

Attract Visitors to Your Site

mini

the missing manual[®]



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Matthew MacDonald

Attract Visitors to Your Site: The Mini Missing Manual

by Matthew MacDonald

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Introduction

A critical part of website success is attracting visitors. This Mini Missing Manual gives you the knowledge and tools you need to do that. It shows you how to build a community around your site and how to use the power of keywords and Web search engines to rise up in the rankings of search results.

Once you do that, you'll want to see how effective your efforts are. You'll learn how to use a powerful—and free—service that tracks visitor activity on your site; Google Analytics lets you know where your visitors live, what browser they use, which of your Web pages they love, and—just as important—which pages don't work for them. Using this information, you can fine-tune your site to keep the visitors coming.

Tip: To learn more about building and improving your website, see *Creating a Web Site: The Missing Manual*.

Attract Visitors To Your Site

The best website in the world won't do you much good if it's sitting out there all by its lonesome self. For your site to flourish, you need to find the best way to attract visitors—and keep them flocking back for more. In this Mini Missing Manual, you'll learn some valuable tricks for promoting your site. You'll also see how search engines work, how to make sure they regularly index your site, and how to work your way up the rankings of search results. Lastly, you'll learn to gauge the success of your site with visitor tracking, and you'll use a powerful free service called Google Analytics to learn some of your visitors' deepest secrets (like where they live, what browser they use, and which of your web pages they find absolutely unbearable). Before you know it, you'll be more popular than chocolate ice cream.

Your Website Promotion Plan

Before you plunge into the world of website promotion, you need a plan. So grab a pencil and plenty of paper, and get ready to jot down your ideas for global website domination (fiendish cackling optional).

Although all webmasters have their own tactics, it's generally agreed that the best way to market a website is to follow these steps:

1. Build a truly great website.

If you start promoting your site before there's anything to see, you're wasting your effort (and probably burning a few bridges). Nothing says "never come back" like an empty website with an "under construction" message.

2. See step 1.

If in doubt, keep polishing and perfecting your site. Fancy graphics aren't the key concern here—the most important detail is whether you have some genuinely useful content. Ask yourself—if you were browsing the Web, would you stop to take a look at this site? Make sure you've taken the time to add the kinds of content that keep visitors coming back.

3. Share links with friends and like-minded sites.

This step is all about building community. Contrary to what you might expect, this sort of small-scale, word-of-mouth promotion might bring more traffic to your site than high-powered search engines like Google.

4. Perfect your site's meta elements.

Meta elements contain hidden words that convey important information about your site's content, like a site description. Search engines use them as one way to determine what your website's all about. For details, see below.

5. Submit your website to Internet directories.

Like search engines, directories help visitors find websites. The difference between directories and search engines is that directories are generally smaller catalogs put together by humans, rather than huge sprawling text indexes amassed by computers.

6. Submit your website to Internet search engines.

Now you're ready for the big time. Once you submit your website to web heavyweights like Google and Yahoo, it officially enters the public eye. However, it takes time to climb up the rankings and get spotted.

7. Figure out what happened.

To assess the successes and failures of your strategy, you need to measure some vital statistics—how many people visit your site, how long they're staying, and how many visitors come back for more. To take stock, you need to crack open tools like hit counters and server logs.

Throughout this book, you'll tackle these steps, get some new ideas, and build up a collection of promotion strategies.

Spreading the Word

Some of the most effective promotion you can do doesn't involve any high-tech XHTML wonkery, but instead amounts to variations on the theme of good old-fashioned advertising.

The first step is to find other websites like yours. If you create a topic-oriented site—your musings on, say, golf, fine jewelry, or jeweled golf clubs—similar sites make up your virtual neighborhood. They're part of a larger online community to which you now belong. So why not introduce yourself? Strike up a *reciprocal link* relationship (see the next section).

On the other hand, if you're creating a business site, similar sites are, obviously, your competitors. As a result, you're unlikely to share links. However, it's a great idea to Google your competition. You'll probably find service sites—business directories, news sites, content sites, and so on—that link to these competitors. Once you find these service sites, you can publicize your site there as well.

Reciprocal Links

A reciprocal link is a link-trading agreement. The concept is simple. You find a website with similar content and strike a bargain: Link to my site, and I'll link to yours. Reciprocal links are an important thread in the underlying fabric of the Web. If you're not sure where to start searching for potential link buddies, pay a visit to Google and use the *link:* operator (as explained in [Figure 1-1](#)) to see who's linking to sites similar to yours. (You can get an even more powerful link viewer as part of the Google Webmaster Tools, described in "[Google AdWords](#)", below.)

Reciprocal links only work if there's a logical connection between the two sites. For example, if you create the website <http://www.ChocolateSculptures.com/>, it probably makes sense to exchange links with <http://www.101ChocolateRecipes.com/>. But <http://www.HomerSimpsonForPresident.com/> is a far stretch, no matter how much traffic it gets.

Topic isn't the only consideration in link exchanges. You should also look for sites that *feel* professional. If a similarly themed site is choked with ads, barren of content, formatted with fuchsia text on a black background, and was last updated circa 1998, keep looking.

Once you find a site you want to exchange links with, dig around on the site for the webmaster's email address. Send a message explaining that you love <http://www.101ChocolateRecipes.com/>, and plan to link to it from your site, <http://www.ChocolateSculptures.com/>. Then, gently suggest that you think your website would be of great interest to <http://www.101ChocolateRecipes.com/> readers.

Tip: Reciprocal linking can require a little finesse. It's best to look for sites that complement yours, but don't necessarily compete with it. You'll also have more luck if you approach web peers, sites of similar quality or with a similar amount of traffic to yours.



Figure 1-1: Google has a little-known but valuable search keyword that identifies sites that link to your site (or anyone else's for that matter). It's the `link: operator`. If you type in `link:http://www.disneylandparis.com/`, for example, you see all the sites that link to EuroDisney's home page. You can use any URL you want (for example, try `link:http://www.disneylandparis.com/uk/introduction.htm/` to find out who's linking to the English-language intro page).

Once you enter into a link agreement—even if it’s just an informal exchange of emails—remember to keep your end of the deal. Don’t remove the link from your site without letting the other webmaster know about the change. It’s also a good idea to keep checking on the other site to make sure your link remains prominent. If it disappears, don’t fly into an Othellian rage—just send a polite email asking where it went or why it disappeared.

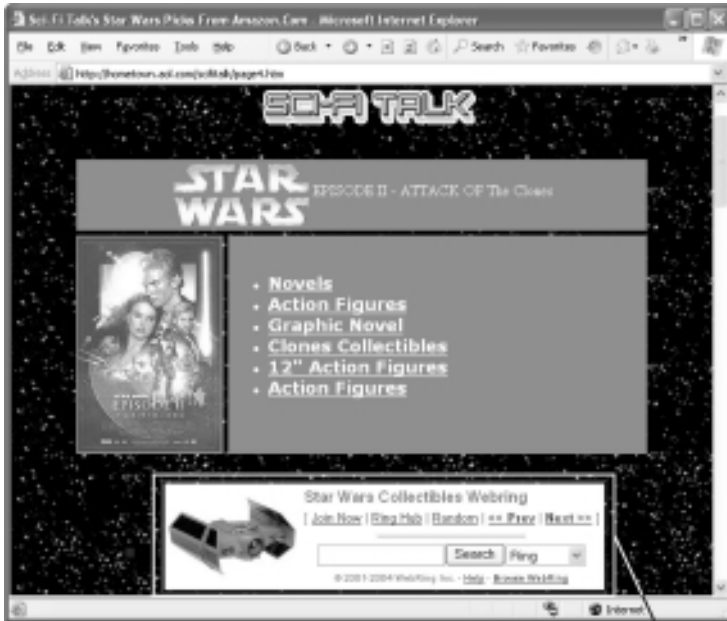
Reciprocal links are also a good way to start working your way up search engine rankings (see [“Rising up in the rankings”](#) below). That’s because one of the criteria Google takes into account when it determines how to order the results of a web search is how many other sites link to yours. The more popular you are, the more likely you’ll climb up the list.

Note: There are some companies that sell reciprocal link services. The basic idea is that they try to pair up different websites (for a fee) in a link-sharing agreement. Don’t fall for it. Your traffic might increase, but the visitors you get won’t really be interested in the content of your site, and they won’t hang around for long.

Web Rings

A web ring is similar to a reciprocal link, but instead of sharing a link between two partners, it binds a *group* of websites together.

For example, imagine you create a brilliant new site featuring reality TV trivia. To get more exposure, you can join a web ring dedicated to reality TV. You agree to put a block of XHTML on your site that advertises the ring and lets your visitors go to other sites in it. As payback, you become another stop within the ring (see [Figure 1-2](#)).



