

PRODUCT REVIEW / ANALYSE DE PRODUITS

Google Analytics

Product: Google Analytics, Google Inc.

URL: <http://www.google.ca/analytics/>

Audience: Web designers, web developers, web content contributors and website owners.

Purpose: Web analytics software monitors and assesses the use and usability of a website's design and its content.

Price: Free. (A premium version is also available. For Premium accounts in Canada the price may vary. Contact a Google Specialist to obtain an exact quote. <http://www.google.ca/analytics/premium/contact.html>)

Introduction

What is web analytics? According to the Digital Analytics Association (formerly the web Analytics Association), web analytics is the “objective tracking, collection, measurement, reporting, and analysis of quantitative Internet data to optimize websites and web marketing initiatives” [1]. In other words, it is one of many tools that can be used to gain a better understanding of how people use a website in order to improve it. Historically, systems and IT departments paid top dollar for propriety software like “WebTrends” and “Omniture”. Many organizations use proprietary software, but many small businesses and nonprofits choose to try out many of the free, or low-priced, web-based tools to get a sense of how their websites are used. Google Analytics was one of the pioneering products in this arena and, as a result, continues to be very popular. There are, however, a growing number of competitors to Google Analytics such as Yahoo Analytics.

Description

Google Analytics is a website that can be setup through an existing or new Google account to track how users navigate and click through a website. All that is needed to collect data is a small piece of code called a “Tracking Code”. Analyzing the data can be as simple or as complex as required.

Google Analytics can easily be implemented, and an impressive amount of data can be collected by people with very basic coding skills. Furthermore, with the increasing usage of database-driven websites, even fewer technical skills are needed to do the initial setup. In many cases, administrative panels or dashboards include an option to insert a Google Analytics tracking code. Such is the case with “LibGuides”. If it is not a built-in feature, it can usually be added with a third-party plugin.

Because the data collected by Google Analytics, including IP addresses, is stored on servers in the United States, the website should include a privacy statement with details on the collection, storage, and usage of this data. To view an example, see the [Canadian Research Knowledge Network's Google Analytics Privacy Statement](#).

Features

The “Reporting” section is organized much like a website or blog dashboard but with customizable widgets that can be tailored to individual needs. Along the left navigation are a number of more detailed reports that allow for a deeper analysis into the data. The broad sections include:

- **Audience:** These reports show what city the traffic is coming from and what technology they are using. The “Technology” report is most useful on a broad level in terms of website maintenance, keeping up with browsers, and ensuring that the website is usable across platforms. Another use for these reports could be for assessing how distance users interact with the website using the “Location” report as an “Advanced Segment” (Figure 1).
- **Traffic Sources:** These reports are very useful in understanding where users were before landing on pages and what terms they searched in a web browser that brought them to the page. The “Keyword” report (within the “Search” report) is very helpful in understanding users’ intentions when arriving on certain pages. For example, were they using search terms that implied they wanted help on using “Refworks”, or did they need to find the Refworks software itself? These are the kinds of questions that can be answered.
- **Content:** The “Content” reports include the “Pages” report. This provides, at a quick glance, a view of all pages sorted by most viewed to least viewed. The “Search Terms” people used to search in your website’s search box provide an even greater understanding of what users are looking for as compared with searches within an external search engine. A recent addition to the Content reports is a measure of how fast your pages load (Figure 2).
- **Goal Conversions:** This is designed for use with e-commerce applications and transactions such as making a final purchase after navigating through a website. More and more, libraries are finding ways to use this feature for their own nonprofit goals. For example, “Goals” can be setup for views of error 404 pages to ensure the website does not have any broken internal links. In addition, social media and marketing campaigns can be tracked as “Goal Conversions”.

Fig. 1. Example of the browser technology Audience Report.

