

How to Analyze Your Web Site Traffic (Part 2)

By Herman Drost

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(Part 2 of a 3 Part Series)
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In Part 1 of this series, we discussed the the different terms used to describe web site traffic language.

Ways to Track Your Visitors

1. Counters – these are heavily used on web sites by newbies but appear unprofessional. It is very common to go to a page and see something like "You are visitor number 12345 to this page". These numbers cannot be trusted as the page designer has the ability to seed the base number or to alter the counter such that it adds more than 1 each time.

2. Trackers – tracking software details the path a visitor takes through your Website, so they do more than just count your traffic: they track it. Tracking software tells you more than just the number of visitors -- it can break visitor statistics down by date, time, browser, page viewed, referrer, and countless other values.

Examples:

Hitbox (<http://www.hitbox.com>)

Sitemeter (<http://www.sitemeter.com>)

Extreme-DM (<http://www.extreme-dm.com>)

Counters and Trackers often require you to place a button or graphic on your site in exchange for the free use of their service, which is not ideal for most site owners. So try to avoid using these services unless you don't have the ability or expertise to execute tracking scripts of any kind on your own server.

3. Using Your ISP's Statistical Package

Your Internet Service Provider (ISP) keeps log files which record

every single "hit" (request for a Web page or graphic) on your Web site.

Analyzing log data can give you a good idea of where your site visitors are coming from, which pages they are visiting, how long they stay, and which browsers they are using. Before signing on with a hosting company, make sure they offer access to raw log files. Even if you don't need them immediately, sooner or later you'll be glad to have them.

There are also different types of log files - access, referrer, error, and agent are the primary ones.

Here is a sample of a raw access log file entry:

Access log

Analyzing the access log will give you information about who visited your site, which pages they visited, and how long they stayed on the site. This is useful information in determining whether or not your site is working as you intend.

The record below shows the visitor's IP number or hostname, date and time of the request, the command received from the client, the status code returned, the size of the document transferred, and the browser and operating system the visitor was using.

```
nas-112-52.slc.navinet.net - - [29/Jan/2000:17:17:12 -0500] "GET
page.html HTTP/1.1" 200 23443
"http://www.mydomain.com/page.html" "Mozilla/4.0 (compatible;
MSIE 5.01; Windows 98)"
```

Referer Log

The referrer log contains referral information - the source that referred the visitor to your site. If the referrer was a search engine, you will also find the keywords that were entered to find your site - very useful information. Here are some example records. The record below shows that the visitor followed a link from somedomain.com to the index page of the site.

<http://www.somedomain.com/page.html> - /

This record shows that the visitor came to my site from a search engine link. Notice the keyword data is included in the record.

<http://search.yahoo.com/bin/search?p=design+tips> - /

Agent Log

This log provides information on which browser and operating system was used to access your site.

```
Mozilla/4.0 (compatible;MSIE 5.01; Windows 98)
```

Error Log

The error log obviously provides a record of errors generated

by the server and sent back to the client. The record below shows the type of server, date and time of the error, client identification, explanation of the error code generated by the server, and the path to the file that caused the error.

```
apache: [Sun Jan 30 10:09:57 2000][error] [client 195.238.2.162]
File does not exist:/u/web/mydomain/favicon.ico
```

As you can see, log files contain a wealth of information about how your visitors are using your site. Now we will talk about how you get the relevant data extracted from the log files and compiled into a useable format.

In Part 3 of this article series, we'll discuss Web Traffic Analysis Software.

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