Web ring links

Figure 1-2: Many Web ring sites don't list the formal address of all the member sites. Instead, visitors move from one site to the next using previous and next links. This sequence of sites makes up the "ring."

Sadly, the majority of web rings consist of gaudy, amateurish Web disasters. Pair up with these nightmares and your site will be deemed guilty by association. However, with a little research, you may find a higher-quality ring. Maybe. To search for one, use Google (enter the topic followed by the words "web ring").

Note: The biggest disadvantage to Web rings is that they usually require you to add a fairly ugly set of links to your page. Before you sign up, carefully evaluate whether the extra traffic is worth it, and travel to all the other sites in the ring to see if they're of similar quality. If you're in a ring with low-quality sites, it can hurt your reputation.

Shameless Self-Promotion

To get your website listed on many of the Web's most popular sites, you need to fork over some cold, hard cash. However, some of the best advertising doesn't cost anything. The trick is to look for sites where you can promote *and* contribute at the same time.

For example, if you create the website <http://www.HotComputerTricks.com/>, why not answer a few questions on a computing newsgroup or discussion board? It's considered tactless to openly promote your site, but there's nothing wrong with dispensing some handy advice and following it up with a signature that includes your URL.

Here's an example of how you can answer a poster's question and put in a good word for yourself at the same time:

Jim,

The problem is that most hard drives will fail when submerged in water. Hence, your fishing computer idea won't work.

Sasha Mednick

<http://www.HotComputerTricks.com/>

An answer posting is much better than sending an email directly to the original poster because on a popular site hundreds of computer aficionados with the same question will read your posting. If even a few decide to check out your site, you've made great progress.

If you're very careful, you might even get away with something that's a little more explicit:

Jim,

The problem is that most hard drives will fail when submerged in water. Hence, your fishing computer idea won't work. However, you might want to check out my homemade hard-drive vacuum enclosure (<http://www.HotComputerTricks.com/>), which I developed to solve the same problem.

Sasha Mednick

<http://www.HotComputerTricks.com/>

Warning: This maneuver requires a very light touch. The rule of thumb is that your message should be well-intentioned. Only direct someone to your site if there really is something specific there that addresses the question.

Some sites let you post tips, reviews, or articles. If that's the case, you can use a variation of the technique above. Remember, dispense useful advice, and then follow it up with a byline at the end of your message. For example, if you submit a free article that describes how to create your groundbreaking vacuum enclosure, end it with this:

Sasha Mednick is a computer genius who runs the first-rate computing website (<http://www.HotComputerTricks.com/>).

Promotion always works best if you believe in your product. So make sure there's some relevant high-quality content on your site before you boast about it. Don't ever send someone to your site based on some content you plan to add (someday).

Tip: If you're a business trying to promote a product, you'll get further if you recruit other people to help you spread the word. One excellent idea is to look for influential bloggers. For example, if you're trying to sell a new type of fluffy toddler towel pajamas, hunt down popular people with blogs about parenting. Then, offer them some free pajamas if they'll offer their thoughts in a blog review. This sort of word-of-mouth promotion can be dramatically more successful in the wide-reaching communities of the Web than it is in the ordinary offline world.

Return Visitors

Attracting fresh faces is a critical part of website promotion, but novice webmasters often forget something equally important—return visitors. For a website to become truly popular, it needs to attract visitors who return again and again. Many a website creator would do better to spend less time trying to attract new visitors and more time trying to keep the current flock.

If you're a marketer, you know that a customer who comes back to the same store three or four times is a lot more likely to make a purchase than someone who's there on a first visit. These regulars are also more likely to get excited and recruit their friends to come and take a look. This infectious enthusiasm can lead more and more people to your website's virtual doorstep. The phenomenon is so common it has a name: the *traffic virus*.

Note: Return visitors are the ultimate measuring stick of website success. If you can't interest someone enough to come back again, your website's just not fulfilling its destiny.

So how does your website become a favorite stopping point for Web travelers? The old Internet adage says it all—*content is king*. Your site needs to be chock full of fascinating must-read information. Just as important, this information needs to change regularly and noticeably. If you update information once a month, your website barely has a pulse. But if you update it two or more times a week, you're ready to flourish.

Never underestimate the importance of regular updates. It takes weeks and months of up-to-date information to create a return visitor. However, one dry spell—say, three months without changing anything more than the color of your buttons—doesn't just stop attracting newcomers, it can kill off your current roster of return visitors. That's because savvy visitors immediately realize when a website's gone stale. They have much the same sensation you feel when you pull out a once-attractive pastry from the fridge and find it's as hard as igneous rock. You know what happens next—it's time to toss the pastry away, clear out the website bookmarks, and move on.

Tip: Signs of a stale site include old-fashioned formatting, broken links, and references to old events (like a Spice Girls CD release party or a technical analysis of why Florida condos are an ironclad investment).

The other way to encourage return visitors is to build a *community*. Discussion forums, promotional events, and newsletters are like glue. They encourage visitors to feel like they're participating in your site and sharing your web space. If you get this right, hordes of visitors will move in and never want to leave.

Favorite Icons

One of your first challenges in promoting your site is getting visitors to add your site to their browser bookmarks. However, that's not enough to guarantee a return visit. Your website also needs to be fascinating enough to beckon from the bookmark menu, tempting visitors to come back. If you're a typical Web traveler, you regularly visit only about five percent of the sites you bookmark.

One way to make your site stand out from the crowd is to change the icon that appears in visitors' bookmarks or favorites menu (an icon technically called a *favicon*). This technique is browser-specific, but it works reliably in most versions of Internet Explorer, Firefox, and Safari. The illustration in this box shows the favicons for Google and Amazon.

To create a favicon, add an icon file to the top-level folder of your website, and make sure you name it *favicon.ico*. The best approach is to use a dedicated icon editor, because it lets you create both a 16-pixel×16-pixel icon and a larger 32-pixel×32-pixel icon in the same file. Browsers use the smaller icon in their bookmark menus, and Windows PCs display the larger version when visitors drag the favicon to their desktop (Macs don't support the desktop-icon feature). If you don't have an icon editor, just create a bitmap (a *.bmp* file) that's exactly 16 pixels wide and 16 pixels high. To get an icon editor, visit a shareware site like <http://www.download.com/>.



Adding Meta Elements

Meta elements give you a way to add descriptive information to your web pages, which is important because some web search engines rely on these elements to help visitors find your site. [Figure 1-3](#) explains how it all works.

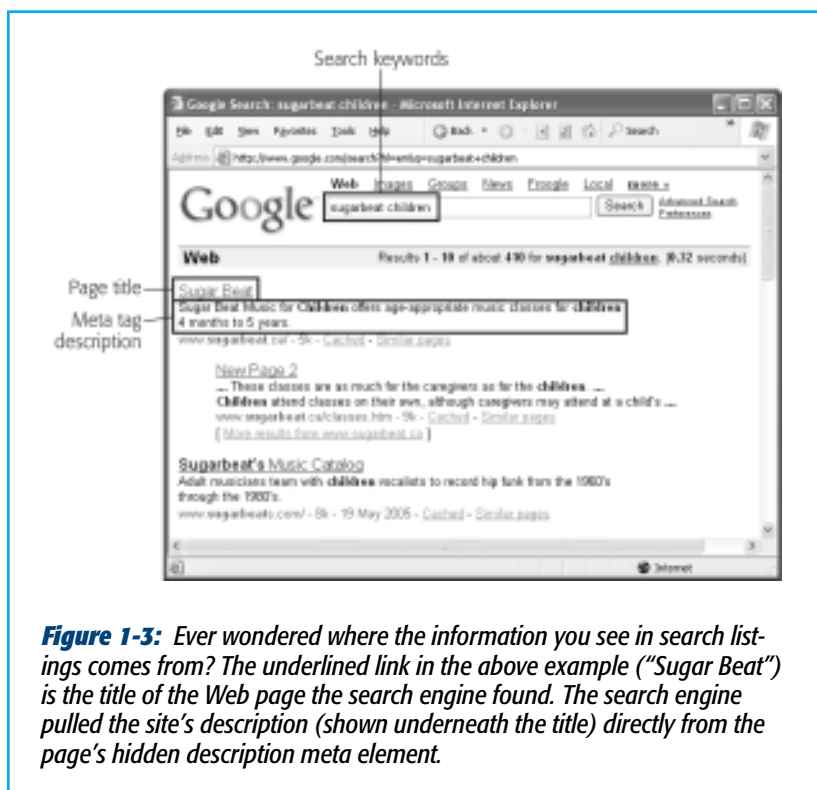


Figure 1-3: Ever wondered where the information you see in search listings comes from? The underlined link in the above example (“Sugar Beat”) is the title of the Web page the search engine found. The search engine pulled the site’s description (shown underneath the title) directly from the page’s hidden description meta element.

