Review: Despite flaws, voice search has potential

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I never thought I'd be telling my phone what to do. But I often find myself talking to various digital assistants — Siri on the iPhone and Google Now on Android devices — to request driving directions, restaurant recommendations and answers to all sorts of nagging questions.

Until recently, I harbored a small prejudice against this kind of voice technology. I've long been annoyed by automated phone systems that make you speak instructions rather than enter them with a touch-tone phone. These technologies tend to hear me incorrectly and slow me down as I try to make a train reservation or check my credit card account. I also feel odd talking to my phone, rather than with a real human.

Even when smartphones started letting you search the Web with voice commands, my instinct was to stick with typing, however awkward touch-screen keyboards became.

My attitude slowly changed. A key turning point came during a 230-mile (370-kilometer) drive from Charleston, West Virginia, to visit friends outside Cleveland. I needed to pick up wine for my hosts and was pleased when Siri found a winery in Dover, Ohio. The shop was about 50 miles (80 kilometers) away from where I was, but relatively close to the highway I was on.

A traditional search might have located places that were closer in distance, but more out of the way. More importantly, I was able to perform that search while cruising on the highway. (Yeah, I know I shouldn't be doing that, but using voice commands beats typing while driving.)

Of course, neither Siri nor Google Now is flawless. During the course of my trip, Siri responded to a request for directions to Marygate Drive with a list of movie theaters named Mary. Google Now tried to look up "Fort museum" rather than the Ford museum. As for that search for wine shops, one of Siri's recommendations was about 120 miles (190 kms) away in the wrong direction. It took a few tries to find choices closer to my route.

Another complaint: Both require Internet connections for the most part —even for tasks that don't involve looking up anything, such as setting the alarm on your phone. The exception is Google Now's ability to make phone calls anytime by saying "Call Tom" or another name on your contact list, but in those times when you don't have a data connection, you're not likely to have voice service, either.

But if you don't need perfection, both Siri and Google Now are decent assistants, especially considering that typing on small touch-screen keyboards can be frustrating.

Siri is chattier — and feistier — than Google Now. She'll always respond with something, whereas Google Now often gives you no more than a list of websites, as if you'd just conducted a regular Web search. Only occasionally does Google Now give you a spoken-aloud response.

Ask for the assistant's name on the iPhone, and she responds, "My name is Siri, but you know that already." Google, being Google, responds with websites with "What is your name?" in them.

The digital assistants offered two very different responses when I asked: "Why is it too cold?" Google Now's list of websites starts with one on biking in cold weather. Siri speaks out the current temperature and shows me a graphic with forecast for the next several hours, while insisting, "I don't find that particularly cold."

I had the most fun asking both about the meaning of life. Predictably, Google Now returns links to a bunch of websites, plus an ad on top for the Mormon church. Siri is armed with more than a dozen witty responses. One is "42," a punch line from the novel "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy." Another time, she tells me it's chocolate. Yet another, she responds with a dictionary definition of life.

Siri excels with restaurants, in part because of Apple's partnerships with the reviews site Yelp and restaurant-reservation service OpenTable. Ask for Italian restaurants, and Siri offers you several — with information on price range, average user ratings on Yelp and distance from your current location. Ask for GOOD Italian restaurants, and Siri sorts those restaurants by rating.

Ask for reservations, and Siri gives you a few choices with open spots, whether you're looking for something tomorrow night or this weekend. Just tap on one to complete the reservation through OpenTable.

Google Now sometimes gives me a link to OpenTable or information from Google-owned Zagat, but other requests simply lead to restaurants' websites and paid ads.

As for movies, both will give you movie showtimes and let you buy tickets, though for tickets iPhone users will need a free software update to iOS 6.1, which came out in late January. In addition, Siri can only buy tickets through Fandango, not MovieTickets or other rivals.

Both correctly give me latest sports scores, though I stumped Google Now when I asked how a particular team was doing. Google Now simply gives me the latest score, while Siri tells me where the team is in the standings. When I asked about the Detroit Lions a few months ago, she preceded the response with "Uh, oh." I chuckled at the phone when I heard that. The Lions finished the 2012 NFL regular season in last place in the NFC North division.

Siri is better at integrating with the phone's calendar and alarm clock. When I ask for an alarm for "tomorrow night at 7," Siri tells me she can't set anything more than a day ahead, while Google Now simply sets one. Imagine the embarrassment

should my alarm clock go off while out with friends at a show.

I asked Siri whether I'm free on Monday. In a recent reply, she said my calendar is clear, while Google Now gave me a website discussing "murder-free Monday." Google Now is smarter, though, in creating a calendar reminder for movie plans with Tony, as Siri stumbles trying to find a movie called "plans with Tony." She does successfully create one for dinner with Tony, after warning of a conflict on my schedule.

Siri is better with answering such questions as who won the Oscars for best picture in 1996 and who won the Nobel Peace Prize. As usual, Google Now returns standard Web results.

Both directly answered me when I asked when Memorial Day is. Siri added, "I hope you get the day off." Thanks for looking out for me, Siri.

What I also like about Siri is that she's always a click away — just tap on the home button on the iPhone. Google Now is like a disappearing act: Sometimes you see its search box and the microphone button; sometimes you don't.

By now, you might be wondering, why bother with Google Now?

Although Siri performs better in many situations, Google Now isn't bad if you have an Android device. Apple has had more time to refine its service, as Siri has been around for more than a year — and longer as a startup before Apple bought it. Google Now made its debut over the summer in phones running the Jelly Bean version of Android, and it continually gets new capabilities.

In addition, Google Now does more than voice search. Over time, it's supposed to know about your interests and give you information without asking. If you have the necessary permissions turned on, you can search for a sports team on a desktop computer and find the latest score waiting for you on the phone after the game. Walk by a movie theater and see showtimes automatically pop up. Commute along a certain route each day, and Google Now will check traffic and offer alternative driving directions when appropriate.

That's smart.

But Google Now isn't wise enough to figure out that I typically take public transit in New York and don't even own a car. I had to set that manually. And Google doesn't have a good way to distinguish a casual search about a company from actual interest in automatically getting its stock price at the end of the day.

What's clear from my test is that we're just at the beginning of seeing what voice search and virtual assistants can do.

It's easy to get caught up on the mistakes these services make interpreting our voices. But Siri and Google Now are enticing enough that I can't wait to see what they do in the months and years ahead.

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