

## Making Sense Of Website Statistics

Every website owner wants lots of traffic directed to their website, but this can sometimes involve spending a lot of time and money. Fortunately, most website owners can increase their return on investment simply by paying closer attention to their website log files. Most website hosting companies have special software installed that will process these website log files and display the information in an easy to read format. From this information website owners can get an understanding as to how many people are visiting the website, where the visitors are coming from, where they are entering and exiting the website, the average number of page views per visit, and many more interesting facts. These statistics will allow you to better analyze the effectiveness of promotional campaigns and give you some insight as to how you can tweak your website to increase your return on investment.

### "Hits" Explained

There seems to be some confusion regarding the terms used to describe website visitor traffic. We usually hear website owners speak in terms of "hits" to their website. Hits don't accurately describe the number of visitors viewing the website – they are actually just any sort of HTTP request made to your server. Not only are requests made for website pages, but also for all the images and other files associated with viewing a single page. Therefore, one page view could actually result in dozens of hits, and, if a single user visits many pages on your website, this visit could generate hundreds or even thousands of hits. This can excite some website owners, but this number is not a reliable indicator of how many people have actually visited the website.

The term that website owners want to focus on is the amount of unique impressions that are generated by their website. A unique impression will measure the number of actual people visiting the website based on their IP address, browser, and operating system. No matter how many "hits" a visitor registers on your website, the server will record the session as one unique visit. Thus, the number of unique visits gives us a much better idea of the amount of traffic the website is generating.

### What to Look for When Analyzing Website Traffic

**Number of Unique Visitors:** We've already determined that the best measure of true website traffic is the number of unique visitors. What we want to look for is a trend in the average number of unique visitors. On a day to day basis, there may be a good amount of volatility in the number of unique visitors, but we want to pay attention to the trend of the average number of visitors per month. Optimally, we'd like to have the number increase on a monthly basis.

**Entry Page Statistics:** From these statistics we can learn which page people are using to enter your website. Most visitors will enter from your home page, but you may notice that up to 50% of your website traffic originates from a page other than your home page. It's important that your website have an easy to use navigation structure to ensure that visitors can find the information they are looking for, even if they don't enter through your website's main page.

**Bounce Rate:** The bounce rate can be defined as the percentage of people who visit your website and immediately leave. Don't get worried if your bounce rate is high – most websites have a bounce rate of about 50% or so. If the bounce rate is unusually high, you can experiment with your website to try and retain more visitors. Maybe you need more enticing graphics, less text, faster loading pages, or a more engaging design.

**Exit Page Statistics:** These statistics will show you where people are leaving your website. When you know which page is losing the bulk of your website's visitors you can experiment with some changes in an attempt to retain more visitors.

**Average Time & Page Views Per Visit:** Website visitors are very goal oriented and task driven. Upon visiting your website, most visitors will merely scan the page to quickly determine whether or not it contains the information they are searching for. By analyzing the average amount of time spent on your website and the average number of page views per visit, you can determine how engaging your website's content is. The key to retaining visitors and increasing the number of page views is to have relevant and interesting information on your website. Remember – content is king!

**Top Referring URLs:** This statistic lets you know where the bulk of your website's traffic is coming from. This is important if you're pursuing a website marketing campaign or search engine optimization campaign because you can easily judge the campaign's effectiveness by looking to see how many visitors each marketing method is generating.

**Top Search Words & Phrases:** This information will let you know which keywords and phrases visitors are searching for in Google and the other search engines in order to find your website. With this information you can gauge the effectiveness of a search engine optimization campaign, or get an idea of how your website's keyword density should be altered to position it for the keywords and phrases that you're targeting.

**Browsers, Platforms & Screen Sizes:** This information gives us some insight as to the type of software and hardware your visitors are using. You should ensure that your website looks the same across all browsers and operating systems. In addition, you must pay attention to the screen size and resolution in which your visitors are viewing your website. The goal is to ensure that no visitor has to resort to the horizontal scrolling bar to view your website – this is a major turnoff for most people.

**Country of Origin:** A good website stats program will also let you know the geographic region of your website's visitors. This is important if your website only has appeal in a particular region. For instance, if you own a retail store that caters to Southwestern Ontario and you notice that 90% of your website traffic is coming from the U.S., then it can easily be determined that you need to re-think your online marketing strategy.

The goal of website traffic analysis is to assess how well or how poorly your website is working for your visitors. From these statistics you can figure out what the problem is and try out some possible solutions. The problem often lies in the website's visual appearance, layout, navigation structure, or keyword optimization. When making modifications to your website in order to remedy these problems, it's best to only make minor and gradual adjustments, and then assess the progress over the next month or so to truly understand if your changes were for the better. Also, remember that sites with a greater number of visitors will have more accurate web statistics. Sites with smaller numbers of visitors are more prone to have their averages thrown off by a few anomalous visitors.

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