

# Beyond spray and pray

*Heather Maitland* finds out how to tell if your online marketing is worth it

Either ‘... an extremely worthwhile investment for your business or a massive time sink that brings little or no benefit’. Kieran Flanagan points out that distinguishing the two is not always easy.<sup>1</sup> So how can we tell if online marketing is worth it? Evaluation involves a judgement about effectiveness but monitoring – the routine collection and recording of data over time – is just as important. I’m amazed by the number of marketers I contact who don’t know that their website is down.

An anonymous blogger on the eMarketing Wall suggests we should keep an eye on speed as well as uptime because search engines (and visitors) hate slow loading sites. They point out ‘it doesn’t take a rocket surgeon’ to do this as there are easy-to-use tools out there, recommending Pingdom’s free service that monitors the availability and response time of your site and Google Analytics’ Intelligence Alerts feature that you can set to email you when specific changes occur.<sup>2</sup>

Rebecca Lehmann suggests setting Google Intelligence Custom Alerts to tell you about

- big drops in the number of visits,
- big drops in the number of goal conversions (your emailing list submission form or shopping cart could be broken),
- if Google Analytics flat lines (your website is down or someone has broken your Analytics code),
- big drops in the number of referrals from Google (Google thinks you have done something naughty).<sup>3</sup>

Evaluation isn’t rocket surgery either, but you do need to do a bit of thinking first. How can you evaluate the success of your online marketing if you don’t know what you mean by *success*?

You should have a marketing strategy that integrates online and offline activity, setting out measurable objectives. If you don’t, then you at least need to write down clear motives for your online marketing and add some hard numbers that establish what you would count as successful, insists Kieran Flanagan.<sup>1</sup> Find the numbers by looking at benchmarks for your sector. *Marketing Profs* published some benchmarks for email marketing at the end of July: with open rates at 21% (16% for the travel and leisure industry); click through rates of 5% (2%) and unsubscribe rates at 0.3% (1.6%).<sup>4</sup> It sounds difficult but isn’t

– look at the useful case study at [www.smartinsights.com/social-media-marketing/how-to-track-qr-code-campaign-effectiveness/](http://www.smartinsights.com/social-media-marketing/how-to-track-qr-code-campaign-effectiveness/), particularly if you like pizza.

If you are bored by all this, then Andy Crestodina urges you to think of it as Fantasy Football. Once you know exactly what you are trying to achieve, you are not tracking statistics, but watching the scoreboard. And he lists loads of free tools that will help you keep score.<sup>5</sup>

Laura Patterson thinks that we usually measure the wrong things. Evaluation is a decision-support tool so we should be measuring impact. We need to prove to our colleagues that the investment of time and money in online marketing (and, indeed, offline marketing) benefits the organisation.<sup>6</sup>

‘You need access to data that show outcomes of marketing campaigns, rather than mere activity reports’, says Wayne Morris. The number of fans and mentions indicate levels of interest, but the feedback rate – the number of comments divided by the number of page views – puts this into a meaningful context, and the number that click through to the website and join the mailing list shows their real value to your organisation.<sup>7</sup>

According to Paddy Moogan, there’s no point in measuring something we can do nothing about. ‘If a metric isn’t actionable, then it’s just fluff that fills up space in a report.’<sup>8</sup>

So how do we choose what actionable outcomes to measure? Dave Chaffey recommends using the balanced scorecard approach first introduced in the Harvard Business Review, looking at outcomes in three areas:

- Financial results (e.g. return on investment in online marketing: for every pound spent, what did it earn?)
- Customer value (e.g. sales per customer, new customers, customer satisfaction ratings)
- Operational processes (e.g. efficiency of online booking or sales, conversion rates)<sup>9</sup>

But how can we measure these outcomes when it is so hard to tell how ‘much’ a Twitter follower is worth?

Jen Evans says that we need to stop thinking about transactions – what she calls the ‘spray and pray’<sup>10</sup> approach – and measure relationships. We can’t do this if our campaigns are really saying ‘Buy this, and go away until I’m ready to send you another message’. We need to understand the chain of small steps that make up the

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pathway a customer takes between our activity and its outcomes.

Of course, that pathway is different for every customer and changes over time. As Evans points out, a new mum is only a new mum for about two years. We need to look at our relationships with customers and see what indicates an increased likelihood to participate or buy.

These relationships are based on information and experience.<sup>11</sup> That means that, although we may not be able to see the whole path, we can at least see what Evans calls digital toll booths, significant points along the way where information is exchanged. And then we can take measurements at these points to see how likely it is that the customer will take the next step, and another, towards the outcomes that we are seeking.<sup>12</sup>

If you want some more help, Kieran Flanagan has detailed suggestions for measuring outcomes of social media activity<sup>1</sup>, Belinda Walsh proposes metrics for email marketing<sup>13</sup> and Paddy Moogan outlines his actionable website metrics.<sup>13</sup>

You don't have to be an Analytics fanatic to prove the impact of all your hard work, you just need to know what success will look like when you get there. ■



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