

# Take Advantage of Advances in Web Measurement

by Joel Hadary

**Summary:** *Today, if you have clear objectives for your Web site and are able to devote a reasonable level of effort to measure, there is no excuse for not having a meaningful, beneficial Web measure system.*

There is no reason why anyone shouldn't take advantage of advances in Web measurement to maximize the benefits of their Web site. Just five or six years ago, if you had a few simple statistics about your Web site, you were practicing the state-of-the-art Web analytics. While state of the art, it wasn't enough. All but the simplest Web sites have multiple parts, each with different functions. One-size-fits-all analysis isn't very useful and can often be misleading. Web managers found that executives demanded that their Web sites, which were costing millions of dollars, be measured, so they were, but the results weren't useful. They weren't even interesting. In that analytic environment, Web measurement was implemented and then ignored.

Fortunately, the science and art of Web measurement (yes, Web measurement is both science and art) has substantially improved in the last half dozen or so years. Today, if you have clear objectives for your Web site and are able to devote a reasonable level of effort to measure, there is no excuse for not having a meaningful, beneficial Web measure system. The techniques and tools are available for those who want them to use them.

## Functionality and Content

The foundation of good Web measurement is the realization that different parts of a Web site have different functions. There are routing pages which direct visitors to where they want to go. Home pages, which have tremendous routing responsibilities, cannot be measured in the same way as a sell page, information page, enrolling page, or a service page. Once pages have been classified by function (many pages have more than one function), it is very important to group pages by content. Not only does categorizing pages by content enable you to make sure each content area has the appropriate pages (for example, each content area should generally have only one router page), it also enables tracking of similar pages as a group. For example, if there are ten pages with details on a particular product, no single page may have a high visit count, but as a group they might. If the pages had not been grouped together, their importance may have been missed. Depending on the product mix, a sell page in one content area should not be compared to a sell page in another content area. On the other hand if a Web site has just one product, sell pages may be grouped together in one content area so that they can be measured together. While content categorization is important for its own sake, it provides the basis for visitor segmentation, which is one of the most important techniques for effective Web measurement (as discussed below).

## Success Correlation

Function and content are a necessary starting point, but the question still remains: what should be measured? Page views, visits? Often not. Correlation to success is

more important. For example, an auto sales site had a collection of movies showing off their cars. The movies had high page views and were initially thought to be very successful. However, upon further analysis, it was found that there was little correlation between viewing the movies and actually buying a car. It turned out that despite their extremely high page views, they were an expensive waste of Web site real estate.

## Visitor Segmentation

Function, content and correlation make a good foundation, but even if you have them, you may still not get all the potential benefits of Web measurement. Web sites have a wide range of visitors many with different requirements and behaviors. The adage, "Average companies use averages; outstanding companies don't" is especially true for Web sites. Average Web statistics are often useless, and can even be misleading. It is not unusual for the home page of a large public site to have 70 percent of its visitors come once, look at just the home page and leave never to come back. With only 30 percent of visitors having potential value, looking at total statistics for the home page are meaningless. After segmenting out "worthless" visitors, there can still be a wide range of interesting segments. Do frequent visitors behave differently than casual visitors? What are the differences between buyers of women's clothes and men's clothes? Are there different kinds of shopping-cart abandonment visitors - some who eventually buy and some who don't? Are there pages that are unsuccessful on average, but very successful for a specific segment? Do visitors from different marketing channels behave differently? Do they have different requirements? If the Web measurement system is properly set up and maintained, there are a wide range of segments that can be identified and tracked in order to fine-tune a Web site for maximum return on investment.

Usability studies, surveys and focus groups can provide valuable insights into visitor behavior, but nothing beats actual tracking segments based on Web site behavior. For example, a major financial site that provided online processing for its customers had a complex, feature-rich online system.

Based on usability studies, surveys and focus groups, this is what their customers wanted. However, based on tracking online behavior, they discovered that 80 percent of their customers only used a fraction of the features, that many of those who used advanced features didn't need to, and that there was a high attrition rate among the 80 percent who didn't need the advanced features. Based on these insights, the site was redesigned so that customers could seamlessly choose a simple path or a path with more advanced features.

The two paths were hosted on different servers. Performance improved and processing costs were reduced, but more importantly, user attrition declined. Eventually, surveys showed that customer satisfaction improved.

With classification by function, content categorization, success correlation and segmentation there is much that can be discovered that can lead to a more effective Web site. However, there is still more that can be done. Real estate analysis (does space taken by a function match its importance?), link tracking (who is clicking when on what links?), process analysis (time to start, time to complete, time on each step, field abandonment, save and come-back potential), attrition analysis (when and why do visitors stop visiting), use of proxies (how do you relate offline events to Web

activity), longitudinal analysis (how do visitors behave over time?), and testing (what works best for whom?).

## **How to Start**

Arguably, the most difficult task in Web site measurement is starting. The first and most important step is defining the site's objective. Is it selling product, is it online processing, is it providing information, a combination or something else? What benefits do you want to get from your measurement system? What are the "low-hanging fruits"? Prioritize benefits both by magnitude of benefits and time to benefit. The sooner you can get measurable benefits, the easier it will be able to get the support needed for longer term benefits. Once the objective is established, decide how to structure the measurement system. Is it product based or function based? What should be grouped together, and what should be distinctly identified?

What is need on a regular basis, and what kinds of deep-dive analyses should be done? Then, start measuring. Getting a good measurement system is an iterative process. As you start discovering actionable insights from your measurement system make sure that the system not only supports your management but also your channels and enables you to make ongoing measurable improvements. Lastly, does it prepare you for the next redesign?

Successful Web site measurement and analysis requires more than just installing a measurement package and sitting back and looking at prepackaged reports. However, the techniques for using measurement for significant, ongoing Web site improvement are well developed and available.

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