AN INTRODUCTION TO GOOGLE ANALYTICS

UNDERSTANDING WEBSITE TRAFFIC AND VISITOR BEHAVIOR

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Google Analytics is an excellent (and free) program which offers great insight into traffic statistics for your law firm's website. The site tracks all traffic to your site, storing a wide array of information on referral sources, visitor information and content. With so much being offered, the Analytics control panel can be a bit overwhelming for beginners and even seasoned site owners. In this report, we will explore the key statistics to consider when evaluating your website's success. First up: Traffic Sources.

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I. THE BASICS OF TRAFFIC SOURCES

There are a number of ways through which a visitor can wind up at your website. They can of course type in the site URL directly, perhaps from a business card or a firm advertisement in the local paper that they stumble across. This type of traffic is referred to as **direct traffic** as there is no web intermediary.

Alternatively, website visitors may be referred to your site generally through a link on an external site. If a visitor finds you on a local bar association's member list and clicks in to your site through this listing, the local bar association site would be seen and indexed by Google Analytics as a "**Referring Site**."

Finally, a web visitor might come to your site through the good old search engine results page. This generally occurs when an individual is looking for a local service provider and turns to Google or Bing to find a suitable match. If a visitor clicks on your site which appears in the results pages, Google Analytics will acknowledge this as visitor referred by a search engine.

Lastly, if you are running an Adwords campaign for your site, which is a form of search engine marketing, or paid advertising, Google Analytics will also track this information within your account so you can determine the effectiveness of your paid campaigns.

Determining where your visitors are coming from can help you to identify your site's strengths and weaknesses. This information can be found on the Overview page of the Traffic Sources section of your Google Analytics Control Panel.

BENCHMARKS & INTERPRETING TRAFFIC SOURCES STATISTICS

Attorneys often ask us, what should my statistics look like? And in most instances, there is no one set of norms that can be used with traffic statistics. Just as law practices vary greatly, so too will benchmarks for traffic to the site.

When a website is first launched, most site owners will find that most of the traffic is direct traffic. This is due in large part to the fact that the site does not yet rank well and that the firm often sends out announcements encouraging contacts to visit the site through a direct link. Overtime, with good SEO, you should find that the percentage of visitors from search engines gradually increases. If the number of visitors from the search engine does not show considerable improvement, you should consider enhancing your optimization strategies.

Statistics on referring sites should also be carefully interpreted as they can tell you what websites have links to your site and effectively drive traffic. This can help you to determine if paid listings in attorney directories are effective and help you to gauge other sites that might bring in similar results.

Traffic sources statistics can also help you determine the success of a marketing campaign, either in print or online, featuring your URL. Although it can generally be difficult to assess print ad success, paying careful attention to any spikes in traffic after the publication can help you to evaluate effectiveness.

While it's just one small part of the comprehensive Analytics offerings, understanding traffic sources to your site can you give you a better idea of the effectiveness of your marketing efforts and search optimization strategies. Be sure to check on these statistics on a regular basis so you can identify and correct any problems early on.

II. BOUNCE RATES

The bounce rate is a metric which helps to assess traffic quality. Simply defined, the bounce rate measures the number of single page visits that your site receives. If a visitor lands on your home page and then exits your site without visiting another page, they are seen as "bouncing" out. When you log into your Google Analytics control panel, the bounce rate is measured in percentages. If you had two new visitors to your firm's site yesterday, one who came to your home page and then hit the back button right away, and another who then proceeded on to your "Attorney Profile" page, your bounce rate for yesterday's visitors would be 50%.

The bounce rate measures the quality of traffic and helps to determine the effectiveness of entry pages on your website. You may find that visitors who first arrive on your home page have a much greater bounce rate than those who first come to your attorney profile page. This disparity can be telling and should cause you to reassess the copy on both pages. Perhaps you do a better job of selling yourself on your attorney profile page but the information on the home page lacks an effective marketing message.

Many people are alarmed when they look at their bounce rates and see a number like 34%, meaning that about 1/3 of all website visitors are leaving after checking out just one site page, but this number actually falls within the normal range. A bounce rate under 20% is unattainable and the large majority of sites have a bounce rate between of 30%-55%.

You're probably asking yourself, why are these numbers so high? This has to do largely with the search engines. While they have become excellent at matching search queries with relevant sites, they're still not perfect. Think about just how many times you hit the back button when checking out Google results because the site does not quite have what you're looking for.

Another reason that folks might bounce out right away is because they get all of the information they need from visiting that one page within your site. This might be the case for a prospective client looking for your phone number who can easily gather that information from the home page. In another example, you might find that opposing counsel types in your name to view your educational background; if the search engine takes them right to your attorney profile page, they need not look any further.

There may be cause for concern if your site's bounce rate soars above 55%. Again, be sure to see if this is across the board or just on certain pages within your site. Then do your best to change up the content and watch to see if the bounce rate decreases over time. If not, you may need to call on an expert to help you improve the content, call to action and perhaps even the ease of navigation on the site.

III. UNIQUE VISITORS

The purpose of a website is to serve as a resource for its visitors. If you maintain a site for your law firm, it is essential that you track visitor activity for new and returning users to evaluate your site's effectiveness. Google Analytics is a great resource because it compiles detailed visitor information in a manner that is easy to understand. These details include an overview of the number of visits, absolute unique visitors, and pageviews. With so much information at your fingertips, it can be difficult to digest the statistics and understand their significance.

We often have clients ask us, what qualifies as a visit? What makes that different from a pageview? What is so 'unique' about an absolute unique visitor?

