

# Is there anyone out there?

Website traffic, interactivity and feedback

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Making Links  
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## INTRO

This workshop looks at one of the big mysteries of web publishing: who is looking at your website, and what do they think of it.

I'm going to reflect on some of my experiences trying to understand and solve this mystery. But part of what makes it a challenge is that different websites with different audiences experience interaction in different ways. So I'd like to hear from you about how you've approached this question.

To frame the discussion I will start by telling you about myself, and what I do at Infoxchange Australia.

I have worked in in-house publishing roles in print and web environments for the past 5 years.

I joined Infoxchange Australia about 2 years ago. We are a not-for-profit social enterprise using IT to effect positive social change by empowering disadvantaged communities and the health and welfare workers that serve them. Our mission is 'Technology for Social Justice'

With this guiding philosophy the company undertakes a range of activities, mainly focused around access – the provision of hardware, networking and internet access – and online services.



The work of my team falls in the latter category.

We are responsible for managing 11 online news and information services that primarily serve the community, government and not-for-profit sectors, mainly in Victoria, although we have many interstate subscribers and readers.

We also manage a very popular Employment Board that is exclusively for community, government and not-for-profit jobs. All are interactive services, where users are encouraged to publish their own information on the sites.

While the primary overall audience is, as I said, workers from the community, government and not-for-profit sectors, there is a lot of variety within this broad grouping.

To give you an idea, I've listed here the different news and information services we run.

- Community News
- Disability News
- Youth News
- CHIRS (housing and homelessness workers)
- Wired News (digital divide)
- Health and Primary Care News
- Community Building
- Yarraweb (an area of Melbourne)
- Community websites for public housing residents in Broadmeadows, Fitzroy and Collingwood

Is there anyone out there?  
**Infoxchange audiences**

- ↘ Policy makers
- ↘ Researchers and students
- ↘ Frontline welfare workers
- ↘ Managers
- ↘ Consumers

It's not just the topic or area of interest that varies – each news board might be used by

- policy makers,
- researchers and students,
- frontline welfare workers,
- Their managers,
- 'consumers' (ie people living in public housing or with a disability),

All with different levels of experience with the internet and – importantly – different access situations. For example, some might access from home, from a desk-based job, or from a shared office computer.

Is there anyone out there?  
**Identifying usage and users**

- ↘ Website statistics
- ↘ Interaction online
- ↘ Solicited feedback

Now given the topic of this workshop, at this point it's fair for you to be wondering how it is that we know all this about our audience or audiences.

Some of you might also be wondering why we want to know. The answer to that is quite simple: knowing who they are and what they think of our site helps us to deliver a better quality, more relevant service.

The answer to the question of how we find out is a bit more difficult.

At Infoxchange we approach this in three main ways:

1. By analysing statistics about the traffic to our sites
2. Interaction on the sites themselves
3. Directly requesting feedback, both formally and informally

Is there anyone out there?  
**Website statistics**



As far as statistics go, I'm not going to be able to go into as much detail here as in the session yesterday – I don't know if anyone attended that?

It's also the case that different software can give you different statistics, and also that they can be named differently.

What I will do is highlight some of the general types of statistics that you can obtain, and how we find it useful at Infoxchange.

This is a screenshot from the stats software we use at Infoxchange, created in house. We supply this for all clients who have their websites made by our design and development team. It is useful, but not many people know how to read it.

Is there anyone out there?  
**Website statistics: Volume**

- Hits
- Page views
- Visits (sessions)
- Sites

Within that package there are a number of key types of information that my team uses to gauge the success of our sites

In combination, these stats give a picture of how much a site is being used. There are some pitfalls with each individually, which is why we consider them as a group.

A hit is recorded each time the user's action makes a request of the website server. Depending on how the site is constructed, one web page might count for several hits, as the banner, images, parts of the menu and sections of the site content are all requested separately. So hits can be very inflated.

- Page views are recorded each time a user moves from page to page in the site. So obviously this again can give you an inflated number, since a user might look at each page of your site numerous times.
- At Infoxchange, we consider that visits (sometimes called sessions) are getting closer to an accurate view of the usage of a site. A visit is counted when a user spends a half hour block on the website. So while a number like 8000 visits per month doesn't necessarily mean 8000 individual people looking at the site, depending on what else you know about your users it is a good indication of the site's popularity.
- Finally, 'Sites' measures the individual IP addresses or internet servers that make requests for your website. This is also close to representing the number of people who use the site, although more than one person might be using from one Site, and it doesn't tell us anything else about them.

So the general information you can get from these types of statistics can be known as VOLUME – how many.

Is there anyone out there?  
**Website statistics: Activity**

- Most popular URLs
- Entry pages
- Exit pages
- Internal pathways
- Referrers
- Search strings

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Site statistics can also give you limited information about what people do on the website.

You can find out

- the most frequently visited individual URLs – which might be a page of the site, or a particular item or document
- Where people are entering the site – what first grabs their attention
- Where they are exiting – at what point they've had enough
- What overall pathway they follow through the site.

Obviously a lot of this is going to depend on who the user is and what they're looking for. But a consistently hi entry rate for a specific area of your site can be an indication that this is sought after content, while a common exit point might lead you to take a critical look at that content.

