

Digital marketing and dark social traffic

For most digital marketers, the dark web is the password protected place inhabited by monsters who peddle terrorism, drugs and many other heinous unmentionables. It's a part of the internet few of us want to have any association with.

 By Charlie Stewart 28 Jul 2017



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But how many of us have heard of, or are actively engaging with, dark social? No, I'm not referring to Black Twitter, nor am I speaking of the place that Schweizer Reneke hockey mums post saucy images. Dark social is a growing nuisance for digital marketers who are keen to attribute the source of web traffic and its potential to deliver online sales. It refers to the untraceable sharing of content through social media channels.

And like the dark web, which is way larger than the internet most of us use, the amount of traffic from dark social shares dwarfs the regular sharing of content. If someone clicks a link to your website from an open platform like Twitter or Facebook, analytics programmes will generally tell you where that referral visit came from.

Attribution atrophy

But as the popularity of private messaging apps such as Snapchat and WhatsApp has grown, so too has the amount of web content people are sharing through these media. The trouble is that links shared this way lack referral tags, so platforms like Google Analytics attribute their visits to 'direct' traffic, encouraging us to make false assumptions about their source.

According to research from RadiumOne, some 84% of onsite shares (where someone copies a URL and pastes it into email or a messaging app while reading a piece of content) happen over dark social channels; not surprisingly, much of this is coming from mobile.

Now, we're all aware that Facebook is a huge source of traffic for most websites. Yet RadiumOne found that only 11 percent of site-originated mobile shares and 21 percent of mobile clickbacks happened worldwide via Facebook. Put another way, dark social gives seven times the number of site-originated mobile shares

that the world's largest social media giant hands out.

Why is this a problem?

A simple, personal, example will shed some light. The other day, waiting in the airport lounge for a flight, I decided to find a new clock for my kitchen. I typed a couple of queries into Google and clicked on a paid ad for a well-known local retailer. After browsing through a few pages, I saw something I liked and used the email share feature on the product page to send a link to my wife. A little later, she clicked through from her laptop and bought it.

When the retailer looks at its funnel attribution, it'll see that she made a purchase after visiting just one page from a desktop device via a direct traffic source. What they won't see is that the sale had a gigantic assist from (and was arguably generated by) paid search on a mobile device. And if that's happening with other customers, it pretty much stuffs up the clever attribution modelling that digital marketers use to justify ROI.

So, what to do about it?

The challenge is that there's no real solution. That said, it would be remiss to not gauge the scale of the problem. Doing this is relatively easy. All you need to do is open your analytics platform and run a filter to show the landing pages that attract direct traffic. It's fair to say that any long links (like /contemporary-metal-clock-60cm-7404010870) weren't typed in manually, so they probably came from dark social.

While this won't help you determine how the content was originally shared or which channels assisted the conversion, it'll shed some light on how much dark social traffic you may be receiving. And it might give you some ammunition the next time someone questions the value of your spend on other channels when direct traffic is apparently doing so well.

Like the retailer I visited, you could include sharing buttons on your site to encourage people to share content using these rather than copying and pasting the link. But even if these have UTM tags, the likelihood is that any traffic source data that these carry will be stripped out if visitors are directed to a secure (https) website.

So, for the time being, we're in the dark. But with growing awareness of the challenge, it's unlikely to be long before some bright spark comes up with a solution.

ABOUT CHARLIE STEWART

CEO at Rogerwilco
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