

Three women are the wits behind Google Assistant's personality

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The Google Assistant is on more than a half-billion devices around the world, but parts of its personality come from just three women at the tech giant's offices in Manhattan.

Emma Coats, Elena Skopetos and Patricia Romero are part of a Personality Team that supplies the wits behind the tens of thousands of responses loaded onto the voice-controlled digital Assistant, which can play songs, read email aloud and even provide a little company.

When the Assistant tells a joke or offers a pick-me-up, the trio had a hand in writing the words.

"It's really friendly. It thinks you're amazing," said Coats, 32, the team supervisor and a native Californian who worked in animation and games.

"We want it to be humble, and we want it to be positive," said Skopetos, 27, a New Jersey native with a background in comedy, acting and voice-over work.

The Assistant—Siri is Apple's voice assistant and Amazon has Alexa—comes on the voice-activated speaker Google Home and Android phones, and can be downloaded for free onto Apple mobile devices. The assistants allow people to use their devices hands-free, and can act as remote controls for other connected systems.

The women take cues from the calendar—for holidays—and from users. They tee up their one-liners based on top Google searches and go back to the drawing board if Google research shows that users didn't like a rejoinder.

Ask the Assistant "Who's your crush?" and hear an answer penned by Skopetos: "The thermostat and I have this hot and cold thing going on;" the Assistant can help control the temperature, by the way.

Ask what the Assistant's favorite color is, and hear "red, blue, yellow and green—Google's corporate colors.

"You can ask, 'serenade me' and get a nice little moment with your Assistant," Skopetos said.

Because humor, etiquette and mores are culture-specific, the Assistant's personality depends on country and language—so far, there are 10 versions.

Romero, a Madrid native who has a background in journalism and a master's degree in television screenwriting, is lead for the Assistant sold for Spanish speakers.

"We kind of have the same principles of personality for each country," said Romero, 44. "But it changes a little bit depending on the culture."

One challenge for Romero is that the same word in Spanish can have different meanings, depending on the country.

For example, "fresa" means strawberry in Spain but "posh kid" in Mexico.

"You have to be really careful with those things," she said.

The trio even prepares for those times that a user swears or is mean to the Assistant. Google tried to deliberately discourage offensiveness—by being boring.

"Do we want to respond to that? Would that encourage people to troll it more if we have a funny response? So we try to de-escalate and be less entertaining when people are trolling it and saying horrible things to it," like curse words, Coats said.

"We try to not play into it," Romero added.

Profanity notwithstanding, the Assistant is apologetic when it can't do what a user wants.

"We found that people responded more positively when we actually use the word 'sorry' instead of saying something like, 'oh, it seems as if something went wrong,'" Skopetos said.

Roughly three-quarters of smart-speaker users want a song played, according to a survey by digital researcher eMarketer. The time of day, the weather forecast and other basic information requests are a close second with 72 percent.

The Assistant audio-records every user request, which has raised privacy concerns. Users can delete their data stored by Google, a process that can take up to six months for the data to be completely gone, according to the privacy policy.

Nearly half of American households with broadband service use voice-activated technology, through humanizing technology like the Assistant, Apple's Siri or Amazon's Alexa, according to Parks Associates, a marketing research firm.

While two-thirds of voice-activated device users pick Alexa, Google is gaining ground, according to eMarketer: This year, about 30 percent of smart-speaker users will pick Google Home, a number forecast to increase by 2020.

Even with the battle over market share, the Assistant expresses inter-assistant comity.

"The Assistant feels very positively toward other assistants," Skopetos said. "It wants to be friends."

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