Twelve Tips for Integrating Analytics into Web Projects for Interactive Agencies

1. Think strategically about analytics.

Goals change. Websites grow. Managers come and go. Marketing ideas flow.

Good data collection needs consistency and reliability.

Are these incompatable realities? If you are planning your analytics on a tactic-by-tactic basis, then probably. If you are thinking strategically about your analytics, then you will have very few problems. Having an extensible analytics installation is key to making sure your project has long-term measurability. This touches on business objectives, technology requirements, and marketing flexibility. Make sure your analytics specialist is asking the long-term questions and getting into the meat of what constitutes value to the client. By working through these topics, it will be possible to come up with an analytics strategy from day one that can be consistent without becoming a straight-jacket.

2. Assume the client will want to know how the project performs.

If a client is spending money on a project, they are going to expect a return. Sometimes they may not be completely sure what that return looks like. Sometimes they may change their mind on what the value of that return is. Sometimes they may look for other types of returns that no one planned on from the start. In every case--from new build to re-build to re-skin--the client will want to know what their return on spend was.

If the planning was good and the analytics were in place form the start, reporting back on performance will be relatively easy. Also, it could extend the engagement and offer additional billable hours. This will also make "next steps" easy to identify and "phase two" will have data backing it up. Having quantitative results at hand from day one always makes pitching the client on additional work and budget easier.

When analytics are not in place, "phase two" is usually based on what work could not be accomplished in phase one and the project gets drawn out longer than might have been promised initially. Some clients are okay with this, and some get fatigued. In any case, you and your agency run the risk of having a diminished reputation with your client.

3. Use analytics to sell.

In the early phases of a project--the pitch and discovery--having data to back up your assertions is really helpful. This is true also when pitching "phase two" of a project or looking for additional budget for "enhancements" the client may not have been willing to agree to in the first round.

A history of successful analytics installations can give you the background you need to sell in new business.

A successful analytics installation can give you the proof you need to sell in "phase two" or to change direction.

Further measurement can show the client that your recommendations were correct and they should fund "phase three".

4. Use Google Analytics if possible.

It's free and it's understandable and it's easier to set up.

If your client has a corporate analytics platform that is required, then make sure to integrate that. Many times, a parallel installation of GA can be built in. Many times this parallel installation is more useful than the corporate platform. Having an analytics specialist who knows GA really well and can configure it up front will get you excellent results faster than almost any other path.

5. It is less expensive to integrate analytics up front.

Planning is cheaper than code refactoring. Measure twice and build once. Paying your analytics consultant for 20 hours in the discovery and planning phase is much cheaper than paying that same consultant for 40+ hours to audit your web project and direct your developers on how to update the code to integrate analytics and verify the results. Then add developer costs on top of that. And additional project management.

Also, during the time when you can't see what is happening, you and/or your client could be losing even more money by spending on marketing that is not working! This is especially important when running paid search and/or direct response programs. Any program that relies on agile development or rapid iterations is almost impossible to optimize without analytics.

6. Clearly identify the value of the project in the client's business

Analytics isn't about visits and bounce rate. Those are metrics. Analytics is about understanding value. Providing value is the highest aspiration of any vendor. If you are not providing value, you probably won't be working for that client for very long. Every project needs to be rooted in how it provides value for the client.

Experienced analytics specialists can turn data into information.

Well implimented analytics can see to the heart of the project and show what the value is.

7. Clearly identify how business values are realized in the project.

Perhaps the most important work of the analytics specialist is to identify the actual mechanisms that produce value in a project and set up how to measure them. Having this from the beginning makes the work of measurement far easier than if analytics has to be integrated after the project is launched.

There are two pieces that flow out of this aspect of analytics--the functional measurement and the reporting of the measurements. Functional measurement is technical and specific and potentially expensive to correct later. Reporting of the measures is more of an art than a prescription. Having an analytics specialist who is well versed in different types of reporting can help you work through the nuances of communication with the client. Getting these

communication issues settled earlier rather than later makes everyone feel more comfortable and able to agree on what work needs to be done.

8. Make analytics a required part of the project--just like design, just like programing.

There is no way around it--if you want to know what the project contributed, you have to measure it. You can't measure it after the fact. You can't measure it in "phase two". You have to capture the data from day one. You have to understand what it means right away. If you want cost-effective, results orientated projects, analytics can't be an add-on and it can't be an "enhancement". No one says "Let's build it now, and think about designing it later." In the same way, you should not think "Let's launch it now, and think about measuring it later." Measuring it later may be impossible. The necessary data may simply be missing. It happens all the time. Many a project has been derailed or delayed by inadequate planning and implementation of analytics.

9. Build in an "analytics friendly" way.

If you have an analytics specialist and you incorporate analytics into the project from the start, this probably won't be a problem for you.

If you try to use analytics as an "up-sell" or "enhancement", you could run into big problems. Not everything can be measured in any way. There are many coding conventions that are pushed by tech teams that do not play well with analytics measurement. Shared objects, reusable code, cloned installations, etc., all run the risk of making more work down the road if they are not discussed in advance. Refactoring code is expensive and sometimes impossible.

If code refactoring is necessary, then having an analytics specialist with a technical background will be very helpful. These people can help the business people and the technical people communicate about what the sticking points are, what work is needed, and what the potential trade-offs might be. However, they will be expensive.

10. Have an analytics specialist handle the analytics planning.

Although account people and technical staff all have experience with analytics, they seldom have the specific knowledge needed to work through the issues to get a solid analytics installation planned and running. Most account people will know to put the tracking scripts on the pages, but that is only the very first step. Analytics specialists focus on the whole picture of what needs to be tracked, how to track it, how to troubleshoot any problems that may come up, and what the trade-offs are. Having these extra eyes on a project will make sure your analytics are ready to go from day one.

11. Have yourself added as an administrator.

Don't get the administrator password and log on as that person. Being added as an administrator has several benefits:

- Allows you to see who is doing what when changes are logged.
- You get central access to your clients' Google Analytics accounts through one log in
- It maintains appropriate boundaries between client and vendor.

In the interest of transparency, the analytics account should be owned by the client and managed by the vendor.

12. Sync with Adwords.

If you are running Google Analytics and Adwords, then the accounts should be synced. Not everyone knows to do this, but it is a great way to get stronger reporting out of your Google Analytics and Adwords. The key is to have both tools established under the same master Google Account, then link them by following the instructions in the interfaces. This should be done right away.

Short List of Recommended Reading

NWSEM.com
Visual Business Intelligence by Steven Few
Web Analytics Demystified by Eric Peterson
The Semphonic Blog
Beyond Web Analytics

About Jason Lucey

Based in Portland Oregon, Jason has been specializing in search marketing and analytics for over 9 years. From beginnings as a community moderator with WebMD, Jason has gone on to work as a developer, webmaster, SEO, project manager, web strategist, IA, and general internet marketing specialist in both the agency and client worlds. Jason is a strong believer in honest numbers and real business results.

Jason formed NWSEM in 2008 as a consultancy to help make measurement understandable for clients so that they will start creating a culture of measurement within their own organizations.

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