

Setting the Website Optimization Scene

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Before diving into the many website optimization best practices and test ideas in this book, it's important to first give you some background and history on this subject and also some key differences between this and other types of optimization relating to websites and search engines.

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Introduction to Website Optimization

The online business world continues to change and evolve at a frenetic pace. No longer are online businesses just throwing money at creating and marketing their websites and hoping for success; many are now getting increasingly savvy when analyzing and improving their websites.

Unfortunately too much emphasis is still placed on two things: the aesthetics of the website and how to best drive traffic to it. Very little emphasis is placed on the actual visitors to the website and how well it engages and converts them for key goals like purchase or signup—in a nutshell, how well optimized the website is. To illustrate just how little attention is usually placed on conversion, recent studies by Forrester and eMarketer found that for every \$80 spent online to acquire traffic to websites, just \$1 is spent to proactively convert this traffic once it has arrived.

Remember, you could have the best-looking website in the world, but if your visitors find it hard to use or it doesn't fulfill their needs, they often won't come back (and will likely go to a competitor that's only a few clicks away on Google). And you could spend hundreds of thousands on paid search and Facebook ads driving visitors to your website, but if your website isn't optimized to engage and convert them for your key goals and doesn't influence them to come back, much of this money will be wasted down the drain.

This is why it is so critical to build and run an effective website optimization program for your online business so that it does indeed engage and convert your website visitors much better. More important, as a result of having a website like this, your online business is far more likely to generate greater revenue and profits in the future.

Unfortunately though, this optimization and improvement of websites isn't as easy as you might expect, and you need much more than just a website testing tool. In addition to this, there are many disparate online disciplines you need to learn and apply before you can become truly great at optimizing websites. Web analytics fundamentals are vital for analyzing success metrics and key reports, and to generate better test idea insights from them. Web usability best practices are essential to make your visitors happier when they interact with your website. A great grasp of online marketing best practices (in particular copy writing) is a must if you are to be able to truly influence your visitors with your headlines, images, and calls-to-action. Finally, website testing skills are essential to create high-impact tests needed to optimize your website. See Figure 1.1 for a visual representation of how these disciplines overlap to form website optimization.

Rather than have people need to rely on reading multiple separate books in all of these disciplines, I decided to make website optimization easier to learn by pulling all these skills together and presenting them in the format of Wiley's Hour-a-Day popular book series.



Figure 1.1 Interlocking disciplines needed for website optimization

In particular, one of the most important skills you need to help power your website optimization and testing efforts is a sound understanding of how to use web analytics. This is because web analytics data not only helps you measure the success of your optimization efforts, but they can also provide you with some excellent insights to help form your test ideas. Web analysis techniques will be put to great use throughout this book, from learning and measuring the success metrics for your type of website to learning advanced analysis techniques to find high potential conversion pages.

However, even before starting your website optimization and testing efforts, you will likely be met with several challenges in your organization preventing you from doing so with speed and efficiency. Therefore, you will also become versed in fundamentals to help overcome these, improve your internal processes, and ultimately help build an optimization organization that will ensure you get the most out of your optimization efforts.

To help you make changes to optimize your website, you will then learn important website testing strategies and fundamentals, including how to target and personalize your content to better meet the needs of your all-important visitors. These strategies and fundamentals will ensure your A/B and multivariate tests are set up, run, and analyzed optimally for the most impact on your conversion rates and success metrics.

You will also learn to focus on your visitors and their common journeys through your website so that you can better meet their needs, engage them, and convert them. You will learn how to build personas and use cases to help you do this, in addition to gaining the voice of your visitors by using survey, feedback, and task completion rate analysis tools. Remember that your website would be nothing without your visitors!

Over the remainder of the book, you will then learn many advanced best practices, tools, and tips that will help increase your conversion rates and keep your website visitors coming back for more—no matter what type of website you have. You will also learn some “out of the box” optimization best practices that involve more than just

your regular website—for example, emerging mobile website best practices and vital email marketing best practices.

Understanding and adopting these optimization best practices and test ideas will also help give you a competitive edge over your rivals. This is because they more than likely aren't doing a very good job of testing and optimizing their websites, and it will have them wondering exactly how your website is doing so well.

In order to get the most out of this book, I suggest that you spend one day reading each week, and try not to be too tempted to skip through the weeks and read it all in one sitting. I also recommend that you take notes while reading the book and mark down any particularly relevant tips you notice for your website. Don't forget to use the test idea tracker in Appendix B to list any tests in this book you want to try on your website, and then use the test results tracker in Appendix C to document and help you learn from your results.

The final chapter is also very important to pay attention to, because this is when you will revisit your key success metrics and conversion goals to see just how much you have optimized them and, therefore, your website.

