

**/// GOOGLE ANALYTICS
FOR
PUBLIC RELATIONS
MEASUREMENT
AND
EVALUATION** **//////////**

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// INTRODUCTION

As of August 2014, there can be few PR professionals who haven't heard of Google Analytics (GA). However, the number of practitioners actively using Google Analytics to help shape, drive, measure and evaluate their PR and comms activity remains low.

Many may assume that Google Analytics is purely about measuring web traffic. Nothing could be further from the truth. In the last two years, GA has turned into a universal measurement and evaluation platform that can encompass both digital and offline environments. Not only that, it can provide powerful insight into the economic contribution of all PR and comms activity in both commercial and non-commercial environments.

This document is intended to give CIPR members insight into how Google Analytics can be used as a broad based measurement platform to help better demonstrate the value of PR and comms activity.

// WHAT IS IT – AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO YOU?

According to Google, GA provides “powerful digital analytics for anyone with a web presence, large or small.” This description doesn't really do justice to the extent of what GA can measure. It is true that GA began primarily as a tool for gaining insight into website traffic. But now it can be used to measure mobile app usage and – via the Measurement Protocol – any data source that can be imported into the system. Not only that, but GA has for some time allowed users to exploit a technique known as attribution analysis to understand what combination of PR, comms and marketing techniques deliver against defined goals. In other words, both the direct and indirect contributions of different channels and activity can be shown. For PR (a medium largely known to deliver indirect value), this has big implications.

// HOW DOES IT WORK?

In relation to websites, GA works by using a technique known as page tagging. When first installed, GA places a piece of Javascript code on each page of a website to be tracked. This code is used to set cookies in the browser of a particular visitor. These cookies in turn allow Google to capture a vast array of information about visitors which is then saved into your Google Analytics account for analysis.

// WHY DEFINING YOUR GOALS AND OBJECTIVES IS THE MOST VITAL FIRST STEP

The typical approach to looking at Google Analytics is to simply dive in and have a look. After a few minutes, most people tend to glaze over at the vast amount of reports and data.

Before you go anywhere near a Google Analytics account, you should always ask one basic question: why does my website exist?

If you stripped everything back, what would be the single focus or purpose for your website? If you have an e-commerce site it may be fairly obvious – sell products for a profit. Or a B2B site may view lead generation as a key objective. But any organisation whether commercial or non commercial must presumably have a purpose for existing. And the website should hopefully exist to align with those purposes. Put another way, can we translate or correlate our organisational and communications objectives in such a way that this would be reflected in an observable website behaviour? Even more simply, what defined group of people do we want to visit the site and what do we want them to eventually do? Is this behaviour evidence that our organisational purposes are being achieved?

In the context of GA, goals have a specific meaning.

THERE ARE 4 BASIC TYPES OF GOAL

- 1. Destination goals.** In other words, if you can persuade the right visitor to visit a specific page on the site, this counts as success. For an e-commerce site, the “Thank You” page after a purchase would have specific economic value. But simply getting the right people in front of the right content would also count as success.
- 2. There are two types of engagement goal – time on site and number of pages visited per session.**
- 3. Event goal.** This is a catch all for any other observable behaviour on the site such as watching a video, downloading a PDF and so on.

Ideally, there will be some way to correlate web behaviour with a desired audience behaviour.

For example, let us imagine we have been tasked with “raising awareness” of a particular brand, service or message to a defined audience.

Perhaps if we could understand whether our defined audience had not only visited our site, but had actually visited specific pages of content and spent sufficient time on them to indicate they may well have consumed that message. We could also understand which particular elements of our PR and comms activity had delivered the right kind of visitor. Better still if there is some observable real world behaviour that could be correlated with this web behaviour.

For example, the use of search engines is a proxy for awareness. By default, in order to search for information about something, you must already have prior awareness and intent to seek out information about the subject or topic. Thus search volume data can be indicative of raised awareness levels.

