

BRIAN CLIFTON

Foreword by Chris Sherman  
Executive Editor, SearchEngineLand.com

# Advanced Web Metrics

with Google  
Analytics™



SERIOUS SKILLS.

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# Advanced Web Metrics with Google Analytics™

Brian Clifton



Wiley Publishing, Inc.



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Cover Image: iSTOCKPHOTO  
Copyright © 2008 by Wiley Publishing, Inc., Indianapolis, Indiana  
Published simultaneously in Canada  
ISBN: 978-0-470-25312-0

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Clifton, Brian, 1969-

Advanced Web metrics with Google Analytics / Brian Clifton.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-470-25312-0 (pbk.)

1. Google Analytics. 2. Web usage mining. 3. Internet users--Statistics--Data processing. I. Title.

TK5105.885.G66C55 2008

006.3--dc22

2008001405

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Best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Neil Edde', with a stylized, flowing script.

NEIL EDDE

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*Eight out of 10 implementations of web analytics solutions  
are incorrectly set up.*

—Bill Hunt, CEO, Global Strategies International



## Acknowledgments

Writing this, my first book, has been both very rewarding and very hard work; but above all it has been enjoyable. Many people have contributed either directly or indirectly to its content. Some inspired me, some sanity checked my coding, some proofread my English, some contributed ideas, and some simply encouraged me to dig deep and work through those many late nights. I hope I have remembered everyone. If I have missed any, my apologies; I will add your name to the book blog website ([www.advanced-web-metrics.com](http://www.advanced-web-metrics.com)) and any future print editions.

First, many thanks to the Wiley publishing team: Willem Knibbe, who I first discussed the content with many moons ago and who subsequently convinced the Wiley group that such a book was both worthy of producing and needed by the army of online marketers that use Google Analytics; Dick Margulis, who did such sterling work at taking my initial stab at producing a book and restructured it into something much better; Pete Gaughan for managing the whole process; Rachel McConlogue and Luann Rouff and many other people at Wiley who work tirelessly in the background to help create and polish what I hope you will consider an easy, yet enlightening, read.

Significant feedback, help, and brainstorming were also freely provided by Nina Privetera Hoyt, a former colleague and great friend now working for Médecins Sans Frontières; Dave Mumford, Andrew Miles, and Nikki Rae from Omega Digital Media Ltd, who helped with providing data and screenshots from their Google Analytics accounts as well commenting on the first draft and helping with the book blog; Sara Andersson for her generous advice and strategic thinking regarding integrating offline and online marketing, and for sharing her ideas on search input; Daniel Silander of Neo@Ogilvy for his thoughtful feedback from an agency's perspective; Dennis R. Mortensen for his hawk eyes at proofreading and his honest opinion from a competitor's point of view; Chris Sherman for reviewing this book and for honoring me by writing the foreword; and Timo Aden, Jean-Baptiste Creusat "Jee Bee," Alan Boydell, Rene Nijhuis, Estela Oliva, and Philip Walford of the Google Analytics Team (EMEA), for their stimulating discussions, experiences, and thoughts about implementing Google Analytics for their clients.

Last but not least, special thanks go to Tomas Remotigue and Alex Ortiz-Rosado, both of Google, who have significantly contributed to my knowledge and understanding of the internal workings of Google Analytics over the years. Both worked late and on their own time to sanity check and expand upon the technical aspects of this book, with Alex becoming my much appreciated technical editor.



## About the Author

Brian Clifton is an established search engine marketing and web analytics expert who has worked in these fields since 1997. Specializing in search engine optimization (SEO) and web analytics, his business was the first U.K. partner for Urchin Software Inc., the company that later became Google Analytics. Brian joined Google in 2005 to define, develop, and lead the web analytics team for Europe, Middle East, and Africa.

Brian received a BSc in chemistry from the University of Bristol in 1991 and a Ph.D. in physical and theoretical chemistry in 1996. Further work as a postdoctoral researcher culminated in publishing several scientific papers in journals, including *Molecular Physics*, *Colloids and Surfaces*, and *Langmuir*. During that time he was also an international weightlifter, representing Great Britain at world and European championships.

Studying science at university during the early nineties meant witnessing the incredible beginnings of the Web. In 1991, Tim Berners-Lee, a scientist working at the CERN laboratory in Switzerland, launched the first web browser and web server to the academic community, therefore sowing the first seeds of the World Wide Web.

