

Using Web Analytics to Increase and Optimize Web Site Traffic

Anyone who has ever worked on a Web site understands that a site's development is never finished. Content needs to be continually updated to keep visitors engaged and ensure information is timely. But how does one know what information is being used most or what might be driving potential customers away? Web analytics can help.

Web analytics involves gathering, converting, analyzing, and reporting user traffic data in order to understand and optimize Web site usage.

Anyone with a Web site can benefit from this information. At the simplest level, it's useful to know what kind of traffic a site gets. But if used correctly, analytics can go well beyond that. Web analytics can be the key to developing a successful strategy to drive more traffic through a site, build awareness for a brand, and generate more business.

Gathering Data

The first step to analyzing the effectiveness of a Web site is to collect the data. This is fairly simple, since most Web hosts automatically store basic information—IP address, date and time, error messages—on the server each time someone visits the Web site. But unless a business has the capability to retrieve logs from the server and convert them into a usable format, it's difficult to know what to do with this data.

Converting, Reporting, and Analyzing Data

In most situations, an analysis tool will be necessary to convert the log files into standard and custom reports. There are a wide variety of analysis tools available, some are free while others charge a fee for use. One of the most widely-used free tools is Google® Analytics, but there are a variety of powerful paid options available like Urchin, Webtrends, Lyris HQ, and Omniture SiteCatalyst®. It's best to conduct a thorough comparison based on the company's specific needs before deciding which one to use.

Whatever analysis tool is chosen, it should provide a number of standard reports. Each report can offer valuable insights into why

Suggested analytics tools

Google® Analytics
www.google.com/analytics

Urchin
www.urchin.com

Webtrends
www.webtrends.com

Lyris HQ Web Analytics Solution
www.lyrishq.com

Omniture SiteCatalyst®
www.omniture.com

visitors come to the site and what they are doing when they get there. The following are a sampling of some of the most common reports available and what information they convey.

Page views

This report tracks the number of pages visited. Page views and hits are sometimes mistakenly believed to be the same thing. However, hits measure the number of requests for HTTP information, which can include images, hyperlinks, headlines, or any other component on a page. A single page view may include up to 300 hits from one page view.

Measuring page views helps judge the content's quality—higher numbers of page views generally indicate better content and can be a good indicator for what information works on the site. If a page covering a specific topic has a high number of page views, it's safe to assume that developing more content surrounding that topic is a good idea.

But just because a page doesn't get a lot of traffic doesn't always mean that the information isn't relevant or important to visitors. Take a close look at pages with fewer views to analyze what the issues may be before getting rid of them altogether. It's possible that a page is simply difficult for visitors to find, and a minor change to navigation may remedy the problem.



Example of site usage summary in Google Analytics

Visits/unique visitors

It's extremely useful to understand whether a site is able to draw visitors back more than once. This report provides a good look into a site's overall quality by comparing the total number of visits—how many times the site has been accessed—to unique visitors accessing the site. For instance, an individual visiting the same site five times in a month would be reported as five visits and one unique visitor.

An engaging Web site will draw visitors back time and time again. This is desirable because it builds brand recognition and increases sales. Therefore, the goal is to have a high ratio of visits to unique visitors. If the ratio between these two measurements is low, the content may not be adequately sparking visitors' interests. It could be that the site looks unprofessional, the navigation isn't intuitive, or possibly the content as a whole just isn't meeting the public's needs. As changes are made, keep an eye on this report—if the ratio begins to increase, the right steps are being taken to remedy the issues.

Most popular pages

Knowing which pages are visited most often and what visitors like about a site will help when planning site updates. Pages that have the most sought-after content should receive a strong focus on the home page or within the navigation areas so they can easily be found. They should also be updated regularly to draw visitors back.

Pages that consistently do not make this list might need to be updated or eliminated altogether. Either way, close attention should be paid as to why this content is being ignored by users. It may be that the link going to the page is in an inconvenient or inappropriate spot, limiting access or even awareness. Or perhaps the information on the page is incorrect, inadequate, or doesn't meet visitors' expectations. Troubleshooting the issues may help correct the problem.

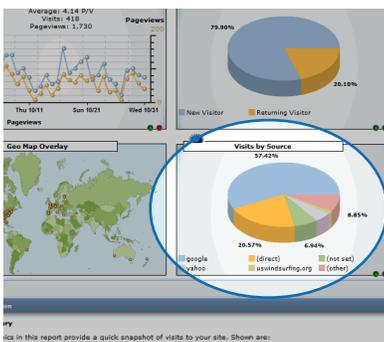
Referring pages/Web sites

This report compiles a list of external URLs that brought visitors to the Web site via a referral link. The information is especially useful when trying to analyze the effectiveness of online advertising or public relations campaigns, but it also helps indicate external buzz that may be going on about the company and/or its products beyond any direct marketing efforts.

Digging a little deeper into this report can be particularly educational and may help improve efforts to drive more traffic to the site. For instance, if a particular site is sending a lot of traffic, it might be a good idea to contact that site's administrator and ask if there is anything that can be done in return. This may lead to new cross-promotional opportunities. Or perhaps there are sites that aren't listed in the report that should be. In such cases, it would be helpful to contact the administrators and try to strengthen those relationships.