Free Google tools such as Google Trends and the Google Keyword Planner can provide insight as to whether PR and comms activity has indeed had an effect on observable behaviour. Namely, the number of visitors generated via search activity who subsequently do the things we want them to do.

In short, time spent on defining goals and determining their economic value has major downstream benefits in terms of reporting, metric selection and the ability to gain meaningful insight into ROI.

However, one more thing needs to be in place to get maximum evaluation benefit.

// IMPORTANT CONCEPT: ACCOUNTS/PROPERTIES/VIEWS

A Google Analytics account can contain many properties (or websites). Typically, you will probably be only interested in one key property or website. However, for each property, GA allows you to create different profiles or views of the data. This is an important concept to grasp.

When a GA account is first created or a new property is added to your account, a single default view or profile is created. Many people simply continue to use this default profile. This is a mistake.

As a basic minimum, any GA property should have at least three profiles:

// the original default profile // a Test profile and // a Reporting profile.

There are a number of reasons for doing this. If you simply rely upon the default profile, you have no data back up. Due to the way Google captures and stores data, if you make a change that impacts what data has been saved, there is no way of going back and getting it if you make a mistake. Also, the default profile will capture all data. For reporting purposes, this may not be appropriate. For example, most sites are mainly interested in genuine external audience visitors rather than from their own employees. Or more likely, they would want to be able to distinguish between the two.

Unless you take steps to filter and access the correct data, you may well be working from erroneous sources. Particularly organisations where internal traffic is a high proportion of site visits. Ensuring that you have set up the account properly is vital.

// TIME ON SITE

It is important to understand how Google calculates time on site or the amount of time an individual visitor spends on a site. There are two key things to bear in mind. First, Google cannot calculate time spent on a site for a single page visit (so called “bounced” visits). This is because Google requires at least two pages to be visited to calculate time on the first page.

When you first arrive at the site, the meter is set to zero. Google also knows the time at which you move to a second page – and calculates the time on the first page by subtracting the first time stamp from the second. If only a single page is visited, then Google has no idea whether someone spent one second or 30 minutes on that page.

This is why all bounce visits have “time on site” as zero. The other thing to bear in mind is that Google cannot calculate the time on page for the last page of any multi-page visit. Imagine you visit four pages on a site. Google can calculate the time for the first three pages. But the final page (or exit page) will have time on page as zero. Because you are leaving the site, Google has no means of calculating time on the final page. Thus calculation of overall time on site is based on only three out of the four pages. Again, you have no insight into how long people spend on the final page. This is important if using time on site as an engagement metric.

// CAMPAIGN TRACKING

As noted above, although Google can often identify where traffic has come from, this isn't always the case. For example, if somebody visits a site as a result of clicking on a link in a piece of online press coverage, Google will be able to tell you that the visitor arrived at your site as a result of reading that piece of content.

However, what about someone clicking on a link shared on Twitter? Google will tell you that this was a visit from Twitter – but not which specific Tweet sent that visit. Or if the visitor clicked while viewing the Tweet on a mobile phone? Or clicked on a link in an email? All of those visits will not be allocated properly by Google.

Worse still, any traffic that Google can't allocate appropriately gets dumped into a category called "Direct". Your visit traffic here should only be for people who visit the site directly – either because they have been previously and bookmarked a page. Or they have enough awareness of the URL to type it directly into the browser. Direct traffic should therefore be a measure of brand awareness. Increasing direct traffic levels should be indicative of higher brand awareness. However, if that traffic is being "poisoned" with traffic from other sources, it not only removes a useful metric, but also makes it nigh on impossible to understand the contribution the various elements of your comms programmes are delivering.

So how do we get round this?

In short, you need to help Google by providing additional information to allow it to understand more precisely where the visit has come from.

// ENTER TRACKING PARAMETERS

If you are intending to share links to your site via social media you should append tracking parameters to get more granular insight into your activity.

Google provides a free URL Builder tool which also explains in more detail what these parameters can tell you: support.google.com/analytics/answer/1033867?hl=en-GB

Very simply, adding these extra tracking parameters to your links means you can understand the contribution made by them at a campaign or more granular level.

