

## How much is your content worth? Measuring website content ROI.

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Since the advent of the web channel for content delivery in the mid-1990s, practically every company has been happily generating content and publishing it online. Organizations post content for any number of reasons, such as helping a customer solve a problem or enticing a buyer to delve deeper into the site, to get eyeballs on the site to sell ads or to build a corporate brand by showing a level of expertise on a particular subject. Given the wide range of content and the many different objectives, it is difficult to evaluate the return on investment (ROI) on content. One way to get a handle on this information is to use web analytics software to help you identify a range of metrics that, depending on your goals, help you decide if you are getting a decent ROI.

### ANALYZE THIS

Many companies still generate content with little concern for how effective it is (i.e., if it is generating a decent return on investment, however you choose to measure that). As Phil Kemelov, VP of strategic consulting at web analytics consulting firm **Semphonic**, and the lead analyst on The CMS Watch Web Analytics Report explains, "I think companies are still only just getting the message that web analytics are the key to controlling costs in web development and analyzing and marketing your content. It seems companies have been comfortable spending money on developing content and they don't know if it's being read or not and if it's really contributing to their bottom line."

Part of the problem, according to Stephan Pretorius, president of Acceleration--a firm that works with companies to help them build a marketing technology infrastructure around site analytics, advertising, email, and search--is a lack of understanding in the marketplace about the connection between content ROI and web analytics. "I think from a site analytics perspective, which is obviously measuring content and content pieces, one of the key things we find is that customers don't really have a grasp of the difference between actual data and key performance indicators (KPIs)." He adds that you can't have a goal to improve KPIs because they are health measures themselves. Instead, he explains, you need to identify actionable data you can measure to have an impact on your KPIs and hence your ROI.

Matthew Langie, director of product marketing at web analytics software firm WebTrends, says that web analytics software can help you do that. He explains that when you produce offline content, it's harder to measure customer behavior. But online you can see where users clicked, if they subscribed, and the path they took through your website and your content. "Almost everything is measurable online, which is the beauty of that form of marketing. You can optimize what you can measure," he says. Once you can measure, he adds, you can make decisions based on how effective a piece of content was on your site. "From that, we can measure based on the click stream which content is more effective than something else. What's great is you can measure most if not all the user behavior online," Langie says.

## CONTENT TYPES

Before you can understand content ROI, you need to identify the type of content you are publishing and what you hope to achieve with it. Kemelor says that by knowing the type of content, you can better recognize the objectives you want to achieve and then be equipped to decide if the content is successful or not. "The first element of analyzing content is to understand the purpose of the content. So for example, you have content serving different purposes: content delivering information, content to persuade or inform [and so forth]. It's really key to understand how the content on your site maps to the goals and objectives of your website," Kemelor says.

Akin Arikan, senior segment manager for internet marketing at Unica, a web analytics company, identifies four content types: retail, B2B, customer service, and publishing. He says, "This industry distinguishes four types of business models, and depending on which model applies, you end up prioritizing related metrics and finding out what works."

With retail or B2B sites, Arikan explains, the goal is to generate leads or sales. A customer service site is trying to supply the necessary content on the website to prevent a more expensive call to a live customer service agent. And content-oriented sites, such as a publisher's website, are trying to generate advertising sales (unless they use the subscription model).

## UNDERSTANDING OBJECTIVES

Understanding the type of content can help drive your objectives--what you hope to achieve by publishing a certain type of content. Once you understand the type of content, he says, "what to measure and how to measure becomes more straightforward." For instance, if you want to measure the effectiveness of a content page that's meant to drive people to purchase something, you need to measure the clicks after that page to see

where people go and if they go to the desired page after reading the content.

According to Kemelor, if you think about this up front as you create the content, it becomes much easier to understand the results. "It always comes down to profit or loss at some point, and if there's content on the site, there should be some decision at the outset as to what the measurable outcome is," he says. In fact, Pretorius thinks the content itself is less important than the goal you are trying to achieve. "I don't think content matters," Pretorius says. "You have to distill it down to the business objective. What they are trying to do: save time, make money, and so on."

However, this is not as easy as it sounds. Even if you have measuring tools in place, there's no simple equation to measure content ROI. That's because, says Langie, even after a decade, there are not a lot of people who really understand the numbers and how this all works. He says although there is a growing body of expertise, there is still a level of immaturity in the marketplace. "Like any business decision, it requires an investment. It's important to know and understand about your investment in online marketing," he says. That means you need analytics solutions as well as an investment in people and personnel and the expertise to understand the metrics. Langie points out that a common challenge is to find people who understand how to do this effectively.

