Effective Diagnosis of Your Website's Performance Requires a Two-Dimensional Approach

Increasingly complex websites need diagnostics that are able to both evaluate site performance and facilitate the strategies required to make improvements. To achieve these results, the best methodology is to merge site behavioural metrics with attitudinal survey data.

It has become quite the juggling act for a site owner to manage and monitor a website that caters to multiple audiences – while trying to increase and maintain the highest level of site performance. Because the goal of current website design is to create an interactive experience delivering more relevant content to users, websites have become increasingly more complex. The best methodology for evaluating and enhancing website performance is to merge site behavioural metrics with attitudinal survey data, enabling site owners to make tactical and strategic changes that serve to minimize pain point areas for visitors and optimize the overall web experience.

Traditionally, website satisfaction research has aimed at monitoring shifts in site satisfaction and providing high-level explanations for these shifts. If, for instance, satisfaction had increased in the current month as users found the content more up-to-date compared to last month, the traditional approach to delivering results would be useful for many site owners because of their need to maintain only a high-level understanding of their websites' performance. However, as sites become more complex, their owners are demanding more than just "taking of the pulse" metrics. What they are looking for is a complete set of diagnostics that empower them to make both short-term and mid-term fixes to their sites.

Website satisfaction surveys, such as those provided by most research firms, are no longer able to meet this need and should be characterized as "feedback" mechanisms rather than website optimization tools. Providing a quantitative overview of the website landscape, traditional analysis focuses on advanced analytics, such as regression, which requires large samples and delivers only macro-level recommendations.

In response to this gap between what is needed and what is being delivered, site owners have, increasingly, turned to usability studies to get qualitative data that they can easily wrap their heads around. However, usability studies are "one point in time" snapshots that do not optimally meet the needs

of site owners, who find themselves still looking for a methodology that can facilitate continuous website improvements at a reasonable price.

In an attempt to fill this ever expanding gap, metrics companies such as Omniture now dabble in conducting surveys. Their hook is different than that of traditional research companies: they link attitudinal and behavioural information in order to provide a better understanding of website performance. However, site metrics companies are not research companies; they focus on providing site owners with as many data points as possible, not on data analysis that leads to actionable recommendations. As such, site owners are left with little more than high-level

improvements to a website. However, it is the way in which these data are collected, analysed and used in concert that is key to providing actionable information to site owners.

A Fortune 500 company recently faced an issue regarding its worldwide site of over 300,000 pages. The company was trying to determine why a key metric – links leading to the correct content – had declined from May to June 2009, while satisfaction had not declined significantly over the same period. Looking at the attitudinal data, it appeared that links on the site were no longer directing users to the desired content in an effective manner. However, this was not enough information to provide site owners with

which users went *from* the index page (see Figure 1). Working backwards and forwards, we were able to find a page that preceded the index page and contained a crucial dead link, one that was initially intended to lead visitors to the index page in question. On that page, there was an intersect of users who rated the links poorly. We were able to pursue the issue down to the page level and provide an actionable recommendation to the site owner: Replace the dead link with a link that functioned properly.
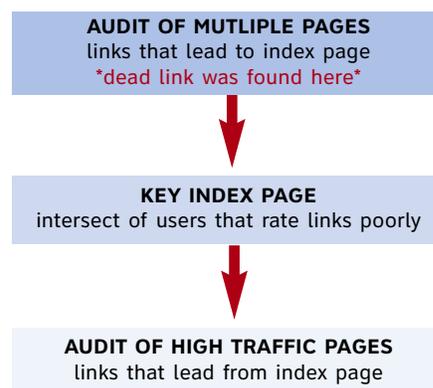
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feedback obtained in an unscientific manner, along with a great deal of behavioural data – and still no clear recommendations on how to improve the site.

Site owners are often left feeling they could have gotten the same value from a page-level feedback tool such as that offered by OpinionLab. So why pay for the additional work that Omniture provides? A company like OpinionLab provides simple feedback that is appropriate for the collection of open-ended verbatim responses but is inappropriate for the planning of strategies, since there are no checks for sampling in the collection of data. Data collected in an unscientific manner should never be used in a quantitative manner for the development of strategies, as the data are not representative of site visitors.

The merging of behavioural and attitudinal data for analysis constitutes the basis for making continuous

direction to fix the problem.

Analysis of behavioural data involved splitting the website into various sections and then comparing attitudinal scores across sections. As you can imagine, this was not an easy task on a website with well over 700 sections. Nevertheless, it led us to pinpoint the section responsible for the deterioration in the "links" metric. To our dismay, this section was over 100 pages deep. The next phase involved a systematic analysis of key index pages within the poorly performing section to find a key user convergence point with the same links issue Among the index pages, there was one, with a high percentage of users, that fitted our criterion – that is, it rated poorly due to the presence of links that led to the wrong content.

The final piece of the puzzle was now qualitative in nature, due to the small sample size: it involved an audit of the pages users visited to get *to* the index page as well as high-traffic pages to

Figure 1: Determining A Specific Cause of Poor User Rating in the "Links" Metric

AUDIT OF MUTLIPLE PAGES
links that lead to index page
dead link was found here

↓

KEY INDEX PAGE
intersect of users that rate links poorly

↓

AUDIT OF HIGH TRAFFIC PAGES
links that lead from index page

The recommended change resulted in a 10 per cent increase in the scoring of the links metric and a subsequent 4 per cent increase in overall visitor satisfaction. Although the solution may have been fairly simple and straight-forward, merging behavioural and attitudinal data proved to be most informative. It enabled us to identify the exact page – among the more than 300,000 pages of a global website – that needed to be corrected. What's more, it permitted us to do so in a time frame – a matter of hours – that was a large benefit to the site owner.