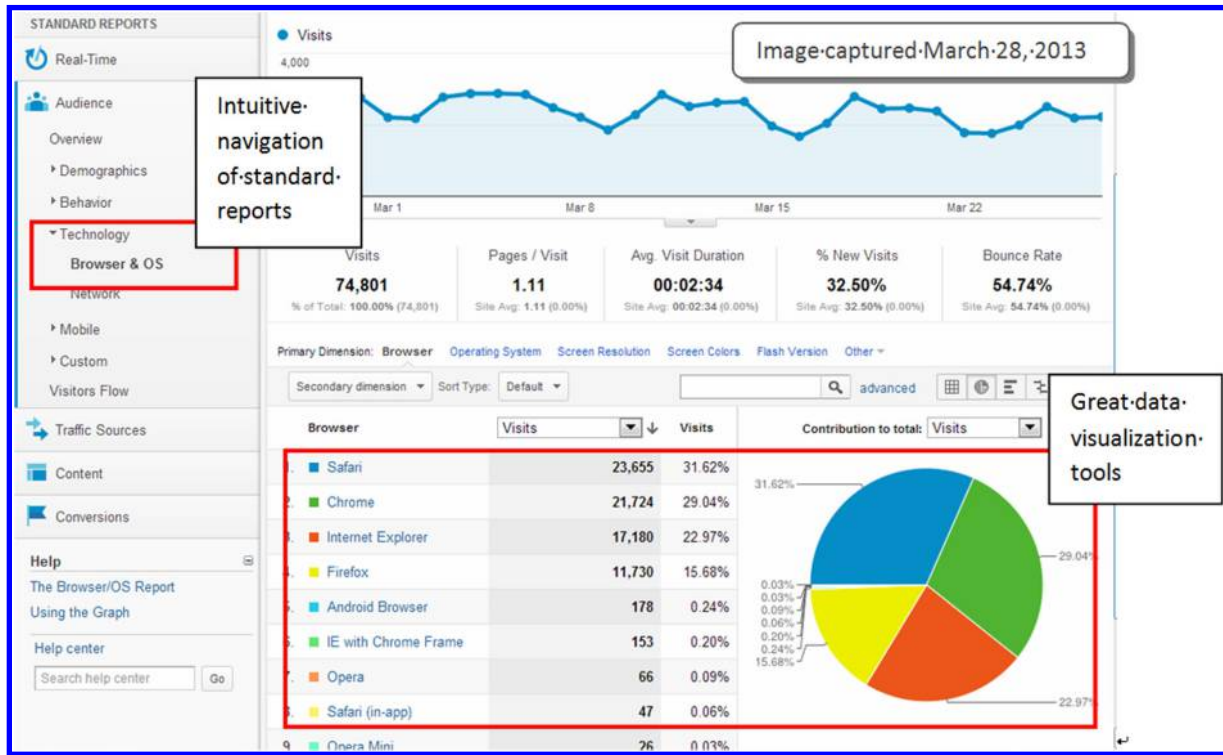


Fig. 2. Example of site search terms Content Report.