The Rise of Website Optimization: The Aftermath of the Dot-com Bubble Bursting

What started off as just a way of exchanging research between institutes in the early 1990s, the World Wide Web quickly came to mainstream prominence in the mid-1990s. This was due to the increasing ease of online access and the rise of websites like Yahoo .com and Amazon.com, with millions of people coming online to experience new exciting ways to find information and shop. And with this huge demand for these new websites quickly came huge revenues from advertising and product sales for many online businesses.

Traditional businesses and new business ventures began to invest millions in getting their own online business to get their slice of the pie, with these online businesses quickly and affectionately become known as dot-coms.

The growth in revenues for many of these dot-coms increased with amazing velocity, and with that came crazy high market valuations. As a result of this, major investments were made by venture capitalists into these hot dot-coms and new dot-com startups, eager to also earn their slice of the pie. Unfortunately though, in this new gold rush, very few checks and balances were put in place to make sure these dot-coms' long-term strategies and business plans were sound.

As a result of this, money was usually spent very fast to grow most dot-coms and their market share as quickly as possible, often by expensive lavish marketing campaigns aimed at attracting as many new visitors as possible. The 2000 Super Bowl ads were the pinnacle of this frenzied spending, with 19 dot-coms like Pets.com spending

millions on advertising that looked and seemed cool but yielded extremely low return on investment (ROI). Eight of those no longer exist.

All this investment in marketing meant very little money was spent on understanding the visitors to these websites and improving the usability of them so they better engaged and converted their visitors. Consequently, many of the visitors to these dot-com websites either rarely came back or purchased very few times in the future. Certainly not enough to warrant the huge marketing investments made.

Soon after this, the stock market valuations of these dot-coms became untenable, with many dot-coms still leaking money like a sieve, constantly looking for the next round of funding to stay alive. In March 2000, the stock market came crashing down with the emerging realization of this, and the dot-com bubble had burst. Many dot-coms folded soon after this, and it was only then that surviving and new online businesses began to become more prudent with their spending and analysis of online business.

This overdue rise in web analysis in 2000 was helped by the growing demand for new advanced log-file website analysis tools like WebTrends (which was a pioneer in this at the time). However, most of the analysis being done was concerned with measuring website hits (as they often were referred to) and revenue. Very little emphasis was placed on understanding visitor interaction and ways to improve websites, and what was done often relied on obtaining this from expensive usability labs.

Along with this rise in web analysis was a long-overdue emphasis on website visitors and the usability of websites. Usability experts like Jakob Nielsen released books that exposed the huge number of issues that many websites had at the time and detailed how to resolve them. Steve Krug's groundbreaking book *Don't Make Me Think* (New Riders, 2001) helped put usability and user focus further into the spotlight, using a very simple format that was very easy for anyone to understand (including examples of how to email your boss to start cheap usability testing!). I strongly suggest you read this if you haven't done so already.

However, at this time there weren't many tools available that could easily test these recommended usability improvements, and there was a lack of understanding of the ROI from doing so. This meant that online businesses were doing very little website testing when building or launching new content, merely hoping their efforts would perform better.

The testing that was done was usually handled informally with no tool, by putting up a new version for a while to see which version seemed to do better. This often resulted in bad consequences for website stability and user experience. And it wasn't until years later when some online businesses started showing great results and ROI from improved testing rigor and process that other online businesses started to notice and slowly follow suit.

Unfortunately, creating and optimizing websites then took a further step back with the rise of tools that made it very easy to create and launch websites with no

programming knowledge. This meant that anyone could create an online presence with very little expertise, which unfortunately meant a deluge of quickly built but bad websites with poor user experiences, with little understanding about how to engage and convert visitors (none more so than the rush of slow-loading intro splash pages).

All of this meant that testing and optimization continued to take a back seat to marketing websites for the first half of the 2000s. This didn't really change much until 2004, when website testing tools like Offermatica and Optimost started to appear that made it much easier and less risky to test making improvements to websites and understand the benefits and ROI from doing so.

Then in 2007, testing became accessible to a much wider market with the launch of Google's free Website Optimizer tool. Although much more primitive than paid testing tool solutions, it allowed online marketers to finally start to dip their feet in the testing waters with little cost or technical knowledge.

Now five years later, there is a much better understanding of the need to optimize and test websites and the ROI and benefit from doing so. This has resulted in the appearance of many new testing tools offering greater functionality but at a fraction of the cost of expensive tools. For example, testing tools like Visual Website Optimizer have allowed businesses to test with better functionality than Google Website Optimizer but at a far lower cost than Offermatica (now called Adobe Test&Target). This has helped begin a long overdue shift away from just visitor acquisition, with much greater focus on and understanding of the need to improve and optimize websites.