Some website packages can also tell you specifically how long a user spends on a site, and in which areas. While this can be useful, it needs to be considered very much in context – who the user is, their interest in the site, what the site contains and its intention. As a rule, I would say that taking note of longer session times is more valuable than worrying about short ones.

If you are relying on your site being linked from other sites, the 'Referrers' stats can also be useful in telling you how people are reaching your site – where they were before you.

Likewise if you hope that people find your site through search engines, packages showing Search Strings can tell you what key words people are using to get to your site. You can then match this against the key words in use throughout your site and make adjustments where necessary.

Is there anyone out there?  
**Interaction online**

- ↘ News
- ↘ Jobs
- ↘ Events
- ↘ Publications
- ↘ Research projects
- ↘ Requests for info/assistance
- ↘ Service information
- ↘ Views – vox pop
- ↘ Feature items

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As you can see you can glean quite a lot of information from statistics about traffic to and from your site.

But it's important to consider them in context – for example, if your site doesn't receive a lot of hits but you have a very targeted audience and usage is strong among them, there's no point worrying about your traffic rates. Equally, you have high rates of traffic passing through your site, but not a lot of people staying to look closely at the content, or using the tools you provide online.

This is why for Infoxchange Australia's online services we also take account of the interaction that occurs within a site when assessing its success.

In the case of the news services I described earlier, this usually means the number and type of contributions we receive from users – I have listed some of the types of contributions we receive.

Now across the services we provide, there is a great range in the level of interaction that goes on. For some services we might receive 1 contribution each week, while for others we receive 10 or more, and this is primarily because of the differences between the focus of each service. So again, the rate of interaction must be considered in context. At Infoxchange we consider any rate of interaction valuable because it brings us closer to knowing our audience – what they contribute to our services tells us about what they're up to and what they are prioritising at that time.

It's not always appropriate to the purpose of a site, but it can be a very useful way to engage with your audience and give you the opportunity to find out more about them and what they think of your site. You might consider creating the opportunity, even if on an irregular basis – for eg if there's a major issue affecting your service area, you could invite people to send in their views by email and then publish a collation of them.

Another way we encourage people to contribute is to actually ask them to – we regularly invite people to write an article or participate in an interview. If you're trying to encourage contributions and it's not that successful, you might want to solicit a few contributions like this – we often find people didn't realise that they could, or that their activities would be 'newsworthy' for Infoxchange.

Is there anyone out there?  
**Solicited feedback**

- Feedback forms
- Prominent 'contact us' page
- Specific service questions
- Comprehensive surveys
- Face-to-face (anecdotal)

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In a similar way to that sort of vox pop approach, Infoxchange also solicits feedback about the website itself.

We do this by making sure feedback forms and contact emails are available from our sites. But we find that we don't get a lot of feedback in this way. In fact we find ourselves relying on the truth of the old adage 'no news is good news' – people tend to be pretty quiet unless they have a specific query or a problem. That's when they use the feedback form.

So at Infoxchange we regularly request feedback directly. You have to approach this quite carefully – remember that people have other things to do with their day. And while your website might be forefront in your mind, to them it might be one of many resources; maybe they don't really think about it, they just use it. So when we ask for feedback, we are as targeted about it as possible.

In fact, sometimes we ask for feedback specifically about a certain aspect of the site, for example the search function in the online library, or a particular series of articles. We do find that this approach doesn't generate a lot of responses, but what we get tends to be pointed and thorough.

However you can't be forever asking people questions – particularly if like us your audience is mostly made up of repeat users.

If you only have one crack at it, you need to do a proper user survey. We generally do this online, although for some services and audiences we also do run copy surveys.

## Is there anyone out there? Infoxchange online services

- Geographical location
- Occupation or role relevant to service
- Topic of interest (reason for accessing site)
- Frequency of usage
- Nature of usage
- Most and least useful sections
- Wishlist

When you conduct a user feedback survey you really need to think about what you're hoping to get out of it – just like with any type of survey for any research.

These are some of the common details we look for are

- Geographical location – which state, and whether rural or metro
- Occupation or role relevant to service – for example, for Disability News, are they a policy worker or a person with a disability
- Topic of interest (reason for accessing site) – what are they looking for
- Frequency of usage – are they regular users?
- Nature of usage – do they log on daily for five minutes? From home or work?
- Most and least useful sections – like exit and entry pages in the statistics section, must be taken with a grain of salt
- Wishlist – what other sections, topics, tools or resources they would like to see on the site.

As much as possible we try to use multiple choice, to minimise the hassle for respondents.

I'm sure you've all ignored surveys like this on a website at some time or another. So how do we get our users to actually fill out the form?

For some services, those where the overall level of interaction is low, we flag the survey in a pop up window. This is not appropriate for sites that require a high level of accessibility, however it is a very useful way to drive people to the survey.

Other times we might send a direct email to subscribers, or highlight the survey as a lead article on the site. We also have been known to offer the odd prize, although as you'd be familiar with, there isn't always a budget for this.

But the most crucial aspect of conducting a feedback survey is following it up. If a user has a complaint about the site that we can't address, we let them know where possible. We always publish a round up of responses and what our reaction will be.

Is there anyone out there?  
**Contacts**

Thank you!

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That really is the crux of it – website managers need to take on board user suggestions wherever possible. If people take the time to give you feedback, well it proves that they ARE out there. You can no longer pretend you're publishing into a void when you know more about who your audience is, what they are interested in and what they want from you.

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