WEB ANALYTICS – A REPORTING APPROACH

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A web analytics program consists of many elements. One of the important elements in the process is the reporting. This step often does not get the attention it should, taking a back seat to the effort of getting and compiling the numbers (on the Analytics side) or day-to-day operations (on the Business side). It is sometimes abbreviated or omitted altogether in an attempt to save time. This is a mistake. This article focuses on that reporting.

Reporting in Context

Reporting is a component of an analytic process intended to support decision making. (In figure 1, below, I have provided a general outline of the typical analytics cycle.) Web analytics helps your team understand how well your Web investment/campaign is doing. However, this understanding is not useful to the Business if the insights are not shared in a way that the rest of the organization can focus on and act upon. “Useful” sharing is dependent on how you convey information in reporting.

Reporting is the analysis deliverable. You are sharing what you learned. It allows you to disseminate the knowledge throughout the organization. Good reporting drives the Business to act on that knowledge so the organization can improve.

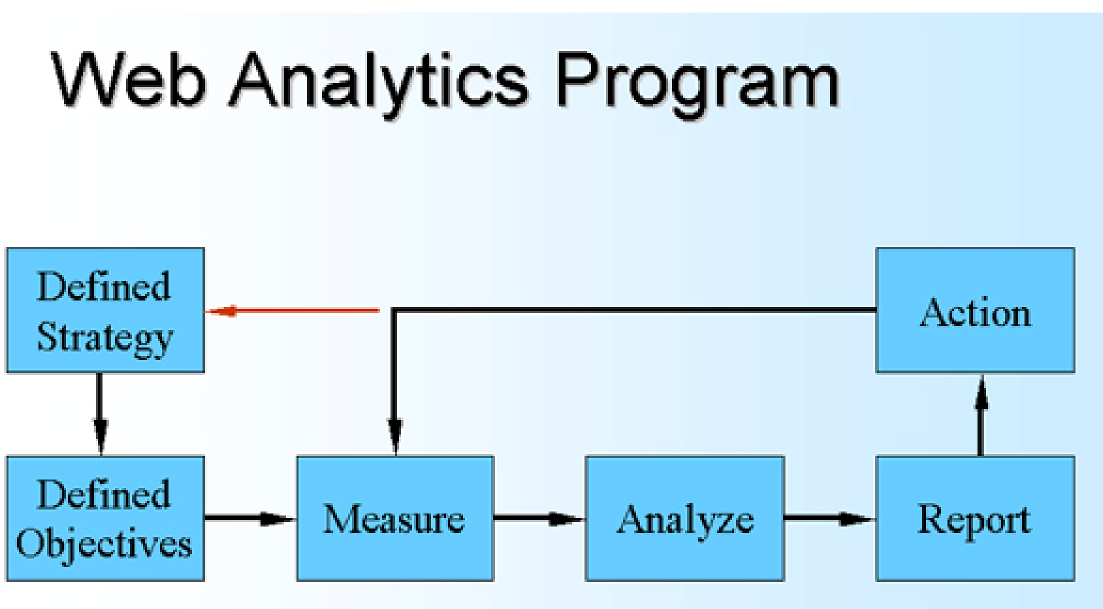

Figure 1.

What Makes a Great Report?

For reporting to be effective, it must be provided in a way meaningful to the recipient. A great report focuses on its audience as well as its subject. Most people will glaze over when confronted by rows and columns of numbers. Numbers-only reports tend to float to the bottom of the product owner's to-do list, unread. That is not what people need, but all too often that's all that is provided.

Great reporting, however, provides insight and recommendations:

- It is the insights and recommendations which people can understand.
- Recommendations allow one to focus on managing for value as well as performance.
- Further, written recommendations tend to become to-do lists that the Business implements.

Great reports share these style attributes:

- Clarity – The information is easy to understand. A clear sentence does not require the reader to decipher how the sentence is to be interpreted. Do not use ambiguous or complex language. Avoid using technical jargon. Avoid restating the obvious. Direct and succinct declarative sentences are almost always better than marketing prose.
- Completeness – Completeness provides context. The report should contain the appropriate level of detail, covering all the necessary variations or conditions. However, make sure you are not sacrificing clarity for trivia that adds no real value.
- Accuracy – The information contains no factual errors and does not mislead the reader. Neither overstate nor understate what you need to convey.

Remember you are trying to use your report to provide understanding. Keeping these points in mind when you write will help support this effort.

A Reporting Outline

In the past, I have successfully used a six-part reporting format. It can be used for either ongoing tracking or short term testing. (I selected short term tracking for the abbreviated examples below). Each section is intended to provide understanding about what is being reported and its meaning:

1. **Purpose**

2. **Test Conditions**
3. **Results**
4. **Analysis**
5. **Lessons Learned**
6. **Recommendations**

Purpose

The intent of this section is to provide the reader with an understanding of the goals and objectives of the report to the reader. It outlines why you have created this report, what you are tracking, and why are you tracking it. Here you declare the purpose of the test and the hypothesis being tested. Communicate how the test or tracking supports the corporate goals. Including any quantified targets and relevant milestones.

For example:

> "This report provides the results of an A/B test on copy for the first page of the Web account creation process. It was run June through July of 2006 by Michael Jones, Janice Abrams and Rob Ibri."
>
> "The test was initiated as a result of a review of the Web site by consultant John Score. John recommended improving the benefit copy on the page. The purpose of the test was to improve the click through rate from the first page by improving the perceived benefit of getting a Web account."
>
> "The rate of Web account creation has been declining and the Business seeks to reverse that decline. Customers with Web accounts are a primary source of prospects for services and, in addition, are 25% more likely to purchase goods and services than a non-account customer."

