



The Customer Journey Starts With a Question

How to Deliver Answers With Intent Marketing



The Paradigm Shift

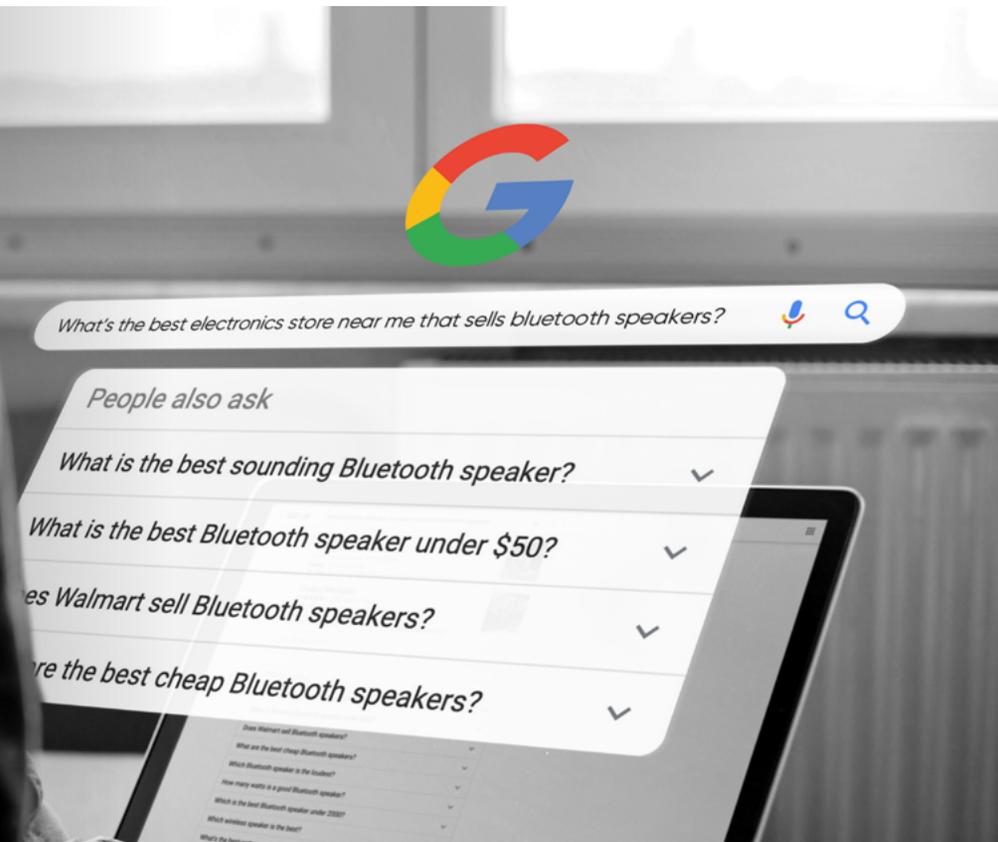
We are seeing a fundamental shift in consumer search behavior. With the rise of voice assistants, chatbots, and the introduction of conversational search, the customer journey is more often starting with a question, a desire, a need. Why now? We are being trained to simply ask for something, whether we're typing in a box on a screen or speaking aloud to Alexa, Siri, or Cortana. We have started to speak up and just ask for what we need.

Google, for example, is changing our expectations. A few years ago, if you typed "pizza" into Google's search bar, your search results would consist of links to blog posts about pizza. Now when you search for "pizza," you get a structured, detailed answer – a Knowledge Card including nutritional information and ingredients, a local pack showing pizza places near you, and a list of links to brand domains and Yelp. And when you search for "best pizza," the local pack results are filtered to show only establishments with an average customer rating of four or more stars.

When we add more depth to our questions, AI-powered discovery services like search engines, apps, maps, and voice assistants are responding with more relevant, and more detailed information. We've witnessed the explosion in "near me" searches parallel the rise of mobile. Over the last three years, there has also been an 80% increase in Google searches using the word "best."¹

¹ <https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/consumer-insights/best-searches/>

Google search results pages include a feature that shows what "people also ask." The search engine is literally trying to retrain the world to ask instead of search. The feature displays a set of questions. When you click on one option, you will see an answer right there on the SERP – and then you can click through to run a full search with that question.



The New Customer Journey

Carrie, a software VP, has a house in Delray Beach, Florida, and she is on a mission to find new outdoor speakers that sound amazing on her rooftop deck. Where does she start? She opens a browser and asks a question:

"Which brand of outdoor Bluetooth speakers is the best?"

