

Free Stuff: Counters

By Richard Lowe

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If you are a webmaster and you are not examining the statistics of your site regularly, then you are running blind. If you are serious, then you must be examining your site statistics regularly to find out which pages are being visited, where the people are coming from and what they are doing while they are on your site. You have two ways to do this: log files (the recommended and far superior method) and counter scripts.

Log Files

The absolute best option is to place your site with a web host which gives you complete access to your log files. Most web servers keep (at the system managers discretion) a detailed record (called a log file) of every single thing that happens on the site. Every page visit, every image load and even every single error is recorded.

Since log files are already created automatically for you, why not take advantage of them and get the detailed statistics they provide? This has the added advantage that you are not adding the additional overhead of recording statistics that are already being recorded by your web server. Log files are also invisible to your visitors (it's really none of their business how many hits you are getting) and require no setup of any kind.

A number of options exist to analyze your log files. Virtually all web hosts that allow you to access these logs also provide some online tools to view them in an organized manner. Usually these tools consist of some routine that runs each night and creates graphics and charts which you can examine

at your leisure.

You can also find a number of programs (shareware and professional) which will help you determine exactly what is happening on your site. These programs generally cost money, which is beyond the scope of this article.

Local Scripts

Personally, I am not sure why anyone would want to include a locally hosted counter script on their pages. I mean if the web host allows CGI (or ASP, PHP or similar technology) scripts to be executed he almost certainly gives you access to the log files. So why add the additional overhead and complexity of a local script? The only reason that I can think of is to include a counter on the page - which I would not recommend anyway since I do not see how a hit counter improves a site. The way I look at it, if you are getting the hits you don't need to brag (and your visitors may not believe you if you told them what you were getting anyway). If you are not, why would you want to tell you visitors that no one is visiting your site?

Frontpage Extensions

Frontpage is a product sold by Microsoft which does a reasonably good job of web site editing. This product includes a number of extensions, and one of those allows for hit counting. I must take just a minute to explain my feelings on this counter: it's one of the worst counter implementations that has ever been created. Don't use it. If you do, you will regret it.

Remote Scripts

If you cannot get access to your server log files (which is generally true for sites on free hosts such as GeoCities and FortuneCity), then your best option is to use remotely hosted counter and statistics scripts. If your site is hosted on a free host, they will most likely provide access to a counter script of some kind. You can use that script if you desire, or you can use one of the scripts listed later in this article.

Remotely hosted scripts are extremely inferior to examining the server log files for the following reasons:

- 1) Since the script is on a remote server, it tends to slow your page load. Sometimes this slowdown can be very significant.
- 2) The scripts usually require an image load from the remote host, which introduces the possibility that your site statistics are being used for marketing and advertising purposes. In this case, the script and associated image load are acting as web bugs, with all of the associated privacy issues.
- 3) The counters may cause cookies to be placed on your visitors computer systems. Many people now simply do not want cookies, so you are introducing additional reasons for people to leave your site.
- 4) The counter companies usually make money by indirect means such as advertising and selling marketing research information. This makes them very vulnerable to the whims of advertisers (and the stock market). You could find yourself replacing all of your remotely loaded scripts more often than you would like simply due to company turnover (and quite a few of these companies have gone

belly up in the year 2001).

There are not that many advantages to using these scripts. In fact, the only real reason that makes sense is simply that you have no choice because you do not have access to the server logs. Another reason is if you really want a hit counter displayed on your pages.

If you must use a remotely hosted counter script, be sure and look at them all before settling on one. Why? Since the code is embedded within all of your pages, it can be quite a pain to change later. So take the time to find a script which gives you all of the data that you need to manage your site.

Some remotely hosted scripts are listed below.

BeSeen

<http://www.beseen.com/hitcounter/index.html>

Simple counter with a variety of styles.

Bravenet Web Services

<http://www.bravenet.com/>

The counters come in various sizes and colors, and increment when new visitors come to your web page. When you click on your counter it will take you to several pages of useful statistics.

Extreme Tracking

<http://www.extreme-dm.com/tracking/>

Very advanced tracking service. You will be able to tell exactly what your visitors are doing if you add this service to your site. Some of the features include: real-time reporting and extensive referrer tracking.

Fast Counter

<http://www.bcentral.com/fastcounter/>

This service from bCentral gives you a simple, fast counter. Nothing fancy, just a variety of styles. Not much reporting capabilities.

FreeStats

<http://www.freestats.com/>

A very good tracking service with lots of features. With Freestats you will be able to know exactly what your visitors are doing on your web site, how long they've been there and where they came from.

HitBox

<http://www.hitbox.com/>

By far the best tracking service on the internet. If you want to find out exactly what your visitors are doing, where they came from and how long they stayed, this service is for you. Note: this service does require a bit more setup than most.

HitMatic

<http://www.hitmatic.com/>

A good counter with lots of statistics.

SiteMeter

<http://www.sitemeter.com/>

Site Meter is a free, fast, and easy way to add a web counter to your web page. Not only does it display the number of visitors to your web site, it also keeps statistics on the number of visits each

hour and each day.

WebStat

<http://www.webstat.net/more.html>

Reasonably good statistics package. Easy to install, easy to use.

WebTracker

<http://www.fxweb.com/tracker/>

Implementing a WebTracker on your page lets you count visitors to your page. You gain informative data on what browser they are using, the operating system they are running, and can even tell if they are a return visitor! Find out what days of the week are hot at your site, and find out what time of the day visitors come to your site. Note: limited to sites with 500 hits per day or less.

Additional Information

Constantly collect and analyze statistics

<http://www.internet-tips.net/Webmaster/Statistics.htm>

You MUST collect and analyze statistics about your web site to determine what is working and what is not.

Watching Your Visitors

<http://www.internet-tips.net/Webmaster/maintwatching.htm>

If you are a webmaster, then you need to know what your visitors are doing on your web site.

Web Bugs

<http://www.internet-tips.net/Security/webbugs.htm>

Web bugs are little graphic images inserted into web pages, emails and other web-aware documents to allow companies to gather information about you without your knowledge.

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