Note: Fun fact for etymologists and geeks alike: the term “meta element” means “elements *about*,” as in “elements that provide information *about* your Web page.”

You put all meta elements in the `<head>` section of a web page. Here's a sample meta element that assigns a description to a web page:

```
<!DOCTYPE html PUBLIC "-//W3C//DTD XHTML 1.0 Strict//EN"
"http://www.w3.org/TR/xhtml1/DTD/xhtml1-strict.dtd">

<html xmlns="http://www.w3.org/1999/xhtml">
<head>
  <meta name="description"
    content="Noodletastic offers custom noodle dishes
made to order." />
  <title>Noodletastic</title>
</head>

<body>...</body>

</html>
```

All meta elements look more or less the same. The element name is `<meta>`, the *name* attribute indicates the type of meta element it is, and the *content* attribute supplies the relevant information.

Meta elements don't show up when your page appears in a browser. They're intended for programs, like browsers and web search engines (see the box below), that read your web page from top to bottom.

In theory, there's no limit to the types of information you can put inside a meta element. For example, some web page editing programs insert meta elements that say its software built your pages (don't worry; once you understand meta elements, you'll recognize this harmless fingerprint and you can easily remove it). Another web page might use a meta element to record the name of the web designers who created it, or the last time you updated the page.

Some meta elements are more important than others, because search engines heed them. In the following sections, you'll learn about two of these: the *description* and *keywords* meta elements. These details, in conjunction with the <title> element, constitute the basic information that a search engine needs to gather about your page.

UP TO SPEED

How Web Search Engines Work

A Web search engine like Google has three pieces. The first is an automated program that roams the Web, downloading everything it finds. This program (often known by more picturesque names like *spider*, *robot*, or *crawler*) eventually stumbles across your website and copies its contents.

The second piece is an indexer that chews through Web pages and extracts a bunch of meaningful information, including a Web page's title, description, and keywords. The indexer also records a great deal of more esoteric data. For example, a search engine like Google keeps track of the words that crop up the most often on a page, what other sites link to your page, and so on. The indexer inserts all this digested information into a giant catalog (technically called a *database*).

The final piece of the search engine is the part you're probably most familiar with—the front-end, or search page. You enter the keywords you're hunting for, and the search engine scans its catalog looking for suitable pages. Different engines have different ways of ranking pages, but the basic idea is that the search engine attempts to make sure the most relevant and popular pages turn up early in the search results. A search engine like Google doesn't rank websites individually. That is, there's no such thing as the world's most popular Web page (in the eyes of Google). Instead, Google ranks pages in terms of how they stack up against whatever search keywords a visitor enters. That means that a slightly different search (say, "green tea health" instead of just "green tea") could get you a completely different set of results.

The Description Meta Element

The description of your page is probably the easiest meta element to come up with. You simply write a few sentences that distill the content of your site into a few plain phrases. Here's an example:

```
<meta name="description" content="Sugar Beat Music for  
Children offers age-  
appropriate music classes for children 4 months to 5  
years old." />
```

Although you can stuff a lot of information into your description, it's a good idea to limit it to a couple of focused sentences that total no more than around 50 words. Some search engines home in on the description text, while others rely more heavily on the text in the page. Even if your description appears on a search results page, readers see only the first part of it, followed by an ellipsis (...) where it gets cut off.

Tip: The *description* meta element gives search engines some key information. You should include it in every page you create.

The Keyword Meta Element

Your keyword meta element should contain a list of about 25 words or phrases that represent your website. Separate each word in the list by a comma. Here's an example:

```
<meta name="keywords" content="sugarbeat, sugar, beat,  
music, children,  
musical, classes, movement, babies, infants, kids, child,  
creative" />
```

The keyword list is a great place to add important terms (like "horseback riding"), alternate spellings ("horse back riding"), synonyms or related words ("equestrian"), and even common misspellings ("ecquestrian"). Keywords aren't case-sensitive.

Unfortunately, there's a huge caveat here. Most search engines don't use the keyword list any longer. That's because it was notorious for abuses (many a webmaster stuffed his keyword list full of hundreds of words, some only tangentially related to what was actually on the site). Search engines like Google take a more direct approach—they look at all the words in your web page, and pay special attention to words that appear more often, appear in headings, and so on. Most web experts argue that the keyword list has outlived its usefulness, and many don't bother adding it to their pages at all.

DESIGN TIME

The Importance of Titles and Image Text

A search engine draws information from many parts of your page, not just the meta elements. To make sure your pages are search-engine-ready, you should check to make sure you use the `<title>` element in all your pages, and that you use alternate text with all your images.

Alternate image text is the text a browser displays if it can't retrieve an image. You specify this text using the `alt` attribute in the `` element. Search engines pay attention to the alternate text—for example, Google, uses it as the basis for its image-searching tool (<http://images.google.com/>). If you don't have `alt` text, Google has to guess what the picture is about by looking at nearby text, which is less reliable.

The `<title>` element also plays several important roles. You already know that it determines the text your browser displays in the title bar of the browser window. It also helps identify your Web page in a listing of search results (see [Figure 1-3](#), shown earlier). Finally, the `<title>` element contains the text that appears in the bookmarks menu if a visitor bookmarks your page. Keep that in mind, and refrain from adding long slogans. “Ketchup Crusaders—Because ketchup isn't just for making food tasty” is about the longest you can stretch a title, and even that's iffy. On the other hand, remember not to omit essential information. The title “Welcome” or “Untitled 1” (a favorite in the Expression Web design program) isn't very helpful.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTION

Keyword Tricks

Can I make my website more popular by adding hidden keywords?

There are quite a few unwholesome tricks that crafty Web weavers use to game the search engine system (or at least try). For example, they might add a huge number of keywords, but hide the text so it isn't visible on the page (white text on a white background is one oddball option, but there are other style-sheet tricks). Another technique is to create pages that aren't really a part of your website, but that you store on your server. You can fill these pages with repeating keyword text. To implement this trick, you use a little JavaScript code to make sure real people who accidentally arrive at the page are directed to the entry point of your website, while search engines get to feast on the keywords.

As seductive as some of these tricks may seem to lonely websites (and their owners), the best advice is to avoid them altogether. The first problem is that they pose a new set of headaches and technical challenges, which can waste hours of your day. But more significantly, search engines learn about these tricks almost as fast as Web developers invent them. If a search engine catches you using these tricks, it may ban your site completely, relegating it to the dustbin of the Web.

If you're still tempted, keep this in mind: Many of these tricks just don't work. In the early days of the Web, primitive search engines gave a site more weight based on the number of times a keyword cropped up, but modern search engines like Google use much more sophisticated page-ranking systems. A huge load of keywords probably won't move you up the search list one iota.

Directories and Search Engines

Now that you're well on your way to perfecting and popularizing your site, it's time to start looking at the second level of Internet promotion—search engines. Getting your website into the most important search engine catalogs is a key step in publicizing it. Working your way up the rankings so web searchers are likely to

find you takes more work, and monopolizes the late-night hours of many a webmaster.

Directories

Directories are searchable site listings with a difference: humans, not programs, create them. That means that a small army of workers painstakingly puts together a collection of sites, neatly sorted into categories. The advantage of directories is that they're well-organized. A couple of clicks can get you a complete list of California regional newspapers, for example. The unquestioned disadvantage is that directories are dramatically smaller than *full-text search* catalogs. That means directories aren't very useful for those in search of a piece of elusive information that doesn't easily fall into a category, like a list of the English language's most commonly misspelled words. Over the years, as the Web's ballooned in size, directories have become increasingly specialized, and full-text search tools like Google and Yahoo have become the most common way that people hunt for information.

So, given that directories are just the unattractive cousins of full-text search engines, why do you need to worry about them? Two reasons. First, some web visitors still use directories, even if they don't use them as often as they do full-text search engines. Second, some search engines (including Google) pay attention to directory listings, and tend to rank sites higher if they turn up in certain directories. Getting into the right directories can help you start to move up the results list in a full-text search. And just like college, getting into a directory requires that you submit an application, which you'll learn about next.

The Open Directory Project

The most important directory to submit your site to is the Open Directory Project (ODP) at <http://dmoz.org/>. The ODP is a huge, long-standing website directory staffed entirely by thousands of volunteer editors who review submissions in countless categories. The ODP isn't the most popular web directory (that honor currently goes to the Yahoo directory), but other search engines use it behind the scenes. In fact, Google bases its own directory service (<http://directory.google.com/>) on the ODP.

