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## e-Solutions

## Optimize Your Website

Digital analytics tools can help you measure your website  
traffic—and increase online sales

At its best, an ecommerce website is a successful movie theater marquee, enticing passersby to come inside and buy tickets to the 7 o'clock show. At its worst, it's a strand of tangled, burnt-out Christmas lights: Getting it to work requires unraveling an intricate web of crossed lines and ill-formed knots, then locating the single broken bulb that's keeping the entire string from being lit.

Whether your website is a marquee or a mess could be a matter of metrics and measurement, suggests a 2012 report by U.K. digital marketing agency DBD Media. Its study of 50 ecommerce websites found that only 50 percent of online businesses track their site's conversions—the number of website visitors who follow calls to action, such as making a purchase—while 60 percent lack a "funneled goal," or intended path for visitors to take through the online sales funnel. If your website has a broken "bulb," such as low sales conversions or high shopping-cart abandonment, that's a problem, as fixing it requires a map with which to locate it. Digital analytics—or Web analytics—is that map.

**T**o increase your online sales, you have to understand the traffic on your site, how that relates to your overall business objectives, and how you can generate more of it. That's what Web analytics helps you do.

—Kevin Autburn, United Stationers

"To increase your online sales, you have to understand the traffic on your site, how that relates to your overall business objectives, and how you can generate more of it," says Kevin Autburn, United Stationers director of Web merchandising. "That's what Web analytics helps you do."

## Metrics that matter

The practice of measuring websites' performance, Web analytics is the digital equivalent of a check-up. Like a physician with a stethoscope, Web analytics tools track key performance indicators—symptoms—so they can diagnose and treat illness: failed business objectives.

The symptoms that tools can monitor are infinite. Generally, though, data fall into one of several categories:

- **Visitor data:** Web analytics can tell you not only how many people visit your site, and how often, but also their demographics, including their age, gender, language, and location, as well as their operating system (e.g., Windows, Mac) and browser (e.g., Firefox, Chrome, Safari).
- **Traffic data:** Web analytics can tell you where your website visitors are coming from, including, for example, how many come directly to your site by typing its URL, how many come from third-party websites, such as blogs or social networks; how many come from paid advertisements or email promotions; and how many get there from search engines like Google (and what search terms they use when they do).
- **Engagement data:** Web analytics can tell you how your website content is performing by tracking statistics such as page views (i.e., the number of pages viewed on your website), average time spent (i.e., the average time visitors spend on your site), and exit pages (i.e., the pages from which people leave your site).
- **Search data:** Web analytics can tell you how visitors are using your website's search function—that is, what they're searching for—and how satisfied they are with the search results they get.
- **Ecommerce data:** For ecommerce sites, Web analytics can give you sales-specific data points, including not only total online sales and transactions, but also average order size, average order value, and conversion rate.

Because the old business adage—you can't manage what you don't measure—holds true, collecting and monitoring these and other performance data allows business owners to set tangible goals and strategically track performance against them.

"It gives you the opportunity to optimize your site," explains John Hassman, United Stationers director of marketing analytics. "If you know that 80 percent of the time people are searching for copy paper when they come to your website, you could put banners promoting copy paper on your homepage. Or, you can change how your site is laid out so people don't have to search for copy paper to find it."

The result, more copy paper sales, directly benefits your bottom line. "Ultimately, one of your main goals should be driving up customers' average order value—how much they're spending each time they visit the site," says Hassman. "Digital analytics gives you insights to help you do that."

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#### Tracking tools

There are both free and paid solutions for businesses that want to track digital analytics. For those who lack experience and budget, the former will suffice, according to Hassman, who says the most popular free solution is Google Analytics.

"If you're doing nothing at all in the way of digital analytics, you should at least have Google Analytics," Hassman explains. "There's no support—you have to do everything on your own—but it's not that difficult; all you have to do is find someone to help you set it up and you can start gathering information about the people on your site."

Google Analytics can deliver rich—at least basic—insights. With additional setup and configuration, it also can track ecommerce data. Although there's a premium version

that offers additional functionality for a fee, those who desire extra features, including deeper data points and more customized tracking, should consider paid solutions such as IBM Digital Analytics, Adobe Analytics, or Webtrends.

"Although they can be cost-prohibitive for a lot of small and medium-sized businesses, the reason you want to look at paid solutions is they provide a lot more robust features," Ausburn says. "At some point you may transition from wanting out-of-the-box metrics to being more specific with the goals you're measuring, and that requires a more sophisticated tool."

Whichever tool you select, implementing it requires "tagging" each HTML page on your website with a special piece of code that interacts with your analytics software, which then generates visual reports via a dashboard. In the case of Google Analytics, your website administrator or IT person should be able to do the tagging for you. In the case of paid tools, however, the software company often can provide consulting and tagging services.

#### Acting on analysis

"Call United," Ausburn recommends. "Talk with us first, because we have the capabilities to help businesses understand their needs and implement the necessary tagging."

Of course, it's not enough to just collect website data. In order to fully realize digital analytics' benefits, businesses must act on it, too.

Start by setting a goal—for example, growing online revenues, increasing average order value, decreasing shopping-cart abandonment, or making more conversions. Then choose four or five core metrics related to it, which you should monitor on a daily basis.

"Over time you can start building up data and chunking it into quarterly, yearly, then month-over-month, quarter-over-quarter, and year-over-year reports so you can see some trends," Ausburn explains. "Then you want to baseline it, if you can, against industry standards so you can determine if your site is performing the way it should, and if it isn't, act accordingly."

Pay special attention to funneled goals. For instance, consider the goal of increasing conversions. "In the B2B space, a 25 percent to 35 percent conversion rate is pretty good," Ausburn continues. "But let's say you're only getting 15 percent conversions. You can dig into the metrics and see that you have average or above average page views up to a certain point in the sales funnel, but after that, page views drop off. Now you have a targeted way to diagnose your problem."

The problem could be that there are too many steps in the checkout process, or that you don't accept a popular payment method.

Another scenario is search. "You could run a report that tells you what searches come back as unsuccessful," Hassman says. "If you look at those search terms alongside exit pages—where do people leave your site, and do they leave before they buy something—maybe you'll find there's an item they're looking at, but you're not price-competitive on that item."

"Some of the big-box stores are investing millions of dollars to have people work on their websites," Ausburn concludes. "If you don't have the same information they have, you're going to fall behind."

Whatever problems you find, trial and error in combination with continued measurement will eventually yield solutions—and sales. ■

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