Measures of Success for Cyberspace

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April 4, 2002

THE MORE THINGS CHANGE, THE MORE THEY REMAIN THE SAME

In 1952 *Fortune's* then managing editor Ralph D. Paine gave a speech to the Ad Club of St. Louis in which he stated, "Unless television executives can figure out a way to prove its effectiveness, it will not survive..."

Shortly after that speech, The Advertising Research Foundation blessed Arthur Nielsen's concept for measurement of television audience and the Nielsen Ratings became a standard unit of measurement for television advertisers.

So it was not surprising that in the early days of the Internet, fearing that without adequate measurement to justify the expenditures, the net might not survive, the market cried out for a "Nielsen of the Internet."

Today, trillions of hits, millions of page views, and thousands of speeches later, there still isn't a "Nielsen of the Internet" and the one organization that came closest to it is teetering on the edge of bankruptcy. There are some very good reasons why we don't have the same sort of standards that are used in other media.

The first is that the Internet is not a medium like television. It is a marketplace where people buy and sell things, and one of those things may be advertising, but it is just as likely to be goods, services and information. A better analogy is that the Internet is, in fact, part of the infrastructure like the phone company or the utility company. No one justifies their telephone system or the need for electricity. They accept it as part of doing business. So too, the Internet is an integral part of doing business.

Secondly, even for the small percentage of web sites that base their business on an advertising model, television is the wrong analogy. When television began, it was tightly controlled by government licenses and by the three networks. They essentially had 24 hours of airtime a day to sell. As we who are trying to measure it well know, the Internet is a free-for-all. Not enough banner space on one site? Just add more pages, change the banners more frequently – all for pennies, rather than the millions or dollars that it costs to add another network.

The third major difference between those early days and today is that the Internet has brought about a revolution in marketing far beyond the scope that even the most forward thinking of us might have imagined. I don't use the term "**revolution"** lightly. It is a remarkably precise term.

Because, in truth, consumers are revolting against, and seizing power from, the marketers. Mitch Kapor has described the Internet as the "ultimate democratic society - a truly chaotic universe." It represents the unleashed raw will of millions of consumers. As *The Cluetrain Manifesto* clearly points out, the consumers are in control and they're going to let YOU know what they think by changing their behavior.

THE CHALLENGES:

The biggest challenge to a researcher on the web is the sheer enormity of the task. There are now 3 billion web pages in existence, some 80,000 newsgroups and approximately 15,000 editors and reporters writing for online publications.

The good news is that technology can help you find your way through this vast maze and there are a number of organizations out there that will be happy to assist you in gathering your data.

The bad news is that chances are the data you gather will have major gaps in it and may be of questionable validity. Organizations like SRDS and Media Metrix are making concerted efforts to audit and verify traffic rates and provide more accurate data on things like page views, hits and visits.

However, there are still gaps. Publications that require subscribers to log on will not be included in most web searches. Even the most comprehensive search firms can only gather about 60-80% of what you want. That contrasts sharply with print clipping services that return about 85%.

Finally, the resources required can be daunting. Remember that for every article that appears in the New York Times, there could be nine that appear in www.NYTIMES.com -- one for every time they update their pages.

So how do you measure the effectiveness of your web PR efforts? Essentially the same way you'd measure any other marketing efforts. The first, and most difficult, question each Internet marketer needs to ask is: What do you hope to accomplish with your web efforts?

There are three major categories of purpose, though, knowing the web, I'm sure someone will come up with a dozen more before the month is out.

1. **Proactive publicity.**

   Almost all organizations today include "the Internet" as an audience, or category of publicity. Recent statistics indicate that consumers are increasingly turning to the Internet first for information on purchases, life choices and news. A proactive PR campaign today must include a web presence, Recognizing that it requires a different type of activity and has a completely different set of editors, smart organizations dedicate a Web-savvy individual(s) to ensuring that news of their company or organization appears in the major e-zines, listings, and link lists.

2. **Reactive crisis management**

   Just as consumers are increasingly turning to the web for information, so too are journalists, particularly when they are following a crisis. In response, most savvy organizations have developed "crisis communications" web sites that they can turn on when necessary. These sites contain contact information and background data and thus become a place for journalists to get the most up-to-date data.

3. **Relationship building**

   The biggest difference between the Web and traditional media is its interactive nature. Thus it becomes a perfect medium for building relationships with your publics. In chat rooms and on web sites, around the world or in your neighborhood, dialog is occurring daily, even hourly, with constituencies, customers and prospects, and as well as enemies. The goals of all those dialogs are the most basic of public relations objectives: to educate, convince, win over, make aware and persuade.

