



Don't Obsess Over Absolute Numbers, **Focus on Trends**

By Bill Herron, Adaera



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One of the most challenging things about web analysis can be figuring out what to measure and what the numbers really mean. A number by itself doesn't really tell you much about the performance of your site. It's when you compare numbers and look for trends and changes that you can start to understand—and improve—the effectiveness of your site and your marketing campaigns.

UNDERSTANDING TRENDS

Are your numbers good? How do they compare to the past? Were there any external factors or one-time events that contributed to the counts? To get true insight into the performance of your web site, don't obsess over absolute numbers, e.g. there were X number of visitors and Y number of page views on this date. Rather, track the trend of these values over time. By looking at trends, you help eliminate these questions so you can effectively measure changes to your site or the success of your customer acquisition efforts.

Looking at trends over time means comparing traffic counts over a successive period of time frames: daily, weekly, monthly, etc. In addition, it means comparing traffic counts from like time frames: January of year one to January of year two, quarter four to quarter three, each Monday for the past three months, etc. By tracking over time and across similar time frames, you smooth out the data, reducing the impact of unique occurrences that could cause you to make incorrect decisions based upon extraneous factors, one-time events and seasonality.

ALMOST ALL OF YOUR ANALYSES CAN BENEFIT FROM LOOKING AT TRENDS RATHER THAN ABSOLUTE NUMBERS

Whether you're interested in the effectiveness of a new headline on your homepage, a marketing campaign you're running or a revamped navigation system, your

analysis will be most valuable if you measure the change rather than the absolute. If you told me that a new marketing campaign converted 5% of visitors, I'd wonder what your marketing campaigns usually convert. But if you told me that a new campaign resulted in a 40% increase in conversion over previous campaigns, I'd be impressed—and encourage you to figure out how to duplicate those results with your other campaigns.

CASE STUDY

During an analysis of a client's web site, we determined that the single access rate for the company's homepage (the number of times the homepage was the only page viewed compared to the total number of visits to the homepage) was 42%. This rate had remained relatively consistent for the three-month period we analyzed. Based upon the belief that this rate could be improved and significant savings achieved in customer acquisition costs, we proposed various changes to the homepage, such as reducing the size of the images used, reorganizing the center content area and modifying the navigation elements.

Before we got the go-ahead to make the changes, questions arose as to whether the 42% rate was good or bad. What was the industry average? What was an acceptable rate? Was the high rate due to a misaligned advertising campaign? We explained that their rate had been consistent so it was unlikely that the cause was an off-target advertising campaign. We also explained that there were no readily available industry averages specific to their market, but showed how a percentage decrease in the single access rate could significantly decrease their customer acquisition costs. In addition, we showed how the revenue from the potential increase in customers could far outweigh the costs of implementing the change.

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We received the go-ahead, made the changes and tracked the results. They were significant.

THE SINGLE ACCESS RATE FELL FROM AN AVERAGE OF 42% FOR THE THREE MONTHS PRIOR TO THE CHANGE TO AN AVERAGE OF 26% DURING THE TWO MONTHS AFTER THE CHANGE

Perhaps more importantly, their inquiries (how they measured customer acquisition) increased during this time. In analyzing the results, we were concerned during a spot check of a single day’s results that the rate had dramatically increased. Contacting the client, we found that their ad server was down on this day, thus preventing various images from displaying. These problems probably caused the spike in the single access rate. While this day’s rate affected the trend of the average rate, the affect was reduced as we tracked the trend of the single access rate over time.

TAKING TRENDING TO THE NEXT LEVEL

By looking at your web analysis in terms of percent of change, you’ll get a better sense of the effectiveness of your site and you’ll have the information you need to make decisions about what’s working and what’s not. In addition, you’ll start to recognize general patterns of activity so you can identify spikes immediately, and analyze them further.

As you begin looking at trends, consider not only reviewing base or summary numbers, such as visitors or page views, but variances in these counts, as well as ratios, such as the single access rate described above. In fact, most of the things you analyze (search engine visitors, exit ratios, buyers versus browsers, etc.) can be more effectively tracked by looking at the trends in these measures over time.

TO TAKE IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL, BEGIN NOTING EVENTS THAT CAUSE THE MEASURES TO FALL OUTSIDE OF THE NORMAL TREND

Was there a campaign that caused the measures to significantly outperform the trend and can this campaign be duplicated? Was there a problem that caused the measures to perform lower than the trend and can this issue be eliminated? Based upon the impact of the event, you can calculate the costs or benefits of duplicating or eliminating the issue, giving your company greater insight into the performance and optimization of your site and allowing you to make more astute business decisions.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bill Herron

Bill Herron is the President and Founder of Adaera. He began the company in September of 2002 because he saw a need for companies to move beyond the superficial web analytics that many had implemented and to gain true insight by expanding analytics across all their marketing and business endeavors.

Before founding Adaera, Bill held several technical and management positions with Peterson's and West Group, both part of the Thomson Corporation. While at Peterson's he was responsible for increasing qualified traffic to Peterson's and its partner's web sites and recommending actions to improve conversion rates based upon web analytics and usability best practices. Bill holds a B.S. in economics from Penn State University, is a member of the NetIQ Customer Advisory Board, is a certified e-commerce consultant and was featured in a case study based upon his work with Peterson's.

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FOCUSING ON WEB SITE TRENDS WITH WEBTRENDS REPORTING SERIES

Viewing trends is available by default in WebTrends Reporting Series. To view a measure over time, select the time frame (weekly, monthly, quarterly, etc) from the calendar in the left hand side of the report or by selecting Custom Date Mode.

To compare similar time slices, i.e. January of Year One to January of Year Two, select Comparative Mode from the button above the calendar.

Calculating Single Access Rate

To calculate the Single Access Rate as described in this report, use the formula:

Single Access Visits to Page X / Entry Page Visits to Page X

You can determine the number of Single Access Visits to the page you would like to analyze by going to Navigation > Single Access Visits in WebTrends Reporting Series. To find the URL you would like to analyze, use the "Search report for specific string" option within the report.

Divide the number of visits listed here by the number of visits to the page, where the page was used as an entry page, available in Navigation > Top Entry Pages.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about using web analytics to improve your web site, visit the WebTrends Resource Center:

www.netiq.com/webtrends/resourcecenters.asp

CONTACTS

Worldwide Headquarters

NetIQ Corporation
3553 North First Street • San Jose, CA 95134
713.548.1700
713.548.1771 fax
888.323.6768 sales
info@netiq.com
www.netiq.com

WebTrends Sales
1.888.932.8736 • info@webtrends.com
www.webtrends.com

NetIQ EMEA
+44 (0) 1784 454500 • info@netiq.com

NetIQ Japan
+81 3 5909 5400 • info-japan@netiq.com
www.netiq.com/japan

For our offices in Latin America & Asia Pacific,
please visit our web site at www.netiq.com/contacts