How to read between the clicks

Source: bCentral / MSNBC / 3.02.04

Savvy "bricks-and-mortar" store-owners constantly analyze customer traffic patterns to uncover ways they can improve the buying experience for their shoppers. You can do the same thing on your website. By analyzing the way visitors navigate through your web pages, you can improve your customers experience and make your site more appealing to users.

The most popular pages.

The most highly trafficked pages on your site can tell you what type of information visitors hope to find when they come to it.

To make your site even more effective, you'll want to highlight this content by making it available in fewer clicks or finding ways to package it as "preferred" content. For instance, if you discover a particular product offering is receiving the most hits, position it on the home page (maybe in a sidebar) where it will be easy to find, and group it with links to complementary products or services that may interest people who buy it.

The least popular pages.

Your site traffic can also tell you which site offerings are duds. For example, if you have a feature that receives only three hits per month, you might consider replacing it with more details about your product offerings.

Be sure to analyze why a particular page is not popular before taking it down. Is it difficult to find? Does it take a long time to load? Is it relevant to only a small portion of site visitors? Keep in mind that even pages with low traffic may be closing sales for you. If it encourages even one person to do business with you, it's probably worth keeping.

Traffic patterns.

Study the length of time that visitors are staying on your site and how they are navigating through it. This may uncover a site structure that works well for users, so you can replicate it elsewhere on your site. It may also help you find inconsistencies in site navigation and information paths. Pay attention to what page they come in on and what page they leave on.

For example, if you notice that users jump to multiple pages, staying only a short time on each, and then leave your site completely, it may be a sign that it's difficult for visitors to find the details they need. It might also be a sign that your site takes too long to load, which will drive users away.

E-mail and phone queries.

Track the e-mails and customer calls your business receives for signs of improvements that can be made to your site.

Do a number of customers ask similar questions? It may be time to update your FAQs. Are requests for product details common? You many need to make your product descriptions clearer or more robust. Are people confused about the status of their online orders? It may be time to review the

ordering process. The goal is to identifying trends in these communications can help you improve visitors' experiences with your site.

Customer feedback.

You can use your site to solicit direct feedback on its effectiveness by doing a little online market research.

Add a temporary customer survey (or Tell-A-Friend with a comments section) to the home page and offer an incentive for completion, such as a 10% discount on your products and services. You can ask questions about site navigation, design, or ordering processes.