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Website statistics - Explained in plain English!

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“So, how many visitors have I had at my website?”

“Is our website redesign pulling more traffic?”

“Are the search engines sending us any customers? If so, which engines and for what phrases?”

“I can see my web traffic statistics, but I have no idea how to ‘read’ them!”

If you’ve ever found yourself asking any of these questions, you’re not alone. After building a great website, one of the first things people start asking is ‘Ok, now what? What’s happening?’ It’s a fair set of questions, and we’re going to help with some common vocabulary and descriptions for all the terms you might encounter when looking at web traffic statistics.

First off, in order to track visitor usage patterns on your website, please don’t use one of those external counter things (‘hosted by some other company!’) since they slow down your website load times, and can leave you with an ugly red box (or a broken page) if they don’t load properly. Plus, why reveal your visitor count to the world? That’s for your eyes only.

In fact, you don’t need any external counters – your web server (the computer that ‘serves’ your website to the world when people click on your pages) keeps track of a lot of details for every visit of every page of your website. This information is very hard to interpret in its raw form (lots and lots of numbers and special codes). But that’s server talk, and we don’t speak ‘server’ – so we rely on software to massage and collect all that information into reports we mere humans can understand. A great website host will provide you with a link to these human-readable reports as part of their hosting package. Make sure you have a great host for your great website! (hint hint)

So once you have access to these reports, what are they telling you? In short, they provide a lot of information, some of it quite valuable, and some of it completely ignorable.

The goal here is to explain what’s important, what you can ignore, and what value these statistics can provide to you as a website owner.



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To get started, let's provide a few definitions of common terms you'll see on a typical traffic analysis page:

Hits

This is the smallest measurable unit of action in the world of web statistics. It's also the most overrated and confused, and actually can be ignored.

A hit is any request by a web browser (the software used to see websites) for any piece of your website. For example, if your home page has 5 graphics on it, plus 3 other extra files, anyone visiting your home page would cause 9 hits to be cataloged (one for the page itself, and another 8 for all the assets and pieces of that page).

So a website with many graphics on any page could register thousands of 'hits' a day, while the same website redone with just a handful of graphics might show a lower 'hit rate'.

In short, ignore this – there's no value to you.

Files

The next step up from a hit is a call for a file. Most of the time this is one and the same (a request for a file, like a photo, or logo, or an acrobat document) causes both a hit request and a file request to be logged. Sometimes, a hit is for a non-file item, (and we'll avoid that level of detail for another day, just trust me on this), so 'hits' is usually a larger value than 'files'. But both are equally worthless in determining traffic patterns and usage, so again, feel free to ignore.

Pages (a.k.a. Page Views)

Ah, now we're getting somewhere!

A page request (or page view) is a call to the server for a specific page on your website. Your home page is one page, your about us is another, and each of your product pages all count as separate pages. This is great information to know, because now you can see how many pages people are looking at over time. More importantly, most online traffic viewers will show popular pages (most requested) from highest to lowest number of requests. This tells you what sections of your website are most trafficked, and what areas might need to be worked on (better content, more exposure in the menu or from other popular pages).



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By looking at page popularity, you can focus in on what works and what doesn't for your visitors (they vote with every visit!). From there, you can improve (or drop) the underperformers, and increase your return on investment.

Are the popular pages trumpeting your special offers, or linking to other areas you want people to know about? Are your underperformers in need of fresh new content?

Entry / Exit Pages

Now that we know what a page is, and can see the top-visited pages, another area to look at is entry and exit pages. If you had an actual, physical building that represented your business, this would similar to the first (and last) product someone looked at when they arrived (and left) your store.

Popular entry pages are good to know, since you can tailor your message or specials or content for the people just arriving to your website, while exit pages can be reviewed for bad performance, or as the end-journey on typical visits, and again, your special offer can be reiterated on popular exit pages (one last chance before they leave to get them to take action on your website).

Visitors (Unique and Repeat), (a.k.a. Sites)

Every web browser that visits your website comes with a unique identifier, known as an IP address. We'll skip the complexities of what that means, but they look something like this: 192.168.34.5 (four sets of three numbers from 0 to 256).

Some visitors have static IP addresses (they remain the same across all visits), while others are assigned IP addresses from a pool that their service provider has when that visitor logs into the internet (EX: AOL and other ISPs do this for their members). So the same AOL member could visit your site 5 times in a week, and each time would look like a different person, since their IP address is probably different. Conversely, people browsing from their office probably all share a common IP address (their connection to the internet, or Site), so they all look like the *same* visitor to you.

(sigh)

But that's OK – we're looking for trends, not pinpoint accuracy. We want to see that the overall visitor count is rising over time, and hopefully that corresponds with an increase in revenues from your website.



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Referrers (a.k.a. Referring Sites)

Referring sites are those that send you traffic. Most of the time, it's your own website (when someone clicks from one page to another within your site). The rest are from other sites that have your website link as part of their pages – usually a search engine, or perhaps a website you traded a link with, or one that linked to you because they liked your content or a specific page.

Links from other *quality* sites (especially the search engines) are quite valuable and great for traffic, since they're a recommendation or 'personal referral' from the website they came from. And search engine traffic is always appreciated.

Search Strings

When a web visitor uses a search engine (like Google or Yahoo) to find your website, they type in a phrase ('great web sites') that reflects what they are looking for. If the search engine matches a page in your website to the entered phrase, you show up on the search engine results page. If the visitor then clicks on that link, and winds up on your website, the traffic reporter will show that visit as coming from the search engine (the referrer) and the Search String will be the phrase they typed to find you.

This is very valuable information to know, since it shows you a few different things:

- what are people using to find you (which might be very different from how you view your own website content).
- how search engines have indexed your website.

You might be surprised at what search strings appear in your results, since you might not have optimized for those terms in your content. Or conversely, content you did optimize for does not show up, since people are not using the phrases you think would work. And search engines only index on the content they can see, so if you want to be found under a given search string, but never mention that string in your content, keep dreaming!

Browsers, and Operating Systems (a.k.a User Agents)

A few other more 'techie' statistics are what browsers (Mozilla, Firefox, Internet Explorer, Opera, many others) people are using to view your website, and what operating system they have installed (Windows, Mac, Linux). Only the hard-core techies really worry about these values but it's a good idea to eyeball them once in a while, to make sure your website looks great in the more popular browsers (Internet Explorer commands a large percentage, but others are growing market share every day) coming your way.



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Also, here is where you can see which search engine spiders (the software agents that visit your website and index your content) are visiting, and how often. Good to know.

In Summary:

There's a lot to look at, and a lot of terms to consider. But don't let it all overwhelm you – once you understand the terms above (print this out as a handy guide) and review your statistics on a weekly basis, it soon becomes easy to eyeball the report and spot the trends.

- What sections are popular, or not? Can we fix the underperformers?
- What search engine terms are people using to find us? Is that what we expect?
- Is our traffic coming from other websites, or search results, or directly entered in the address bar?
- Is our traffic trending upward or downward? How does that correspond with revenues (or follow-up calls for more information) over the same time period?