UNDERSTANDING THE KEY TERMS

Each time a page on your website loads, this is counted as a pageview. If a site visitor goes to your home page and then clicks on a link to another page on your website and then proceeds to go back to your homepage, this would add up to be a total of 3 pageviews.

A visit, or session (which Google uses interchangeably), is the activity between a visitor's browser and the website. Closing the window or being idle for more than 30 minutes ends a session. If a person walks away from the computer and comes back 31 minutes later, this counts as a new session.

An absolute unique visitor counts as each person who comes to your site during a selected date range. Each person counts as one absolute unique visitor, hence "absolutely unique;" this has nothing to do with the amount of times they click around or are idle and start new sessions (visits).

You will often find that the absolute visitor count does not match up with the other numbers listed in the visitor section. Not to worry; they're not supposed to. An absolute unique visitor counts each person who comes to your site only once, a visitor who visits your website five times in a week will count as one absolute unique visitor- the same as a visitor who visits your website once for 20 seconds. Together, they will count as two absolute unique visitors. With this in mind, pageviews will always have the highest numbers, followed by the amount of visits and then visitors.

RETURNING VISITORS

If you want to assess visitor retention, there are charts that display how many new and returning visitors your site has attracted under the 'New vs. Returning' tab. User retention can also be monitored in-depth under the 'Visitor Loyalty' tab. From these critical statistics, you can see if you're getting many first-time visitors or if most of your visitors are returning. If you find that most of your visitors are falling within the 101-200 visit range, this shows that you have some dedicated visitors who return on a regular basis.

Ideally, your site should attract new visitors each month and have a large number of returning visitors. Think of this as visitor nirvana—you're getting checked out by new web users and also have content or site resources that keep your visitors coming back. As you continue to build an online presence and develop your firm's website, you should find that these statistics continue to increase. If they don't, you could probably use the help of an online marketing consultant to evaluate your site's optimization and content strategy.

IV. CONTENT STATISTICS

Content is single-handedly the most important component of website success but, unlike an attractive design, it can be difficult to evaluate. How do site visitors perceive the information on your site and how is that perception affecting their decision to contact (and retain) you? Google Analytics can help you answer these questions with its statistics on website content.

Upon logging into your Analytics control panel, you will find that there is a whole section devoted to content analysis. Below are the key statistics which you should be actively monitoring:

Top Content

This report includes a list of the most commonly read pages. Here you will find the number of pageviews for each top page and the average length of time spent on each page. Of course, you want the average length of time on the majority of your top pages to be substantial. If it is a copy-heavy page like your blog or articles page, you want to make sure site visitors are there for a considerable length of time, meaning they are actually reading the information and find it interesting enough to keep reading.. If visitors are spending less than a minute on the page, it can probably use some help. Of course there are exceptions to this rule, most visitors won't spend more than a minute on your Contact Us page; they will grab your number and/or address and then ideally reach out to you. With this list, it is also important to pay close attention to bounce rates. For a full explanation of the significance of bounce rates, refer to our previous post on the statistic.

Top Exit Pages

Google Analytics also keeps track of the exit points, or the page a visitor was on when they exited your website. This statistic is also incredibly valuable for measuring the quality of your content. The point of your website is to engage site visitors and keep them reading! If you find that your attorney profile page has a high exit rate, you are probably not selling yourself well enough. Or if your blog page is turning people off, you might consider exploring other topics or perhaps even toning down your opinions that may not resonate with many. Once again, it is normal to expect some pages to have a high exit rate. For instance, once a visitor fills out the consultation request page and receives the confirmation of submission, they are likely to exit the site and wait for your call.

Top Landing Pages

People tend to think that when a visitor comes to a new site, they arrive first on the home page; this is far from the case. When internet users search for your site using Google, they are likely to be directed to the page that best matches their search query based on Google's index. For example, if a visitor searches for an estate planning attorney in your town, they will probably be taken first to the estate planning overview page of your website. By understanding where visitors are landing on your site, you can have a better idea of what web-users are searching and also which of your pages are well-optimized with appropriate keywords.

Since your content should be frequently updated and new copy added to your site regularly, it is important that you monitor these statistics often. Once you add content, refer to Analytics to see if it is resonating with visitors. If it is, keep it up and post similar articles or blog entries. If not, try moving in a different direction and explore different calls to action to engage site visitors.

HOW OFTEN SHOULD I CHECK MY ANALYTICS?

Despite the significance of these metrics and how they play into site success, many website owners fail to regularly monitor and analyze visitor trends.

We are often asked how this is best accomplished; after all, it can be a hassle to log into your Google Analytics control panel and navigate around to each page. Luckily, with just a few simple steps, you can have your Google Analytics report sent to you on a regular basis so these statistics come directly to your inbox. To set up these automatic updates, simply select the report that you'd like to keep an eye on and choose the email link on the top left-hand corner of the screen. Here you will find the option to have the report emailed instantly or schedule future report emails. When scheduling these updates, you may opt to receive a report each morning, each week or once a month. In most cases, once a week is the best option. Set aside a half hour to review this report each week and take note of any significant changes.

WHEN TO EXPECT TO CHANGES

When monitoring your Google Analytics' reports, it's important to keep in mind that very few, if any, changes to your firm's website will have an instant impact on your visitor traffic statistics. This is largely due to the way the search engines index new information and the length of time it takes for new information to get into the search results. Of course, if you run a large advertisement in the local paper on a Monday, you might expect to see instant increases in traffic but with most site changes, real, lasting visitor trends will take a while to appear so be sure to remain steadfast and check regularly.