Test Conditions

Outline how the test or tracking was conducted. Was it an A/B split test, a year over year comparison? In an A/B test, for example, provide a screen shot of the control copy and the test copy. Who got the various copy versions and how was it delivered? Who provided the copy? If it is it ongoing tracking you would indicate what is being tracked, how it is being tracked and what variables were used.

For example:

> "Two of our Sr. marketers each provided different benefit copy for the page. Each copy was run in an A/B test against the existing control copy. (The control copy itself had been created by the Web IT staff). Half the people coming to the page got the control; the other half got the page with the test copy in an alternating fashion. At the time of the test, the copy had not been revised for 5 months".

"The first test copy (call it the M copy) was run from June 1st. through June 29th. The second copy (the N copy) was run from July 1st. through July 29th."

"The Control copy was as follows:"

Etc.

Results

This section is where you present those numbers, charts, graphs, etc. as appropriate. You should also indicate any anomalies encountered during the test. Some people are visually oriented and some prefer an outline. The first group responds to visual graphs and the second to tables like the ones listed below. I like to provide both.

For example:

M test results:

Page	% Visit Click through	Visit Volume
Get A Web Account - Control	32.99%	238,779
Get A Web Account – M copy	33.23%	238,780

N test results:

Page	% Visit Click through	Visit Volume
Get A Web Account - Control	33.04%	200,756
Get A Web Account – N copy	33.33%	200,756

Analysis

The first three sections (Purpose, Test Conditions, and Results) exist to present the context for the Analysis section. It is here you present the success or failure of the thing being tested or tracked.

Analysis is the meat of the effort. Now that you have the numbers, what do they mean? Present your causal hypothesis – what happened and why could it be happening? Here is where you draw your conclusions and inferences about user behaviors and the effect on the Business. In "effect", I include the economic impact.

You should make your conclusions explicit for your reader and include all assumptions, definitions, qualifications, etc. so that any objections can be accounted for. You should also be clear about the limits of the analysis, given the available information.

For Example:

> “Historically, the click through rate for the page with the control copy can vary plus or minus 5% month over month. However, there has been a downward trend in the conversion rate over the past 6 months. The current trended average is 15% below the previous norm.”
>
> “The percentage difference in click through between the control copy and the N and M copy is not statistically significant. In effect, we are looking at the same results for the three copy versions. We also note that the alternative copy did not diminish results.”
>
> “We can suggest two reasons for the lack of change. One is that in both cases, the alternative benefit copy was not effective. Perhaps better copy would produce better results. The second possibility is that in this context, benefit copy is not useful in producing click-through; it’s not a significant trigger.”
>
> “The test does not provide a definitive answer to which reason is correct, only that the tested copy produced no improvement. However, it is understood from prior testing that task-oriented visitors tend not to read page copy. This is a plausible explanation for why the copy made no difference at all, either positive or negative.”
>
> “Although the control copy was last revised at about the time the decline in registration began, the decline began before the last revision. It is worth pursuing improved click-through rate for the page. However, it is unlikely that this will address the root cause of the decline that initiated the test.”

Lessons Learned

In this section, you can take a step back and abstract the results of the test. What are the fundamental underlying lessons? Can you extrapolate the lessons to other pages, products or sections on your site? Are the results in line with other industry results? If not, how do they differ and why?

For Example:

> “Best practice suggests that persuasive benefit copy should produce correspondingly better conversion results. This is a well accepted understanding. The test results are not what we would expect based on that understanding. It is also understood from prior testing that visitors, particularly if they are task oriented, tend not to read Web copy.”
>
> “A tentative conclusion is that the visitors are not reading the copy. We may also want to look at our event registration forms, where we sometimes have

a significant amount of benefit copy on the form page itself, to see if that copy is productive.”

Recommendations

Make specific recommendations based on the knowledge and insights gained from the test. At the end of the day, this is what management pays you for.

You can also perform an opportunity assessment – what are options for taking advantage of the knowledge in other areas or in new areas of the business?

For Example:

> “Because there is no improvement using the new copy, we should continue to use the control copy.”
>
> “It will be useful to conduct an additional test with copy provided by Marketing to help verify that benefit copy is non-productive on this page. While an eye-tracking study would be more definitive, such a test is cost prohibitive in this case.”
>
> ”We have not tested usability changes to the form itself. We also recommend testing changes to the form to see if improvements to the click-through rate can be obtained in that context.”

After the Report is Created

First, distribute your report to the decision makers and the affected parties. But don’t stop there. All too often, this is where the work ends, sitting on a desk and never considered.

Meet to discuss the findings. Meetings, while time consuming, are often the most effective means of getting people on the same page and moving forward. It helps people to focus on the lessons and insights gained from the report.

Discuss the analysis and recommendations and begin to discuss the changes needed to be made: labeling, placement, copy, persuasion flow, the call to action, usability, site navigation, product design. Create an implementation plan. List all the tasks, who does them, and when must they be done.

Then you should then memorialize the information. Put the report in an accessible repository where folks know where to find it. Reports need to be constructed so that they can provide insight a month or a year later to people who were not involved in the original project. The report then becomes part of the institutional expertise. The business will not need to keep testing the same things and relearning the same lessons as often happens when knowledge is not shared.

Lastly, the methodology described above should be part of your regular business work flow, if it is not already. Make it a habit. As part of a regular process, it is both easier to do and more effective.

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