

Getting Started with Google Analytics

As analytics applications go, Google Analytics is probably the easiest (or at least one of the easiest) available in the market today. But don't let the simplicity of Google Analytics fool you. There's a lot of power to harness using Google Analytics, if you know how.

Before you can harness anything, though, you need to have a solid place to stand. That's what we're going to provide for you in this part of the book, from an application standpoint. In the chapters that follow, you'll learn why you want to use Google Analytics, and how to set up an account and install the tracking code. We'll also include some basics about navigating Google Analytics to help you move around as we dig deeper and deeper into the capabilities of Google Analytics in coming chapters.

If you're an advanced Google Analytics user, this part of the book will probably all be review for you. Feel free to skip ahead (or even just to skip around and skim through what's in these chapters for a refresher). Those who are new to Google Analytics probably need this information and should keep reading.

What's New in Google Analytics

Google, like every other software company on the planet, spends a lot of time and money on R&D (Research and Development). So it should come as no surprise that Google's programs, like Google Analytics, are in a constant state of flux. Even parts of the program that you might think are there to stay can change, literally overnight.

Google has gotten better about giving a little warning about elements of programs that disappear, but the company will still roll out a feature overnight and not let anyone even know it's in the works until it hits the page. Google Analytics is no exception to that rule, and in the year and a half since the last update of this book, lots of things have changed. Some reports have disappeared, others have turned up, and features have changed considerably.

Fortunately, the changes all seem to be good. There are still features that would be nice to have that don't exist in Google Analytics, but given time they'll probably turn up, and if they don't, then it's not likely that you'll miss them too much.

Two Years Equals Lots of Changes

So what's changed since the last edition of this book was released in August 2007? Here's the quick and dirty view of some of the most important changes:

- **Google Analytics Data Export API:** Google Analytics made the Data Export API available to all users. This API (which stands for Application

Programming Interface) allows programmers to deeply customize Google Analytics to work with other applications, or even as a customized stand-alone. The Data Export API isn't covered in this book, because it's most useful to developers and very advanced users.

- **AdSense and Analytics Integration:** Google Analytics and Google AdSense are now linked together so that you can view the success of your AdSense campaigns.
- **Cost Data Settings:** You can now change your cost data settings in Google Analytics. That's covered in Chapter 13, "AdWords Integration."
- **Motion Charts:** Google Analytics now has a feature called Motion Charts that gives you a new way to view the data that's available in your Analytics account. Motion Charts are covered in a little more depth later in this chapter.
- **TV Ad Metrics:** Now you can track your television ads using Google Analytics. You'll learn more about this new capability in Chapter 16, "Traffic Sources."
- **Advanced Segmentation:** The segmentation capabilities of Google Analytics have improved dramatically over the last couple of years. Advanced segmentation improves segmentation capabilities that previously existed and provides new features that allow for the creation of customized segmentation. These new features are covered in Chapter 5, "Account Dashboard Basics."
- **Custom Reporting:** Ever wish you could have access to reports that are more tailored to your specific needs? Now you can. Google Analytics has added a custom reporting feature that allows you to create reports that are truly meaningful to you specifically. You'll learn more about custom reporting in Chapter 9, "Advanced Dashboard Features."
- **Event Tracking:** Event Tracking is now a section of reports that are available to help you track events that take place on your site. You'll learn the basics of event tracking in Chapter 19.
- **Improved Training and Help Files:** Previously, the Google Analytics help files were frustrating at best. Trying to find something was like being caught in a House of Mirrors. Everywhere you turned, everything looked the same and there was no way to find the "real" answer to your question. Thankfully, that's changing. And in Appendix A, you'll find additional information about using these files and other resources that are available to you.

Lots of other, smaller changes have also been implemented. For example, the Site Overlay report has changed in appearance and the Reverse Goal Path report is going away soon (possibly even before you read this text).

Betas Galore

One thing Google is known for is its beta program. Google has often released a program or feature to the general population “in beta” to get feedback before releasing the final project. In fact, some programs have remained in beta for years.

Google Analytics isn't one of those programs, of course, but it does have features that are still in beta. These features are new additions since the last edition of this book, and it's not clear how long they'll remain in beta.

What that means to you is that these features are subject to change over time. They could even go away—completely go away. It will depend on how well users adopt the features, and what changes are suggested for improvements.

Custom Reporting

One of the beta features available in Google Analytics is custom reporting. This feature allows you to create reports that are customized to your specific needs. For example, if you want to know how your keywords are performing in specific countries, you can set up a custom report for that.

You can create a custom report using a metric of your choice, or you can use metrics and dimensions (which are segments of your site visitors) to further define analytics that are meaningful to your specific business or even to a goal that you've developed to move your business forward.

Creating custom reports is covered in Chapter 9. There you'll learn how to create a custom report that tells you exactly what you want to know about your site visitors.

Advanced Segmenting

A segment of your site visitors is basically a division or group. For example, you can segment visitors by visits that come from iPhones or even by returning visitors only. This gives you the control to look only at specific groups of visitors to see how they affect your web-site traffic or interact with your web site.

Google Analytics has always had segmenting capabilities, but the advanced segments that are offered now are a different type of grouping, brought on in part by the changing definitions surrounding analytics.

What used to be segments (campaign, keyword, language, browser, etc.) are now called dimensions. That's because a dimension can be a general source of data (a broad category), but it's not really going to mean much to you until you can dice it down and apply it to a specific group of visitors (or a segment).