WHAT KIND OF RULERS DO YOU NEED IN CYBERSPACE?

The precise tool or technique you use to measure your image or results in cyberspace depends on the objective you select. My idea toolbox has half a dozen measurement devices.

1. **A tool to find out what the cyber media is writing about you and what your constituencies are seeing about you (and your competition)**

   This type of tool comes under the same category as "clipping services" and there are a number of them out there. Companies like CyberAlert can look at specific publications as well as the whole "universe" of Internet publications. One problem most of these services have - and in truth it's a problem we all have - is archival stories. While it is a plus to an organization to have archival stories on the web, since this increases their chance of being seen, the drawback is that it will skew your numbers if you are trying to develop accurate metrics for your cyber presence. If you don't want them included you need to contact the service to ensure that they exclude old data.

   Another problem that at least one firm, CyberAlert has solved, is the problem of "dead URLs." As you know, URLs become obsolete rather quickly. What CyberAlert does is "capture" the text from the URL as they find it and store it, so that if that URL goes dead, you will still have the text from the original hit.

2. A tool to find out the size of the impact you are having

This is where the companies like Media Metrix and Nielsen-Netratings, Standard Rate and Data Service (SRDS) and Business Publishers Association come in. These firms, as well as the Advertising Research Foundation and the Internet Advertising Bureau, are all working on developing standards to determine a standard way of determining how many potential eyeballs you are reaching. Part of the problem is that while the larger web sites are represented in these ratings, many smaller sites that may have a huge impact on your audience may not be represented.

I've always maintained that Hits stands for "How Idiots Track Success" and as a metric they are virtually worthless. The emerging standard is the monthly "unique audience" -- the number of actual people that visit a site during a month (if 1 person visits 10 times during a month, that's 1 unique visitor). It is somewhat similar to print circulations, although perhaps a weekly unique audience figure would be even more similar.

As with print circulations, the figure doesn't represent the actual number of people who saw a story; it represents the number of people who had the *opportunity* to see it. Another caveat is that Nielsen-Netratings figures are based on panels of some 30,000 Internet surfers who have software attached to their computers that track where they go. Similar to Nielsen TV ratings, it is a random sample of actual users

If Nielsen-Netratings doesn't list a particular website that is critical to you, BPA International, ABC Interactive or SRDS Interactive might list a unique audience figure; the next best is to take a self-reported unique audience figure from the website itself.

If all else fails and you're stuck with hits, visitors or page impressions, you can still extrapolate unique audience figures from monthly page impressions or number of visitors using a multiplier. The multiplier is derived from looking at the relationship between page impressions, number of visitors and unique visitors in Nielsen-Netratings' database over a four-month period. After looking at several hundred publications, the ratio of unique audience to page impressions was .11, and the ratio of unique audience to visitors was .46 So when monthly unique audience figures are absolutely not available, monthly page impressions can be multiplied by .11, or monthly visitors can be multiplied by .46 to extrapolate monthly unique visitors.

If the publication you are trying to track gives you weekly page impressions/requests, those have less similarity to print circulations than unique audience. Weekly page impressions are a good relative measure of the traffic/importance/audience size of various websites, but are useless as a comparison to print or broadcast media.

The holy grail is actual unique page requests for a particular story. While that number might be much lower than print circulations, since in print pubs we never know if someone reads a particular article, it would be a far more accurate determination of how many people have actually seen a story. In lieu of that, unique audience is the most comparable figure, because it's people, not double counted, who may see your story.

Regardless of which figures you use, it is always dangerous to compare Internet audience figures with print audience figures because of the different methods of data retrieval.

3. A tool to find out what your constituencies are saying about you

To find out what people are saying about you, you need to monitor their chats and discussions in Usenet groups and other chat areas. Services like CyberAlert, E-Watch, Burrell's Cybertalk and Autonomy all gather and process the postings that your constituencies are making on Usenet discussion groups and other Internet chat areas. In general, the problem we face is too much data rather than too little.

E-Watch was the first to deliver discussion group data, but they quickly overwhelmed their customers with data. CyberAlert and Autonomy have made great strides in filtering data and use highly sophisticated algorithms and promise delivery of only those areas or those topics that you want. It's a good idea to work with whichever vendor you chose to specify which sites you want to search, as opposed to searching the entire universe.

