Stepping Up Your Use of Web Analytics

You've taken the first step, you've applied a web analytics solution to your website. You're familiar with the basics, but how do you make real use out of the numbers? Here are 10 tips for getting more out of your tracking:

1. Hits should be discarded from the conversation.
Everything on your website is stored on a server somewhere. Each time a request is made from the user's computer to your server, it registers as a hit. A hit is counted when the page is loaded, when each image is loaded, and when the rest of the content is loaded. Hits were a common term to use in the early days of the world wide web when images took a long time to load and were therefore used sparingly, but a modern website might be composed of hundreds of images and other content types. One visit from a single user would register so many hits the resulting number is meaningless, but the term 'hit' has become so common to our vernacular that less experienced website owners might refer to a hit when they really mean a single user visit. Make sure you don't read or refer to these two statistics interchangeably; it confuses the discussion for those that know the difference.

2. Views vs. Visitors: It depends on your website
A visitor is calculated by your analytics software as a request from a unique IP address generated by an individual's computer. Whether you're looking at uniques per day, per month or per year, a visitor is counted once. A visit, on the other hand, can be generated multiple times by a single user. One person might go to your website multiple times per day, and each time this is added to an overall count of total visits to your website by multiple users. Which of these statistics should interest you more depends on the type of website you manage. On a promotional website for a single item that you only expect someone to buy or sign up for once, you would benefit more from knowing the number of unique visitors, but for a large e-commerce site offering multiple projects, you would most value visits from any number of buyers who might shop many times over.

3. Incorporate your search terms
It's easy to forget that your audience is not like you. Chances are, the public you are marketing to is not nearly as informed about your product or industry as you are. Undaunted, website managers attack this problem by providing a wealth of information and instructive materials on their websites. This approach is very helpful once consumers find your website, but what if they can't find it in the first place? Analytics offers insight into the keywords that are bringing people to your site, and it's vital to pay attention to these cues. Users may not be using the same terminology or jargon so familiar to insiders, and a more colloquial term, used more frequently throughout the copy, might draw more visitors. Take advantage of both your analytics program's capabilities to show what keywords brought traffic in and what phrases they searched for once they arrived at your website.

4. Be aware of how your traffic is calculated

Analytics, one way or another, is triggered by code placed somewhere in the coding language that generates your website. Google Analytics, for instance, requires a small piece of Javascript to be placed before the end body tag, and most programmers insert it into the footer code to ensure that it is included on every page. The website analyst should therefore keep in mind that any page that doesn't have that code will not be counted. Page views of a PDF, for example, will not be incorporated into overall website page views, nor will views of the RSS feed. Websites such as blogs that are highly dependent on RSS views should supplement with a method of tracking RSS statistics.

5. Visitors from different sources have different behaviors

Referring URLs is arguably the most valuable statistic that analytics programs offer. General visitor traffic provides much less insight about the type of user wandering your content than knowing where that user came from and what his additional interests are. Once you start noticing a surge of traffic from a particular source, add that referring URL to a segment and let your analytics program show you what users from that source did once they reached your website. You might find that some campaigns convert more sales when targeted to the audience of a particular website, or that they show more interest in some pages than others.

6. Set conversion goals

This is an additional step to any analytics program: telling the software what counts on your website as a conversion. For e-commerce websites this might be a page view of a purchase confirmation, for a corporate website, it could be the view of a confirmation after subscribing to the company newsletter. Whatever your goal is, it should be reflected in your analytics program, and most solutions will even give you the option to set a dollar figure to each conversion.

7. Studying browser statistics is time well spent

Time is money, so time should never be wasted. Website managers who insist that their development team spend equal time accounting for every browser type back to 1997 may find their programming team putting a lot of man hours into very small segments of your audience. You may have three users looking at your website on WebTV every month, but is that a significant portion of your audience? The internet has advanced too far to design for the lowest common denominator anymore.

8. Bounce rate should be kept in perspective

The bounce rate for your website is calculated by determining the number of visitors who go to the home page and then go somewhere else on your website, rather than "bounce" right out again. That doesn't mean that it makes sense to strain resources in pursuit of 0%. There will always be some percentage of users who reached your site by accident. If someone got to your website looking for information about cats and you build catwalks, that traffic is not useful to you anyway. There are even some websites that offer all of their important information updates on the home page, negating the need for returning users to go anywhere else. Set a realistic percentage for your website and try to stay at that rate.

9. Technology moves slower than you think

Everyone's talking about mobile devices with Internet capabilities, but not everyone has one. More importantly, they probably aren't using it to browse your website. Across nearly any industry, your analytics program will most likely show that visits to your website from mobile devices accounts for under 3% of your traffic, perhaps much less. Rather than jump to the conclusion that this is because your website isn't optimized for mobile devices, consider instead the behavior of internet users. The most dominant period of day, in which a business website will experience a high volume of traffic, is Monday through Friday from 9 to 5, when the American workforce is at the office. Users browse business websites on their computer at work, they play with apps on their phone. You may have an audience in the mobile market, but you may also serve them best by leaving your website alone and developing an app.

10. Embrace change, but make it an informed decision

You may like blue, but that doesn't mean your audience responds to it. Weigh the time it takes to make a change across your website against its performance by testing it on one page and tracking how it affects your conversions. Testing is ultimately the most powerful capability your analytics program will give you.