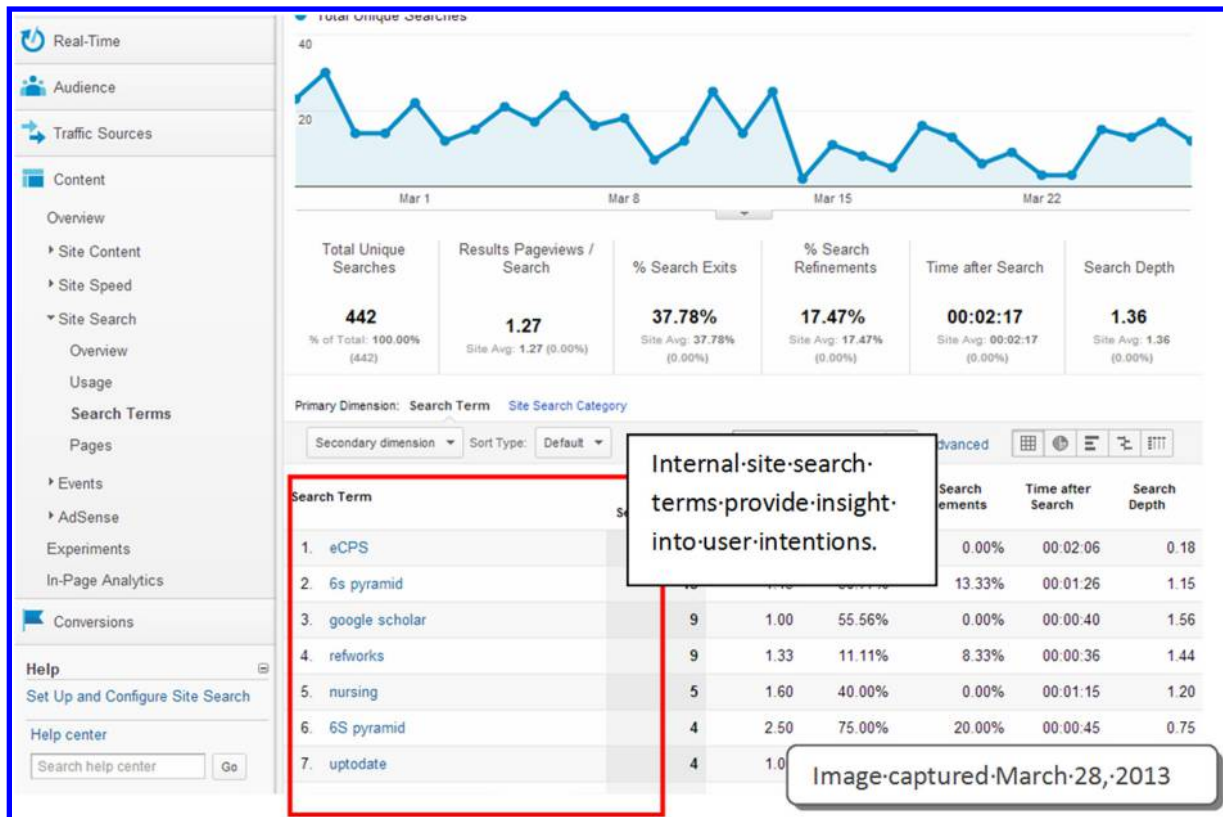
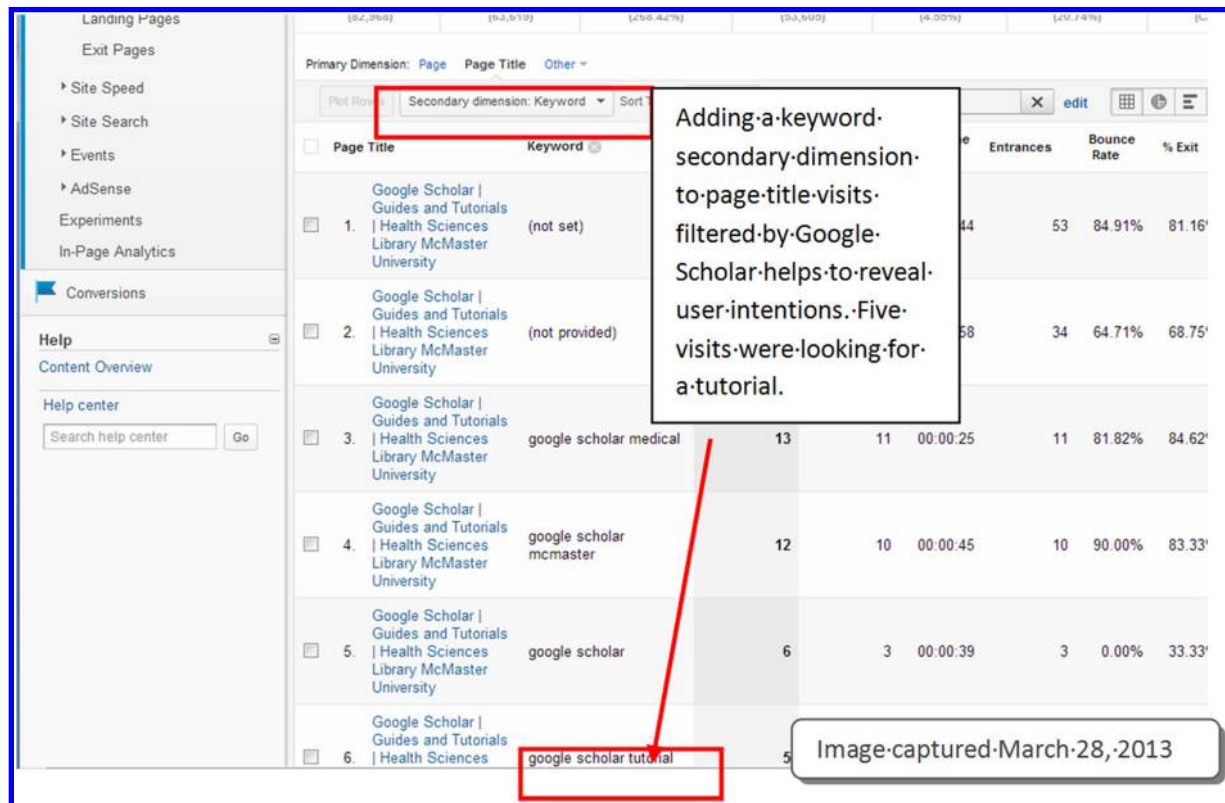