However, even with these newer and better testing tools and increased focus on testing, you should realize that website optimization is still in its infancy and that few online businesses are doing a great job of this (particularly in regions outside of the U.S.). This means that you have a huge opportunity to capitalize on this and beat your competitors in the online world by testing and optimizing your website to a better extent.

Indeed, had many of the dot-com companies devoted more money to understanding the needs of their visitors better, made better use of analytics to make more informed decisions on their website, and adopted more focus and rigor in their testing initiatives, many of them would have made greater profits and survived much longer.

The Differences between Landing Page Optimization, Conversion Rate Optimization, Website Testing, and Website Optimization

Before you discover and learn how to optimize your website, it's important to actually know what website optimization actually *is*, and how it differs from other similar web improvement fields. And there are many of them: landing page optimization, conversion rate optimization, website testing, and A/B testing.

All of these terms are bandied about, often with little understanding of the differences between them, and this can often confuse people. They all mean very similar

things in that they all help improve aspects of websites, but let's review these to help clear up any confusion. This will also help you articulate this to others in your organization, which will be a key part of building a website optimization culture there. Here are the main different common fields associated with website optimization:

Landing Page Optimization Many people consider this the same as website optimization, but it is often considered as the art of optimizing pages that visitors directly land on after clicking on a search engine or other advertising link. The problem with this though is that the page doesn't have to be landed on directly to have an impact on your conversion rates—any page on your website can have potential impact on your conversion rate, regardless of whether visitors arrive on it from Google or a newsletter, or arrive from another page on your website. You also need to optimize a visitor's whole journey through your website and common conversion-related page flows, not just their landing page.

Conversion Rate Optimization Conversion rate optimization is quite similar to website optimization, but it places too much emphasis on solely increasing conversion rates. While it is very important to increase your conversion rates, this is somewhat shortsighted because you can increase your conversion rate in many ways, but it doesn't always mean that your website visitors will be happier or more engaged. And for certain types of pages and websites like media ones, there is no major conversion goal due to them not really selling anything or capturing leads. Therefore, these websites are generally left ignored when discussing conversion rate optimization, to the detriment of these and their visitors.

Website Optimization The art that you are learning about in this book covers much more than the previous two disciplines and places greater emphasis on testing and improving websites from a usability and visitor perspective, in addition to testing and improving conversion rates and success metrics. It also involves optimizing any kind of page, whether it's landed on from offsite or not, and whether there is even a major conversion goal for it or not.

Website Testing (or A/B Testing) Last, website testing is actually the act of testing changes on your website in order to optimize it for one of your goals, whether this involves doing simple A/B testing (a popular euphemism for website testing) or advanced multivariate testing. This is done with a testing tool and is a very important process of any of the fields mentioned previously.

The Difference between Website Optimization and Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

It's also really important to clear up another common misinterpretation. Many people not very familiar with the term website optimization often confuse it with search engine optimization (SEO). SEO companies even still continue to bid on the phrase

“website optimization” in Google, which only serves to confuse people even more. To help clear this up, first here are definitions of the two:

Website Optimization Website optimization is an art that tests and improves websites to better engage and convert their visitors, by combining website testing, analytics, usability, and online marketing best practices (Source: Rich Page).

Search Engine Optimization Search engine optimization (SEO) is the process of improving the volume and quality of traffic to a website from search engines via “natural” (or “organic”) search results (Source: Wikipedia).

Next, here are some other reasons why website optimization is different from SEO and why it’s important:

- Website optimization affects your visitors when they arrive on your website and how they engage and convert for your goals. SEO has an effect on the visitor *before* they get to your website, in the actual search engine results pages (SERPs).
- It doesn’t matter how much you optimize your website rankings in Google if your website isn’t fully optimized to meet your visitors’ needs and convert them. You are simply pouring money down the drain if you don’t optimize your website—many visitors from search engines will simply leave if their needs aren’t met.
- Website optimization initiatives are often much cheaper to execute than running expensive SEO campaigns. In fact, leading web analysts like Avinash Kaushik firmly believe that in order to start optimizing your website, you need just 10 percent of your SEO budget.
- Once you optimize your website so that it engages and converts your current traffic better, you should then engage in SEO to drive further traffic, and then optimize how well this SEO traffic converts on your website.

I’m not saying that you should ignore SEO—in fact you should start to think of onsite factors that influence SEO while doing website optimization (URL structure, page names, page interlinking, and keyword usage). Indeed, any website owner who wants the best chance of generating significant revenues and profits in the long run should engage in SEO, but just make sure you optimize your website to engage and convert your visitors before heavily focusing on it.