AT INTERNET
Online Intelligence Solutions

CHOOSING A WEB ANALYTICS SOLUTION

By Jacques Warren

ABOUT JACQUES WARREN

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Jacques is the co-author of "Web Analytics : Mesurer le succès et maximiser les profits de votre site Web*" Eyrolle editions 2009.

*"Web Analytics: Measuring the success and maximizing the profits of your website"

SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

Discussions and debates on the range of different web analytics tools available always raise a lot of interest. Choosing the right solution falls into the category of vital decisions that a company has to make! Although we do not deny the importance associated with making such a choice, we believe that the most important factor to be considered is the people who will use tool, which will be discussed later.

Before any measurement tool is purchased a very important decision needs to be made. The field of science has shown how the different materials which are used have influenced scientists' knowledge. Purchasing a measurement tool also means adopting a view of what we actually want to measure.

We believe that this is particularly true in the field of Web Analytics[1]. Anyone who has tried to analyse their online activity with more than one solution has found themselves with many unanswered questions relating to the significant differences in the results that exist, defying all logic. We don't believe, and insist on the fact, that it is a good idea to use more than one tool to measure the same phenomena. It is even less of a good idea to use a second tool to confirm the results generated by the first one just so that the results which are generated can be trusted! We have, unfortunately, taken part in many unproductive discussions and debates on why differences in results exist. There is, however, a solution to this problem: all you need to do is correctly implement the right tool, keep a check on it and believe in it.

With this in mind, there are several different factors which need to be considered before choosing a Web Analytics solution and this white paper will explore each of the different factors in detail.

1 For the purposes of this White Paper, our comments will be limited to behavioural analysis tools which analyse visitor activity on digital interfaces, in other words "classic" Web Analytics.

DO YOUR HOMEWORK

In principle you should already have established your different Key Performance Indicators (KPI)[1]

It is not possible to present the important factors which are to be considered when choosing a web analytics solution without raising the issue of what it is exactly that we want to measure. What criteria should be used to choose a Web Analytics tool if we do not know what we want to do with it? In an ideal world, we believe that this reflection should precede any decision which is to be made on choosing a solution. In principle you should already have established your different Key Performance Indicators (KPI)[1]. These KPIs, coupled with the Web Analytics solution's capability of efficiently and effectively delivering the essential measurements identified during the reflection process, will form the basis of the selection criteria to be used for choosing your measurement tool.

We are aware of the fact that companies purchase Web Analytics solutions before identifying what they need to measure, and in many cases this is how companies have entered Web Analytics. Whatever the situation, if your company has not identified what needs to be measured, we strongly recommend that you do so, either to better exploit your current tool or review your initial choice!

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1 Read our White Paper "Key Performance Indicators: Definition and Action".

THE SELECTION PROCESS

Once the chosen solution is in place and people have become accustomed to working with it, it becomes difficult to change habits

Even with the support of an analysis framework and a set of well defined indicators, selecting a Web Analytics solution is not such a simple affair. Such products evolve in waves, or new feature upon new feature is added to the existing product; features which can be shared by more than one publisher or which are unique to each. The selection process becomes more complicated when we consider all of the different people involved in the selection process, the continuous addition of criteria judged as being essential and the additional needs which are created once users become aware of the application's capabilities and potential.

Several readers will undoubtedly find a shortcut to help them decide which Web Analytics solution to buy: why not just take the market leader (defined in terms of market share or sales turnover) or simply use a free solution and at a later date see what is actually needed? Although this approach would save a company time by getting around a difficult task (such as all the different committees which exist), we believe that there is a significant risk associated with it: once the chosen solution is in place and people have become accustomed to working with it, it becomes difficult to change habits even if the first choice is not the best. Why not spend the required time necessary at the beginning to make the correct choice first time?

KEY QUESTIONS

There is of course the question of the results that we expect to obtain (described above). Which fundamental questions do we want the solution to answer? What outputs do we want to measure so that the quality of how a company executes its strategic vision for the Web can be measured?

