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Make the Numbers *Work*

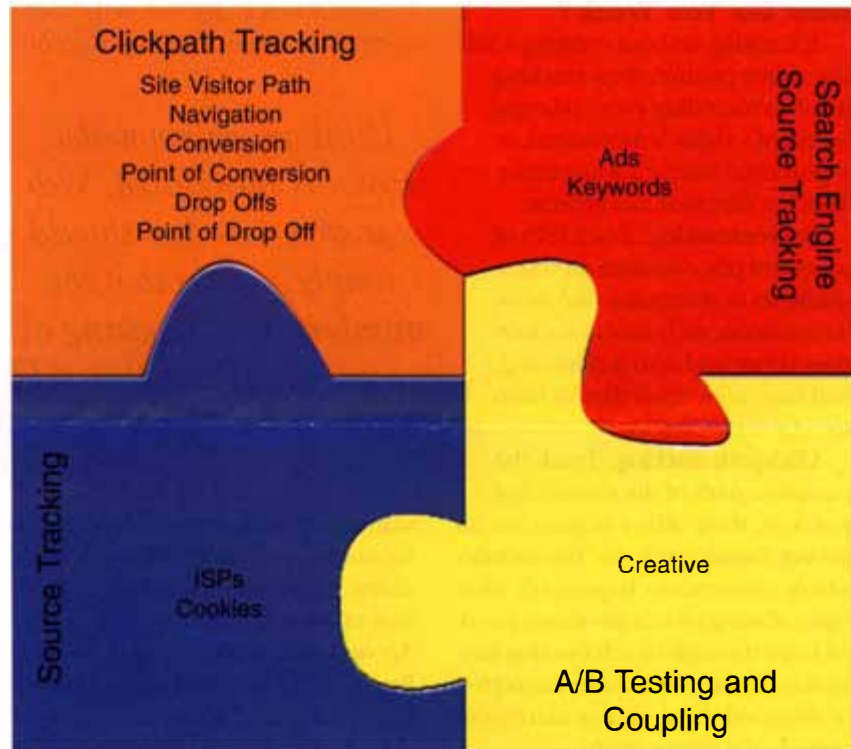
AN INTRODUCTION TO INTERNET METRICS TRACKING

No matter what you want your online presence to do for your business, you won't know if it's doing its job unless you look at the numbers. Without numbers, you're dealing in guesswork. In a best-case scenario, guesswork leaves out the information you need to get the most mileage out of your online presence. Worst case, it means pumping money into an inefficient online campaign.

Here are some of the methodologies used to create the best tracking system, an explanation of how tracking works in the online world today, and examples of some of the problems businesses face when tracking online metrics.

What Do You Track?

Your site is built around conversions. A conversion is the thing you want your site to accomplish for you, such as delivering leads, generating phone calls, driving offline store visits, or anything else. Usually, it will be built around one central conversion or conversion group, such as shopping cart checkout, and possibly several less important conversions, such as signing up for a mailer. If you're running an online magazine, your central conversion might be creating paid subscriptions; a secondary conversion might be using the "e-mail this article to a friend" option. Put most broadly, your conversion goals are



Source tracking, clickpath tracking, search engine source tracking, and A/B testing and coupling are the four essential components of a successful online metrics tracking strategy. These pieces of the puzzle combine to give you a deep understanding of visitor movements within your site.

the answer to the question, "What is my site *for*?"

Your conversion rate—the ratio of the number of conversions to the number of times visitors interact with your site—is what tells you how successful your Web presence is. A high conversion rate means a well-functioning site; a poor conversion rate means your site needs to be improved, or in extreme cases, entirely reworked.

Every visitor comes to your site from a different place, at a slightly different time of day, from a different

source, and takes her own path through your site to arrive at a conversion. When you add up all the factors that lead to a conversion, that number could be in the millions—and each factor is important in its own way. To keep track of all of these factors, the success or failure of each step along the way needs to be measured. That means starting with your Web site's offsite "sphere." This includes:

➤ search engine keywords you're targeting through paid search and

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search engine optimization efforts;

- sites that link to you;
- banner ads placed on other sites;
- all the way through the actions site visitors take.

