

Alexa, can I do my holiday shopping through you?

December 13 2017, by Joseph Pisani



In this Wednesday, Sept. 27, 2017, file photo, an Amazon Echo Dot is displayed during a program announcing several new Amazon products by the company, in Seattle. A test by an AP reporter finds that the virtual assistant Alexa inside the Echo Dot is good at reordering stuff bought previously on Amazon. But asking it to order new items was trickier, and it's definitely not for browsing. (AP Photo/Elaine Thompson, File)

It was a few weeks before Christmas and time to put my voice assistant to the test: Could I just shout out the gifts I needed to buy without having to get on a smartphone or computer?

Alexa, the virtual assistant inside my Echo Dot, is really good at

reordering stuff I already bought on Amazon. But asking it to order new items was trickier: I had to be precise and know exactly what I wanted to buy. There were times I had to rephrase orders until it could understand me. And other times I just gave up and went to my phone to make an order.

Voice shopping is supposed to be the future, and Amazon—which was far ahead of its competitors in offering it—has pushed customers to use it this holiday season by offering earlier access to deals that way. Other retailers are betting on voice shopping, too: Walmart, Target and dozens of others have teamed up with Google to sell merchandise through the technology company's voice-activated devices.

Shopping by voice has some pitfalls—like hindering the ability to research options and comparison shop for the best price, or changing your mind about something in your cart. Amazon.com Inc. said "shopping with Alexa is really exciting" but it is still early on, and that it "continually learns and adds more functionality." And Alexa did try to be helpful, sending photos to my smartphone or suggesting other products.

PLAYING WITH WORDS

Toilet Trouble, the [board game](#) that sprays water on players from a plastic toilet, was on top of my niece's wish list. But Alexa didn't know what it was at first. When I said, "Alexa, order me Toilet Trouble," it responded: "Amazon doesn't have the Toilet Trouble you previously bought." I wasn't sure what that was about—I hadn't bought the game before and searched my past orders to make sure I wasn't mistaken.

Alexa offered to sell me another game called Yeti. "Would you like to buy it?" it asked. I said no, but it was pushy: "OK. You know, seeing is believing. Would it help to view this on Joseph's phone?" It sent me a link to the listing for Yeti through the Alexa app, but I still didn't want it.

I tried another way to ask for the game: "Alexa, order me the Toilet Trouble board game." That worked, and the \$10.76 game was at my door two days later.

BUNGLED BOOK BUYING

I moved on to a children's book: "Alexa, order 'Should I Share My Ice Cream.'" It thought I needed my caffeine fix and tried to reorder something from Starbucks. So I asked in a different way: "Alexa, order the book 'Should I Share My Ice Cream.'" It again tried to buy something from Starbucks. On my third try I included the author's name, Mo Willems. That still confused Alexa: "I'm not quite sure how to help you with that."

I gave up and bought the book using my phone. This was a good illustration of how voice shopping can be slower than scanning a site and clicking.

QUICK COOKER ORDERING

This was fast and easy: "Alexa, order me an Instant Pot Mini." It recognized the brand and size right away, gave me the price of the pressure cooker and asked if I wanted to buy.

NO SWEATER FOR ME

Voice shopping is not for browsers. There was a blue cashmere sweater I had seen on Amazon that I wanted to buy, but couldn't remember the brand. "Alexa, order navy blue cashmere sweater." It read me the top result, but it was a women's sweater. I asked again, specifying it was for men. This time, Alexa wanted me to reorder a navy blue hoodie I bought in March.

Analysts have said [voice shopping](#) can work best when you don't have strong preferences about what brand of batteries or detergent you buy. In this case, I did care. So I'll buy the exact sweater I want from the app.

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