Let's imagine you are running a campaign that makes use of online press coverage, social media, email and advertising. By using campaign tracking, you can understand which elements of the campaign have a higher propensity to deliver the right audience with the right behaviour. Or even understand which particular stories and/or Tweets deliver more impact. Identifying these patterns allows you to focus on doing more of the things that work and stop doing things that aren't contributing.

Practical tip: even though links with added tracking parameters tend to be quite lengthy, they can still be reduced by using standard URL shorteners such as bit.ly - and still preserve the tracking parameters. This clearly is a big boon in the area of social media, specifically Twitter. Also, tools such as Hootsuite allow you to add these parameters "on the fly" to reduce the overhead in terms of time spent creating and managing parameterised links.

// ATTRIBUTION ANALYSIS

For decades, PR professionals have often struggled with providing a robust way of measuring the value of their work in economic terms. Certainly when PR was largely characterised by media relations then metrics tended to focus on easy to count figures such as number of press articles and similar. Even so, these really didn't address the key issue - what effect did the appearance of those press articles actually have on the behaviour of the target audience? Did that behaviour then translate into a direct impact on an organisation's objectives? Not only that but what about the potential cumulative effect of this activity over time?

The honest answer is that these questions went largely unanswered for a variety of reasons. Either because the means of identifying these causal connections were deemed too costly or time consuming, or just not possible to understand. PR measurement remained in the area of outputs. Or worse, the creation of faux ROI metrics such Advertising Value Equivalence.

The increasing use of digital technologies in communication has certainly led to the creation of more data and additional techniques that may help to answer some of these questions more fully.

In the context of Google Analytics, the ability to use attribution analysis is one that holds great promise for the PR practitioner.

// BUT WHAT IS ATTRIBUTION ANALYSIS?

Let's imagine your end goal is to sell a product. In order to demonstrate the value of PR activity you may seek to see if you can see a direct causal connection between a positive press article and a sale. Or a Tweet or Facebook post.

In the context of a website, it is perfectly possible to see whether a particular visit resulted in a goal being achieved. But realistically, not every visit will see the goal achieved. In fact, when it comes to the activity generally under the purview of the PR practitioner, you are likely to be disappointed. However, this doesn't mean to say that PR and comms activity has little value. It is just that it fails to acknowledge the effects that PR and social media activity have on a goal being achieved. More specifically it fails to account for the largely "assistive" or indirect nature of this kind of communication.

Let's use a simple analogy. Imagine a football team which is paid on a performance basis. However, only people scoring goals will receive any remuneration. The goal scorer is given all the credit. It doesn't take much to understand that as a reward system this is doomed to failure. And yet in many ways, this is how many organisations seek to evaluate their communications and PR activity. Only those things that can be shown to have a direct impact on the end result must have any kind of value. As per the football analogy, this fails to account for the way game is played. By default, football is a team game. Many factors will play a role in allowing the eventual goal to be achieved - not least the contributions of various players to allow the goal scorer to put the ball in the net.

The challenge for PR and comms professionals is to understand the contribution pattern - and the direct and indirect (assistive) roles played by various elements of the comms mix.

Google Analytics has for several years provided the ability to gain precisely this kind of insight. However, in order to gain this insight, by definition you need to have goals defined and values associated with those goals as well as a clear definition of exactly what elements are going to be considered as part of the campaign.

But the benefits are fairly self evident.

Imagine being able to show that a combination of two positive press articles, two Tweets, a Facebook post, and an online display ad were the most likely combination to deliver your desired end result - whatever that might be. A sale, a business lead, awareness, a change in behaviour.

// THE REAL TIME EFFECT

By default, GA can track website activity in real time. Not only can you see where people have come from but what device they are using and what content they are consuming. This kind of insight can be helpful when looking at the real time impact of PR – particularly in the area of TV and radio coverage.

According to Google, the medium that has the biggest impact on search volume is television.

