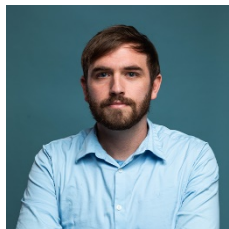


This Startup Aims to Help SMBs Survive Covid Via Voice Apps

Voice platform adoption is growing during the pandemic



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BY [PATRICK KULP](#)

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As surveys show that more Americans than ever are spending time with smart speakers and other voice-enabled devices amid the Covid-19 quarantine, some small businesses are latching onto the emergent platform to engage new customers while keeping existing ones up to speed on operational information.

A relatively new startup called Zammo is promising to help those hard hit local shops weather the pandemic period by connecting them to voice activation platforms. Zammo offers small- and mid-sized companies the ability to build out a presence on major voice platforms—with the exception of Apple’s Siri, for now. The startup ultimately aspires to do for the space “what Shopify did for ecommerce,” as Zammo founder and CEO Alex Farr put it.

By a stroke of bad timing, the company officially went to market in March—just when the coronavirus quarantine temporarily shut down many of Zammo’s potential small business clients. But Farr said the pandemic quickly opened up its own opportunities, as small businesses in various states of reopening struggled to reach customers and consumers cloistered at home turned to their smart speakers.

“Our demand actually went through the roof because people wanted no-touch, no-germs [solutions]—they wanted to talk to their devices more than ever,” Farr said. “What Covid has done for our industry—and for voice interactions in general—is that they have exponentially sped up the adoption of it.”

The company uses AI to pull information from businesses’ websites and then formats it into a style that allows customers to ask questions. For example, customers can ask their voice-activated speaker where the nearest location of a chain is, or which retailers in an area stock a brand’s products. Zammo can also work with businesses on customized voice apps, like integrating with scheduling or payment platforms so that customers can book appointments or workers can inquire about paychecks via voice.

“Right now, voice is like the wild west in terms of the ability to stake your own claim—right now you can get out there and get a big, old ranch, but five years from now, you aren’t going to be able to get a condo,” Farr said. “Right now is critical for small businesses to participate.”

A survey of business leaders by Capgemini last fall found that adoption of voice as a marketing channel ranges from 17% to 48% by category with no industry cracking the 50% level. But since then, a report from Edison Research found that the number of device users who turned to voice commands several times a day increased by 5% during the pandemic, and Pandora saw a “double digit” surge in first-time voice users.

Tim Barnes, co-founder of Wyoming-based Blacktooth Brewing, said he was surprised at the age range and demographic profiles of people who had found the company’s beers via voice since it adopted Zammo a few months ago. “I guess the surprise would be how broad the spectrum of users has been,” Barnes said. “I’m shocked that both my mother and grandmother can use it.”

For Jasmine Diedrich, owner of a small coffee chain based in Everett, Wash., Zammo helped her customize a voice app that would tell people which of the company’s 17 locations was nearest as they were driving. Her next goal is to build out a function that would allow people to order by voice.