Then of course, there are the questions associated with return on investment, which will in turn determine the scale of a company's budgets. Of course investment cannot represent a large part of the profit margins, although one of the expectations of a Web Analytics solution is to be able to improve profit margins thanks to optimisation and the different analyses available. We are not offering a calculation method, but are simply saying that any investment needs to be placed in a context where a comprehensive return can be expected.

The questions associated with return on investment, which will in turn determine the scale of a company's budgets

If you already know that your data should be integrated into your company's other systems, your CRM in particular, then the solution's capabilities will increase when compared to other contexts where the analyses are simply web based. Do you need to integrate external data to the Web Analytics solution or do you need to export data from your solution to your other systems? These two questions are somewhat complex and require very specific criteria to be drawn up, criteria which are determined by your systems which are already in place.

We recommend, and it is only but normal, that you rely on and contact your chosen solution's professional services

There is also the important question of human resources. It goes without saying that, in the medium term, Web Analytics requires a minimum level of internal expertise to use the chosen solution. We recommend, and it is only but normal, that you rely on and contact your chosen solution's professional services during the first year after the solution has been implemented. Not doing so for fear of spending too much money will be a costly error in the long term. Such professional services offered by any solution provider could certainly be a criterion for selection. However, as the aim of reaching a high level of autonomy becomes increasingly apparent, internal expertise in using the solution will naturally increase.

SELECTION CRITERIA

Below is a list of some general criteria to be considered when choosing a Web Analytics solution; you will undoubtedly have other criteria to add to this list according to your individual needs. We believe that each criterion is necessary, and it is up to you to decide the importance of each one.

Will the solution be hosted internally or externally?

Should you have complete control of data collection and data processing or will you rely on the publisher to carry out these tasks? Some solutions offer the two options. Hosting the solution internally has significant advantages in terms of flexibility and control. However, we cannot deny the disadvantages associated with flexibility in terms of the costs of infrastructure, application supports and updates, which for many companies, can become sky-high. With outsourcing, on the other hand, the partial loss of control and increased dependency is compensated by simplifying tasks, whilst problems associated with the upkeep of the infrastructure in place are transferred to the publisher. With outsourcing you will always be kept up to date on the most recent version of the product that is available.

Respecting laws and regulations

it goes without saying but any future service provider must confirm that they will respect the data collection and data protection laws which are in force. The service provider must also have a set of clear instructions on the type of data that you can collect. Some solutions have very strict laws on the information that different data collection activities leave on their servers, whilst some solutions refuse to collect data which can be used to identify people (Personally Identifiable Information)

Real/delayed time

From the outset, real-time doesn't mean looking at what happens on a site at the exact moment when an event takes place. A minimum period of time is required to process the results and in any case why would a company want fragmented results relating to visits which are still in progress? With some Web Analytics solutions the results can be obtained up to anything from 15 minutes to an hour for certain variables. If real-time costs do not represent an excessive cost for your company then why ignore them? However, few companies will find it relevant to use real-time, as there are only a few occasions when it will be really useful. Very few companies have a flexible structure in place to take full advantage of real-time and what it has to offer. However, such companies do exist and their ability to process data rapidly, such as AT Internet's solution with a 5 minute cycle, may be an important criterion for selection.

Documentation, language and support

Readers may not consider these points to be as important as questions they may have relating to the different capabilities of a Web Analytics solution and the features that it has to offer. Be careful! These three points are important for the long term success of any solution that has been implemented. This is not only a simple question of the tagging in place and the prior settings chosen, but on a larger scale it includes the effectiveness of using the solution in the long term. You will need to check if there is an abundance of documentation available in the users' language (certainly not a default if this is the case!) and if users can receive support in their language. As far as the support is concerned, it is always good to know the service levels provided, the availability of the support and response times according to the severity of a potential problem. This aspect should not be ignored; never having to contact the support team means that the solution is not used! You will inevitably do this.

Present and future costs

You should have a good idea of the costs associated with the solution for a period of at least 3 years. For solutions which have been installed internally, there are normally renewal costs for the support which often correspond to 20% of licence costs. There may also be costs associated with an increase in the number of pages/events which are analysed, even for a version which is implemented internally. Costs associated with outsourced solutions normally include support costs, whereas billing in terms of traffic volume is repeated on an annual basis. The Web Analytics solution which you purchase may also be modular, with several different features available. The different features which are available are subject to additional quotation, which is far from being a disadvantage.

