

Log Analysis

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A completed website that is listed in search engines, hosted on a reliable server, and ready for action is a great thing. It holds nothing but promise and potential for greatness.

I remember looking at the first version of auctiontrainer.com with pride. Eventually, however, that pride turned to worry. Why? Because questions started to arise.

- *Did we do something wrong that was turning customers away?
- *How many people were viewing the site versus those buying something?
- *What could we change to improve our sales?

I found out that these questions, and more, can be answered by analyzing the log files kept by most web servers and hosts. You may or may not have access to these files, depending upon your host's setup. You can usually access them through FTP.

If you do not have access to your log files because of your current host's restrictions or setup, then you have the alternative of setting up a "free" tracking service. Be careful, though, as the statistics shown there can usually be viewed by anyone and are not always as in-depth or accurate as they could be. Plus they usually involve adding a new button or logo to your website to advertise for the free service provider.

If you have access to your raw logs, you can use software which will analyze these log files for you and give you a breakdown of statistics for the site. These programs are not always cheap. Generally, you get what you pay for. I have the advantage of having Aaron around to ask these sorts of questions to. He says he's tried several "free" or very inexpensive ones and found them all to be lacking in some way or another. Having done that, he has found the software that does the job efficiently and very well. It's called "Open Web Scope" and can be found by going to: <http://openwebscope.com/Default.asp?vid=258>

As a quick run-down of what can be seen in your Web logs and the power they will give you, here are a few basic features of most web log analysis:

"Unique Visitors"

This is the number of visitors which have accessed the website each day, week, and/or month (depending on your software). This tells you how many visitors have accessed your site and does not include people who visited more than once during the time period measured. This is an important number and, by itself, is enough to set you on fire as you begin seeing how many visitors

versus sales you're making. Most logs measure unique visitors per day by default.

“Hits” & “Unique Hits”

This term should not be confused with “Unique Visitors” (above). “Hits” are a measure of how often something has been accessed, regardless of who accessed it when. So someone accessing your site several times a day will be counted each time they access each file and page of your site (a page could include fifteen or more images, all counted as hits!). Similarly, a “Unique Hits” measurement records the same number, but only once per visitor per time period (see “Unique Visitors” above). These numbers are nearly useless except as a basic measure of your site's activity. If you are worried about page loading times, however, this number for each page can tell you where you could possibly optimize to limit the number of “hits” per page (the more hits, the longer it takes for the page to load).

“Referring Sites” or “Referral URLs”

This is a great piece of information. Some logs give the last ten while others track all of them. The best ones give you the top ten followed by a complete list. The top ten are, of course, of main interest because these are the sites or IP addresses (if they cannot be resolved to a website address) that refer to your site most often. Usually they will be search engines, affiliate sites, or similar places. Most of these links refer directly to the web page the users were sent from so you can visit them yourself. Additionally, this will give you an idea of the keywords being used to access your site.

“Errors Reported”

This is another great tool for site optimization. These errors are usually nondescript and mean nothing to you – especially server-type errors such as “Cached reload” or similar. However, if you notice a lot of “Page Not Found” or “404” errors listed, you may need to double-check your site's links as something may be wrong!

“Days of the Week”

This is another useful tidbit of information as it tells you when your site is accessed most often. It usually includes the time of day as well. This also tells you the best day for updates (the day before the most popular day, obviously) and the best day to include incentives or promotions on your site.

These simple tools and bits of information are the basics of what you need to analyze your website's statistics and really begin focusing your marketing efforts towards realizing higher profits for you and a better user experience for your site visitors.

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