smacked when, a few days after Doug set Alexa up, he showed me the transcript on his phone of everything we’d said to her so far — including a couple of sick jokes our son had made about suicide?