She gets an answer in the form of a rich snippet featuring a list from an independent reviews site, along with blogs, videos, and more reviews. Carrie watches multiple videos comparing the outdoor speakers on the list. She gets an answer (Bose), but now she wants more information. So she searches:

"What bass and treble settings are best for outdoor speakers?"

She finds an expert blog and gets an answer. She's ready to buy. Carrie searches:

"How much does the Polk Atrium 4 speaker cost?"

She ends up on Polk Audio's site where she interacts with a chatbot and she gets an answer. Maybe she's on the road, so she asks Siri:

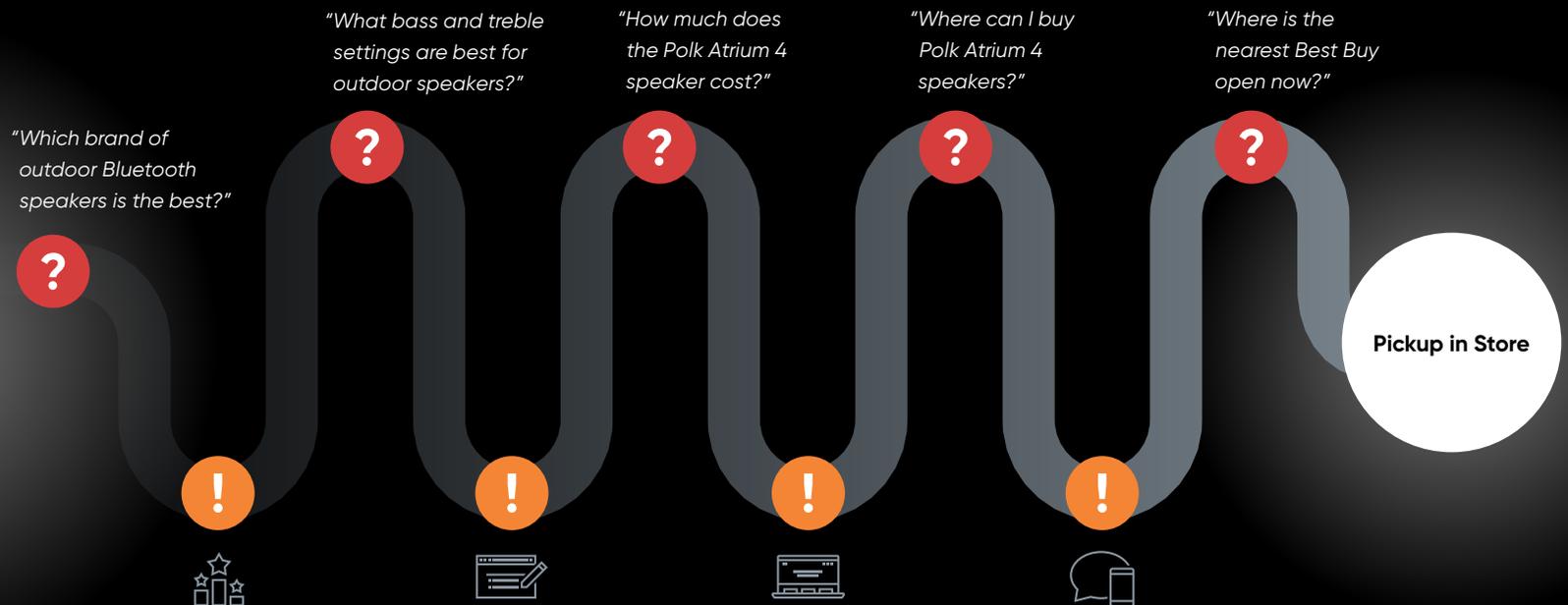
"Where can I buy Polk Atrium 4 speakers?"

She gets an answer: Best Buy. She arrives home and while relaxing over a meal, she asks Alexa:

"Where is the nearest Best Buy open now?"

She gets an answer. She hops in the car, navigates to Best Buy in Boynton Beach, and buys her speakers.

This is the new customer journey we're seeing. The customer journey really is starting with a question – and it's leading to new, different questions as a part of the research process. We are moving into a world where we just ask for the thing that we want.



Questions Are the New Keywords

As consumers, we've been witnessing the evolution from links to answers for a long time. Google introduced the Knowledge Panel, providing basic information about a topic directly on the search engine results page, back in 2012. We're adapting naturally. But what about the marketing side? Marketers must structure their brand data to keep up with this shift and provide direct answers – on and off the brand website.

