

# Mining for Gold . . . In Your Web Traffic Logs

By Philippa Gamse

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Understanding your Web site's traffic patterns is a crucial component of your marketing mix. The information in these logs is collected as visitors find and move around your site at their own volition. So, it's "market research that cannot lie" - and therefore provides unprecedented insights that can help you to strategize not only for the future development of the site itself, but also for your overall business and marketing plan.

I'll describe the most important sections of the log report when analyzing your site's marketing effectiveness. Often, deciding what's right and what's a problem is a gut feel that you'll develop by looking at your log reports over a period of weeks or months, by trying some new tactics, and observing the trends and results.

## General Statistics

This introductory section shows the overall traffic to the site, including the number of actual visitors, as opposed to "hits". This is an important distinction - one hit is generated for every page and every individual image that a visitor requests (e.g. a page with some text and five pictures will take six hits to download). So, the ratio of hits to individual visitors can be quite high.

By the way, it's also important for you to appreciate this distinction if you are selling advertising space on your site. You may be asked by a potential advertiser to prove your traffic levels, and if you happily say "millions of hits", they may look suspicious!

This section also shows the average time spent on the site, which should give some indication as to how engaging it is. If your site is rich in content, but the time spent on it is relatively low, it may not be meeting the needs of the visitors it is attracting, or it may be targeted at the wrong audience.

I had a client who earlier this year placed #1 in some major search engines. He was ecstatic! But his site had not been worked on for some time, and was very dry and boring. We discovered from his logs that the average time spent on his site was less than two minutes - obviously indicating a problem. And to make my point again, without this evidence from the logs, he would have continued to believe that his site was successful.

## Most and Least Requested Pages

The most requested pages are a great barometer of the "hot" areas of your site, and thus the most popular aspects of your online products or services. These may be different from your original

expectations, and so this information can be very valuable for overall business development decisions.

If the least requested pages (i.e. the ones that attract the fewest visitors) contain important content, then something's wrong. Usually, it's either that their content is not interesting to your markets after all, or that the site is not driving your traffic to these pages in ways that are attractive.

### Top Entry and Exit Pages

If the inside pages of your site are well promoted in the search engines, there should be a number of top entry pages (i.e. the first page that the visitor sees), in addition to the home page. This is a good reminder to include clear navigation back to other areas of the site from every page, to ensure that the first-time visitor gets a complete picture of your offerings.

The top exit pages are also an indication of your site's effectiveness - if these are not the right places for most visitors to leave from, some adjustments are needed. Make sure that every page of your site has an objective, and that you clearly direct the visitor to the next page or to the action that you wish them to take.

### Single Access Pages

These are pages that a visitor views, and leaves without exploring any further. Typically, this will be the home page, and I am often asked whether this is an issue. I usually give the standard consultant's answer: "It depends . . ."

Your home page should quickly show the different audiences for your site that they've come to the right place for what they want, and where to go to find it. So you might have sections for members, prospective members, journalists, consumers, etc. The home page should do enough to engage them, and send them on to the appropriate inside pages.

If the home page does a good job of this, there will probably be some remnant of visitors who came to your site by mistake, in which case they will leave immediately. But that's OK - they aren't the right traffic for you.

It's really your judgment call as to what constitutes a problem. But, that client I mentioned earlier whose visitors spent less than two minutes on his site also had about 85% single access figures on his home page - some things are obvious!

A splash entry page to your site (i.e. one that says "Welcome, enter here", but with little or no actual content) will often also show large single access figures. Although these pages can look very striking, they unfortunately tend to be unpopular with impatient surfers. I've seen splash pages that have lost one third of a site's visitors. If you have a splash page, check the single access figures for it in your logs, and be prepared to remove it without hurting the feelings of your Webmaster!

### Most Active Countries and Cities

If your site is aimed at an international audience, this section will show which country visitors originate from. This information can be useful in making decisions such as providing pages in languages other than English.

The most active cities report is unfortunately very misleading, as it relies on the registered location of the Internet Service Provider. Most log reports therefore show very disproportionate visitor numbers from Virginia - the home of America Online!

## Top Referring Sites / URL's / Search Engines

These are the Web pages that send visitors to your site. The largest figure here will usually be the "No referrer", showing people coming directly to the site. This means that they are typing in your URL, or have your site bookmarked, and implies that your other forms of marketing are working.

The log reporting program should display other Web pages that send you traffic as html links, allowing you to click on the URL (when online!) to see the originating page. This will show the effectiveness of your reciprocal links or paid advertising. You will also be able to see other sites that are linking to you. It's worth checking these out if you aren't familiar with them - either to thank them, or to check that their link to you is appropriate.

For search engine referrals, clicking on the link will resubmit the search, and allow you to evaluate competitors' sites and positioning relative to yours. It's also possible to review keywords that are bringing traffic from one particular source, and to try to improve the site's performance for those words in other search engines.

## Top Search Keywords and Phrases

This is crucial information, as it shows exactly what people were looking for when they came to your site. Often Web site marketers take their best guess at these keywords on their first design, but because the search engines index every word on all your pages, other terms can be found, especially in a content rich site.

So the most popular search phrases can tell you what's really "hot" in your products and services. Understanding these is another great key to understanding the current needs of your site's market(s), and making business strategy and development decisions. One of my clients recently decided to write a book on a topic area that, until she saw her logs, she had no idea was so sought-after.

## Conclusion

There are other sections in the log report, especially around the technical data for your site. The pieces that I have covered here are the significant ones for marketers. If you don't have this information available, I really urge you to get it, and review it - I guarantee that you'll find some gold nuggets!

Philippa Gamse, "CyberSpeakerSM", is a professional speaker and e-commerce consultant. She helps her clients develop e-business and marketing strategies to gain maximum competitive advantage. Philippa can be reached on (831) 465-0317, or at <http://www.CyberSpeaker.com/>

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