

3 data trends shaping digital marketing in the next 18 months

By [Grant Lapping](#)

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As we move into the next phase of the digital revolution, data will take an increasingly important role in how brands shape their customer experience and interact with consumers.



Image credit: Luke Chesser on Unsplash.

As wearable computers proliferate and everything from cars to smart speakers to industrial equipment are connected to the internet, people and devices are creating more data than ever before.

Not only can brands use this data to create personalised offerings for each consumer, they can also use it to deliver messages and interactions that are tailored to the consumer's need within the context of a particular moment. This gives brands and marketers breath-taking power to meet the needs of their customers, but it also raises new privacy and security risks.



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Here are three data-related trends I see changing the game for brands over the next year to 18 months.

Bridging the gap between online and offline

The world of digital commerce and brick-and-mortar retail are starting to converge into a single customer experience. Not only have most of the world's and South Africa's leading retail brands made extensive investments in omnichannel strategies spanning apps, websites and stores.



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Online retailers such as Amazon and South Africa's Yuppiechef have gone into high-street retail. HomeChoice Showrooms has taken it a step further by creating home layouts that match typical two-bedroom houses allowing their target market shoppers to see how the items will fit in their homes before buying online.



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der online. Or, in some cases, they can order online and fetch at a store. And increasingly, in more advanced markets, they can pay from an app while they shop in-store. At Amazon Go, for example, shoppers simply check into the store with the Amazon Go app, take the products they want and walk out.



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Scanners and cameras watch shoppers as they move through the store, the AI keeps tabs on the items they have taken from the shelves, and the goods they pick up are charged to their account when they leave. What makes this so exciting for retailers is all the choice data they can now collect on prospects and customers in physical stores.

For the first time, they can get a level of consumer insight about shoppers in real-world stores that compares to the rich behavioural data they can collect across their digital channels. With a 360° view of the customer across digital and brick-and-mortar channels, they can deliver more personalised engagements and experiences at every touchpoint.

The challenge? Making optimal use of that data without being creepy. It's a little disconcerting when you get Facebook ads for beds for days after you searched for mattress deals. But imagine just how invasive it might feel if you get ads served to you online after facial recognition software spotted you looking at beds in a furniture store?

Given that facial recognition technology is already in use at boarding gates at some US airports – you can board by presenting your face to a camera – this scenario is not so far-fetched.



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Flourishing within the walled garden

A handful of large digital companies – sometimes called 'GAFA' (Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple) or 'FAANGS' (Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google) – are becoming the power brokers in a data-driven world. In some cases, they know more about us than our partners do because of the amount of data they have gathered about what we buy, what we read, what we search, what we do online.

They have accumulated personal data and established their dominance at a speed that left regulators in the dust. As the Cambridge Analytica scandal shows, even the leaders and owners of platforms such as Facebook are sometimes surprised by the unintended effects of the data they collect and how it can be put to use.

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Paradoxically, attempts to regulate these platforms through regulations such as the EU's General Data Protection Regulation could entrench their position in the market. Brands may struggle to gather customer opt-ins and manage consent on their own – and will find their relationships with consumer data increasingly mediated through companies like the FAANGS.

These platforms may not allow you to store data you generate on their platforms outside their walled gardens. The choice may one day come down to using their technology and allow them to have a complete view of your data or renouncing the insight you generated on their platforms in your own data management platform. Besides, Google owns DoubleClick, and Facebook owns WhatsApp, so it already knows a lot about your business, in any case.

How this will all shake out in the future remains unpredictable, however, lawmakers and regulators will always struggle to keep up with the speed of change in this landscape.

Visualising and vocalising the future of search

Just how popular voice and visual search are now and how big they will get is [contentious](#), but there can be little doubt that they will be a key part of the future. Virtual assistants with voice search capabilities – Google Assistant, Apple's Siri, Microsoft Cortana and Amazon Alexa – are becoming more powerful and more popular with end-users.

Voice-only search allows users to browse the web and access information without actually having to scroll through sites on desktops and mobile devices. Amazon's Alexa, for instance, can seamlessly search through Spotify's musical inventory, scan Wikipedia or shop on Amazon quickly at a user's command.



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Visual search is becoming more sophisticated, too, with platforms like Google Lens, Instagram, Pinterest and Bing building image recognition algorithms into their software. With visual search you can, for example, point your smartphone camera at an item in the environment to find out where to buy it or to discover related content.

Voice and visual search will expand a brand's options to answer customer needs with an individualised experience, especially for local searches – which comprise the bulk of voice searches. The organisations that jump in now will be ahead of the curve and could have the opportunity to build strong voice search rankings ahead of the competition.

ABOUT GRANT LAPPING

Grant Lapping is Managing Director at DataCore Media, which helps organisations to drive better results from their digital marketing investments by unlocking the full potential of campaign performance data. DataCore Media services include digital media strategy, buying and planning across all digital, social media and mobile platforms as well as the implementation and management of the technology organisations need to effectively track and optimise their campaigns.

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