Unica's Arikan agrees, saying he has been preaching for a number of years that regardless of whether you are measuring the effectiveness of your content or your web marketing campaign, companies need to invest in time and personnel. This means assigning at least one person who is dedicated to data gathering and analysis (more than one person if it's a larger organization). The other thing Arikan advises is to place as narrow a focus as possible on your goals to avoid what he calls "analysis paralysis." Rather than loading up with a web analytics tool that spits out 200 reports, he recommends focusing on the top three metrics you want to improve this year.

Even after you identify the goals you want to achieve with your content, you need to keep the analytics process going. This not a one-and-done proposition, Pretorius says. "What I think a lot of people fail to understand is that website improvement is an ongoing process, not something you do once," he says.

When your company publishes content to a website, you may have a variety of motivations and goals in mind. But unless you set up a system to provide benchmarks to meet those goals, you are not going to be able to provide

any real meaningful measurement of success. Content ROI is by no means easy to measure, but if you put software in place and hire the right individuals to help you interpret the data, you can get a grip on your content investment. You can begin to understand what's happening to all of your content after you publish it online.

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## Metric Examples

If you want to start measuring content ROI in a meaningful way, it is important to decide which metrics to use and how to interpret the data. This is always going to be open to question partly because, as Arikan from Unica says, there are literally hundreds of different metrics, and the ones you look at depend on your content type and goals. Some examples are described below:

**Time Viewed:** One metric is the simple time-viewed metric, says **Semphonic's** Kemelor. "You can determine what you think should be a reasonable time on [a] page that indicates someone has read the article." He says a government information site might use this metric. The goal is to get people to read the information on the site and not leave it quickly.

**Cost Savings:** A customer service site might look at how quickly visitors found the information rather than the time spent on the site. Quick culling of information saves the company the cost of a call to customer service, according to Arikan.

**Page Views:** If you are an ad-supported content site, you can use page views to measure your ROI. "If you are ad supported, the most important metric is page views," explains Arikan. "The more pages, the more ads you deliver, and since you get paid for the ads, that's what you care about."

**Cost-Per-Page View:** Content publishers could also look at the cost-per-page view metric. As Arikan puts it, "How expensive was it to get the visitor here and how many pages did they end up seeing?"

**Number of Qualified Leads:** A B2B or retail site might want to look at how the content leads to qualified leads or actual sales, Arikan says. On a catalogue site, for instance, did the content entice the visitor to buy? On a

B2B site, did the content drive the visitor to fill out a form to learn more about the products and services on the site?

## Measuring Internal Content Use

It makes sense that companies are concerned about external content usage, but it can also be useful to look at internal content usage on your intranet to see what people are reading. Generating internal content also involves an investment of time and knowledge of what people are or are not reading, which can help you make better decisions about where to put your resources.

Kemelor from **Semphonic** and CMS Watch doesn't think companies are utilizing their intranets enough. He finds this surprising given that companies know much more about their employees out of the gate than they know about customers. "When doing external analytics you want to look at financial data and demographic data to get a better understanding of your customers so you can market more efficiently to them," he says. But on an internal site, you have a built-in segmentation of your audience because you know so much about them, such as which departments they are in, what they are interested in, and so forth. Kemelor explains that on external sites, you can only get this level of information if visitors choose to give it to you.

Arikan says that measuring content usage on intranets is a big part of Unica's business. He looks at internal sites as a kind of customer service offering. Employees are looking for information. Big corporations have gigantic intranets, he says, and they want to know which content people are using. Langie from WebTrends agrees, saying a number of customers from large companies are using WebTrends tools to track internal data.

"On an HR site for example, companies want to know: Are employees downloading HR policies or the travel policies or the expense report policies? If we are subscribing to a journal, are people reading it and can you actually make an informed decision about the content?" For example, if your company buys a white paper on a particular HR topic you believed would be popular, but it turns out it wasn't, you can understand if it's because it wasn't a very good article or it simply wasn't well-promoted. If you move it to the homepage and people still aren't reading it, you might assume people just don't find it interesting. But he explains that using analytics enables you to make an informed decision just as you would with externally-facing content.