The digital world is moving from keywords to questions. For a long time, search marketers have focused on keyword stuffing or keyword buying. Instead of trying to buy (or more accurately, bid on) every question imaginable, we need to focus on the data that powers answers to those questions. We're going to be able to use questions to better understand our customers and to more effectively connect with them on their journey. Because that journey now consists of a series of questions and a series of discoveries. This is both a seismic change, and a significant opportunity.

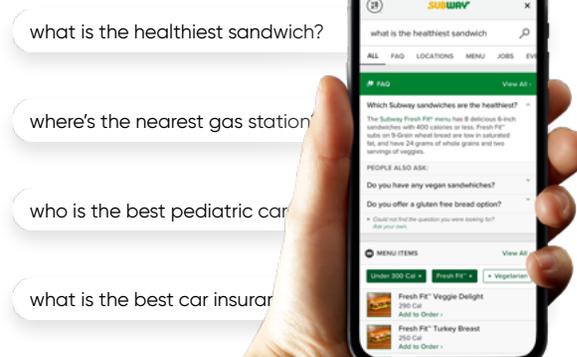
question = search = intent

Intent is not a new concept in search. As algorithms have grown more intelligent, search marketing has moved beyond keywords to the intentions of the searcher. What is new is how marketers can understand their customers' intent – we don't need to build and analyze keyword lists from multiple sources and cross-reference against demographic profiles anymore. By asking questions, customers and prospects are telling us exactly what they want.

From **Keywords**



to **Questions**



“Rip up your demographic-based personas. Kiss goodbye the old-school marketing funnel. The future of the industry lies in understanding the customer’s intent.”

Think With Google²

² <https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/marketing-resources/the-future-of-marketing/>

Understanding Intent Along the Journey

Let's revisit the story about our friend Carrie. As marketers who want to understand the journey she took to purchase outdoor speakers, we start with her searches. By looking at the questions she asked, we can learn what's important to a customer about outdoor speakers. By looking at when she asked those questions, we can map her journey – and strategize to meet similar customers along the way.

By analyzing reviews, Google Q&A, site visits, and search behavior – analyzing all of these visits – you can begin to craft a framework and pull these questions out.

Let's look at a blog that Carrie visited while researching speakers.



Best Outdoor Speakers 2019

A great outdoor speaker has to withstand the elements and deliver robust bass, crisp treble and full midrange with the power to hurdle over both wind & chatter at parties. These speakers check all the boxes, and still cost less than \$100.

With a 4.5-inch mid-woofer/tweeter and a 0.75-inch tweeter inside each speaker, the Atrium 4 aptly handled both the distorted guitars of classic rock and the thumping bass of hip-hop while producing clear vocals.

If you want more bass and have the space (and some extra cash), consider Polk's \$150 Atrium 5, which come with 5-inch midrange woofer/tweeters.

Drivers: 4.5-inch mid/woofer, 0.75-inch tweeter
Wireless: No
Output: 80 watts
Battery: None
Mounting Hardware: Included

We can extract a lot of questions from this short excerpt:

"What are the best weatherproof speakers?"

"What speaker quality do I need to hear over the wind?"

"What speaker has great treble and great bass?"

"Best speaker for electronic music?"

"Best speaker for house parties?"

"Speaker for loud open setting?"

"Most powerful speaker?"

"Best speakers under \$100"

Building an Intent Model

Once we've done our research and have our list of questions, we can build an intent model. It has nodes for products, sound quality, and environment – and it shows all the interrelationships between these nodes. This creates the basis to answer questions like:

