MAKING YOUR WEBSITE POPULAR

Many people create websites and then don't have a good idea of how to promote them. This paper gives an overview of main ways to generate traffic to a website. The items discussed here apply to both commercial and non-commercial sites.

1. Measure your traffic
There are many good tools to do this. The ones that I'm most familiar with are:

- Read the web logs directly. It is possible to import the web logs into a text editor or into Microsoft Excel. This gives you all the data for each visitor, but takes more time. The logs are used by other products to generate their reports.

- Webalizer (see http://www.mrunix.net/webalizer/) is a popular open-source web analysis tool that can quickly read and analyze Apache web logs.

- AWStats (see http://www.awstats.org) is a more recent open source tool with a broad feature set. It works with both Apache and IIS (Microsoft's web server) logs and is what I currently use.

- Mach5 (see http://www.mach5.com), a commercial product in three versions (free/$100/$200) that can generate a tree view of how visitors came through your site and can generate "stickyness" statistics.

The statistics I find to be of greatest usefulness are:

- Number of unique visitors. This is better than the total number of visitors. Each person who views the site is counted as only one visitor.

- Where the visitors came from. In particular, how many came directly (by typing in the URL), how many came from a search engine (which one and what search term was used), and how many came from a link from another website.

- What the visitors saw. It is important to see which pages on your site were most popular.

- Stickyness and popularity. How many pages per visitor? Did they add the site to their favorites?

2. Content drives traffic
One of the first things you'll learn when analyzing traffic for different web sites is

(a) The more pages (and words), the more likely a search engine will steer visitors to the site.

(b) The better the quality and usefulness of what you provide, the more a visitor will linger on your site, visit it again, refer it to others, and link to it.

(c) The more broadly-interesting your content, the more visitors it will generate, but also the more likely there are others who provide the same content and dilute this interest.

3. Search engines
One of the ways that others can reach your web site is through search engines. This is a big enough topic, that I've written a separate paper to discuss how to submit and be successful with search engines. In general, you should be aware of the following:

- Your content must be visible to search engine robots--the content must be in text form on an HTML page linked to by other HTML pages that a search engine robot can access. Content hidden in GIF images, Flash graphics, or behind a Java or Javascript navigation system are not accessible to the search engine robots. PDFs are visible.

- Remember the 80/20 rule. Google is most important, then Yahoo, then MSN, then the many others. For most of the sites I know, Google, Yahoo, and MSN constitute over 80% of the visitors that come from search engines.

- Lots of words expressed in lots of ways generate lots of traffic. In addition to having key words on your home page, PDFs, forums, etc also generate lots of traffic because they provide lots of content.

4. Alternate "free" places to submit
Several websites that I work with get most of their traffic from sites other than search engines. The following are worth considering:

- Google images. If your "product" is image oriented, Google images is a good place to get visitors. http://www.fietstocht.com, a personal travel website, gets about 25% of its visitors from Google Images, 25% from Google (text search), 25% from other search engines, and about 25% from direct hits or links from other sites.

- Directory-type websites. There are many sites that provide listings of other sites. For example C/Net does comparison of computer hardware prices, http://www.scriptsearch.com lists free or inexpensive software tools. There are directories in almost all categories and many are free.

- Forums. Although you have to be careful, it is sometimes possible to place a notice on a forum that lets people know that the answer to their needs can be found on your website.

- Press releases and other type "news sites". There are also places like http://www.prweb.com where you can issue a press release for free.

5. Activities that generate traffic
You can also use non-web related activities to draw people to your website. Two of the major ways I know to do this are

- Newsletters. These could be email newsletters or direct mail that encourages people to visit the site.

- Talks at industry events. I have been a speaker for several industry events. At the end, people usually ask for a copy of the presentation. Instead of giving this out, I tell people to download it from my website.

6. Pay for clicks
Companies have started discovering that the internet is a good place to advertise. Many people now use the internet to find products. For the advertiser, the internet pricing structure is well-suited. Unlike, print, radio or television, you only pay for people who actually click to get to your website. The two most popular "pay for clicks" providers are:

- Google. Typically for $0.10 per click, you can buy words on Google and be listed on the sponsored links section.

- Overture. This is more costly per click, but can generate good results. Overture is owned by Yahoo and works with most search engines other than Google. These search engines auction the top positions in response to certain key words. Although it may cost several dollars per click to be the first link that people see in such popular categories as "Hawaii" and "Bargain PC", it can generate a lot of traffic.

How much traffic can I expect
Here are some typical statistics:

- A five-page site that's not promoted, but is visible to search engine robots: 0-30 visitors per month.

- A 25-page site with useful content visible to search engine robots, but no promotion: 200-500 visitors/month.

- A 1000+page site with many photos of interest to world travelers: 3000-6000 visitors per month.

- A well-promoted site with weekly newsletters, many white papers, forums, and excellent software marketing resource (http://www.softwareceo.com): 50K-100K visitors per month.

- The biggest open source (http://www.freshmeat.net http://www.sourceforge.net) sites: 9 million visitors per month.

Examples
The following are some examples of things that I've done to make the websites that I have more popular:

- For my consulting site (http://www.corp21.com), I have focused on providing as many useful articles, like this one, and then analyzed which topics are most popular. This generates both referral business and adds credibility to the services I provide.

- For a vertical market site for the plastics industry (http://www.selectedtechnologies.com) I provide a plastics industry directory as a free service. This pulls people from the plastics industry to this "portal" where they will also see the software that I sell.

- My web software site (http://www.dataroo.com) relies heavily on submissions to software directory sites (Freshmeat.net, Hotscripts.com) where people looking for this type of software can search for products that meet their needs. To address as broad of an audience as possible, there are free versions, paid versions with support, and open source projects related to the Surftree product.

Conclusion
This paper is an overview. Feel free to give me comments to help improve this. Here are three references to let you further explore this topic:

- Vermeulen, Bert. *Promoting a Web Site Through Search Engines*. Corp21 ©2004.

Please contact me if you would like more info or help on making your business more successful.

About the Author
Bert Vermeulen owns Corp21, a company that supports, incubates and advises businesses, entrepreneurs, and inventors around the world. For more information, see http://www.corp21.com.