

STATISTICS PACKAGES AND HOW TO USE THEM

Every minute of every day, web servers tirelessly write logs detailing all the requests that are made of them. These log files are so huge and unfriendly that special programs have been created to allow you to decipher and make sense of the recorded information. The generic name for such a program is a "Stats Package". If you have a web site and you are not utilizing a Stats Package to examine this information you are working with one hand tied behind your back.

Your web site is a marketing tool and like other marketing initiatives you will want to measure its success and maximize the return on your outlay. Let's assume that right now you are measuring the success of your web site by noting how many people subscribe to your mailing list, or fill in a feed back form. If you have e-commerce capabilities, perhaps an order form or a shopping cart, you can tally up your sales at the end of the month.

All of these measures are worthwhile and they will accurately report what is happening. What it won't tell you are things like, how many people backed out of filling out a feedback form or completing an order. How long they stayed on your site and when they lost interest. Or, did they click on a link only to get an error page?

Statistics programs will give you this information and much, much more. In effect these programs are conducting continuous usability surveys with added features including visitor demographics, and progress reports on marketing and search engine initiatives.

Because this information is so up to date and so easy to measure you can make small changes to your site and immediately see the effects. Updating and maintaining your web site regularly is important if you want to keep your customers coming back. But unless you manage your updates carefully you could be creating dead links. These dead links will produce a 404 Error – "Page Not Found" and can create a negative impression of your organization. Keeping an eye on your stats will help you to maintain your links and correct any problems quickly.

Like everything, stats packages have their limitations. There are a few things to watch out for. Firstly, because of the sheer volume of information being processed, you will most likely only get information on the 10 or 20 most popular pages, or the 10 or 20 most popular referring web sites. If the stats were to do otherwise it would be as useful as the raw log files! And although a stats program can tell you generally where your customers live, it cannot tell you their exact address, nor can it tell you their email address.

Web Trends and Live Stats are the two market leaders in the field. Your web hosting company will probably be able to offer you one of these packages. Ideally you will be able to have summaries of the stats emailed to you once a day, week, or month. If not, ask to have your log files sent to you. You can then run your preferred stats package over the logs yourself.

Both Web Trends and Live Stats have excellent help features. I particularly like the fact that Live Stats has an explanation of the information at the bottom of each report.

Often the greatest contributor to the success of a website is its continual honing of content to the needs and preferences of your target market. Your stats package is your best friend in this respect; get to know it well. Using your stats package regularly enables you to almost look over someone's shoulder while they surf your site. Very interesting...

Below we list some important reports for you to keep track of

- Visits – The number of individual visits to your site
 - Page Views per Visit – How much time these visitors spent on your site
 - Time Spent Per Page – The average amount of time spent on a page
 - Exit Points – Where your visitor lost interest (or completes an order)
 - Referrers – How did these visitors get to your site?
 - Most Popular Pages – What your visitors like most
 - Least Popular Pages – What your visitors like least
- **Information that is not so important for most web sites**
- Bandwidth – Data transfer information, only interesting if you are getting close to your free allowance
 - Browser By Operating System - Only of interest to the most technical, or Internet Researchers
 - Browser Type – Only of Interest to web developers and Internet Researchers
 - ISP or Network - Only of Interest to Internet Researchers
 - Hits – Only of interest to those people who want to quote big numbers. Browsing the Average Web Assets web page will tally up almost 20 hits. In one visit to the Web Assets site almost 200 hits are generated. (It's better for us to know about people not hits.)

Use Web Assets "Stats Tracker" to keep track of the activity in your web site. If you have not got a copy of this spreadsheet please email customerservice@webassets.com.au