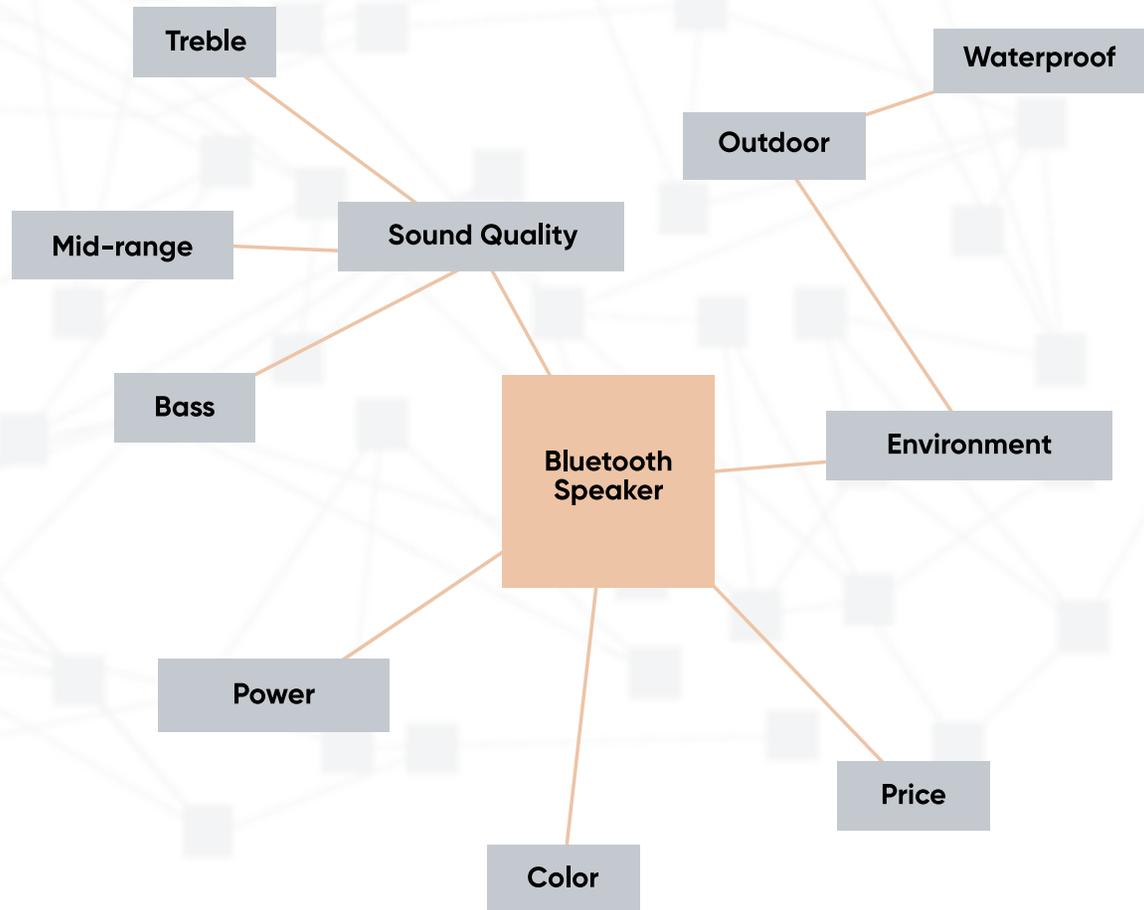
"Does the Polk Atrium 4 sound good outdoors?"

"Does it work in Florida weather?"

"Can you hear it over a crowd?"

"Does it have bass boost?"

Our goal is to understand and optimize our marketing strategies for Carrie's path of intent.



