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May 29, 2017

Should you start building apps for Google Assistant?

Last week at I/O 2017, Google showed off plenty of cool new tech for people who are interested in developing apps for the Google Assistant.

What is the Google Assistant?

Let us ask Wikipedia.

> " *Google Assistant is an intelligent personal assistant developed by Google and announced at Google I/O in May 2016. Unlike Google Now, Google Assistant can engage in two-way conversations.*

I did a quick Google search from my computer and found the answer on Wikipedia. But that is so 2016! Now, you can just ask Alexa or Google Home and they will do the search for you and get you the answer (that is, they actually read out the answer). I don't have either of those devices as of today but hope to get my hands on a Google Home soon.

But Google Assistant is not just the software that powers the Home device. Google says that it is an intelligent personal assistant which will soon be embedded into all things Google - your Android phone, your Android smartwatch, your Android powered car and your Android powered Earth to Mars personal space shuttle.

OK, maybe we are not quite there yet on that last one.

Google Assistant apps

Remember when you could just create a website and you would automatically get traffic because there just weren't that many websites? This is because back then, Google needed a lot of content to power its search engine and there weren't really that many people feeding it with content (I mean, creating websites).

Google Asssistant apps are basically the equivalent of content which powers the Google Assistant. While Google may be very good at finding stuff which is public knowledge, it still needs help with some specialized tasks.

Actions on Google

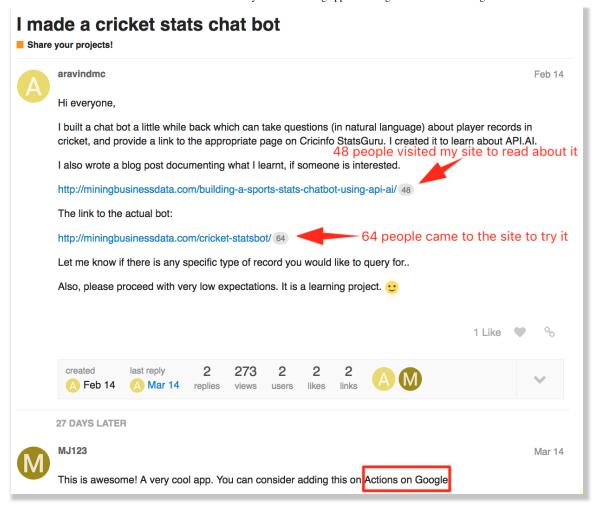These apps you create are called Actions on Google.

That is, when someone is asking their Google Assistant to do some task for them, Google wants the user to think of all these apps as actions they can perform. You can 'invoke' these actions in different ways (to read more see this outline I made of a relevant talk from I/O 2017).

As an example, I created a cricket stats chatbot a while back. You can ask questions in spoken English and it will return hyperlinks to relevant information. *If you tried to do the same query on Google search, it cannot find the information*. This is because, this domain is too specialized for Google at the moment.

An imaginary app for Google Assistant

Now, I don't own the website which powers the cricket chatbot (Cricinfo).

Let us pretend I did own the Cricinfo website. Now it would not be such a bad idea to create an app for Google Assistant which can answer the same kind of questions that my chatbot does. My little chatbot got a fair amount of interest on the API.AI forum.

Notice that someone is even suggesting to add it to "Actions on Google".

So here is how I would proceed to do this:

1. I will make sure my chatbot can answer questions about cricket statistics fairly decently
2. I will submit it as an Action which is available for the Google Assistant
3. Google will review and approve my app.
4. Ta da! I will become a billionaire!

But wait. How did we go from step 3 to 4?

Whats in it for me?

You have probably heard this phrase. Especially when you try to persuade someone to do something they don't want to. 🙂

For me to create the cricket stats Action for Google, I need some way to monetize my app. Maybe it could be something as simple as a monthly subscription fee associated with the Google account of the user. Or it could be something more complex, such as showing cricket gear related ads if people are asking for stats from a suitable interface (e.g. on their smartphone).

Whichever way you decide, you actually need to have a reasonable chance of monetization if you wish to create an app for the Google Assistant.

What if you don't have a way to monetize?

What I have discussed till now is fairly obvious stuff.

Suppose you don't have any way to monetize your app, but you are just curious about it. I can give you a few reasons why it still makes sense to start now.

Reasons to start now

You should create an app if you

1. have a brand and you don't want to lose control of it (yes, Google will do some checks, but what if there is a competitor whose branding is very similar?)
2. simply want to get your feet wet and understand how it works before it becomes huge (do it slowly and systematically though)
3. are just interested in the coolness of the tech. You should definitely go ahead because you are already aware that the ROI could be zero

Other reasons

But here are some below-the-surface reasons to start now. This is similar to starting websites before it became too easy for everyone to publish a site. I learnt much of this from a podcast episode I listened to and made notes on, so you can check out my notes if you are interested.

1. Just as there was a gold rush on domain names and some people made fortunes with domain squatting, there is a likelihood of a gold rush on "discovery phrases", and people

may do "discovery phrase squatting". Being early could give you an advantage here, but also Google seems to be looking out for this already. 🙂

2. People can say stuff like "Talk to FitStar" if they want to talk to an app called FitStar. Here, FitStar is the invocation name. In some ways, invocation names work like domain names, but unlike domain names, there are additional considerations. Invocation name are spoken, not typed out:

   1. Shorter names are easier to say
   2. Plain English words are probably easier for people to enunciate (and thus for Assistant to recognize)
   3. But shorter names are also inherently more competitive
   4. So being early does provide you an advantage here too.

3. Just like you will compete for search traffic with suitable AdWords, you will compete for voice invocation traffic with suitable invocation triggers ("I want to meditate").

4. Google will be looking for a lot of factors to determine ranking when it tries to locate suitable apps for invocation triggers. For the sake of domain age, you would start a website a few months before you need to show up in the search results. Similarly, being early has some advantages here too. Even if your app doesn't show up in the top results for invocation triggers, if it shows up in the list of Google's results (i.e. it is outside of the top 3, or how many ever the Assistant will show by default) over a period of time, that does count for something (according to this video).

Reasons not to start now

Here are a few reasons not to start now:

1. You have some insight into why Google Assistant and Actions on Google will never take off. (I would love to hear your thoughts why in the comments section below)
2. The technology is too bleeding edge and not mature enough (there is some truth in this).
3. You are not interested in this stuff and don't care about it for your business (certainly possible)

Want to get started? Read my guide

As you are probably aware, you can use API.AI to build apps for the Google Assistant.

If you would like to learn about API.AI, check out my step by step guide.

Article by aravindmc / Google Assistant / Leave a Comment

About Aravind Mohanoor

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I help businesses prototype/design/build DialogFlow chatbots. Click here if you are interested in working with me.

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