Although the communication potential of the Web was immediately clear to Brian, it took a little while for ideas to formulate around business opportunities. In 1997 he left academia to found Omega Digital Media, Ltd., a U.K. company specializing in the provision of professional services to organizations wishing to utilize the new digital medium.

Since leaving the field of chemical research (and weightlifting), Brian has continued to write. Whitepapers include “How Search Engine Optimization (SEO) Works,” “Web Analytics Data Sources,” and “Web Analytics: Increasing Accuracy for Business Growth.” As with most of his Mosaic–Netscape peers, Brian is also an avid writer on his own blog: [www.advanced-web-metrics.com](http://www.advanced-web-metrics.com); this is his first book.

Brian holds the title of Associate Instructor at the University of British Columbia for his contribution to teaching modules in support of the “Award of Achievement in Web Analytics.” You can also hear him speak at numerous conferences around the world—particularly in Europe, where he presents on search marketing, web analytics, website optimization through testing, and how these can all interlink to create a successful online business strategy. Brian currently lives in West Sussex, United Kingdom.

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# Foreword

You know a book is going to be a winner when it begins with two simple, but incredibly powerful words: “measuring success.” Measuring success is what distinguishes winners from losers on the web, and all savvy website owners will tell you that understanding and making use of web analytics data is absolutely key to their success.

Why? Because analytics data offers a wealth of information about what visitors are doing on your website: what they’re reading, how they navigate, what they’re buying, and what they’re ignoring. By capturing, analyzing, and taking action on this gold mine of information, you can tune your website for maximum performance.

*Advanced Web Metrics with Google Analytics* is a compelling guide to this process. It’s a behind-the-scenes look at some of the most powerful tools available to anyone who runs a website. Author Brian Clifton knows his stuff, and while he offers a thorough look at the technical aspects of Google Analytics, his straightforward style makes the book accessible to anyone who’s interested in improving the performance of a website.

Importantly, Clifton also understands that while mastering technical details is crucial, the primary reason you would want to dive in deep with web analytics is to achieve goals. At its heart, *Advanced Web Metrics with Google Analytics* is as much about developing effective online business practices as it is about mastering a set of tools.

Some might wonder why they should go to all the trouble to understand user behavior and take on the task of optimizing a website when it’s easy and relatively cheap to simply purchase search advertising. The answer is simple: Searchers still overwhelmingly prefer natural search results to search ads, by a factor of 3:1, according to Jupiter Research. Taking the time to optimize your website based on the data collected with analytics tools almost always pays off with increased traffic, sales, and profitability—effects that can last for years.

Search advertising is getting more expensive and competitive. By contrast, most website owners still don’t do much with site optimization, so the playing field is relatively level for everyone, regardless of whether you have a small website or one with millions of pages.

If you’re looking for a way to improve your website and enhance the results of your online efforts, *Advanced Web Metrics with Google Analytics* is an excellent guide—one that you can put to good use right away to help you achieve, and even surpass, your boldest goals.

CHRIS SHERMAN  
*Executive Editor*  
*SearchEngineLand.com*



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# Introduction

Although the birth of Web took place in August 1991, it did not become commercial until around 1995. In those early days it was kind of fun to have a spinning logo, a few pictures, and your contact details as the basis of your online presence. My first website was just that—no more than my curriculum vitae online at the University of Bristol. Then companies decided to copy (or worse, scan) their paper catalogs and brochures and simply dump these on their websites. This was a step forward in providing more content, but the user experience was poor to say the least, and no one was really measuring conversions. The most anyone kept track of was visits, and these were often confused with hits.

Around the year 2000, fueled by the dot-com boom, people suddenly seemed to realize the potential of the Web as a useful medium to find information; the number of visitors using it grew rapidly. Organizations started to think about fundamental questions, such as “What is the purpose of having a website?” and considered how to build relevant content for their online presence. With that, user experience improved. Then, when widespread broadband adoption began to happen, those organizations wanted to attract the huge audience that was now online. Hence the reason for the rapid growth in search engine marketing that followed.

Now, with businesses accepting the growing importance of their online presence, comes the need to measure the effects—and success or not—of a website on the rest of the business. Put simply, this is what web analytics tools, such as Google Analytics, attempt to do. By measuring the ability of your online and offline marketing to attract visitors, the resulting user experience, conversion rate, and ROI enables you to continually benchmark yourself and improve your online strategy.