Demographic vs. Intent Marketing

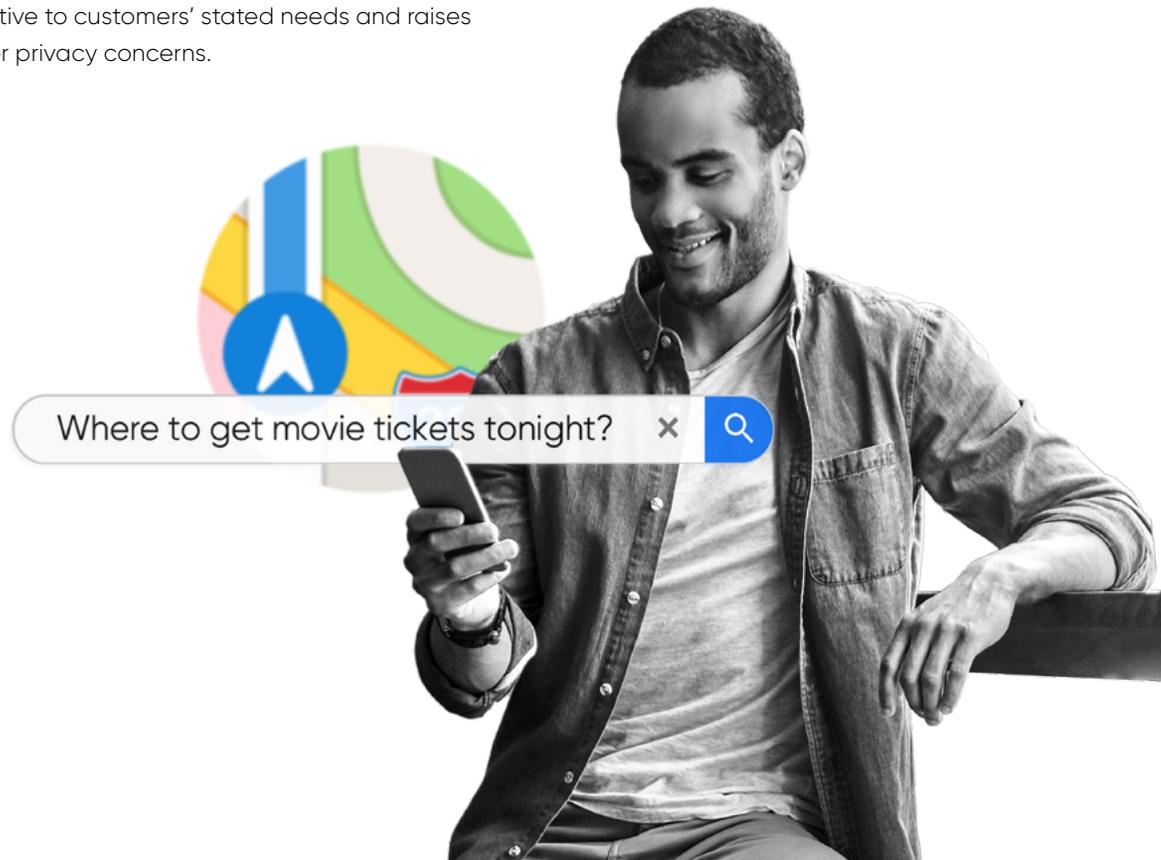
We're used to targeting our strategies based on the demographics of our audience (i.e., age, gender, education, marital status, race, religion, income). This information tells us who our customers are – but not what they do or how they feel. A 70-year-old British man and a 13-year-old Japanese girl might both be inclined to search for the best slice of pizza near them in New York City, or for tickets to the latest movie in the Marvel Universe. Demographics can't tell us what people are looking for in the moment of intent or where they are looking for it.

By effectively researching and modeling our customers' intent based on signals of interest in a product, service, provider, or place, we can target our marketing strategies to their needs and wants across demographic distinctions. In addition to being more effective at reaching and converting customers, intent marketing is reactive to customers' stated needs and raises fewer privacy concerns.

"Marketers who rely only on demographics to reach consumers risk missing more than 70% of potential mobile shoppers."

Think With Google³

³ <https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/marketing-resources/micro-moments/why-consumer-intent-more-powerful-than-demographics/>



If the Customer Journey Starts With a Question, How Do Marketers Answer?

The key to ensuring your brand or business appears in search results as the answer to your customers' questions is managing your brand data. Your brand is made up of hundreds of facts, and concepts, details about your corporate entity, your stores, your professionals, and your products.

Today, too many organizations keep their information siloed in separate systems and repositories. The ideal architecture for AI-powered search and discovery services emerging today (and which will only expand in influence) is to consolidate brand information in a single location. It must be accessible and structured to align to the changing digital ecosystem. Google has their Knowledge Graph – containing more than 70 billion facts from Wikipedia and other sources – to answer questions via the knowledge panel on a SERP, or via voice on Google Home. Facebook has one, Bing has one, Apple has one, and the services of tomorrow will have them as well.

In the intelligent future, your organization – and every company in the world – must have its own Knowledge Graph.



About the Author



Marc Ferrentino is Yext's Chief Strategy Officer and is responsible for the company's product development, partnerships, corporate development, and strategic initiatives. He has worked as a senior executive for high growth tech companies throughout his career, including serving as the Chief Technical Officer of SaaS at BMC Software and Chief Technical Architect for Salesforce.com. Marc has been active in the NY tech startup scene for 20 years and currently advises several startups.

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The customer journey starts with a question. And consumers expect answers. Yext puts businesses in control of their facts online with brand-verified answers in search. By serving accurate, consistent, brand-verified answers to consumer questions, Yext delivers authoritative information straight from the source – the business itself – no matter where or how customers are searching. Taco Bell, Marriott, Jaguar Land Rover, and businesses around the globe use the Yext platform to capture consumer intent and drive digital discovery, engagement, and revenue – all from a single source of truth. Yext’s mission is to provide perfect answers everywhere.

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