easy chat

COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE REPORT

market research

Through researching and discussing who our target market would include, we landed on young professionals. These individuals are in their early-mid twenties and likely just moved to a new city to begin their careers. This group includes both males and females, and they likely make around $40,000-$60,000 per year. According to Pew, 25% of American adults own smart speakers, with a nearly even split between males and females.

According to Statista, 19% of Google Home owners are in this age range, from 18-29. The only larger group was 30-44 year olds at 22%, but we ultimately chose to focus on a younger age range because of our interest in helping young professionals connect with others in new cities. 30% of voice device users have at least a college degree, according to Pew, so our product is likely to fit the market well. Additionally, Voicebot.ai found that 45.9% of users keep their device in the living room, which is the perfect set-up for our product to be used.

This group is likely interested in building community with others, as 22% of them experience loneliness often. More than 50% of Americans from ages 18-29 feel detached from their communities, according to Pew. 88% of them use social media, which is frequently linked to a feeling of loneliness. They want to connect with people in person to create a more lasting community.

product comparison

The Google Assistant can be enabled on all kinds of devices, from phones to smart speakers to cars, the Assistant is Google's voice-user interface. It can function across platforms, and connects to a user's Google account, so that their information can be accessed on all of these devices. Applications on the Google Assistant are called actions. Actions, similar to "skills" on an Amazon Echo device, are programs that run on the Google Assistant voice-user interface (VUI). Easy Chat is an action, and once published will live on this action store.

However, the action store is young, and has only .03% as many actions as there are Alexa skills. Only one of the 4,253 actions on the store currently helps users in talking to other people, Conversation Starters. The rest of the action store is dominated by bot chatting, games, and using the google assistant like a secretary who can manage your phone calls and emails. There is plenty of room for Easy Chat, especially since Conversation Starters is so difficult to use.

Conversation Starters was created for the Google Home, and while it is unclear who created it, the questions were taken from conversationstartersworld.com and the creator thanks the owner of that site. The action is rated 3.9/5.0 stars from 58 reviews, with the earliest review being in 2018. Most reviews have no feedback because the reviewers simply selected a number of stars. Only 6 of the reviews have written feedback, with only 4 providing helpful information. Here are a few examples of reviews:

5 stars - "Neat idea to talk about actual things that may actually matter. Ignore the people's reviews who can't understand what they are doing. Seriously, we have not let natural selection do it's thing- we are de-evolving. Facepalm"
1 star - "Not so good, what is this, I didn't understand."
4 stars - "Nice, you have a great future"

As evidenced above, not every review provides great feedback, and Amazon skills generally have many more reviews. This is partially because many Google Home users do not frequently use the Google Assistant site to find actions. They simply ask Google whatever they want to know and Google responds, unlike Alexa, that requires users to add each skill to their device.

product comparison

Google doesn't show how many downloads an action has, so there's no way for us to know this action's popularity. Through a quick Google search, it is not found, so it's likely not being referenced by blogs or published anywhere other than the Google Assistant website. This is only shown on the Google Assistant website, and users can choose to send the action to their Google Home whenever they want to try it out.

When we tried out the app, it was unclear how to use it. It began by asking if we wanted a question, then if we asked it for another question a couple of times, it asked if we would prefer a category. The categories seemed helpful at first, but it was impossible to select "other" as a category. The app didn't seem to understand us particularly well, and it doesn't seem like the developer thought through the syntax of the users.

This action has 2 simple teal conversation bubbles for its logo, but includes no other visual branding or links to websites/social media for the product.

Neither Amazon nor Google publicly release statistics on how many users a VUI skill or action has. Instead, this measure must be inferred based on the number of ratings and reviews. A skill with 100 or more ratings is a competitive skill to be sure: only the top 1% of Alexa skills have that many, and only the top 5% of skills have more than 8. Most skills have no reviews at all. The current most popular skill on the Alexa store, with 148 ratings, is also called Conversation Starters.

Conversation Starters is an Alexa skill developed by a programmer named Timothy Aaron and is not related to the Google Assistant skill of the same name. The invocation phrase for this skill is: a new conversation. After invocation, Alexa will "return a random choice out of a large collection of handpicked conversation starters" before ending the conversation. The questions range from "how do you define love?" to "what is your least favorite meal?"

"Alexa, start a new conversation"
The skill is free to use and download and has been available since 2016. This means that at the time it was published, Conversation Starters was one of only 5,000 skills. It does not appear that any updates or new versions have been released since the skill was first made available. Today, Conversation Starters has 148 ratings, which is more than 99% of Alexa skills. It is the go-to conversation starting skill for the press, as it always appears in articles as the best skill for help with conversation topics.

product comparison

Conversation Starters is rated 3.4 stars and has 5 reviews. The overall sentiment of the reviews is that this is a fine skill at what it does, but that "what it does" doesn't meet their expectations. One reviewer thought the questions were too deep and is "definitely not for use at a party". Another said it would be good for an "awkward teenage date." Two reviewers were disappointed with Conversation Starters, because they thought it was meant to start a conversation with the Alexa device, rather than other people. One reviewer thought it would be good to include categories in a further iteration.

When using Conversation Starters, it is easy to see what these reviewers were talking about. The questions bounce between being incredibly deep and introspective and light icebreakers. There is also no interaction with the skill, and it ends as abruptly as it begins. If a user is unsatisfied with the question they get, the whole skill has to be invoked again.

