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'Web Analytics' No Longer Means Web Rage

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Ever have one of those moments of utter frustration? You don't know whether to pull your hair out, scream insanely, or just toss the monitor out the window. When something that should take just a couple of minutes takes hours and then underdelivers, we get like that. We're disinclined to repeat the activity that caused such frustration. But wait! There's some good news for former Web rage victims.

Many people (even some of you) stopped "analyzing" Web logs due to the amount of effort required to find actionable data. It's not unusual. We learn to avoid frustrating messes. Web analytic software was created by engineers (seemingly for engineers) to take the raw data your server stores in its logs and convert it into structured information in the form of reports and charts. Sounds promising, but if you've worked with these tools you know better.

Finally, things are changing.

On one level, it's amazing how many online businesses don't use Web metrics regularly. Only one in five companies even bothers to track customer behavior using analytics. Of those that do, according to Jupiter, 28 percent of site managers distribute reports — which are generally ignored.

The biggest value of the Web is you can measure and test everything. The downside? You can measure and test everything. You can even measure when there's nothing you can do with the information. There was a time when Web analytics companies competed on the number of reports they were able to generate. Skimming through those reports is just like browsing "War and Peace."

Gartner recently wrote: "It has long been said you cannot manage what you cannot measure. Nowhere is this more true than on the Web — where examining what works and what doesn't directly influences the bottom line."

Out of frustration, pain, and the need to please clients comes insight. We need to test, measure, and optimize clients' Web sites to improve conversion rates. We need a reliable and standardized way to measure visitor behavior on their sites. We developed a couple of dozen metrics based on the interrelationships of various reports.

There's a lack of business-oriented demand for clearly defined metrics and analysis because of poorly defined objectives. The responsibility of developing Web site traffic analysis fell to engineers. For them, it was important to know 78 percent of traffic is from Virginia (demographics or AOL servers?), that 88 percent of visitors use Windows 98, and hundreds of other reports that don't help us get cash. Again, a collision of marketing and technology.

Recently, we've started seeing companies offering analytics or data mining from the marketer's perspective. WebCriteria, Omniture, digiMine, SPSS, and WebTrends all bear looking in to. Last week, WebTrends Reporting Center 5.0 was released. It provides marketing reports to marketing people and engineering reports to engineering people. Neither group has to wade through the other's data to get information it needs to improve Web site performance. Is WebTrends's new tool perfect? No. But it is a huge step in the right direction.

I'll sum up with the words of former NYC mayor Rudy Giuliani from his speech last week at DMD New York. Asked by an audience member how he got crime under control, he replied the city set up the right tracking metrics and benchmarks. Giuliani said, "If you can't measure it, you can't manage it; and you can't manage it if you are not measuring it."

For direct marketers, that's common sense. You shouldn't have to choose between actionable metrics and a full head of hair. Let's be grateful we no longer have to.