

Measure Your Website

By Gregg Marshall

I've recently been asked to look at a couple of company's websites. The first thing I check, by looking at the home page sources, is whether they are doing any kind of analytics.

Analytics involves adding a little bit of code to each page of your website that lets you track how many people visit each page, how they get to your website, and if they come from a search engine, what keywords they searched on to find you. Measuring what is happening on your website is vital if you want to improve it.

The good news is website analytics is free. Yes I said it's free. Google offers a free website analytics service. All you need to do is go to google.com/analytics. That page will tell you more about the service and on the right side let you sign up using your Gmail email address (you can get one of those free too).

Google offers this extremely useful free service because they can collect additional information about web surfers' habits which lets them improve their service. Google is a very data driven company, often testing things as small as 1 pixel changes in the vertical spacing of search results. And Google's idea of a small test is several million data points.

You won't be getting several million data points. Many of the websites I have looked at (my own included) only get a few dozen visitors a day. But if you look at the data for a month, or even a year if you have a low traffic website, you can be looking at several hundred data points.

I recommend you set up your own Google Analytics account rather than let your web host or developer add your site to their account. My reasoning is the same as I've mentioned before. You don't want to have your ability to access your data controlled by someone else. Fortunately its easy.

Once you have signed up for Google Analytics (which involves logging in with your Gmail account and accepting the terms), you establish a new profile for your website, which really only asks for the website URL and what time zone you are in.

After you click on "create" you are given the tracking code you need to paste into each page of your website. Here's where using a content management system like Drupal or Wordpress makes it easy. With Drupal, you download the Google Analytics module, enable it and fill in the account number (it starts with a UA).

Most of you didn't create your own website, so clicking on the "Email these instructions" link on the page opens a box with the text of an email you can copy and paste into an email to your web developer to ask them to add the tracking code for you.

Then sit back and wait. Google Analytics works with a 24 hour delay so any data collected today won't appear in your reports until tomorrow. In reality, most sites don't get enough visitors that you'll see any useful reports for a week or two.

When you do have enough data to be useful, there are lots of interesting things to be learned from the basic report. For most people, the plot of how many visitors you get a day is most exciting. But wait, there's more! Take a look at the Bounce Rate. It is a percentage of people who visited your site, took one look and clicked the back button. If its high, you are getting people visiting who aren't interested in your products/services (I have that problem). Another interesting statistic is the average time someone spends on your site. If its 30 seconds, there's not much interest in your company. But if its 10 minutes, that's great!!!

The other two reports on the dashboard page I find interesting are the Content Overview (lower right corner) and the Traffic Sources Overview (lower left corner).

The Content Overview shows you the pages most visited on your site. Knowing what parts of your site are being visited the most tells you what your visitors are

most interested in, and where you should be spending more time developing additional content, or that you might have a navigation issue that is keeping people from finding the content you think is important.

The Traffic Sources Overview is mildly interesting in itself, but clicking on the view report link takes you to another page that shows you which search terms people are using to find your website. If you are like me, you may not know what terms people are using to find you (part of my problem is my business is really in several markets). The search terms report is a key when you start looking at Search Engine Optimization. Without a good list of search terms it is hard to optimize your site for the search engines.

I've just brushed on a small part of what you can do with Google Analytics. There are books written just about this useful free tool. By far the most important thing you can do today is get your account set up and start collecting data. Then you can explore GA's other features and, most importantly, know where your website traffic is coming from and what they are looking at.

Gregg Marshall, CPMR, CSP, is a speaker, author and consultant. He can be reached by e-mail at gmarshall@reconnection.com, or visit his website at <http://www.reconnection.com>.