

The Importance of Tracking

By Stuart Reid

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If you are starting out this is probably the last thing on your mind, but it shouldn't be. It's good to get in the habit now. What is tracking? It is simply the various methods you can use to find out how many people respond to each promotional exercise you run.

If you have a web site with a counter or some kind of statistics record on your pages then you will now know how many people visit your site, plus maybe some other useful information such as referring URLs or whatever. What you won't know is where these people learned about your site. If you pay for anything then this information is essential.

Say you have a site that sells widgets. You run one advert as a solo-ad to an e-zine that has 100,000 subscribers.

You run another ad to an e-zine that has 300,000 subscribers. This one is worded differently.

Your web site, after a while, reports you have received about 20,000 more hits than you usually do and you discover your sales are up by 20%.

This is good news. You decide to run an ad again. But how do you know which ad you ran was most successful? You needed to track the links in those ads, so each ad would send the visitor to a different URL.

There are good linking services such as ROIbot. This kind of service takes links sent to them, counts them, and redirects them to your page. This way you can log into the service and see how many visitors you had to a particular link.

The main disadvantage of this is that the link can look a little messy, something like "http://www.trackerservice.com/?username=xxxx&trackercode=xxxx". It will also likely cost money for the service. If you can use cgi on your site you can host your own `link counter`. These scripts will either track links to a page, eg "http://www.mysite.com/cgi-bin/track.cgi?<http://www.some-otherpage.html> " which is quite flexible but doesn't `hide` urls, or they will use codes to shorten the URL and take a neater form such as "http://www.mysite.com/cgi-bin/track.cgi?link1". In practice hosting your own tracker works well and gives you a lot of flexibility.

Another way is to send your visitor to a different URL on your site. In ad 1 for example you say "Visit www.mysite.com/ad1 for more information." and in ad 2 use "Visit www.mysite.com/specials" (a term like "specials" can even make someone more likely to click on what is no more than a coded link). The counter on "ad1" (which in this case would be a different directory on your site) would tell you how many people responded to this ad, and vice versa. Some counters will even count links such as "www.mysite.com/?ad1" as a separate hit for you. This saves you setting up other pages or directories. One of the main advantages of this form of link is the URL just looks like a proper page on your site. The page itself could be no more than a redirection to an affiliate page or a sign-up page.

If you are not aware of how to redirect pages it is quite simple. Your page, for example "specials.html" would take this form:

```
HTML
HEADTITLEYour Affiliate Program Title/TITLE
META http-equiv="refresh" content="0; url=http://www.
YouraffiliateprogramsURL.com"
/HEADBODYBGCOLOR="#FFFFFF"/BODY/HTML
```

Once you have this tracking information it is sometimes surprising to learn, that for example, the ad you run to 100,000 subscribers gave you 15,000 of the extra hits you gained and the ad you run to 300,000 subscribers only gave you 5,000. You would have probably thought the other way round had you not tracked those ads. You would obviously be willing to run ad 1 again to a larger subscriber base!

Tracking your ads is important.

Don't skip it!

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