Before submitting to the ODP, take the time to make sure you do it right. An incorrect submission could result in your website not getting listed at all. You can find a complete description of the rules at <http://dmoz.org/add.html/>, but here are the key requirements:

- Don't submit your site more than once.
- Don't submit your site to more than one category.
- Don't submit more than one page or section of your site (unless you have a really good reason, like the separate sections are notably different).
- Don't submit sites that contain "illegal" content. By the ODP's definition, this is more accurately described as unsavory content, like pornography, libelous content, or material that advocates illegal activity—you know who you are.
- Clean up any broken links, outdated information, or any other red flags that might suggest to an editor that your site isn't here for the long term.

- When you submit your site, describe it carefully and accurately. Don't promote it. In other words "Ketchup Masters is a manufacturer of gourmet ketchup" is acceptable. "Ketchup Masters is the best food-oriented site on the Web—the Louisville Times says you can't miss it!" isn't.
- Don't submit an incomplete site. Your "under construction" page won't get listed.

The next step is to spend some time at the <http://dmoz.org/> site, until you find the single best category for your site (see [Figure 1-4](#)).

Once you do, click the "suggest URL" link at the top of the page and fill out the submission form (see [Figure 1-5](#)). The form asks for your URL, the title of your site, a brief description, and your email address.

Note: If you have some free time on your hands, you can offer to help edit a site category—just click the "Become an editor" link. And even if you don't have editorial aspirations, why not check out the editor guidelines at <http://dmoz.org/guidelines/> to get a better idea of what's going on in the mind of ODP editors, and how they evaluate your site submission?

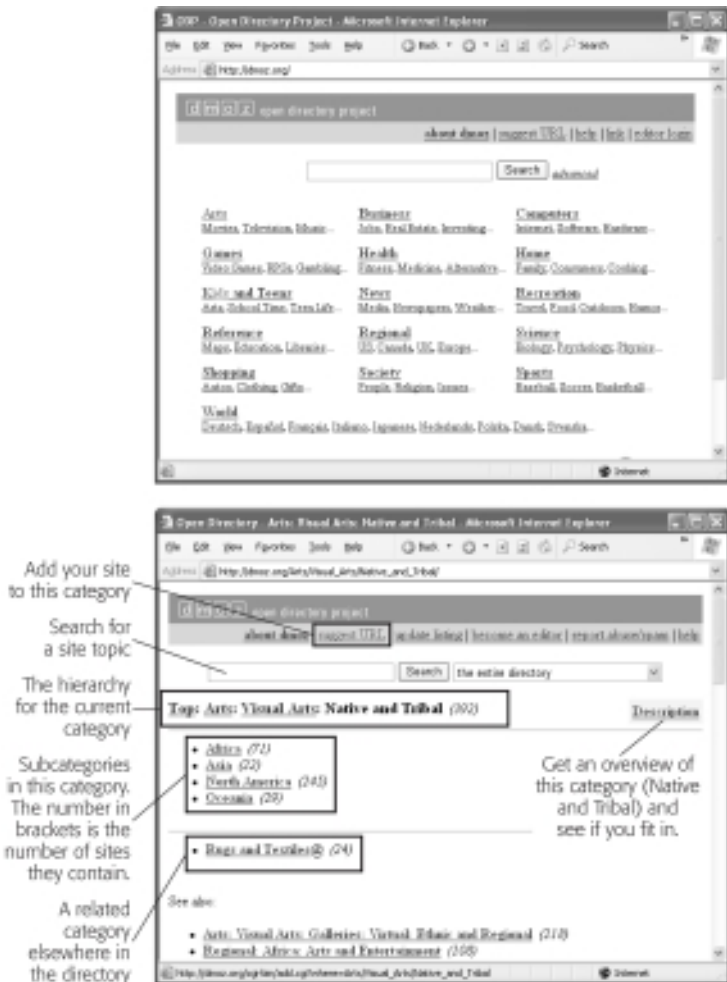


Figure 1-4: Top: When you first get to the ODP site, you see a group of general, top-level categories.

Bottom: As you click your way deeper into the topic hierarchies, you'll eventually find a specific subcategory that would make a good home for your site. Here's the Arts:Visual Arts:Native and Tribal category. There are several subcategories (like Asia, with 22 sites). Categories with an @ after their names link to a related categories in a different place in the topic hierarchy.

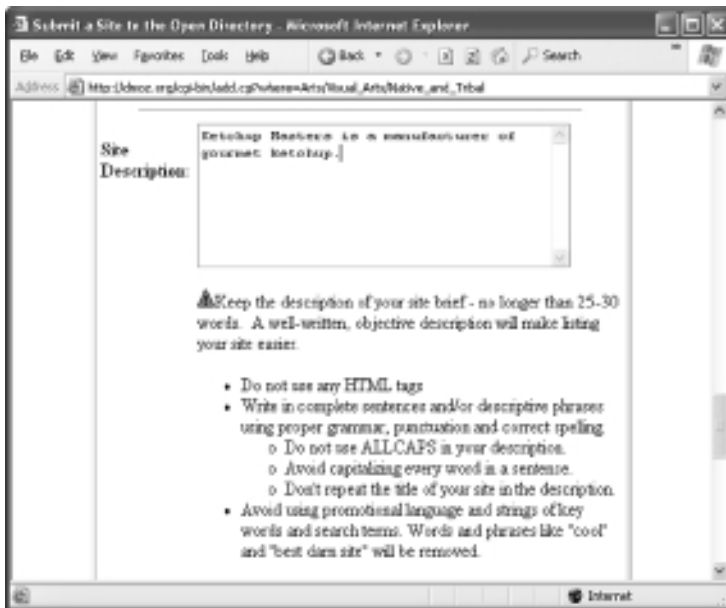
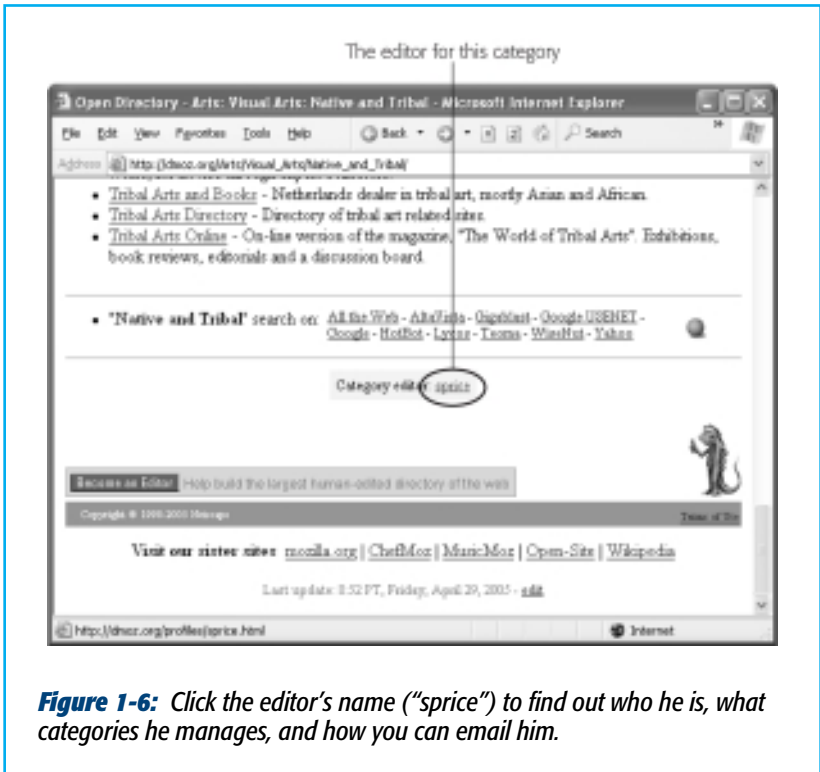


Figure 1-5: Here's a portion of the ODP submission form for a new site. Read all the instructions carefully, fill in the boxes, and then click the inviting Submit button at the bottom of the page (not shown here).

Once you submit your site, there's nothing to do but wait (and submit your site to the other directories and search engines discussed in this chapter). If two or three weeks pass without your site appearing in the listing and you haven't received an email describing any problems with it, try submitting your site again. If that still doesn't work, it's time to contact the category editor. Write a polite email asking why your site wasn't added to the listings, and include the date of your submission(s) and the name, URL, and description of your site. You can find the email address for the category editor at the very bottom of the category page (see [Figure 1-6](#)).



The Yahoo directory

ODP is a great starting point, but it isn't the only directory on the block. The other heavyweight is the Yahoo directory (<http://dir.yahoo.com/>). Unfortunately, getting your site into the Yahoo directory takes considerably more work.