While this Conversation Starters is not in direct competition with Easy Chat since it's on a different operating system, taking a closer look at this skill offers an idea of what the Google Assistant action store might look like in a few years time, and what users had to say about a very similar application.

The best alternative to Easy Chat currently available to consumers is the physical game Table Topics. This game costs $25.00 per box, and over 2 million have been sold, which shows that there is a serious demand for products like this. Easy Chat has the same end-goal as Table Topics but has been designed from the very beginning as a voice experience. Vocal exchanges are intuitive for social interactions – talking is natural. The key to success with Easy Chat is to make the action so simple and natural that getting a box of conversation topics off a shelf or scrolling through a long list of "icebreaker" search results seems like more work.

Easy Chat is different from the current voice-based applications that exist because it focuses on real-time conversations with real people, not a bot. It's delightful while not being gamified or gimmick-y. The action takes a successful concept – icebreakers and table topics – and becomes a useful tool for social interaction through the careful application of voice-design principles that brings engaging, entertaining conversations one step closer.

user research

We began our user research process by asking people in our target market to answer a few questions about how they would use a product like ours. Because the other products in our market felt so clunky and unnatural to use, we knew it was important to ensure that our product did not fall into the same trap. Through studying how people would naturally speak in conversations, we were able to create a product that feels more simple than others in the market.

We also asked general questions to figure out when people would use the product and found that we may need to include different categories of questions, which we ultimately chose to do. Without having too many options, we included questions specifically tailored for families, friends, and small groups. We also found through testing out similar products that it was not ideal to ask the user to listen to all the categories, so we chose to have the Google Assistant listen for keywords like "in-laws" and determine that as the "families"category.

In our quest to create a simple, easy-to-use product, we tested people in our market frequently, discovering new things every time. In one user test, we found that the users were confused by the "Who are you talking with today?" question. When asked this question, most users will say something like "I'm with my small group" or "I'm with my siblings," but to create a simple product, we wanted to avoid any responses that would cause Google to say "Sorry, I don't understand that." This particular group started to say their names rather than our predetermined categories, and our action was not built to understand them. Because of this, we updated the code so that the Google Assistant could listen for names and move along as if users were selecting the "friends" category.

In another test, the user started to try to answer the question with Google rather than understanding that the topic would be for her to discuss with people in the room. With the new prompts we added at the end of each question, such as "Will that work?" users are prompted to answer "yes" or "no." Once a user approves of the question, Google says, "Enjoy." which signals to the user that they are done talking to the device and can then discuss the topic with the people around them.

Near the end of our semester, COVID-19 came to the United States and our user testing model had to change. We originally planned to test this product with many different in-person groups, but with everyone in their homes rather than on campus, we could not make this happen. Thankfully, some of our own friends were still able to test the product through phone calls and even a few in-person tests with those who had also been safely social distancing for a few weeks. We expect to receive more feedback from the first group of users who will use our action on their own Google Assistant-powered devices without any prompting from us. We are excited to see how our product adapts and becomes even better over time.

user research

Here are a few of the questions and responses we received:

How would you ask Google to give you something to talk about?
• What's on your mind?
• Start a conversation.
• What's a good conversation starter?
• What can we talk about?
• Ask me a question.
• Start the conversation.
• Give me a conversation starter.
• Give me something to talk about.
• What should we talk about?
• I don't know what to talk about.
• You got any fun topics?
• How should I start my conversation?
• Do you have any conversation starters we could use?
• Give me something to talk about.
• I want to talk to you – what do you want to talk about?

In what situations would you use this?
• We have a question book that we use sometimes as a couple, so if it had different settings for a group of people, that would be awesome. Two people could have more serious questions to talk about.
• I'd use it in the car.
• What if you used it with your Uber driver?
• I probably wouldn't use it a ton in a group, just with very few people.
• I feel like couples could use it.
• Maybe it could be used for kids around the dinner table?
• I think people getting to know one another as they live in a new city would use it, maybe they only know a few of the people.
• If a roommate brings over a friend of theirs, it helps all of you connect.
• I'd use it at a party or game night situation.
• It could be used in a couple too to spark conversations you wouldn't normally have.
• I'd use it at a party, kickback, or game night.
• I would do it with a group of friends, at a house party, a dinner party, a social get together
• I would use it with 4-10 people.
• Icebreaking context - at training events, spice it up a little.
• It would be nice at the start of meetings, within a group of people.

user research

These screenshots were from tests with users that taught us a lot about how our product worked. We learned that we needed to allow Google to listen for names, to create a simple way for Google to end the conversation, and to let users ask for more questions.

Let's Chat

Let's get the test version of Let's Chat.

Hi there, welcome to Let's Chat! I'm here to help you talk to people you care about. Let's get a conversation started.

Who are you talking with today?

play and chase

One more time?

and Chase

Sorry, I didn't get that. Can you rephrase?

Chase

Suggested input

cancel

Input

Try typing or saying "Talk to Let's Chat".

Okay, here's something to chat about:

What's something useless you are really good at?

Can I have another question?

I didn't get that. Can you say it again?

Can I have another topic?

Sorry, could you say that again?

I don't like that one

Sorry, I can't help.

'Lets Chat' left the conversation