Perennity

This is one of the criteria which is rarely discussed but which is, however, very important. If the choice you are about to make is partner-related rather than product-related, you also need to consider the provider's history. Although the past may not always guarantee what the future may hold, what matters is that the chosen solution be functional for at least a few years.

Features

They should not be forgotten! Don't be dazzled by the large number of features available. Any publisher with a serious product will, of course, have a wide range of features. When choosing a Web Analytics solution, be sensible and stick to the key variables and metrics which are essential to your project and closely examine how each solution can provide you with the results that you expect. Do not choose a solution because of the different features that it has to offer and that you might use one day, but rather according to the features that you need and will use in the near future. This will help you a lot when it comes to drawing up bids to tender, having identified the key features which each solution needs to match, which in turn will make it much easier to compare them.

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Be wary of any potential solution provider who is hesitant in letting you try their solution

Test the application

Request to try a potential solution on your own site. This will allow you to find out what the application is really capable of, and is also a great opportunity to check a system's real performance. This type of operation is possible without having to carry out any complicated tagging on the site. Don't be put off by providers of solutions who object to such a trial because it may be too expensive for them. Be wary of any potential solution provider who is hesitant in letting you try their solution.

Only consider providers of solutions who are ready to legally commit to their performance and service levels

Service level (SLA)

Only consider providers of solutions who are ready to legally commit to their performance and service levels and who are in a position to provide details on their contingency plans in the event of an extreme situation taking place.

Data ownership

Request that the issue of data ownership be clearly mentioned in the contract. If you choose a solution which is implemented on your servers internally, and you carry out the data collection process, it goes without saying that you are the owner of the data. However, this is not always clear with tailor-made solutions; can the data be easily retrieved? Is this even possible? Should a schedule of data retrieval dates be forecast? This fact should not be ignored especially if the publisher only stocks data for a year or two.

Availability, speed at responding to your questions and how they understand your business challenges

As far as bids to tender are concerned a task which should be avoided at all costs is to mention more than 3 to 5 potential solutions on your list. The task of comparing different solutions becomes increasingly difficult with the more solution providers you mention in your bid to tender. It is a safe bet to say that a solution which meets your needs can be found in a limited number of the potential Web Analytics solutions you might be considering to purchase. One specific need, on the other hand, may eliminate most of the solutions you are considering to purchase except for one or two. This underlines the importance of the work involved in identifying your different needs beforehand, which in turn will make the selection process more efficient and effective!

Take advantage of your selection process to examine your future partner's availability, speed at responding to your questions and how they understand your business challenges. To improve your chances of success in the field of Web Analytics you will need to work with solution providers which can demonstrate these qualities.

We deliberately chose not to speak much about the different features available in Web Analytics solutions or of a publisher's ability to measure mobile platforms or social networks, irrespective of the current trend in online marketing. You will notice that not all, but only some, of the different publishers are capable of matching the wide range of measurement needs that exist. The aim was to highlight the importance of the different criteria used in selecting a Web Analytics solution, rather than a product's technical capabilities. We feel that these different criteria are not discussed enough and are what makes the difference between purchasing a product and acquiring a solution.

Choosing a Web Analytics application can be compared to a marriage, with the idea of unity and commitment in terms of the financial and human resources involved in the project over a period of several years. As is always the case, it is always best to test if the relationship is successful as early as possible.

AT INTERNET

Online Intelligence Solutions

AT INTERNET - LEADER IN ONLINE INTELLIGENCE® SYSTEMS

AT Internet is a leading Independent web and mobile analytics solution provider, operating in 9 countries internationally. AT Internet prides itself on its data integrity and customer centric approach.

Proud winner of the 2009 Platinum Distinction for European Seal of E-Excellence, AT Internet provides a robust and reliable best of breed SaaS analytics platform offering a complete solution to enhance your marketing intelligence and business effectiveness.

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