First, there's the issue of cost. If you've created a non-commercial site, you can probably get in free, but it may take persistence, emails, multiple submissions, and a bit of luck. If you've created a

commercial site (one whose primary purpose is to make money) and you want to register it in the U.S. Yahoo directory, you need to pay an annual fee of several hundred dollars. And in the ultimate case of adding insult to injury, you won't get your money back if Yahoo rejects your site.

To get started, you can review Yahoo's official submission guidelines at <http://help.yahoo.com/l/us/yahoo/directory/suggest/listings-03.html>. However, you'll be much happier with the *unofficial* write-up at <http://www.apromotionguide.com/yahoo.html/>, which discusses your free and for-fee options, and explains what the cryptic rejection emails Yahoo sends out really mean. And if you have a commercial website, or you just don't want to suffer through the slow and unreliable free registration process, you'll need to use the Yahoo Directory Submit service (formerly called Yahoo Express), which is described at <https://ecom.yahoo.com/dir/submit/intro/>.

Once you're done with directories (or just ready to move on), it's time to take a look at full-text search engines.

Search Engines

For most people, search engines are the one and only tool for finding information on the Web. If you want the average person to find your site, you need to make sure it's in the most popular search engine catalogs, and turns up as one of the results in relevant searches. This task is harder than it seems, because the Web is full of millions of sites jockeying for position. To get noticed, you need to spend time developing your site and enhancing its visibility. You also need to understand how search engines rank pages (see the box below for an example).

The undisputed king of Web search engines is Google (<http://www.google.com/>). Not only is it far and away the Web's most popular search engine, it also powers other search engines (usually without being credited). Google performs an amazing amount of work—every day it chews through hundreds of millions of search requests.

Tip: For more information about search engines, including who's on top and who owns who, check out <http://www.searchengineland.com/>.

It's not too difficult to get Google to notice your site. By the time your site's about a month old, Google will probably have stumbled across it at least once, usually by following a link from another site or from the ODP. As described in the box above, Google takes outside links into consideration when sizing up a site, so the more sites that link to you, the more likely you are to turn up in someone's search results.

If you're impatient or you think Google's passing you by, you can introduce yourself directly using the submission form at <http://www.google.com/addurl/> (see [Figure 1-7](#)). Most popular search engines include a submission form like this. Just make sure you keep track of where you've submitted, so you don't inadvertently submit your site to the same search engine more than once.

Rising up in the rankings

You'll soon discover that it's not difficult to get into Google's index. But you might find it exceedingly hard to get noticed. For example, suppose you've submitted the site <http://www.SamMenzesHomemadePasta.com/>. To see if you're in Google, try an extremely specific search that targets just your site, like "Sam Menzes Homemade Pasta." This should definitely lead to your doorstep. Now, try searching for just "Homemade Pasta." Odds are, you won't turn up in the top 10, or even the top 100.



Figure 1-7: You can safely skip the comments section on this page but make sure to include the `http://` prefix at the start of your Web page's URL.

So how do you create a site that the casual searcher's likely to find? There's no easy answer. Just remember that the secret to getting a good search ranking is having a good PageRank, and getting a good PageRank is all about connections. To stand out, your website needs to share links with other leading sites in your category.

If you want to delve into the nitty-gritty of *search engine optimization* (known to webmasters as SEO), consider becoming a regular reader of <http://www.webmasterworld.com/> and <http://www.search-engineland.com/>. You'll find articles and forums where webmasters discuss the good, bad, and downright seedy tricks you can try to get noticed.

Tip: It's possible to get too obsessed with search engine rankings. Here's a good rule of thumb—don't spend more time trying to improve your search engine ranking than you do improving your website. In the long term, the only way to gain real popularity is to become one of the best sites on the block.

UP TO SPEED

How Google's PageRank Works

Google uses a rating system called *PageRank* to size up different Web pages. Google doesn't use PageRank to *find* search results; instead, it uses it to *order* them. When you execute a search with Google, it pulls out all the sites that match your search keywords. Then it orders the results according to the PageRank of each page.

The basic idea behind the PageRank system is that the value of your website is determined by the community of other websites that link to it. There are a few golden rules:

- The more sites that link to you, the better.
- A link from a more popular site (a site with a high PageRank) is more valuable than a link from a less popular site.
- The more links a site has, the less each link is worth. In other words, if someone links to your site and just a handful of other sites, that link is valuable. If someone links to your site and *hundreds* of other sites, the link's value is diluted.

Although Google regularly fine-tunes its secret PageRank recipe, Web experts spend hours trying to deconstruct it. For some fascinating reading, you can learn more about how PageRank works (loosely) at <http://www.akamarketing.com/google-ranking-tips.html/> and <http://www.markhorrell.com/seo/pagerank.html/>. Google co-founders Sergey Brin and Larry Page describe the original formulation of PageRank in an academic paper by at <http://infolab.stanford.edu/~backrub/google.html/>.

For way more information about Google and its internal workings, check out *Google: The Missing Manual*.

The Google Webmaster Tools

If you're feeling a bit in the dark about how your website rates with Google, you'll be happy to know that Google has a service that can help you out. It's called the Google Webmaster Tools, and you can sign up your site for free at <http://www.google.com/webmasters/tools/>.

Note: Before you can actually use the Google Webmaster Tools, you need to prove you own the site. To do this, Google asks you to upload a small file (a task that only a site owner can perform). Once Google finishes verifying your site, you can remove this file.

The Google Webmaster Tools let you look at your website through the eyes of Google. It divides its features into several sections.

When you sign up, here's what you see:

- **Overview.** This section tells you whether Google has visited your site, and whether it's successfully added your site to its index. You'll also find links to Help documents that explain how Google sizes up a website and how you can climb the rankings.
- **Diagnostics.** This section warns you about any problems Google has encountered, like incorrect metadata ("[Adding Meta Elements](#)") or pages that it couldn't access (and therefore couldn't index).
- **Statistics.** This section provides information about the searches that lead Googlers from the search engine to your website. For example, you might find out that people reach your pet food site after searching for "san francisco doggie treats." You can get even more detailed statistics using the Google Analytics tracking service described in "[Tracking Visitors](#)".

- **Links.** This section is most notable for its external link viewer, which shows you what websites link to yours. It's like a super-powered version of the *link:* search operator that you learned about in “[Web Rings](#)” above.
- **Sitemaps.** This section helps you build a *sitemap*—a special file that describes the structure of your site and the files in it. You can submit your sitemap to Google and other search engines so they know what to index. This is particularly useful if you have pages that Google might ordinarily miss, like stand-alone pages (those not linked to other pages).
- **Tools.** This section lets you tweak a few miscellaneous Google settings (for example, how often it examines your site for new content). It also lets you create and analyze *robots.txt* files, which you can use to hide a portion of your site from nosy search engines, as explained in “[Hiding from search engines](#)”.

Most serious web designers eventually check out their websites with the Google Webmaster Tools. If nothing else, you can use it to make sure everything is running smoothly—in other words, that Google can access your site, that its automated search robots return frequently to check for new content, and that the robots review all the pages you have to offer.

Google AdWords

As a web-head, you've no doubt seen several lifetimes' worth of flashing messages, gaudy banners, and invasive pop-ups, all trying to sell you some hideously awful products. It probably comes as no surprise to learn that these types of ads aren't the way to promote your site—in fact, they're more likely to alienate people than entice them. However, there are respectable paid placements that can get your site in front of the right readers, at the right time, and with the right amount of tact. One of the best is AdWords (<http://adwords.google.com/>), Google's insanely flexible advertising system.

The idea behind AdWords is that you create text ads that Google shows alongside its regular search results (see [Figure 1-8](#)). The neat part is that Google doesn't show the ads indiscriminately. Instead, you choose the search keywords you want your ad associated with.



Figure 1-8: To see AdWords in action, try searching for a name brand like Microsoft. You'll see a section clearly marked *Sponsored Links* on the right side of the search results, or just above the search results in a yellow shaded box.

The nice (and slightly confusing) part about AdWords is that you *bid* for the keywords you want to use. For example, you might tell Google you're willing to pay 25 cents for the keyword "food." Google takes this into consideration with everyone else's bids, and displays the higher bidders' ads more often. But Google isn't out to rip anyone off, and it charges you only the going rate for your keyword, regardless of how much you told Google you're willing

to pay. And Google doesn't charge you anything to simply display your ad on a search results page. It charges you only when someone clicks on your ad to get to your site.

By this point, you might be getting a little nervous. Given the fact that Google handles hundreds of millions of searches a day, isn't it possible for a measly one-cent bid to quickly put you and your site into bankruptcy? Fortunately, Google's got the solution for this, too. You just tell Google how much you're willing to pay per day. Once you hit your limit, Google stops showing your ad.

