

Introduction to Web Stats

Visits, users, sessions and hits

How do you know whether your online marketing is working? Maybe your sales increase, or maybe your phones get busier, but that does not mean it's the SEO at work. Perhaps you have real world advertising running in tandem (and if you don't, then you should be).

Measuring the effectiveness of your SEO is vital in knowing what is and what is not working for you. The most obvious way of measuring your SEO effectiveness is by looking at how much your website is being used – something called “website traffic” in the biz. There are a number of ways of measuring traffic – the most frequently used are hits, sessions, visits and users.

So what's the different between a visit, user, session and hit? Let me put it this way. Imagine you go to a friend's house. You enter the front door, switch on the light, go to the kitchen, open the fridge, take a can of beer, drink it, put the empty can in the bin, close the fridge door, leave the kitchen, turn off light, leave the house, then close the front door. Then you go back 10 minutes later, do the same thing again, drinking a second can of beer before leaving. After about an hour, you get thirsty again and decide to raid his fridge a third time.

This whole sequence of events is performed by a single ‘user’ because there is only one visitor at the house during the day. Indeed, if I came back the next day and stole some more beer, it would count as a returning user.

Each action you take (turning on lights, drinking beer etc.) is a ‘hit’. In websites, a hit is when any file is requested from the server, so a single webpage with 10 images on it would count as 11 hits.

Each set of visits counts as a ‘session’. Most websites measure a session as a set of actions that take place within an average browsing session. A browsing session is deemed to have ended when there is around 20-30 minutes of no activity. So in the beer raid above, there would be 2 sessions since there was an hour between the second and third visit. Google uses 30 minutes to describe a session, whereas different websites might use different lengths of time. Banking websites typically use short session times - which is why if you log in to your online bank account and don't do anything for 15 minutes you will get a ‘session timed out’ message. The shorter a session is, the more secure the website is (reduced chance that someone might sneak on to your computer when you left it logged in), but also the more annoying for users if they have to re-enter passwords.

The word ‘visit’ is often used interchangeably with ‘session’. While some marketers have recommended for a slightly different definition for each, according to google analytics, they are one and the same, so most people just use this as a convention rather than a standard.

The question of whether to measure your website's traffic in terms of hits, sessions, users or visits will depend partly on what data you need to show. In the old days, when web pages had few embedded files, hits were generally used (and often you would hear phrases like “I get 10,000 hits to my site a month”). Hits are a very bad way to measure traffic. You will probably have no idea how

much beer you lost if you try to measure it in terms of single actions. You should measure users or sessions, which are a more accurate measure of how often your fridge is raided, and how much beer you will lose.

Whichever measure you decide to use, you are going to need tools to measure it, and this is where Google Analytics will become your best friend. (Let's just hope is not the house-breaking-beer-stealing kind of friend though).