Indeed, the rise of dual screening- being online while watching TV- has been well documented by research from various sources (including Google).

But what impact can radio have on web site traffic? And more importantly, the behaviour of those visitors?

One way to find out (very inexpensively) is to make use of one of the most under utilised aspects of Google Analytics: real time analysis.

Any website that has Google Analytics installed has, by default, got access to real time insight into how many visitors are currently on the site and what pages they are viewing [see image below], as well as where they came from – both in terms of physical location and online source – and the device they are using.

Here's an example of how this real time analysis was used to show the immediate impact of a piece of national broadcast radio coverage.

A PR team secures an interview for a company CEO on BBC Radio 4's flagship morning news programme, Today. The interview is highlighted in advance as taking place at 7.25am.

Using Google Analytics' Real Time analysis feature, the company's PR people are able to watch for any change in activity on the site – in real time. At **7.24am**, there is no one on the site.

At **7.25am**, the interview begins with the BBC presenter introducing the guest and the company they represent. In doing so, they obviously mention the company name.

Almost immediately, the PR team can see visits to the website rocket. They can also see how people are finding the site. And where they are physically located.

In this case, they can see that every visit is being generated by UK based surfers visiting Google's search engine and typing in the company name – which in turn delivers the company home page as the top result, which in turn sends them to the company site.

In terms of visitor numbers, these go **from zero to around 200 per minute** (for the duration of the interview).

In real time, the PR team can see which pages these visitors are viewing. As it turns out, the vast majority are looking at the corporate and press backgrounder pages.

Another useful function of Google Analytics is the ability to see what people search for once they are on a particular site. In this case, it was clear that these visitors (obviously driven to the site by the Radio 4 broadcast they were listening to) were seeking financial and investment information about the company (which didn't really exist as the company was in pre-investment phase).

By the end of the 5 minute radio interview, the PR team could see that as a result of that single piece of broadcast coverage, more visits to the site had been generated in that time than in the previous month. Not only that, they could confidently identify what those visitors were interested in - namely investment opportunities in a pre-investment company.

Whereas in the past, that kind of national broadcast coverage would be celebrated, they now have the added bonus of being able to show the direct and immediate impact that coverage had gained against a crucial business objective: securing investment finance.

// GOOGLE ANALYTICS: 5 MINUTE CHECK LIST

If you are looking at a Google Analytics account for the first time, here are some things to focus on in the first five minutes:

Make sure that the Google Analytics tracking code is installed on the site you are examining – either your own organisation or on behalf of a client. You can use a free browser tool such as Ghostery.com to see whether the GA code is in place.

When you first log in to an existing Google Analytics account, check to ensure if the following are in place:

// **have any goals been created?**

// **are there at least 3 basic views (profiles)? Default, test, reporting?**

// **have any basic filters been created? E.g. Exclude employee visits**

// **has Site Search been enabled?**

// **is there a linked Webmaster Tools account?**

// SUMMARY

Google Analytics is a powerful universal analytics platform that can provide PR and comms practitioners with valuable insight into the economic contribution made by their PR and social media activity. With a little effort, PR practitioners can start to gain greater insight into what elements of their campaigns really do deliver real value.

// ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Andrew Smith MCIPR is Managing Director of Escherman, a specialist social media, PR and analytics consultancy. He currently holds the Google Analytics Individual Qualification.

With a career spanning 29 years of public relations and journalism, he has also developed and implemented many highly successful strategic PR and marketing communications programmes for some of the world’s biggest brands including IBM, CapGemini, MySQL, Apple (FileMaker) and Checkpoint.

Andrew has been a consistent PR innovator, being among the first UK practitioners to exploit email (1991), the World Wide Web (1994) and Twitter (2007). Described as the “de facto godfather of PR blogging”, he is a regular speaker and media commentator on the integration of PR with social media, search optimisation and analytics. He is also co-author of two bestselling social media books, *Share This* and *Share This Too*, and a member of the CIPR’s Social Media Panel.