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The Long Tail and Analytics

By Rob Sullivan

The Long Tail and Analytics :: Why Analytics Need to Get Better

There is a theory called "The Long Tail" that noted that a relative handful of blogs have many links going into them but "the long tail" of millions of blogs have only a handful of links going into them. It is very similar to the bowtie theory.

This same Long Tail theory has been applied to search in that a handful of queries drive a lot of clicks to a site but in reality there are sometimes tens of thousands of other terms which actually convert at a higher rate.

In this article I explore the Long Tail of search and how analytics impact it.

There was a great article by Danny Sullivan on Search Engine Watch relating to The Long Tail and Search and how the top 50% of searches generated 80% of the search volume.

However there is also the argument that the bottom 20% of searches also generate 60% of the sales. In other words, those terms which are more focused and specific are more likely to convert. For example, a search for a generic term like "lawyer" is less likely to convert than "New Jersey divorce lawyer."

Therefore, as a search engine marketer we need to not only focus on those high traffic more generic words, but also put some effort towards lower traffic, but more than likely higher converting keywords.

This is a common tactic in today's SEM. In fact it's the norm for PPC marketers - to have exposure on high traffic (and high cost terms) even if they don't get clicks. This helps build brand awareness. Then the budget is more focused on focused terms that generally cost less but convert at a higher rate.

Or organic search marketers we see this every day. My large clients get tons of clicks from more generic phrases but the conversions happen on the more specific terms.

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And my biggest problem with this right now is that I have no easy way to measure those thousands (And sometimes tens of thousands) of individual conversions effectively.

I feel today's analytics packages need to be more flexible and automatically group referrals into keyword baskets, much like today's modern PPC programs.

This way you could easily determine if a Geographic referral (for example) is "worth" more than a product specific referral.

Through grouping of keywords much better analysis of traffic, both paid and organic, could be completed to determine where tactics and strategy could better be applied.

For example, using the above situation, if my site is positioned well organically for both geographic and product specific terms, yet I am seeing more geographic referrals which lead to conversions, then I will want to develop a strategy to enhance this. I would want to emphasize my organic geographic placement and try to further increase my rankings here.

But without the grouped analytics I've mentioned this is difficult to do at this time.

For example, one of my clients is a high profile legal site which gets millions of search referrals from hundreds of thousands of visitors every month. Of the hundred thousand or so Google referrals, I know that about 75% are more generic terms, but what I really want to know is whether the other 25% – the better converting terms - are primarily geographic terms (like New Jersey Lawyer) or searches for specific types of lawyers (like divorce lawyer).

However, because there are so many terms in the Long Tail I can't easily determine this.

Therefore I am calling on Analytics vendors to address this situation. I NEED to know what terms are better for my clients. Sure I can guess that geographic terms are likely better in this case, but I need proof and I can't easily get it.

Analytics should be more like search engines in a sense. Rather than showing me all the referrals, show my the organic referrals from Google which may contain a location. And don't make my have to type in the location (although make it an option), the analytics should be smart enough to group keywords, with some guidance.

Why can't Hitbox, Urchin and Webtrends understand that bankruptcy terms and financial terms may be related, or that Paris and Europe terms are related.

There needs to be more intuition programmed into the analytics to help the average user be able to determine where to focus.

That being said, if there was such functionality in an Analytics package I would think it would become one of the most used features. Because if I could slice and dice the data umpteen different ways to find out if New York is more popular than New Jersey (in terms of search) then i would be able to better

target both my paid and organic campaigns.

That's because I could see that if I'm paying higher PPC costs for New York terms, but find that New Jersey actually converts better then I will shift budget to New Jersey terms.

Conversely, if I find New Jersey terms convert better and I'm doing paid campaigns for both NY and NJ even though I'm ranking highly for both, why wouldn't I try moving some budget to other areas which could do better?

Also, having such intuitive analytics could help find those organic terms which have lower PPC costs because others haven't considered them yet conversions are good.

As you can see, there could be many different ways to use an analytics package that was able to more effectively allow you to use the data.

Because if you can increase the occurrence of higher converting keywords in both your organic and

paid campaigns you will increase your sales. Even if your total search volume drops because less emphasis is placed on generic terms, as long as there's a positive ROI in the end, does it matter?

Consider it another way: My experience has shown me that more specific terms have higher conversion rates than more general terms. Even if the general terms gets more traffic, there are a greater earnings from the specific term.

The point I'm trying to make is that even though a term has high referrals, it isn't likely as highly converting as other terms. Therefore one needs to be able to see the whole picture and with today's analytics this is extremely difficult without lots of manual intervention (exporting to a spreadsheet or database and performing complex analysis).

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Put Muscle Behind Your Web Site With Web Analytics

By Richard Radcliffe

Your business has a web site. You were careful in selecting a designer who understood how crucial your site is to your marketing strategy, and who had the skills to integrate and present your content in a way that fulfills that strategy. It's well designed and optimized. Now you can just sit back and wait for the profits to roll in right? Wrong!

A well designed web site is just the beginning. A good marketing strategy never stops improving, and

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your web site is a vital marketing tool. How do you improve its effectiveness in bringing in more and more leads and turning higher and higher percentages of those leads into conversions?

You do this by understanding everything you can about the people who visit your site. How did the visitor find your site? Did they find you from a link pointing to your site, a search engine? What keywords did they use for that search? How long did that visitor stay at your site? What did they look at? What didn't they look at? How far into a payment process did they get before they abandoned the purchase? What prevented them from becoming a customer?

Knowing the answers to questions like these is extremely important in order for you to refine your web site. You want to use more of what is working for you and get rid of content that doesn't work for you. It will also keep your site up to date in an ever changing marketplace. Now how do you get this information?

The answer is 'web analytics'. Web analytics gathers information about what visitors do when they are at your web site, and then organizes that data into reports you can customize to suit your needs. Analytics can either be hosted online by a provider of the service or can be purchased as a program that you own and manage. There are many different vendors of web analytic services.

Analytics packages can be hosted for as low as \$30 per month and this price goes up as the amount of data tracking increases. Programs, on the other hand, will vary in cost from free trial versions with very few features, to costing thousands of dollars for complete, full spectrum tracking. Knowing what you need to know about your visitors, will help you decide the level of tracking features you need to get the most out of your web site.

It is important to look at the information gathered in these reports, at the very least, on a weekly basis, and to make changes to your web site based on this information. Trust the data, not your expectations of what your potential customers want. Web analytics is a powerful marketing weapon and sets apart those who are serious about having a web site that significantly enhances their business, from those who are not.

Richard Radcliffe is a Web Designer/Consultant, writer, and father of a 6 year old son. He is the owner of Renshaw Design which specializes in web design and web marketing consultation for small businesses, nonprofits, clubs, and professionals with a private practice. Visit his site at

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