

get there

WEB ANALYTICS

USING DATA YOU ALREADY HAVE TO MITIGATE TURF WARS

August 2004

Today, a common problem—especially for large corporate or institutional Web sites or Intranets—is the turf wars fought between various departments or “internal clients” over limited homepage real estate. Too often these disputes are never really resolved; or, if they are, it’s on the basis of random or arbitrary factors, such as who is the most influential, persistent, or first to put in a request. Even if your business or organization attempts to consider strategic factors such as marketing or business objectives in deciding how to apportion homepage or other Web site real estate, quite often the results are the same; unless you are supporting your decisions with Web site traffic data that aligns with your strategic objectives, you are merely speculating on the best use of a scarce and valuable resource. Surprisingly often, people’s assumptions about site visitors and their usage patterns are wrong. Such mistakes can result in user frustration, traffic drop-off, and even lost sales.

Fortunately, you don’t need to leave such decisions to chance; using Web analytic software tools, which help you interpret traffic data that your Web site is probably already collecting, you can rationally and consistently make effective decisions and resolve conflicts about how best to apportion Web site real estate.

Using Web analytics to support design decisions

With the information that Web analytics provides, you can make smarter decisions about the content and structure of your site, and alter or streamline your site design as necessary to optimize campaigns, achieve higher conversion rates, improve customer satisfaction, and/or simply create a better overall user experience. In addition, you can use this information to settle internal disputes regarding placement of content, links, banners, buttons, images, etc.

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For example, during the redesign of a large community college Web site, representatives from a particular facility insisted that the new homepage contain a prominent link to their section of the site, as had the old homepage. They argued that their facility was an important resource not only for the college’s students, but also for the community as a whole, including Web site visitors who might be seeking information about the facility’s resources, services, location and hours. However, the Web redesign team reviewed the site’s log files, and discovered that very few users were accessing this facility’s section of the Web site from the prominently placed homepage link. Instead, most users were accessing the facility’s pages via a link in the student resources section of the site, even though it was less prominently featured. In other words, the data

revealed that students represented the user group most likely to access the facility’s pages, not the general public; therefore, it made more sense to emphasize links to the facility on other student resources pages rather than the homepage, which could best be used for other purposes such as school news and announcements about events and course offerings of interest to the general public. After the redesign was completed, further analysis of traffic data indicated that visits to the facility’s pages actually increased with the new emphasis on linking from the student resources pages, despite the fact that there was no longer a link to the facility’s section on the homepage.

Using Web analytics with integrated communications

Web analytics can also help you increase the effectiveness of other communications. For example, you can use Web analytics to track the success of a particular campaign, or an element in a campaign such as a banner ad, from the banner itself through each step in a conversion process. First, you must establish goals for the site; for example, what are your business objectives, and how does the site support these objectives? Then, you must decide which areas of the site you want to track to optimize your results. To do so, you define usage scenarios that align with your business objectives, and use Web analytics to track them—not only the end results, but the entire process or path that users follow from their point of entry on the Web site through to conversion.

While such tracking is essential for e-commerce applications, it can be just as valuable for other types of sites. For example, your company may offer white papers as both a means of disseminating information and collecting registration data from potential customers. In this case, your objective is to get users to download the white paper. There may be several different paths to the white paper, depending on visitor type, point of entry, direct access vs. external referral, etc. By creating a scenario for each path, and tagging the corresponding pages with a piece of code that the Web analytic software tracks, you can follow users' steps from multiple entry points down to the ultimate conversion point. Then you can review the results, identify where in the process (or processes) users may be dropping off, and make any necessary design changes and tweaks to streamline the process and increase conversion rates. For example, if it turns out that users are dropping off at the registration page, you might want to reduce the number of questions on that page. Once you complete the changes, you can continue tracking, comparing the pre-modification and post-modification results, and tweaking further as necessary.

Using Web analytics to optimize your site on an ongoing basis

As illustrated in the examples above, Web analytics can be especially helpful in the planning stages of a site redesign. However, just as important is the follow-up analysis to verify the results of your decisions once the redesign goes live. Often, optimizing your Web site involves repeated trial-and-error to determine what arrangement of elements works best. For example, when a major medical association redesigned their Web site, they used Web analytics to determine what content visitors were most attracted to on their homepage. By using Web analytics to study visitors' click-through patterns, they were able to make strategic decisions about how to divide up homepage real estate.

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Once the new homepage was launched, they continued to track click-through patterns to see if the new elements were working; based on the data they looked at, they made further adjustments to the homepage to obtain even better results. This example highlights the necessity of using Web analytics on an ongoing basis. In fact, for best results Web analytics should be an integral part of any site maintenance plan, especially for sites with dynamic content such as banners, calendars, news items, forms, search pages, etc.

What is Web analytics?

Web analytics is the study of Web site traffic data to identify patterns in visitors' online behavior. Web analytic software uses log files and or cookies (information that identifies users in order to prepare customized Web pages for them), coupled with flexible (often dynamic) reporting tools, to help you track such information as unique visitors and sessions, requested pages, downloads, page errors, length of sessions, page views, referrals, click paths, bounce rates, robot activity, and more. It can show you how many people visited your site (and which of these were unique visitors), where they came from (if they followed a link to get to the site or came there directly), what keywords they searched with on the site's search engine, how long they stayed on a given page or on the entire site, what links they clicked on (and in what order), when they left the site, and how often they return. It can help you determine which areas of the site are generating the most interest and which are underutilized; what information visitors are looking for, and how they are finding it on your site. It can also tell you whether or not your site's pages are working properly.

There are dozens of Web analytics software programs available with a range of prices and capabilities; a few of the most popular include WebTrends (NetIQ), Urchin, NetTracker, ClickTracks, and DeepMetrix. Depending on which packages and modules you buy, prices can range from about \$500.00 for a basic small business package to \$10,000 for a complete enterprise suite. The best of these software tools are easy enough for a non-technical decision-maker to use. However, translating the data into actionable items requires a combination of technical, marketing, and business expertise, which is why many Internet and marketing communications firms offer Web analytics as part of their service offering. Regardless of which solution you choose, using Web analytics can only help improve the returns on your Web site investment; in addition, it can help smooth over any conflicts that arise in the course of making important business decisions.

Integrated solutions

While other companies often provide only a piece of the puzzle, Movéo offers strategically integrated Internet solutions that encompass front-end (web design), back-end (database tools), revenue growth (web marketing) as well as web analytics capabilities.

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