

By the Numbers: Measuring Your Online Marketing Success

By Kevin Richardson

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Kevin Richardson
krichardson@medrocket.com

MedRocket <http://www.medrocket.com>

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By Kevin P. Richardson
Healthcare Marketing Consultant
President, MedRocket, Inc.

"Publish or perish" has long been the mantra for academic professionals. Either they published original work in scholarly journals, or their tenure at the university was short-lived.

With a little twist, perhaps the battle cry for Internet marketing professionals should be: "Measure or perish." After all, there's just too much at stake to leave metrics out of the online marketing equation.

Measurement gives you knowledge and control. It lets you benchmark your efforts and test new approaches. In short, it improves your marketing and helps you make more money.

This article covers only the tip of the iceberg of the possible ways to measure your online marketing efforts. Try a few and then improve upon them.

Measurement and Metrics and Logs, Oh, My!

A key resource for gathering measurement data is probably already in place on your Web site. It's your good old server log.

But beware -- don't develop a false sense of accomplishment just because your server is gathering "data." It's what you do with it that counts.

Become familiar with your log files. Find out what type of log analysis software you have available and learn how to use it.

The Key Three: Objective, Metric, and Method

You start by evaluating your online marketing objectives. Accompanying the objective, you'll also need to define the "metric" and the "method" to track and access the metric data.

For example, say you have an objective to "sell X amount of a specific product online" during some defined period.

Then you might set the "standard of measure" or metric as the dollar volume of online sales of that product. The method that you'll use to track this could be financial data from the shopping cart program you are using on your Web site.

Add these three things to your online marketing plan for each initiative. It can be as simple as:

Objective:

Sell X amount of ABC product online during Z period

Metric:

Dollar volume of online sales of ABC product

Method:

Track the sales volume of ABC through the Shopping Cart Application on your Web site

Teaching the New Dog Old Tricks

Traditional direct marketing often uses source codes or key codes to track the effectiveness of different offers or mail packages.

You've probably seen these small printed codes in the corner of the business reply card or envelope that are used to track the source of the response. Similarly, unique toll-free numbers are used and the calls are then tracked.

We can use the very same technique with online marketing campaigns by key coding the responses to particular offers, emails, and hyperlinks to be able to log and measure their click-throughs or hits in a meaningful way.

Suppose we create two different versions of an email-driven offer, both with the same subject line. We want to see which version has a higher click-through rate.

You might create a key code type arrangement by linking to

different Web pages in each of the email versions. Such as:

http://www.yourserver.com/heart_offer.html

and

http://www.yourserver.com/cardiac_offer.html

You'll notice that I didn't name the pages "heart_offer1.html" and "heart_offer2.html". The reason for this is human nature. If people click on a link to "heart_offer1.html", their curiosity may drive them to try out other variations of the name using different numbers.

These random page hits will skew the results in your log. Make the names different and not part of any recognizable series.

Other Flavors of Key Codes

There are many ways to use the key code concept to track click-throughs. Another is to append a key code to the end of a URL. This sounds weird, I know. Here's what it would look like:

http://www.yourserver.com/heart_offer.html?123SRE233

and

http://www.yourserver.com/heart_offer.html?456SRE878

Here we'd only have a single target HTML page on the Web site (unlike the two we used above). We've differentiated the links in each of the email versions by appending a question mark and a unique key code -- e.g., "?123SRE233".

When the user clicks on the link, your Web server will log the entire Web address including the key code. Again, this helps you to track the URLs by analyzing the logs.

The question mark and the information that follows are referred to as a query string. Servers will ignore the query string unless it is being passed to a CGI application.

10 Methods to Track Common Metrics

1.) Click Rates?

Measure click rates for email using the unique URL or key code methods previously described. Banners and other links on your site that relate to a marketing effort can similarly be tagged with key codes to track their click-throughs. The number of click-throughs refers to the amount of people who clicked on a link sending them to a page on your Web site.

2.) Visitor opinion of program or service?

If your objective is to increase visitor opinion of an online service or product, then the best way to determine this is -- no surprise -- ask them. Survey your visitors via a request sent by email and offer an incentive for their participation.

You could also set up a feedback form or private poll type application on your Web site that asks a few targeted questions and stores the data for later analysis.

3.) Amount of information downloaded, requested, or viewed?

You're offering information on your Web site and want to track how much has been transferred into the hands of your visitors. Of course, you won't really be able to determine if they actually "read" the material, only if the transfer occurred.