Interestingly, the bid amount isn't the only factor that determines how often your ad appears. Popularity is also important. If Google shows your ad over and over again and it never gets a click, Google realizes that your ad just isn't working, and lets you know that with an automatic email message. It may then start showing your ad significantly less often, or stop showing it altogether, until you improve it.

AdWords can be competitive. To have a chance against all the AdWords sharks, you need to know how much a click is worth to your site. For example, if you sell monogrammed socks, you need to know what percentage of visitors actually *buy* something (called the *conversion rate*) and how much they're likely to spend. A typical cost-per-click hovers around 75 cents, but there's a wide range. At last measure, the word *free* topped the cost-per-click charts at \$2.26, while the keyword combination *llama care* could be had for a song—a mere 5 cents. (And in recent history, law firms have bid “mesothelioma”—an asbestos-related cancer that could become the basis of a class-action lawsuit—up close to \$100.) Before you sign up with AdWords, it's a good idea to conduct some serious research to find out the recent prices of the keywords you want to use.

Note: You can learn more about AdWords from *Google: The Missing Manual*, which includes a whole chapter on it, or on Google's AdWords site (<http://adwords.google.com/>). For a change of pace, go to <http://www.iterature.com/adwords/> for a story about an artist's attempt to use AdWords to distribute poetry, and why it failed.

Hiding from search engines

In rare situations, you might create a page that you *don't* want to turn up in a search result. The most common reason is because you've posted some information that you want to share with only a few friends, like the latest Amazon e-coupons. If Google indexes your site, thousands of visitors could come your way, sucking up your bandwidth for the rest of the month. Another reason may be that you're posting something semi-private that you don't want other people to stumble across, like a story about how you stole a dozen staplers from your boss. If you fall into the latter category, be very cautious. Keeping search engines away is the least of your problems—once a site's on the Web, it *will* be discovered. And once it's discovered, it won't ever go away (see the box “[Web Permanence](#)”).

But you can do at least one thing to minimize your site's visibility or, possibly, keep it off search engines altogether. To understand how this procedure works, recall that search engines do their work in several stages. In the first stage, a robot program crawls across the Web, downloading sites. You can tell this robot to not index your site, or to ignore a portion of it, in several ways (not all search engines respect these rules, but most—including Google—do).

To keep a robot away from a single page, add the *robots* meta element to the page. Use the content value *noindex*, as shown here:

```
<meta name="robots" content="noindex" />
```

Remember, like all meta elements, you place this one in the `<head>` section of your web page.

Alternatively, you can use *nofollow* to tell robots to index the current page, but not to follow any of its links:

```
<meta name="robots" content="nofollow" />
```

If you want to block larger portions of your site, you're better off creating a specialized file called *robots.txt*, and placing it in the top-level folder of your site. The robot automatically checks this file first, before it goes any further. The content inside the *robots.txt* file sets the rules.

If you want to stop a robot from indexing any part of your site, add this to the *robots.txt* file:

```
User-Agent: *  
Disallow: /
```

The User-Agent part identifies the type of robot you're addressing, and an asterisk represents all robots. The Disallow part indicates what part of the website is off limits; a single forward slash represent the whole site.

To rope off just the Photos subfolder on your site, use this (making sure to match the capitalization of the folder name exactly):

```
User-Agent: *  
Disallow: /Photos
```

To stop a robot from indexing certain types of content (like images), use this:

```
User-Agent: *  
Disallow: /*.gif  
Disallow: /*.jpeg
```

As this example shows, you can put as many Disallow rules as you want in the *robots.txt* file, one after the other.

Remember, the *robots.txt* file is just a set of *guidelines* for search engine robots, it's not a form of access control. In other words, it's similar to posting a "No Flyers" sign on your mailbox—it works only as long as advertisers choose to heed it.

Tip: You can learn much more about robots, including how to tell when they visit your site and how to restrict the robots coming from specific search engines, at <http://www.robotstxt.org/>.

Tracking Visitors

As a website owner, you'll try a lot of different tactics to promote your site. Naturally, some will work while others won't—and you need to keep the good strategies and prune those that fail. To do this successfully, you need a way to assess how your website is performing.

Almost every web hosting company (except free web hosts) gives you some way to track the number of visitors to your site (see [Figure 1-9](#)). Ask your hosting company how to use these tools. Usually, you need to log on to a “control panel” or “my account” section of your web host's site. You'll see a variety of options there—look for an icon labeled “site counters” or “web traffic.”

With more high-end hosting services, you often have more options for viewing your site's traffic statistics. Some hosts provide the raw *web server logs*, which store detailed, blow-by-blow information about every one of your visitors. This information includes the time a visitor came, their IP addresses (an *IP address* is a numeric code that uniquely identifies a computer on the Internet), their browser type, what site referred them to you, whether they ran into an error, what pages they ignored, what pages they loved, and so on. To make sense of this information, you need to feed it into a high-powered program that performs *log analysis*. These programs are often complex and expensive. An equally powerful but much more convenient approach is to use the Google Analytics tracking service, described next.



Figure 1-9: This Brinkster Page View Summary shows the number of hits (page requests) received on a given day. The chart below this summary (not shown) shows the total amount of bytes of information downloaded from your site. It's important to realize that a "hit" is defined as a request for any page. If a single visitor travels around your website, requesting several pages, they generate several hits. To find out how many unique visitors you have, you need to use a separate log analysis program, described below.

Web Permanence

You've probably heard a lot of talk about the ever-changing nature of the Web. Maybe you're worried that the links you create today will lead to dead sites or missing pages tomorrow. Well, there's actually a much different issue taking shape—copies of old sites that just won't go away.

Once you put your work on the Web, you've lost control of it forever. The corollary to this sobering thought is: Always make sure you aren't posting something that's illegal, infringes on copyright, is personally embarrassing, or could get you fired. Because once you put this material out on the Web, it may never go away.

For example, imagine you accidentally reveal your company's trade secret for carrot-flavored chewing gum. A few weeks later, an excited customer links to your site. You realize your mistake, and pull the pages off your Web server. But have you really contained the problem?

Assuming the Google robot has visited your site recently (which is more than likely), Google now has a copy of your old website. Even worse, people can get this *cached* (saved) copy from Google if they know about the *cache* keyword. For example, if the offending page's URL is <http://www.GumLover.com/newProduct.htm/>, a savvy Googler can get the old copy of your page using the search "*cache:http://www.GumLover.com/newProduct.htm/*" (Less savvy visitors might still stumble onto a cached page by clicking the Cached link that appears after each search result in Google's listings.) Believe it or not, this trick's been used before to get accidentally leaked information, ranging from gossip to software license keys.

You can try to get your page out of Google's cache as quickly as possible using the Remove URL feature at <http://www.google.com/webmasters/tools/removals/>. But even if this works, you're probably starting to see the problem—there's no way to know how many search engines have made copies of your work. Interested people who notice that you pulled down information will hit these search engines and copy the details to their own sites, making it pretty near impossible to eliminate the lingering traces of your mistake. There are even catalogs dedicated to preserving old websites for posterity (see the Wayback Machine at <http://www.archive.org/>).

Understanding Google Analytics

In 2005, Google purchased Urchin, one of the premium web tracking companies. They transformed it into *Google Analytics* and abolished its hefty \$500/month price tag, making it free for everyone. Today, Google Analytics just might be the best way to see what's happening on any website, whether you're building a three-page site about dancing hamsters or a massive compendium of movie reviews.

Google Analytics is refreshingly simple. Unlike other log analysis tools, it doesn't ask you to provide server logs or other low-level information. Instead, it tracks all the information you need *on its own*. It stores this information indefinitely, and lets you analyze it any time with a range of snazzy web reports.

To use Google Analytics, you need to add a small snippet of JavaScript code to every web page you want to track (usually, that's every page on your site). Once you get the JavaScript code in place, everything works seamlessly. When a visitor heads to a page on your site, the browser sends a record of the request to Google's army of monster web servers, which store it for later analysis. The visitor doesn't see the Google Analytics stuff. [Figure 1-10](#) shows you how it works.

Note: JavaScript is a type of mini-program that runs inside a browser. Virtually every Web browser in existence supports it.

