

Are you managing your web site?

As a small business person, there are many things that you try to manage. By now, you've probably found out that if you can't measure something, you can't manage it. So, many people are stumped when it comes to *managing* their web sites. However, there are an amazing number of things you can find out about what is happening, and once you have some data, you can start to make changes intelligently.

The organization that hosts your website (the ISP, or Internet Service Provider) will determine how good your information will be. Although just about every hosting platform captures the same basic data, how the ISP presents the data as information will vary. In the hosting companies I've seen, some offer a choice of statistics packages, some offer just one, and some basic hosting packages have no stats offering at all. You might even get an option to download logs and run your own custom analysis. If you're considering changing ISPs, statistics should be one area you check out. Even if the ISP denies you access to your stats (or wants to upgrade you to a better package for the privilege), you can sign up with a third party which will provide stats for a small monthly charge or even free for a limited sampling. Third-party stats generally require you to insert some code into each web page you want stats for.

So, your first task is to contact the people who look after your website, or if that's you, contact your ISP, to find out what reports are available. Now you can look at what's happening. Most likely, the things you see first will be the raw numbers for your entire web site. The folk who write the report packages tend to go in for showing you how the number of hits varies by day of the month, hour of the day and maybe even day of the week. Unless you are doing capacity planning for a web server, this is interesting but probably not incredibly useful, in terms of things you can fix. Here are some of the things that I *do* look for:

- Which other web sites referred the most visitors to your site (or the least)?
- What terms did people type into search engines in order to find you?
- Which page on your site did those queries end up on?
- Which browsers do your customers use?
- What size screens do your customers have?

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- After you e-mailed all of your customers with a link to some page on your web site, how many actually went there?
- How long after your mailing were people still visiting that page mentioned in the e-mail?
- Which countries do your visitors come from (or, at least: in which countries do your visitors' ISPs have their servers in)

With this information in hand, you and your web designer can tweak your strategy for encouraging other sites to link to you; optimize your search-engine strategy; determine which browsers and screen-sizes you should use to test your web site's usability on; determine the success of a mailing campaign and decide when to remove a page you referred to; and much more, including whether it's worth creating a parallel site in another language!

In an ideal world, your web professionals will already be looking at your stats. In reality, many small businesses may not be able to afford to keep professionals on retainer to maintain their web site all of the time and the tweaking may have to be done by the business owner or as an occasional service. However, taking some time to do the basic analysis yourself will save you some fees, and knowing what to ask about will change you from a gullible client to an informed client.

Personally, I've always preferred to deal with the latter.