Average number of pages per visit

Tracking the number of pages viewed by an average visitor can be very beneficial. A higher number generally indicates better content, but that isn't always the case. Visitors want to find information in as few clicks as possible, so if a site is easy to navigate, a visitor may achieve his or her goal after only visiting a few pages. This report may provide the best answers when combined with data from other reports, such as page views, in order to provide a more complete picture of visitors' experiences.



Example of referring sites summary in Urchin

Bounce rate

This shows the percentage of visitors who leave within a short period of time—usually five seconds or less. However, the period of time needed to engage visitors will change from page to page, depending on the amount of content. So it's best to create a "run-through" scenario and time how long is necessary to get an adequate amount of information for each page. These times can be used as benchmarks to calculate the bounce rate.

A bounce rate of more than 50 percent may indicate a serious retention issue. It could be possible that the content wasn't what they were looking for, or perhaps the site didn't look polished. No matter what the reason, a high bounce rate indicates a critical problem that needs to be addressed quickly and thoroughly.

Visitor information

It's always good to analyze visitor demographics. Having a solid understanding of the current audience will make developing targeted content much easier. The following are some of the more important demographics to review:

- *Country/region* – Knowing where visitors are from makes it easier to judge whether the site is reaching its target audience or if the content should be adjusted for an audience that may not have been predicted. This information may also help when deciding where to place advertising to reach the largest markets.
- *Language* – It's helpful to know which default language setting visitors have on their browsers. It's possible that a site attracts a lot of visitors who speak Spanish, for example, and a large number of prospective customers may be turned off if the site is only available in English. If this is found to be the case, it may be a good idea to have the site available in that language.
- *Browsers/operating systems/domains* – Web sites may look different when viewed in various browsers and operating systems, so it's best to know what people are seeing to avoid or eliminate issues. For example, Internet Explorer 6 has a lot of known bugs that affect site layout. So if there are a lot of visitors using this browser, it may be a good idea to troubleshoot problems that may occur when these visitors come to the site.

Entry/exit pages

Tracking which pages of the site visitors enter and leave from can provide insight into what information people are looking for and what pages may be turning visitors off. Some pages are actually meant to serve as exit pages, such as a standard message page that appears after a customer places an online order. But if pages that aren't meant to serve as an exit consistently make the exit page list, they should be reviewed for possible issues that might turn visitors away.



Example of exit pages summary in WebTrends

The opposite goes for the entry page list. If pages that aren't meant to serve as entrance points are consistently making this list, they most likely hold information that people are generally searching for and should be regularly updated and/or expanded upon to maintain interest.

HTTP errors

Errors can occur during regular site maintenance, causing broken links or other issues that can disrupt the site's flow and easily turn visitors off. This report provides vital information about page errors throughout the site for more efficient maintenance.

Search metrics

Reviewing both internal and external search metrics can provide significant insight into what visitors really want.

External reports will offer referring search terms from search engines such as Google, Yahoo, Bing, and other third-party engines. Paying close attention to how people phrase their searches and then using this information to develop new products or content that will cater to their needs should help drive more traffic to the site.

Internal search metrics outline what visitors are searching for on the site, whether they find the information they search for, and what action they take as a result of their search. If the site does not currently have a search function, it's a good idea to add one—not only as a benefit for visitors but also as a valuable tool for you.

Once a search function has been added, be sure the analysis tool gathers the following reports:

- Popular search terms
- Searches with results
- Searches without results
- Search path

Custom reports

It's important to have the flexibility to create custom reports to track data specific to a site's needs. Some analytics software has the ability to send you automatic reports on a daily basis highlighting key changes and suggestions. Be sure to choose a tool that offers the greatest amount of flexibility to ensure future needs will be met.

Implementing a Plan of Action

This is where the rubber meets the road, so to speak. It doesn't do any good to gather information about a Web site if no changes are ever made.

All of that data may be a little overwhelming at first, and it may not be completely clear where to start. One recommendation is to analyze data once a week for two to three weeks to track changes and get a handle on any particular trends that may appear during that time.

Then, write down all the things that may need to change. This includes everything from quick and simple fixes to complete overhauls. Sort the list into needs—things that absolutely should be addressed—and wants—things that may not be necessary but might be a good idea.

Next, move each item on the list into groups of short-term, mid-term, and long-term goals for site improvement. Base these decisions on necessity, current resources, and the time it might take to implement. Going through this exercise will provide the roadmap necessary to tackle any problems that may need to be addressed and will ensure that problems are handled in a timely and efficient manner.

Remember that using Web analytics is an ongoing process, which means needs and goals will change often. But the extra effort required for regularly-scheduled reviews and maintenance pays off in the long run with improved site traffic, better flow of information, heightened awareness, and increased business.

To learn more about how Snitily Carr can help with Web site optimization and Web analytics, contact us at 402.489.2121 or info@SnitilyCarr.com.