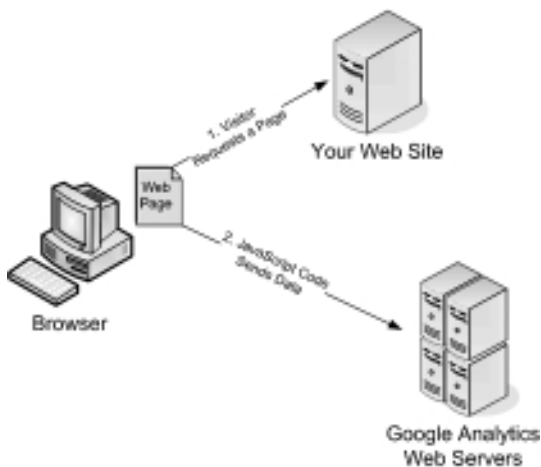


Figure 1-10: *The best part about Google Analytics is that you don't need to keep track of any information on your own.*

Using this system, Google Analytics collects two kinds of information:

- **Information about your visitors' browsers and computers.** Whenever a browser requests a page, it supplies a basic set of information. This information includes the type of browser it is, the features it supports, and the IP address of the computer it connects through. These details don't include the information you really want—for example, there's no way to find out personal details like names or addresses. However, Google uses other browser information to infer additional details. For example, using the IP address, it can make an educated guess about your visitor's geographic location.

- **Visitor tracking.** Thanks to its sophisticated tracking system, Google Analytics can determine more interesting information about a visitor's patterns. Ordinarily, if a visitor requests two separate web pages from the same site, there's no way to establish whether those requests came from the same person. However, Google uses a *cookie* (a small packet of data stored on a visitor's computer) to uniquely identify each visitor. As a result, when visitors click links and move from page to page, Google can determine their navigation path, the amount of time they spend on each page, and whether they return later.

Google Analytics wouldn't be nearly as useful if it were up to you to make sense of all this information. But as you'll see, Google not only tracks these details, it provides reports that help you figure out what the data really means. You generate the reports using a handy web screen menu, and you can print them out or download the data and use it in another program, like Excel, to do further analysis.

Signing Up for Google Analytics

Signing up for Google Analytics is easy:

1. **Head over to <http://www.google.com/analytics/> and click the Sign Up Now link.**

Google Analytics is one of many services you can access with a single Google account. That means you can use the same account you use for services like Gmail (Google's Web-based mail service), Google Groups, Google AdSense, and Blogger. If you don't have a Google account, you'll be prompted to create one by providing your email address and password.

2. **Fill in the information about your website.**

Here's the information you need to supply:

The URL for the website you want track (for example, *http://www.supermagicalpotatoes.co.uk/*). A Google Analytics account can track as many websites as you like, but for now start with just one.

Your time zone. This lets Google Analytics synchronize its clock with yours.

3. Click Finish.

When you finish the sign-in process, Google gives you a box with the JavaScript code you need to start tracking visits (see [Figure 1-11](#)). The next section tells you how to add that code to your pages.



Figure 1-11: The Google Analytics code is lean and concise, requiring just a few lines. That's because it links to a file on Google's Web servers to get the real tracking code. Select all the code displayed, and then copy it to your clipboard (you do this in most browsers by right-clicking the selected text, and then choosing Copy).

4. Click Finish to complete the process.

Google sends you to the main management page for Google Analytics.

5. Add the tracking code to your web pages.

When you add Google's script code to a page, put it at the very end of the `<body>` section, just before the closing `</body>` tag. Here's an example of where it fits in a typical web page:

```
<!DOCTYPE html PUBLIC "-//W3C//DTD XHTML 1.0 Strict//EN"
"http://www.w3.org/TR/xhtml1/DTD/xhtml1-strict.dtd">

<html xmlns="http://www.w3.org/1999/xhtml">
<head>
  <title>Welcome</title>
</head>

<body>
  ...
  <!-- Put the analytics code here. -->
</body>
</html>
```

Tip: For best results, copy the tracking code to every Web page in your site. The only exception is for frames-based sites. If you have one, don't copy the tracking code to the pages used for navigation bars, headers, and other non-content regions. There's generally no point in recording requests for these elements, because your site displays them automatically.

6. Upload the new version of your web pages.

Once you change all your pages, make sure to upload them to your web server. Only then can Google Analytics start tracking visits. The tracking features won't work when you run the pages from your own computer's hard drive.

Now, it's a waiting game. Within 24 hours, Google Analytics has enough information about recent visitors to provide its detailed reports.

Examining Your Web Traffic

As a registered Google Analytics user, you can log in to read reports and make sure everything's running smoothly. If you haven't already done so, now's the time to head to <http://www.google.com/analytics/>.

When you first log in, you see the Analytics Settings page shown in [Figure 1-12](#). Using this page, you can add new websites you want to track or configure existing ones. You can also get a little guidance from a list of help topics that appears on the side.

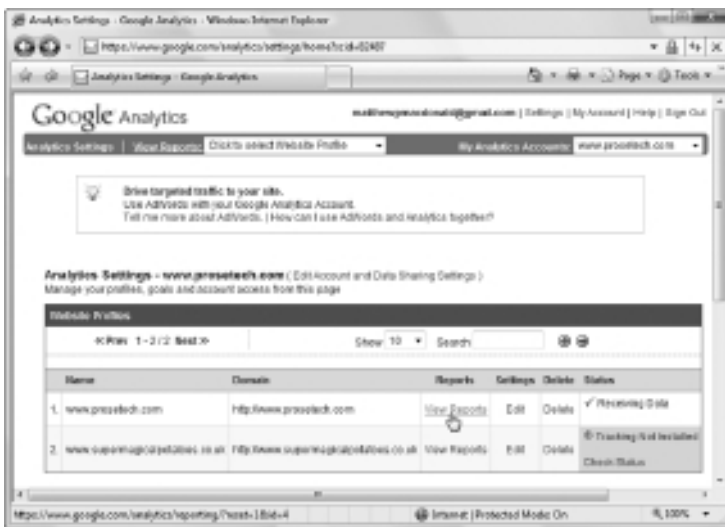


Figure 1-12: This sample account tracks two websites, but only one is successfully collecting data. You can use the [View Reports](#) link to start reviewing reports, the [Edit](#) link to change the information you supplied for your website, and the [Delete](#) link to remove your profile altogether.

To determine whether your website's tracking code is working, check the Status column in the Website Profiles list. Here's how to interpret the different status values your site might have:

- **Receiving Data** indicates that all's well. Your visitors are going from page to page under the watchful eye of Google Analytics.
- **Waiting For Data** indicates that Google's JavaScript code is running on your pages, but the information isn't available for reporting yet. Usually, you see this for the first 6 to 12 hours after you register a new site.
- **Tracking Data Not Installed** indicates that Google isn't collecting any information. This could be because you need to wait for visitors to hit your site, or it could suggest you haven't inserted the correct JavaScript tracking code.

If you see **Receiving Data**, congratulations—you're reports are ready and waiting. Click the **View Reports** link next to your website to continue on to the Dashboard ([Figure 1-13](#)).

The information that appears in the Dashboard can be a little overwhelming. To give you a better sense of what's going on, the following sections break down the key points, one chart at a time.

Graph of Visits

The graph of visits at the top of the page ([Figure 1-14](#)) shows the day-by-day popularity of your site over the last month. This count doesn't say anything about how many pages the average visitor browsed, or how long visitors lingered. It simply records how many different people visited your site. Using this chart, you can get a quick sense of the overall uptrend or downtrend of your web traffic, and you can see if it rises on certain days of the week or around specific dates.



Figure 1-13: The Dashboard displays a number of basic charts that detail your website's vital signs. The menu on the left lets you browse to a variety of different, more specialized reports.

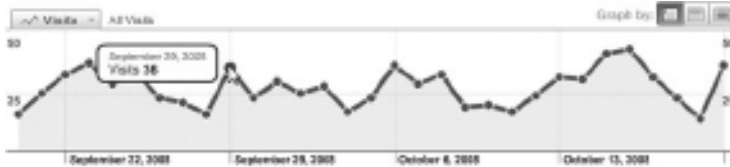


Figure 1-14: To get the specific value for a data point, hover over it with your mouse. For example, this chart clearly indicates a modest 36 pageviews on September 29. To see all the data points, click the Show All button in the bottom right-hand corner of the chart.

With a few clicks, you can change this chart to show *pageviews*, the count of how many web pages all your visitors viewed. For example, if an eager shopper visits your Banana Painting e-commerce store, checks out several enticing products, and completes a purchase, Google Analytics might record close to a dozen pageviews but only a single visit. The number of pageviews is always equal to or greater than the number of visits—after all, each visit includes at least one pageview. To see pageviews, click the down arrow next to the word “Visits” in the top-left corner of the chart, and then choose Pageviews from the list of options.

Tip: Remember, you can look at the data Google Analytics collects over a different range of dates using the date box in the top-left corner of the Dashboard, as identified in [Figure 1-13](#).

