Capturing, Interpreting, and Using Your Web Use Statistics

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Are you learning about customers, or watching paint dry? Most publishers agree that knowledge of Web traffic is increasingly important, but important to whom, and why? How should a publisher react, and to what? Those and other questions were explored by representatives of three companies on the cyberspace frontier.

Sarah Ramsay said her first look at a simple WebTrends report afforded her few surprises. But trying to translate data from a more complicated WebTrends spreadsheet into usable information about published articles was, she said, "a bit like watching paint dry". Ramsay offered some advice that she wished she'd been given.

"The first questions to ask are, What is the purpose of my Web site and What data do I need . . . to judge whether my Web site is achieving its purpose?" Ramsay cited three scientific papers timed for release during an international meeting of cardiologists. Web data showing that most "views" of the papers were on Monday and that the papers had a much longer "shelf-life" than expected may guide future releases.

Other questions are, How am I going to use this information and Do I have the resources to exploit this information? A paper that seemed exciting in peer review may draw few "hits" on a Web site, Ramsay said. "Long and tedious titles are less likely to be clicked on." "The Web statistics you receive today may affect where you spend resources in the future."

Audrey Melkin said that Web reports and statistics are a gold mine of information but often are underused. Her company, a full-service vendor, will publish the online version of CSE *Scientific Style and Format*. Atypon's Literatum product has an administration tool that publishers can use to monitor traffic, add marketing efforts, and even manage page design. For each transaction, the tool records who visited, how long they stayed, and what content they were interested in. "A publisher might wish to know, How did the Harvard library use my journal over a month's time?" Reports can be customized to show top articles accessed within a collection and can even show who tried to access the article but couldn't—a good place to concentrate marketing efforts.

Greg Suprock said that in addition to the obvious data—who visits the site, where they come from, how long they stay, and whether they come back—publishers need to track their hosting provider's "system health" and how long it takes users to download a page (ideally, less than 2 seconds). "You need to know whether the system is up and reliable", he said. "Users have 'click-itis'; if they get bored, they go bye-bye."

Single-user registration, taken with the site license of the access point, can tell a lot about a Web-page visitor. "Stickiness reports" detail how long a visitor stayed on a page.

Once a site's chief referrers are known (the top three for *Nature* are the National Library of Medicine, Google, and Google Scholar), the publisher can ensure that they have the proper metadata to maximize hits. Special projects, such as *Nature*'s podcasts and blogs, are a chance to draw in new users and so warrant special monitoring.

The Web is a new world, but "you don't need to cut the Gordian knot to conquer it", Suprock said. "You just have to focus on what to analyze and determine what is going to be important to you. Work with analysts as necessary: just talking can point you in the right direction."

Responding to an audience question about identifying single users, Suprock said that "light registration" could distinguish a visitor as a graduate student or a professor. Melkin said that a registration form with more than 10 items may scare off visitors. "And I would advise you to put the most common items on top of the pull-down menu, not to list them alphabetically", Ramsay said. "If you do, all your visitors will appear to be from Afghanistan."