The most useful data that you'll be able to pull from Google Analytics will be data that can be applied specifically to give you a clear picture of your average

site visitor. So using segments along with dimensions is the key to teasing the value out of analytics.

One of the coolest features of the advanced segments available through Google Analytics is that you can create customized advanced segments to help you break your web-site traffic down into groups that are meaningful to your business objectives.

Chapter 5 features more information about advanced segmentation and how to create advanced segments.

Motion Charts

The last new feature that should be pointed out right from the beginning is the addition of motion charts to some reports in Google Analytics. These charts are not well-suited to all the reports; however, for reports like New vs. Returning, you can use a motion chart to get a clear picture of the trends that multiple dimensions might indicate.

For example, using the motion chart, you can see how your keywords perform by conversion rate. This helps you to see which keywords are responsible for the most visits and which are responsible for the most conversions.

Motion Charts are automatically enabled on the reports for which they are available, as shown in Figure 1-1. Just click the **Visualize** button at the top of the report to switch to the Motion Chart. (You can always switch back by clicking on the name of the report again.)

As the name suggests, Motion Charts are actually moving charts. The movement helps you to see how your chosen metrics change over time. This allows you to see patterns where you might otherwise miss them. To activate the movement in the Motion Chart, click the Start arrow, shown in Figure 1-2.

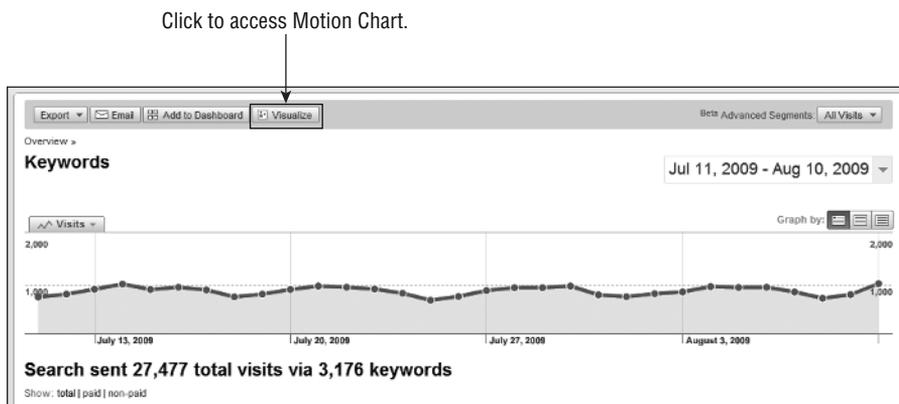
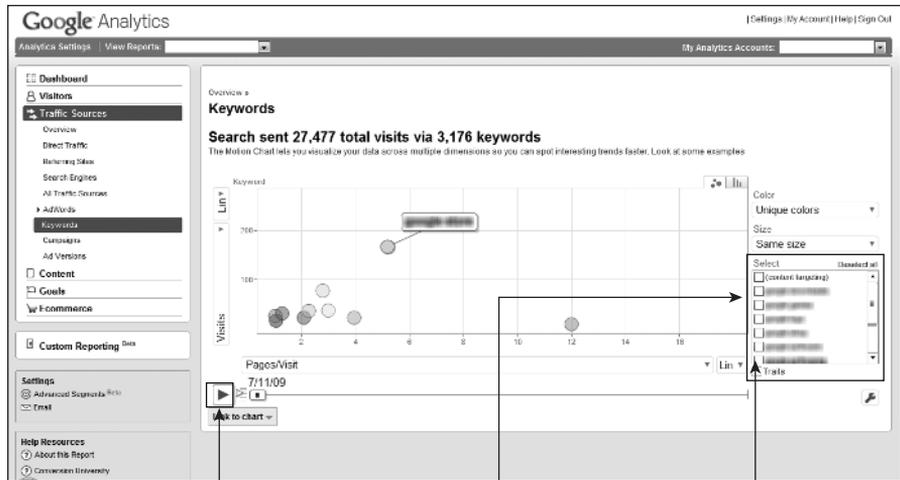


Figure 1-1: Motion Charts are another way to visualize your data segments and dimensions to spot trends you might not otherwise see.



Select to start chart moving.

Choose labels you'd like to view.

Select to enable trails (lines).

Figure 1-2: Controls allow you to start and stop the motion chart and change other visual elements.

You can also add labels to the bubbles on the chart by placing a checkmark next to the label that you would like to view in the scrolling list on the right side of the chart. Checking the Trails box will also add lines to the chart, making the paths of the bubbles clearer and easier to read, but note that the trails only show up for the bubbles for which you've enabled active labels.

You can also switch from the bubble visual to a bar graph, if that works better for you. You'll find the tab that switches between the two types of graphs in the upper-right corner above the graph.

In true Google fashion, too, there's more information hidden behind the labels of the bubbles in the Motion Chart. If you place your cursor over a label, you'll see the exact number (for whatever measurement you've chosen) appear on the X and Y axis.

The Motion Chart is just another way for you to visualize metrics that you're already tracking. And looking at something from a different aspect often helps you to see more clearly a picture that you might otherwise miss.

In all, Google Analytics has lots of new features to offer—features that are designed to help you get more from the metrics that you're monitoring. And learning how to use these metrics won't take you long. Like every other aspect of Google Analytics, there's more than meets the eye, but once you start using any of the new features, you'll find that they're worth the time it takes to get used to them.