Once you've gathered the postings, your next challenge is to analyze them to determine what they are actually saying. Studies have shown that typically people go online to chat about news that they've heard one to two weeks after an announcement, so if you're measuring a specific event, you need to monitor chat rooms for at least a month after the event. You should analyze the discussion content for tone, positioning and messages, just as you would your print or broadcast media coverage. The one problem that technology has yet to tell us is how many people are viewing each discussion group posting. For now, you can only monitor the actual number of postings, not their total impact.

4. A tool to determine what your constituencies think about you

The Internet has made it possible to get instant feedback from your constituencies, and there are now dozens of companies that offer web-based surveying tools. Typically these tools take two forms:

1. Web-based programs that enable you or your web master to either put up a web site, or add a page to your web site to gather data from visitors. Examples of such products are Survey Said (www.surveysaid.com), Survey Connect (www.surveyconnect.com), Survey Tracker http://www.surveytracker.com/htm/software/software.htm), Inquisite (www.inquisite.com), Survey Solutions (http://www.perseus.com/softwareprod/ssweb_index.html), Web Forms (http://www.q-d.com/wf.htm),
2. E-mail services such as Custominsight.com offer automated questionnaire development email distribution. An excellent overview of these products was compiled by Ephraim Schecter and Henry Schaffer from the University of North Carolina and can be found at: http://ias.ga.unc.edu/~eis/websvyware.html. Additionally, David Solomon at Office of Medical Education Research and Development and the Department of Medicine, College of Human Medicine, Michigan State University has written a paper that outlines the challenges and opportunities of web-based surveys that can be found at http://ericae.net/pare/getvn.asp?v=7&n=19.

5. A tool to determine what action, if any, your constituencies are taking

Behavioral change is both the loftiest goal and the hardest to measure. However, new services from companies such as Loyalty Builders (www.loyaltybuilders.com) are making that task ever easier. Loyalty Builders takes customer transaction data and maps it over time to determine what impacts customer purchases and loyalty. When Loyalty Builders data is tracked against PR and Web activity, you can determine what impact, if any, the Web activity had on customer purchase. Other integrated marketing measurement firms such as Millward-Brown and MMI are also beginning to look at web marketing results in conjunction with other marketing activities.

If you don't have access to either the budget or data required by such firms, you could always do it yourself, which is what Miller Shandwick did for Kodak. Unsatisfied with conventional web tracking systems, Miller Shandwick manually analyzed referring URLs for Kodak's Picture Playground site to determine which were coming from Web publications. Some 208 hours later, they determined that during the promotion, 5% of the total traffic coming to the site was specifically from Miller Shandwick's online PR efforts.

6. A tool to determine whether it's all worth it

At some point, you need to put all of the above measures to the ultimate test – does it help the business or ultimate goals of your organization? This involves factoring in the costs for the results. You need to track criteria such as "Marketing or PR cost per new customer acquired," or "Cost per minute spent with prospect," to help you determine what is or is not working. You can also compare the costs of on-line PR with other Internet traffic generators, such as banner ads and sponsored placements, to determine a relative value for your on-line PR efforts.

THE BASIC RULES FOR SUCCESS, NO MATTER WHAT MEASUREMENT DEVICE YOU USE

For any measurement program, however, there are essentially 7 basic steps that any measurement system must take.

Step 1: Define your Objective

Regardless of whether your objective fits cleanly into one of the objectives listed above, you still need to articulate it and get agreement within your organization as to what it is that your PR effort is trying to achieve.

Step 2: Determine the Criteria

What specific numbers will you be tracking, those "leading indicators" that tell you (and your boss) what is working or not.

Step 3: Select a Tool

Your objectives will determine the tools you use. If your goal is to increase awareness and preference, some sort of survey is required. If you're trying for traffic, the psychographics and demographic profile of that traffic will determine your success.

Step 4: Select a Benchmark

Measurement is a comparative process. If what you're selling is water filters, you can't compare yourself to Ragu spaghetti sauce. You need to select a relevant organization or timeframe against which to compare your results. You also need to make sure that the information you receive from that comparison is useful. If you are a small local juice company, there's no point in benchmarking your results against Coca-Cola, since the budgets, staffing and resources will never be comparable and thus your data won't be actionable.

Step 5: Compare to Objectives

Avoid the "this bar is bigger than that bar" syndrome and demonstrate your accomplishments with actionable data.

Step 6: Take Action

The purpose of measurement is to improve a program. To that end, you need to outline the steps you're going to make toward improvement

Step 7: Measure Again

Measurement must be part of an on-going process so that you know what progress you've made. Then when you fix or change things, you know whether they are working or not working.