Site Usage

The Site Usage section ([Figure 1-15](#)) is crammed with key statistics. Details include:

- The total number of visits in the selected date range (initially, it’s the month leading up to the current day).
- The total number of pageviews.
- The average number of pages that a visitor reads before leaving your site.
- The bounce rate. A *bounce* occurs when a visitor views only one page—in other words, they get to your site through a specific page, and then depart without browsing any further. A bounce rate of 11% tells you that 11% percent of your visitors leave immediately after they arrive. Bounces are keenly important to webmasters because they indicate potential lost visitors. If you can identify what’s causing a big bounce, you can capture a few more visitors.

- The average time a visitor spends on your site before browsing elsewhere.
- The percentage of new visits. For example, a rate of 75% indicates that 25% of your traffic is repeat business, and 75% are new visitors. Both types of visitor are important to keep your website healthy.

Note: There are some types of repeat visitors that Google won't correctly identify. For example, if a repeat visitor uses a different computer, a different browser, or logs into their computer with a different user name, they'll appear to be a new visitor. For these reasons, the number of repeat visitors may be slightly underreported.



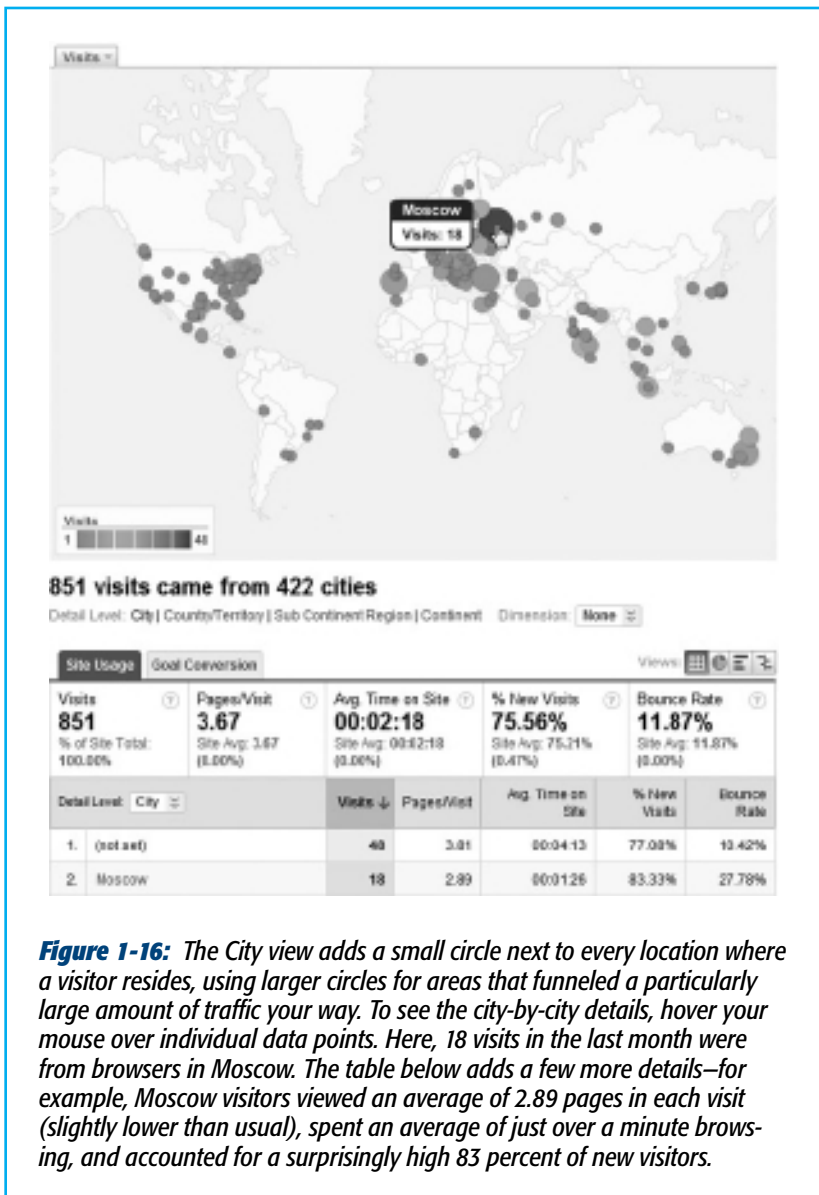
Figure 1-15: The Site Usage numbers are the most important indicator of your site's Web health. You can click any of these stats to see a separate report with more detail.

Map Overlay

The Map Overlay section gives a fascinating look at where your visitors are located on the globe. Google Analytics divides the map into countries, and colors them different shades of green—the darker the color, the more popular your website in that country.

The Map Overlay gets even more interesting if you use the City view shown in [Figure 1-16](#). To use the City view, click the “view report” link under the Map Overlay on the Dashboard. A new page appears with a larger version of the map and a detailed breakdown

in a table underneath. Look for the Detail Level box at the top of the table, and then change the selection in this box from Country/Territory to City.



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTION

Does Google Really Know Where I Live?

How accurate is the location data Google supplies?

Being able to determine the location of your visitors is a powerful tool. After all, if you know your Graceland Vacation site is absurdly popular in Japan, you might consider accepting payments in Yen, translating a few pages, or adding some new pictures. But Google's geographic locating service isn't perfect. In fact, there are two weaknesses:

- The location service is based on a visitor's ISP (Internet Service Provider), not the actual visitor herself. In many cases, the ISP is located in a different area than the visitor's own computer.
- ISPs economize by pooling their traffic together and dumping it onto the Internet at a central location. This means that even if your visitor and her Web server are in a specific city, the computer that connects these visitors to the Internet might be somewhere else.

As a general rule of thumb, the geographic information that Google uses is likely to be close to reality, but not exact. It's highly likely that the country is correct, but the specific city may not match that of your actual visitor.

Traffic Sources Overview

The Traffic Sources Overview is a pie chart identifying how visitors get to your site. It has three slices:

- **Referring Sites.** This slice counts visitors that arrive through websites that link to yours.
- **Direct Traffic.** This slice counts visitors that type your URL directly into a browser or use a bookmark to make a return visit.
- **Search Engines.** This slice counts visitors who come to your site through a search in Google or other search engine.

Figure 1-17 shows a closer look.



Figure 1-17: Over the past month, 81 percent of visitors came from referring sites, while 18 percent came directly to this site (by typing in its URL). Less than 1 percent found their way through a search engine, which suggests you might want to consider investing more time in search engine optimization (see “Rising up in the rankings” above).

The Traffic Sources Overview provides a good high-level look at what’s going on. To get more details, click the “View Report” link underneath, or use the Traffic Sources menu on the left. You can then explore tables that break down the Referring Sites and Search Engines slices. For the Referring Sites slice, you see exactly which websites send you traffic, which is a great tool for quickly identifying your most successful Web partnerships. For the Search Engines slice, you can review the search keywords that lead to your site, which lets you determine what your visitors are looking for (and possibly diagnose why they left unhappy).

Content Overview

As every webmaster knows, all pages aren’t created equal. Some might command tremendous interest while others languish ignored. The Content Overview section lists top-performing pages (Figure 1-18).

Content Overview		
Pages	Pageviews	% Pageviews
/prosetech/BooksNET.htm	1,013	32.40%
/prosetech/	791	25.30%
/prosetech/ProWPFinC2008.htm	237	7.58%
/prosetech/Classes.htm	226	7.23%
/prosetech/BegASP.NET3.5inC....	171	5.47%
view report		

Figure 1-18: In this site, *BooksNET.htm* is the clear winner of the Most Popular Page award, with 32 percent of the total website traffic.

However, it's not enough to simply determine which pages your visitors view the most. Some pages are extra important because of their ability to *attract* visitors. For example, the page of Member Photos on your International Nudist site might attract large volumes of visitors who then stick around to check out your personalized coffee cups, clothing, and memorabilia. A good reporting tool also shows you where visitors *enter* your site, so you know what pages are the attention-getters that lure traffic. Almost as important are the pages that mark the end of a visit. They may indicate a problem, like a page that's extremely large, doesn't work correctly in some browsers, or just plain irritates people. To get this sort of detailed information in Google Analytics, click the "View Report" button in the bottom of the Content Overview section, or use the Content menu on the left side of the page.

Note: There are many more reports you can explore in Google Analytics, and many more ways to slice and dice its results to come up with conclusions about your Web traffic. In fact, entire books have been written about the fine art of analyzing website performance. However, the five charts explained above get you started with great insight into how your website is doing.

Colophon

Peter McKie was the editor for *Attract Visitors to Your Site: The Mini Missing Manual*. Nellie McKesson was the production editor.

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