

Paying attention

 By [Derek Abidinor](#)

25 Oct 2007

In the precursor to this article, [An economy of attention](#), I explained how the attention that web users distribute among web sites is of value to the users themselves as well as to the website owner. Attention is a commodity to be traded on the web. Now we'll see how organisations should court and service this attention.

Relevance, popularity and reputation

Three words often bandied about when debating the functions of the English monarchy, but more importantly, central to how the web works. Fifteen billion web pages out there and we need to filter that somehow. Google became omniscient and omnipresent because it explicitly measures popularity of web content (most clicked on goes to the top of search results). It then came to include relevance (if your website provided a news release about your own product, it should rate higher than an unrelated website reporting on the same), while sites like Digg (www.digg.com) and Technorati (www.technorati.com) use the submissions and content of web users themselves to measure relevant and popular content.

Reputation, in this context, is when submissions are judged based on previous history. [Wikipedia](#) contributors can be invited to become sub-editors and gatekeepers based on machine algorithms which measure the success of their contributions; Amazon rewards helpful customer reviews; the reputations of popular blogs and websites live and die by the quality of their posts and conversations.

These three tenets are crucial for any online strategy to get off the ground. Once you have them, you have attention.

Implications for advertising

If your business lives and dies by Internet advertising, you will be aware of the announcement earlier this year by Nielsen//NetRatings that it will rank sites by amount of time spent on a page rather than by the amount of page views.

Essentially, attention is now the metric. The main reason for this change is, well, bandwidth. Users began to watch video, photo slideshows, listen to podcasts and radio shows on the same page, and were clearly paying more quality attention, or were engaging more with the content. This was not reflected in the advertising model of the time, which rewarded quantity views rather than quality viewing.

Even if you aren't part of an advertising program, by being on the web you are advertising or marketing something, be it your company, cause or yourself. The rules hold true: don't provide a list of links to send people away yet cite other relevant sources and discourage skimming yet syndicate your content.

Implications on web design

Another reason for the change in metrics was AJAX programming, allowing one to complete online form transactions without reloading pages constantly. So while you're completing a form, AJAX can check if your email address is valid, if you've already bought the book, or zoom in on the map on the page without reloading the entire bang shoot.

Designers and developers need to take this into account, and we should all come to expect smoother online transactions and navigation to content, doing away with click-happy websites. IT implementation, including bank transactions, must come to see the usability wins that AJAX delivers.

Implications for the enterprise

If you want information about people using your website or intranet, you can choose statistics or analytics. Statistics will tell you how many people visit your website; analytics will tell you if they navigate through your website as you want them to. In the case of a campaign around a product, you can set a target of them coming via external sites, landing on the product page and completing the transaction. It doesn't have to be around a product; it can be around information or an impression that you want your users to consume. You can measure the success rate of such a goal and much, much more.

Behind the firewall, you can measure the success of internal marketing. What are staff looking at? Why are they going to the help files and which questions do they want answered? Why is no-one clicking on the green-and-fuchsia-blinking banner?

Implications for customer relations

Soon we should have technology that allows websites to capture the attention portfolio of its visitors and customers. By consent. You can then deliver targeted campaigns at individuals, and they will get what they want.

Is this any different to online strategies of recent years? Yes, we used to assume that people would find your website and then they would enter the transaction/consume your message and that would be the measure of success.

Now people converse about products and brands all over the web – and more than likely not on your website. Users trust their peers' experiences more than marketing fluff, and we know this. You ought to be addressing social media anyway, but regarding attention you need to keep them on your website where you will know your customer/stakeholder and deliver accordingly.

In the interim, start by realising that your online strategy has the goal of getting and retaining more attention. When conducting usability testing of your website, make that the outcome. Begin by assuming that while you may be broadcasting for attention now, you will have the undivided attention of your audience tomorrow.

ABOUT DEREK ABDINOR

Derek runs AQME, South Africa's network for independent publishers and consults to established companies in optimising their digital businesses. He would like to see a healthy media ecosystem where media, brands and advertisers can thrive; where foreign and corporate control of our digital media is limited; where free speech allows us to build the society we believe in; and the introduction of a new ethic that will portray our industry as one of virtue and value.

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