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The importance of analytics

Most companies that have websites have access to web traffic statistics, usually provided by their web host. Those that don't take advantage of these files for web traffic analysis (or use a bargain basement web hosting company that doesn't provide them) don't know what they are missing. There is a wealth of information to be found, and reacting to this information can have a dramatically positive impact on a company's bottom line. What follows are some of the most basic web traffic statistics that are typically available for web traffic analysis, followed by brief suggestions on how to use the information.

The Myth of "Hits"

Most web surfers have come across sites that boast about "20,000 hits per day" or something similar. But what does this mean?

To an internet marketer, unfortunately, not much. "Hits" actually refers to the number of requests for information the web server receives. To use an oversimplified example, if your homepage has 20 separate graphics on it, each visitor to that page will account for 20 hits. If you were boasting of 20,000 hits per day, you would really only be talking about 1000 visitors. Obviously, this statistic is not a fair indication of actual site visitors, and shouldn't be figured into your web traffic analysis.

Average Visitors (Daily, Weekly, Monthly)

This is the true measure of website activity. Of course, more traffic is desirable in most circumstances (provided it is targeted). Without access to these web traffic statistics and the ability to look at visitor history, it is impossible to tell if your traffic building initiatives, whether online or offline, are working. You hold your staff accountable for their time and efforts, why wouldn't you demand the same of your website?

It should be noted that the more your traffic increases, the more accurate the rest of your web traffic analysis becomes. This is simply because trends in a larger sample are more telling than trends in a smaller sample where a small number of atypical users can skew the results.

Average Time Spent On Site and Average Page Views Per Visitor

These web traffic statistics can be very useful in determining how your traffic is reacting to your site. If the average time that people spend on your site is small (for example less than a minute), or the average visitor only visits one or two pages, your web traffic analysis may tell you that there is some sort of problem. Perhaps your site is attracting the wrong traffic, with visitors abandoning the site quickly when they realize it isn't what they were seeking.

Perhaps visitors are confused by the navigation and decide to look elsewhere. Maybe your site, even though you love it, gives off an inexplicable bad vibe. Whatever the case, an awareness of the time people spend on your site and the number of pages they view can bring a potential problem to your attention, and help you gauge how effective your solution is.

Most/Least Requested Pages

These web traffic statistics are helpful in determining the "hot" and "cold" areas of your site. If you notice that a page that you think is important is not getting any attention, perhaps the link to this page should be made more prominent or enticing. On the other hand, if there are areas of the site that you deem less important that are attracting a great deal of your traffic, you can shift some of your sales/marketing focus to those pages. Whatever you find in these stats, you can bet that it will give you valuable insight into the interests and motivations of your visitors- a cornerstone of web traffic analysis.

Top Exit Pages

There are probably certain pages of your site where you don't mind visitors leaving (after all, they can't stay forever). A confirmation page after they fill out a form might be one example of a reasonable exit point. A contact page that tells visitors how to get in touch with your company might also be acceptable. Unfortunately, it is unrealistic to assume that each of your visitors is going to find exactly what they are looking for on your site, so it is normal to see a wide range of exit pages. However, if your web traffic analysis tells you that a high percentage of visitors are leaving on any particular page, it bears some close scrutiny. Sometimes minor modifications in content can have a positive impact on visitor retention.

Top Search Phrases

Unlike the other web traffic statistics, which are primarily based on traffic already at your site, this data can be very useful in understanding what type of traffic is coming to your site. If you see relevant phrases that bring you consistent traffic, you can assume that you are getting some targeted traffic.

On the other hand, if there are predominant phrases people are using to find your site that are unrelated to your business, you know that at least some of your traffic is of a lesser quality. In addition, if you notice that people find your site by typing in the name of your company, you should be pleased to know that you have achieved some level of brand awareness. By examining the search phrases that your visitors are using in your web traffic analysis, you gain a better understanding of your visitor.

As previously mentioned, search engine optimization is an ongoing process, rather than a one time "quick fix". If you intend to use your search engine optimization company to help you maintain your positions, you should ask to see a sample monthly report. As the quality of reporting can vary from firm to firm, consider the following three items in your evaluation:

1. Engines

Reports should always be based on the most popular engines, not the engines that the search engine optimization company has had success with. Be sure that the sample report includes only popular engines based upon current.

2. Recommendations

You don't want to pay a search engine optimization company merely to report on positions- you want to be sure that they are looking over your ranking performance on a monthly basis and are actively making the recommendations necessary to maintain and improve your positions. Be sure that the relationship contains monthly observations and recommendations specific to your site. Otherwise, you may be paying somebody to simply compile reports, not to promote the ongoing success of the campaign. Your SEO should offer an ongoing education and continual review of your rankings, traffic levels, visibility, and most importantly...conversion.

The Bottom Line

To most huge corporations, search engine optimization is often a very small piece of an enormous puzzle - and it is a piece they have been doing without for years. The necessary steps required to fully embrace the channel are often enough to stop any well-intentioned initiative in its tracks. As most search engine optimization experts will tell you, some of the most egregious search engine mistakes are consistently made by household name companies - leaving their smaller, leaner competitors the opportunity to take full advantage.

Conclusion

Some people are intimidated by web traffic statistics (mostly because of the sheer volume of data available), but they shouldn't be. While there are many highly specialized statistics that can be used for more in-depth web traffic analysis, the above areas alone can provide invaluable information on your visitors and your website performance. Remember- this data is like a tool and is made available for a reason, it's up to you to use it properly!