



Building Web Success: Optimizing Online Conversions

Part One: Goals and Tracking

Many small businesses have a website but are unaware of how to measure its success. It may have a solid design and functionality, but does it have a defined goal?

Every website needs a goal. With a clearly defined goal, it becomes possible to measure, understand and optimize your website's conversion rate. By optimizing and improving your site's conversion rate, you can better meet online business goals.

To offer more insight and get some expert advice, we spoke with Liam Delahunty of Online Sales, a UK-based company specializing in online conversion optimization.



Identify the Goal

Delahunty states that measuring site conversions start with setting a specific goal for the site. "Site conversions are specific events that define a successful user visit," he says. "On some sites, this goal might be the user clicking on a particular link, signing-up for an email list or maybe performing a document download. For many sites, it means the direct sale of services or merchandise. When the user performs the action - be it a click, a form submission, or a sale - the goal of the site is met."

While Delahunty states it is certainly common to have more than one goal for a website (e.g., you have an email form, a unique link to click, and a separate document download area - all unrelated goals, but all sharing the same site) he stresses the idea that each goal should be identified, tracked and optimized individually.

"For proper site and goal optimization, you must look at the data for each goal separately," says Delahunty. "When you are able to clearly separate one goal from another, it allows you to track and monitor each goal more thoroughly. Once the goal is identified and segregated from other user actions, you can identify ways to increase and improve each goal's performance and success rate."

Look at your site and determine your expectations. Do you expect that the user lands on the home page, clicks immediately to a form and then fills out and submits that form? Do you expect that the user searches for a specific product and buys that product? Or contacts your customer service department? Or requests a document download?

Whatever your expectation is for the site, define it as a goal. Once you have clearly defined your site's goal(s), you are ready to start collecting and analyzing the traffic data surrounding each goal.

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Collect the Data

Tracking the individual user actions in your website is a crucial step towards improving your online performance.

Most often, software is used to enable web traffic analysis. This software can be free (such as Google Analytics, Clicky, the open-source solution Piwik or plug-ins used for Wordpress blogs) and might even be offered by your web host as an added benefit for hosting. Traffic analysis software might also be licensed or purchased from a variety of third-party vendors and traffic specialists such as Omniture, Lyris/ClickTracks or WebTrends.

Many of the free versions will offer you all the information you need, but this will definitely vary by provider. Google Analytics is usually sufficient for most small and medium enterprises (SME) site's needs, but it is important to note, that some businesses prefer not to provide Google with vast amounts of competitive intelligence. For these businesses, one of the other options makes sense.

In addition to the JavaScript-based analytics packages listed above, there are also more traditional log file parsers such as Analog, Awstats and Webalizer. Although the on-page scripts provide excellent data on most users, log file analysis programs will also track search engine bots and spiders. Therefore, log file analysis will provide another level of information about your site's performance.

Delahunty adds, "The on-page scripts are not able to tell you that a product image is "hot-linked" in a forum or that the search engine bots are ignoring a large portion of your site. Looking at log file analysis can provide further actionable insights for the business or site owner."

If you have the resources, using more than one tracking and reporting option can be beneficial. It enables you to see anomalies in the results more immediately and tweak the setup accordingly - but do beware of "paralysis through analysis" and keep looking for actionable information from your statistics. An added benefit of using two or more sources is that comparing the data collected from more than one source will usually offer the reviewer a more balanced, accurate and complete picture of the traffic passing through any website.

Tip: If you are not already collecting web traffic data for analysis, install a free solution (like Google Analytics, Piwik, Clicky, Webalizer, etc.) to begin immediately...you need to be able to see what is happening before you can take steps to improve.

Also note that log-based options could allow you to perform retroactive reporting on historical data (traffic before tracking was in place), while on-page options will not. If you have specific needs in data collecting or reporting, it is important to match the type of analytics package you select to align with your expectations.

Delahunty states that you can get even deeper analysis with other tools: "As you improve and refine your analysis, you might also consider tools such as 103bees, which helps to identify areas of opportunity it discovers in your traffic patterns. Also click-mapping tools like CrazyEgg and ClickTale produce heatmaps to see exactly where visitors click on your pages. These affordable solutions let you visually discover opportunity for improving navigation, imagery, layout and more."

Once your goals are set and site tracking is in place, it makes sense to start understanding more about your goal conversion rate, and how optimizing this rate will increase your business' profitability.

Next week, we will release Part Two: Conversion Rate Measurement

And the final chapter of this series will be Part Three: Conversion Rate Optimization