Finally, there's the connection between points—how visitors proceed from one step to the next. If visitors come through search engine ads, are they satisfied with the landing page? If they put items in their shopping cart, do they proceed to checkout? Metrics tracking will tell you.

How Do You Track?

If tracking is about creating a full-site visitor picture, then tracking involves recording every relevant aspect of a visitor's movement, or a potential visitor's movement. This involves four key aspects:

Source tracking. Track ISPs of users and place cookies on visitor machines to determine vital visitor information, such as who is a first-time visitor and who is returning, and how many times they've been to your site.

Clickpath tracking. Track the complete path of site visitors, not just from their offsite origins, but all the way through your site. This includes where conversions happened; what types of navigation a site visitor needed to go through to achieve that navigation; where a site visitor converted or dropped off; and how many conversions the visitor made.

Search engine source tracking. Track the keyword(s), and in the case of paid search, the ad that led the visitor to your site. This is similar to standard source tracking. When running a search engine marketing campaign, it isn't enough to know from which Web site visitors came to your site; you need to know which keywords are most effective at driving Web traffic.

A/B testing and coupling. Test which elements of your online creative, and which combinations of those elements, work the best using A/B testing. Here, metrics tracking helps determine which options work best, which need to be reworked, and

which need to be dropped entirely.

Meanwhile, rather than testing one variable, coupling tests the effectiveness of an entire conversion clickpath, or a large part of a clickpath. On-site, for example, A/B testing might mean getting the best homepage, product page, and checkout page out of all your options; coupling would determine the best homepage/product page/checkout page combination.

The Pitfalls

Metrics tracking comes with two major challenges, one technical, one creative. Cookie deletion is the technical issue. Because of growing con-

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sumer fears of privacy violations, an increasing number of computer users delete their cookies regularly, regardless of who the cookies are from. According to a 2005 study by Jupiter Research, "Measuring Unique Visitors: Addressing the Dramatic Decline in the Accuracy of Cookie-Based Measurement," close to 40 percent of all Internet users delete their cookies monthly. This threatens to seriously skew metrics tracking results, as cookies traditionally have been used to answer basic questions such as, "Is my visitor a repeat visitor?"—not to mention more complex questions such as, "What has this visitor done on my site before?" and, "What kinds of things would this visitor like to see?" A number of solutions to this problem are being implemented, such as relying more heavily on records of visitor ISPs rather than on cookies placed on computers.

One technical solution many marketers have turned to is flash-based

cookies (as opposed to HTML-based). Flash-based cookies are much harder to remove. However, some metrics recording experts suggest that until the unremovable cookie is introduced, Web statistics recorders should simply assume that the numbers they're looking at are too small, and that trackers should add and multiply accordingly.

On the creative side, the danger is leaving nothing to human creativity. Metrics can tell you what works and what doesn't, but there are certain elements of the picture that might best be left a mystery. In other words, rely too heavily on the numbers and not enough on your instincts, and you could be missing out on opportunities to hit site visitors at gut-level. On the other hand, leaving too much untracked could lead to poor results. For instance, if you can't see how many visitors go to your shopping cart, you don't know how well your online store is doing.

The challenge now, and what will be an increasing problem as the capabilities of tracking systems continue to grow, is creating campaigns that balance eye-catching, heart-stopping creative, but at the same time can be tested and *are* tested to make the best conversions and the biggest contribution to the bottom line.

Creating the best solution for a campaign, whether your own or a client's, means relying on metrics tracking throughout the search marketing process. Which keywords you bid on lead to conversions, and which don't? Which ads are drawing visitors to the site, and which are getting ignored—or are attracting visitors who won't convert well? Which landing page works best for which ads? There's only one way to answer any of these questions: You need to get the numbers. And to get the right numbers, you need to track. ♦

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