

# Using Google Analytics to Make Data-Driven Decisions

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Getting started with Google Analytics can seem like a daunting task. There is so much data available in Google Analytics that it can seem overwhelming. Here are ten considerations to help you dive into your data.

**Set up your code correctly.** This will save you many headaches later on. Follow the guidelines that Google provides and update the code when the new versions and updates are released. If you use a content management system, this is often as simple as pasting the code in one file and it will update across your entire website.

**Start with your strategy.** What do you want to look at? Are you trying to measure event registration? Are you trying to increase online donations? Are you trying to increase alumni engagement? Begin with your purpose in mind and work backwards from there. If you don't attempt to begin looking at your website with a site visitor's mindset, then you will probably be too affected by your institution's political baggage to make any real and positive changes. Take the time to think like your site visitor, and do it strategically.

**Set up goals.** Now that you have strategically thought about what you are trying to accomplish, set up your goals in Google Analytics. Typically, your goal type

will be a URL destination (this will be the case if you use a thank you page in your forms), but sometimes you may choose to use an event to measure similar goals. While Time on Site and Page/Visit are goal options, they are typically less useful than URL destination and Event. One of the most important things to do when creating goals is to assign a goal value. Even if you only use arbitrary, relative goal values, some value is better than no value. This will give you an idea of what pages of your website encourage your visitors to complete your goals.

**Use campaign tracking.** Take advantage of campaign tracking every time you direct a visitor to your website from an outside source. You should always use your website as the hub of your marketing efforts. If you push users to your website you will be able to track the source (e.g., postcard, social media, etc.). To create a URL with the appropriate tracking variables, use Google's URL Builder: <http://goo.gl/Lct6R>.



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**Understand your metrics.** Be sure to read the definitions to the available metrics in Google Analytics (see definitions here: <http://goo.gl/GuxoB>). Making sure that you fully understand what a bounce is versus an exit is vital to understanding the reports. You may need to explain a report to a superior at your institution, so having a thorough understanding of the metrics will prove to be very helpful.

**Find a few good reports.** Not every report that is available in Google Analytics will be worth looking at. Some useful reports to cut



your teeth on will be the *Pages* report under *Site Content*, the *Visitors Behavior* reports, and the *Goals* reports, which provide good starting points for understanding how visitors interact with your website.

**Create advanced segments.** After you are comfortable with the standard reports, begin to apply advanced segments to the reports. This will allow you to take a much closer look at your data and your visitors. Some of the more useful pre-installed segments are New Visitors, Returning Visitors, Visits with Conversions, and Mobile Traffic. You can get very creative and detailed with creating custom advanced segments. You may want to create an advanced segment that looks at social media traffic, visitors that came to your site by searching for the name of your institution, or came to your website through a specific campaign. There are many options for segments. Advanced segments are very powerful because they provide context.

Luckily, dashboards can make the entire process much easier. Add widgets to your dashboard that will allow you to quickly see the status of the key components.

**Set up a dashboard.** It is important that you allow the data to inform your decisions. You will not be able to do this if you constantly have to go back into the same report, reapply your segment, and re-sort based on the same criteria. Luckily, dashboards can make the entire process much easier. Add widgets to your dashboard that will allow you to quickly see the status of the key components of your website and make decisions. Apply filters that act similarly to the advanced segments so that you can have fast access to data with context.

**Wait.** The hardest part of starting out with Google Analytics is waiting for the data. If you just installed the tracking code, it may take a few weeks for useful data to be available. Use this time to explore the reports, do some further research on metrics, set up a dashboard, and create your advanced segments. When the data starts to come in, it will be organized into digestible and actionable buckets.

**Do something!** Having Google Analytics installed and analyzing the data will get you nowhere if you don't make changes with what you find. The entire point of using web analytics is optimizing your website through incremental changes. It is even about more than that--*it is about optimizing your visitors' experience* so that they will accomplish your goals.

Google Analytics cannot tell you why site visitors perform the actions they do, but it can help you better understand how visitors respond to your messaging and what path they take on your website. To get the most out of analytics, be sure to focus on goals and data in context. Only looking at the complete number of visitors and visits will not provide very much usable information, if any. By providing context you will be able to find actionable information. Now take this information and apply what you've learned.