But what can be measured, how accurate is this, and how can a business be benchmarked? In other words, how do you measure success? Using best practice principles I gained as a professional practitioner, this book uses real-world examples that clearly demonstrate how to manage Google Analytics. This includes not only installation and configuration guides, but also how to turn data into information that enables you to

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understand your website visitor's experience. With this understanding, you can then build business action items to drive improvements in visitor acquisition (both online and offline), conversion rates, repeat visit rates, customer retention, and ultimately your bottom line.

## Who Should Read This Book?

If you have ever wondered whether your checkout system is off-putting to potential new customers, how differently your website might be perceived by a new versus a returning visitor, if paid advertising yields better conversions than free organic search listings, whether you can better qualify leads by fine-tuning your search marketing strategy, or simply how to measure the performance of your website, then this book is for you. The most important prerequisite for reading this book is an inquisitive mind with the drive and desire to improve the user experience—that is, engagements and conversions on your website.

I have attempted to make this book's subject matter accessible to a broad spectrum of readers, including marketers, webmasters, CEOs, and anyone with a business interest in making their website work. After all, the concept of measuring success is a universal desire. Although the content is not aimed at the complete web novice, don't worry; nor is it aimed at engineers. I am not one myself; and installing, configuring, or using Google Analytics does not require an engineer! Rather, I hope that *Advanced Web Metrics with Google Analytics* will appeal to existing web analysts as well as readers new to the field of web measurement.

This book describes the best practice techniques you can use to set up and configure Google Analytics. The purpose is simple: to give you the information you need to maximize your website's potential. With a better understanding of your website visitors, you will be able to tailor page content and marketing budgets with laserlike precision for a better return on investment. I also discuss advanced configurations (Chapter 9, "Google Analytics Hacks"), which are not documented elsewhere. These provide you with an even greater understanding of your website visitors so that you can dive into the metrics that make sense for your organization. In as many areas as possible, I include real-world practical examples that are currently in use by advanced users.

The book's content is primarily aimed at an organization's marketer and webmaster, who would work in conjunction with each other. Many chapters focus on integrating your analytical skills with your marketing and webmaster skills, and require no coding ability. There are also sections and exercises in this book that require you to modify your web page content; after all, web analytics is all about instigating change using reliable metrics as your guide. Therefore, knowledge of HTML (the ability to read browser source code) and experience with online marketing methods (for example, pay-per-click, e-mail marketing, organic search, etc.) is required. Some advanced techniques also require an understanding of JavaScript.

## How This Book Is Organized

There are four parts to this book: “Measuring Success,” “Using Google Analytics Reports,” “Implementing Google Analytics,” and “Using Visitor Data to Drive Website Improvement.”

Each part begins with the fundamentals that need to be considered for that topic. Then we build in the detail, followed by real-world examples that demonstrate how to apply what has been presented in that chapter. As a former implementer, analyst, and consultant myself, I cram in as many useful tips, workarounds, and practical suggestions as I possibly can.

Beginning with Chapter 4, you will be viewing reports in detail. As each subsequent chapter extends your skills, the examples become more involved and sophisticated, so try not to skip chapters!

By the final chapter you will have a thorough understanding of best-practice Google Analytics techniques and be well on your way to measuring the success (or otherwise) of your own website through a clear understanding of the processes involved. I have tried to present the material so that readers may explore the possibilities of Google Analytics further and perhaps even add their own contributions to this book via the book blog: [www.advanced-web-metrics.com/blog](http://www.advanced-web-metrics.com/blog).

**Note:** For help with terminology throughout this book, you may find the following link useful:  
[www.google.com/support/analytics/bin/static.py?page=glossary.html](http://www.google.com/support/analytics/bin/static.py?page=glossary.html)



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# Measuring Success

*Lord Kelvin is often quoted as the reason why metrics are so important: “If you cannot measure it, you cannot improve it.” That statement is ultimately the purpose of web analytics. By enabling you to identify what works and what doesn’t from a visitor’s point of view, web analytics is the foundation for running a successful website. Even if you get those decisions wrong, web analytics provides the feedback mechanism that enables you to identify mistakes quickly.*

I

*In Part I, you will learn the following:*

- Chapter 1 **Why understanding your web traffic is important to your business**
- Chapter 2 **What methodologies are available**
- Chapter 3 **Where Google Analytics fits**
- Chapter 4 **How to use Google Analytics Reports**



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