To track these things, you can analyze the server logs for an ordered ranking of your content pages. Besides page views, the log can also tell how long visitors stay on your site.

CGI programs can be implemented to track downloads of Adobe PDF files or other documents. These programs can either just keep track of the number of downloads for a particular document or request the visitor's email address and use it to send them the file as an email attachment.

4.) Increased Leads?

Track increased leads through the use of lead generation forms on your Web site that log requests to a prospect database and send emails to the correct contact points in your organization for quick follow-up.

Some leads may come in by telephone, other email addresses, and personal contacts. When leads come in through other channels, make it a point to determine how the prospect heard about your services or products. Enter this information into the prospect database.

5.) Increased Referrals from Specific Sites?

Perhaps you have been working to increase your exposure and Web traffic from certain sites through sponsorships, banner advertising, or placing your content on other sites. You can track increases in this type of traffic by examining and analyzing your Web server's referrer logs.

If the visitor came from a search engine or directory, generally you can also tell which search terms the visitor used to locate your site. This can help to improve the use of your metatags embedded in your HTML pages.

6.) Repeat visits?

Measuring repeat visits from previous site users can be tricky. The two methods that are commonly used are cookies, and User IDs and passwords to allow access. Both have their drawbacks.

Most people don't mind cookies, since Web surfers now have a better understanding of what cookies can and can't do. Still, some people refuse to accept cookies. Cookies can record the last time a visitor used your site, as well as some of the information areas they visited.

User IDs and passwords are quite common. The downside is that people tend to forget their login information and restricting access doesn't do a lot for you marketing-wise, unless we are talking about a subscription site.

7.) How many people opened your promotional email?

"Danger, Will Robinson, danger!" Determining how many people actually opened your email can be done in several ways, but the tradeoff for invasion of privacy really doesn't justify its use in my book. You also don't know, of course, if they actually read the message, just that they opened it. I don't advocate this technique, but I want you to be aware of its use, so I'm going to explain one way to do it.

One simple way of tracking when a message is opened -- at least for HTML-enabled email readers -- is to include a very tiny one-pixel by one-pixel transparent GIF graphic in the body of the message. These are known as "web bugs" -- referring to a tiny eavesdropping device on a Web page or in an HTML email.

When the message is opened, the mail reader goes out and grabs the tiny GIF file from your server so it can be displayed in the message window. When the server delivers the tiny GIF, it records the transaction to the server logs.

8.) How many people requested information by email?

You can track how many people requested information by email by using autoresponders -- special email addresses that automatically send email back to someone who uses the address.

The autoresponder can return text information, links to other areas of your Web site, and really anything you'd put in an email. The best part is that it happens automatically and you can track how many times email is sent in various ways depending upon your Web server.

Actually, email requests sent to any marketing-related email address, autoresponder or not, can and should be tracked for future analysis.

9.) What's the effect of online PR?

There are a few ways to measure the effects of your online PR efforts. Quantitatively, you might measure the return on your PR by the number of placement "hits" you get at the online media publications and news sites you're pitching. Sometimes the offline version of the outlet picks up these online news and features, as well.

Well, measuring your PR hits online is similar to doing it offline. You can measure raw "hits," and also evaluate each pick-up for its relative value in terms of communicating your key message points, organization and site mentions, the type of hit -- quick mention, new product blurb, in-depth interview, pro versus con, etc.

The online channel gives you additional means to also measure the qualitative value of PR. You should be monitoring your site's own online forums, as well as UseNet news groups, ListServes, and forums hosted by other sites for mentions of your organization, products, and services.

10.) How many people bookmarked your site?

Microsoft has added a feature to their Internet Explorer 5 Web browser that allows web sites to customize the icons that are displayed next to their Web site addresses in the Favorites menu and on the toolbar.

If you weren't aware of this, and if you regularly check your log files then you may have noticed entries for a nonexistent file called "favicon.ico" that shows up as a "404 error -- file not found" in your log file.

The number of times the favicon.ico file is requested represents the number of times that someone bookmarked a page on your site. You can analyze your server logs to discover which pages are being bookmarked, how often, and which areas of your site are deemed most worthy of remembering for a return visit.

It's a pretty neat feature that should show up in the next version of the Netscape browser if we're lucky. You can easily add a favorites icon for your own Web site.

Kevin Richardson is a healthcare marketing consultant, executive coach, and writer who provides fresh perspectives and expertise about online healthcare marketing. Subscribe to his "MedRocket Ezine" newsletter and discover how to profitably attract and serve healthcare consumers online. Subscribe free: <http://www.medrocket.com>

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