Web & Social Media Analytics

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Having first worked in the advertising and marketing sectors in the 1980s, I've seen some major changes in the ways that advertisers can monitor what is going on with their marketing campaigns. Perhaps the greatest change, apart from the sheer volume of data now available, is the way that all of us who use the Internet to promote our organisations, ourselves or just to share information with friends and colleagues, can track the impact of our activities. This column aims to introduce eLucidate readers to some of the tools, techniques and services available to help us understand the effectiveness of our online activities and, hopefully, improve them. In a world where any individual or organisation can have a website or a social media profile it is important to be able to measure levels of activity on those platforms. As the saying goes, "what can't be measured can't be managed".

This issue's article is an introduction to web and social media analytics and in future columns I'll look more closely at specific tools and services which you may wish to use to measure the effectiveness of your online communications.

Let's start with web analytics

If you are responsible for your organisation's or department's website then you should be using some form of analytics tracking software to measure who is visiting the site and what they are looking at. If you or your organisation have a public-facing website then its purpose is to promote something or, at the very least, engage with a target audience at some level. There are some basic things you need to know if you wish to evaluate the effectiveness of your site:

- How many unique individuals are looking at your web pages for any given time period?
- Geographically, where do these individuals come from?
- Which pages of your website are the most popular?
- How long are people spending on your site?
- What are the most popular landing pages and exit pages on your site?
- Which other sites are referring visitors to your site?
- How much traffic to your site is coming from search engines?

When you can answer the above questions then you're well on the way to understanding the dynamics of your site and can begin to then think about improvements or changes that need to be made. For example, if most of your visitors are coming from outside the UK but

your target audience is UK-based then that is something to look at. Similarly, if most visitors are entering your site via a single page but then leaving the site within a few seconds and not looking at any other pages then there may be a problem with your content or layout. Or you may just find that only several people a week are looking at your web pages, a fairly common and dispiriting problem for many people when they first start looking at their analytics. I've helped a number of small companies over the years with their websites and a common misconception is their assumption that their website visitors will start on their homepage and then navigate their way around the site from there. However, the reality is that visitors to most sites will be referred from a search engine, which will point them to the page that most closely matches their search terms and is not usually the home page.

So how do you access this data? There are two key methods: web server log files and/or page tagging services such as Google Analytics. Depending on where and by whom your site is being hosted you may have access to the raw web server log files which are generated by the requests from other web servers passing traffic over to you. These log files can be analysed using a number of software packages including AWStats and Urchin, which will summarise the data in tabular and graphical formats. Page tagging services offer a similar function but rely on JavaScript installed on each web page to be tracked and cookies. Google Analytics is the most widely used page tagging service and offers detailed statistics via its web interface. Like AWStats and Urchin, Google Analytics is free. Both types of service have their strengths and weaknesses and will, by the nature of the way they collect data, present different numbers for the same metrics. However, for the average user either approach is sufficient. For the websites I manage, I use both methods as it gives me more flexibility to drill down on specific metrics. In a future column I will go into more detail on how to interpret the data these tools give you.

Now let's look briefly at social media analytics

If you only use social media services such as Facebook and Twitter for personal communications then you're probably not very interested in measuring the impact of your posts and tweets. Likes and comments on Facebook posts are a ready indicator of whether anyone is interested in what you are uploading. However, if you are posting on behalf of an organisation then you need to know whether your time is being well spent. As the volume of information posted and shared across social media increases it is becoming ever harder to be noticed. Several years ago it was relatively easy to use Facebook and Twitter to effectively promote your products and services but the "noise" in the system and the filters introduced by the platform owners have made this more difficult. Facebook now filters the News Feeds of its users and gives priority to updates from friends and family rather than corporate posts. This is partly a result of information overload in many people's feeds but also to encourage marketers to pay for sponsored posts rather than being able to put their promotional messages in front of people without paying Facebook. Corporate users of Twitter are also finding that for their posts to become visible in user's crowded Twitter streams they need to pay for sponsored tweets.

The good news for social media users is that all the platforms provide analytics data to help users understand the levels of engagements their posts are achieving. Twitter Analytics, for example, was made available to all users in August and allows you to see

how many people have actually seen your tweets and levels of engagement in terms of clicks on embedded links, retweets etc. What may surprise many people is how few tweets are actually ever seen and how even fewer are clicked on. The half-life of a tweet is estimated to be about 20 minutes so unless someone has seen it by then it is increasingly unlikely to ever be looked at. Unless you have a particularly loyal following most of what you tweet will never be looked at. There are also third party services such as Followerwonk and Klout which provide data on the "social authority" of Twitter accounts based on their followers and who is sharing their content. While it is possible to buy Twitter followers and Facebook likes by the thousand, and some misguided and unethical marketers do, it is becoming easier to measure who has genuine followers and, as a consequence, who is worth following. I will explain what these tools can tell us in greater detail in a later article.

The bottom line is, as many digital marketers are finding out, that unless you are sharing information of value to others then you are probably wasting your time. Mark Schaefer, an authority on these matters, has written about what he calls "content shock" whereby the tsunami of digital content, much of it low quality, threatens to overwhelm many web and social media users. Posting relevant, timely and original information has to be at the core of what you do online whether your target audience is only a few hundred people or in the millions. Luckily, once you have created this information there are tools and techniques to help you track what happens to it once you have released it into the wild. I am looking forward to writing about these matters in the coming months.

Useful Links

Followerwonk - use this web tool to search for Twitter users that share your interests and analyse the activities and followers of accounts that interest you.

Google Analytics - find out more about the capabilities of GA and how to install in on your website. If you use a content management system such as Wordpress then installing it is very easy and can be done in a few minutes.

Google Webmaster Tools - if you manage a website then you should be using Webmaster Tools. Once you have registered and authenticated your site you can check it is being indexed by Google correctly, see what other sites are linking to your site (this is a more accurate list than many other link checkers) and a raft of other useful checks and tests.

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