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In the lead up to Christmas, the first thing companies should realise and prepare for is the likelihood that traffic to their site will increase. Certain businesses will naturally appeal more than others to Christmas consumers and this will be their busiest time of the year.

In technical and logistical operational terms, it is imperative that these businesses make sure that servers, back-up servers and subsequent bandwidth are ready to take on a larger amount of traffic. If a website comes across as slow and the reaction to enquiries is lacking, these websites will lose customers in the short term and long term; ultimately reducing the repeat visitor count and diluting the brand.

For both large corporations and SMEs special attention should be paid to customer support departments. During a period where people and departments are on holiday, customer administration needs to be given the resources and reins to sufficiently run the business.

As important as it is to have a seamless administration department over the Christmas break, it is equally as important for business owners to be able to accurately forecast their sales and performance. Benchmarking against previous months sales figures is the traditional way to start gauging cyclical trends. This has changed with current technology, which can now give you your real-time figures to analyse.

Business owners can get these real-time figures from technology like 3rd-party ad servers (3PAS) [or on-the-fly banner ads], content management systems (CMS), customer relationship management systems (CRM) and web analytics services like WebtraffIQ <http://www.webtraffiq.com>.

By having this up to date information, it is possible to record the actions made by visitors which are crucial to answering why sales are up or down. For example, by paying attention to a 'contact us' or 'sales form' and analysing the questions running up to the actual enquiry or online sale, one can easily see if there is a higher stop question (SQ). A stop question is a specific question a visitor does not want to answer which results in them leaving the form and/or site. Removing this question or altering it to be 'softer' will have a direct impact on the bottom line.

With current technology there are real and tangible advantages of using 'real-time' reporting and analysis.

This is most evident in performance benchmarks created by singular projects, such as targeted viral email campaigns, direct billboard and postal marketing, airwave radio and TV campaigns (also known as above, below and through-the-line marketing).

Real-time benchmark examples:

1. Whilst designing a new website, designers can look at current page navigation patterns, looking at which pages are most commonly used, and in what order, that resulted in the desired action. Designers can change website buttons and links to mirror these patterns in order to create the desired result.
2. A banner can be placed on two different areas of the same affiliate website, and results can be matched in real-time to see which is doing better. This allows the banner advertiser or owner to set or bid at the best click-through rate.
 - 2.1 A click-through-rate is agreed by both advertiser and site owner and can be gauged by Cost Per Click (CPC) Cost Per Acquisition (CPA), Cost Per Purchase (CPP), Cost Per Download (CPD).
 - 2.2 Banner advertising, much like affiliate linking, is about placing the banner in the greatest flow of targeted traffic. There are many sizes and types of banners (e.g. static and rich media banners) to consider, coupled the different rates charged by website owners relating to where the banner is placed (e.g. a banner placed on a home page rather than subdirectory will churn more traffic).

Therefore, being able to see live click-through results gives both the advertiser and owner an idea of what the campaign will achieve, thus providing them option to move or change the banner for the better.

3. With a direct marketing campaign (via post), consider using a timed incentive. For example “you must respond by post or email within one week of this special offer”. With an email campaign you should look at the response rate in a time logical way. After taking the negative bounce rate into account; one should look at the weekly, daily and hourly response rate. Knowing that the email campaign was most successful on a Tuesday at 12:00 gives you your prime time to set off future email campaigns.

It is possible to match the airing schedule with the real-time response results, if undertaking a television advertising campaign (you are able to do this with radio as well). For example, how many new visitors there are to the site directly before, during and after the advert is broadcast.

These examples show how homing in on the real-time results of specific initiatives can arm any company with benchmarks for future off and online marketing, PR and sales activity.

Ultimately, performance is directly linked with demand. Good marketers will tell you that demand can be created and pushed by 'hyper' targeting your service or product.

Hyper targeting is about good research into your market and target audience. Every marketing campaign needs pre-launch research into its target audience, delivery mechanisms and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). From the KPIs, the business should be able to work out what sort of Return on Investment (ROI) each campaign should generate.

Website owners can look at a few key churn figures within their reporting systems. Most companies with an online presence also have access to their website reports. ISPs usually offer the most basic statistics packages, and even these if analysed correctly can produce KPIs. At a very basic level it's about looking at the peaks and troughs of user activity and linking them to co-deficiencies and co-dependencies.

Examples of linking co-deficiencies to co-dependencies:

1. Look carefully at your exit page reports and at the same time look at your sales/enquiries/contact form. If you then concentrate on the periods of greatest fluctuation in peaks and troughs of user activity in these two reports side-by-side, you will be able to home in on the problem pages and then reduce that which are directly linked to the drop out rate. Making even minor, but positive changes within these problem pages can have a dramatic effect on the churn rate.
2. Looking at the page before the user clicked on the sitemap link will give you an insight into where your users are feeling lost. Therefore, that particular page and previous paths might need usability and/or design attention.
3. Another commonly ignored statistic is the website interest percentage. This is the next step from website stickiness (how long a user stays on your website or specific pages of your website). Website interest (how deeply a user navigates a website.) is the amount of different pages a visitor looks at before leaving.

Retention is a well-known and critical statistic to pay specific attention to. Retention on a website transfers as stickiness (see above). However, retention (or stickiness) alone doesn't give enough insight into how to change targeted results for the better, and should instead be used in conjunction with other statistics as discussed above.

The following points are our tips for success and smooth running not only over the busy Christmas period, but also throughout the year:

1. Internal and External Dependency and Process Flow

All critical areas of the business activity chain should have back-up schemes in place. For example, if your telephone enquiry line is busy the customer should not hear an engaged tone but should be advised that they are in a queue.

2. Administrative Provisions

If customers can't get through to your business during this time they may think you have closed down completely. They may think that your business can't cope with the demand and that your time in the industry is limited. Therefore, they will look elsewhere.

3. Supply for Demand

Not foreseeing possible 'large' fluctuations in customer activity and preparing for it will render the business unable to deal with extra demand. Business owners must ensure they prepare for larger than normal surges in traffic by taking the necessary precautions, such as increasing bandwidth. A good service to consider is an alerts program that will send you a text, voice or email to notify you that you have server problems or errors on your website (WebtraffIQ Alerts).

4. News Flow

All sites should have a dedicated section for their current news, this helps users feel connected to your business. If current news channels on your site become stagnant then the perception is that your whole site is out of date, and that they can't rely on the information they read.

5. Post Christmas Planning

The Christmas break and the return to work should be a seamless customer experience. The consumer should have no idea that there was in fact a holiday, and should be in no way disadvantaged for visiting during this time. If the consumer has difficulty with any aspect of interacting with your business over this period, they are likely to become frustrated, lose confidence in your brand and not return to the site.

The beauty of Christmas from a statistical perspective is that it provides a particular date range in the global calendar. This scheduled 'floating' period for all businesses can be critical to customer perception. The key target for most businesses, large corporations or SMEs, is the continuation of brand perception and exposure.

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About WebtraffIQ:

<http://www.webtraffiq.com>

<http://www.webtraffiq.com/press/releases.php>

WebtraffIQ is a real-time visitor tracking and reporting analysis product and service for business web sites and e-commerce enterprises. The system has undertaken a four-year research and development-testing period and is used by over 400 individual web sites.

WebtraffIQ provides a campaign tracking service which enables clients to see how various online and offline marketing techniques are working, in effect creating a rich picture of a web site's activities.

WebtraffIQ's clients include: Business Link [Kent], City & Guilds, Eyetracker, Mando Group, Perceptor, Reuters Business Insight, Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors [RICS], Sony UK, The National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum and Tiscali UK.

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