Fig. 3. Example of using advanced features such as filters and dimensions to attain a deeper understanding of the data.



All of these basic reports within Google Analytics can be combined to obtain a deeper understanding of what users are doing using Advanced Segments and “Dimensions”. For example, an Advanced Segment can be setup to filter data to analyze only visits accessing the website through mobile devices. In another example, it is possible to drill down to a single page and add a “Secondary Dimension” to view the keywords searched to bring the user to that page (Figure 3).

Usability

Creating pie charts and graphs with data is very accessible. Each of the reports can then be exported into Excel or PDF format. The website itself is easy to navigate, although recently the frequency of updates to the interface is making it difficult to keep up with changes.

Although reports can easily be created for content contributors, the results are not always intuitive. This is most apparent when creating reports with Advanced Segments and Secondary Dimensions.

Strengths and weaknesses

Although superficially Google Analytics seems to provide a lot of information very quickly and easily, there are some things that would be very useful for library websites and yet are not part of the basic functionality. For example, many library pages include links to external resources and this type of web analytics software requires workarounds

to track the usage of such links. A more advanced level of coding and some tedious inputting of the code into each link is required to see how often these links are used. Moreover, because the software is created for for-profit businesses, a highly cited metric called a “bounce rate” can be misinterpreted when applied to external-link dense pages. For-profit businesses do not want people to leave their pages quickly, but libraries expect that most users will leave some of their pages very quickly. As long as these issues are taken into consideration when looking at the data and the data are carefully analyzed at a deeper level using Advanced Segments and Dimensions, fewer of these misinterpretations will be made.

Conclusion

Google Analytics can, for the most part, be used easily and without any significant training or learning, in particular the Pages and Audience reports. Digging deeper into the data to understand what users are doing requires more knowledge.

As a result of the possible misinterpretations that can be made using any web analytics software, whether Google or Yahoo, for years experts have been recommending that these reports be accompanied by usability tests [2]. Despite the caveats, this type of tool can reveal a lot of trends with just a few clicks. The effort involved implementing and collecting the data is so minimal relative to the value of the insights obtained that it makes implementing and mastering Google Analytics a worthwhile investment of time.

References

1. Kaushik, A. *Web analytics: An hour a day*. Chichester: Wiley; 2007.
2. Kaushik, A. Lab usability testing, what, why, how much? 2006. Message posted to <http://www.kaushik.net/avinash/lab-usability-testing-what-why-how-much/>. [Accessed 7 March 2013.]

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