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Sitefinity

Discover the most effctive version of your web site with

A/B and Multivariate Testing

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deliver more than expected

Creating and maintaining a web site takes a substantial investment of time and money. This investment is justified by the web site's ability to produce reactions from visitors. Those reactions might include buying, donating, sharing, clicking, subscribing or renewing. In Internet marketing, these are known as conversions. Without those conversions the web site fails to offer a return on investment.

Consequently it's extremely important to optimize the web site to maximize the reactions it's producing. However, there are countless strategies (social media, email newsletters, AdWords campaigns) for cultivating these reactions.

Past experiences might provide some guidance about what works best. However, there are lots of remaining decisions. How will it look? What will it say? What is the call to action? When will it be sent? Etc., etc., etc.

These decisions have a sizable impact on the outcome. However, it can be very difficult to discover which specific decisions are contributing to this outcome. A/B and multivariate testing provides a quantitative framework for testing variations and discovering the most effective ideas.

How does A/B and multivariate testing work?

An A/B or multivariate test begins with a desired reaction (goal) and then extends to include the different tactics (variations) for producing that reaction. Once the goal and variations have been established, automated software will administer the test by applying the variations to visitors and watching their reactions relative to the goal.

Step 1
Defining the goal

Step 2
Creating the variations

Step 3
Administering the test

How Much Are Companies Spending On Digital Design Projects
Adele Sage with Vidya L. Drego, Jennifer Peterson, Elisabelle L. Bocal, Forrester Research, August 10, 2011

page | 1

Defining the goal

Because the test is administered by software, the desired audience reaction needs to be expressed in a way that is understandable to a computer. In most cases, this can be done through a web site address (URL) that represents where customers should go.

For example, when a visitor lands on the "Donation" page they will ideally proceed to the "Thank you" page. Visitors who do not proceed to the "Thank you" page represent a failure of the "Donation" page. This is very simplistic logic, but it works for a wide variety of scenarios. Using this information, automated testing software can watch visitor reactions and qualify them as "successful" or "failed".

Creating the variations

The variations represent the different solutions for accomplishing a goal. This might include changes to the content, layout, design, interface or more. These variations are being tested for their relative effectiveness.

Administering the test

The test is administered by displaying different content variations to web visitors. Computer software will automatically handle displaying these variations to visitors.

Visitors will be unaware of the alternate versions of the web content, but their reactions are recorded and compared to other customers. These reactions are then summarized and used to discover the best performing content.

Use existing metrics to provide a "reality check"

Effective A/B and multivariate testing is heavily dependent on goals that accurately represent the desired web site activity. Poorly chosen goals become disconnected from reality and worsen the customer experience.

Consequently, it's very important to pursue A/B and multivariate testing alongside other metrics. These external metrics provide a "reality check" and help ensure that optimizations for a narrow scenario don't negatively impact other important outcomes.

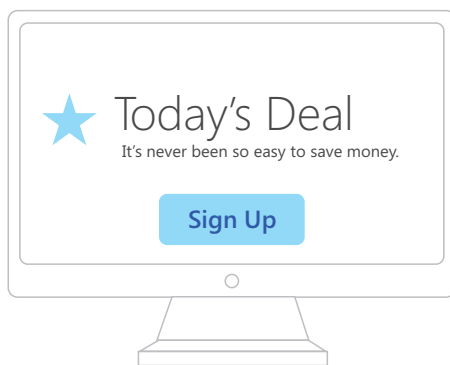These external metrics might include: web analytics, newsletter subscribers, customer

satisfaction surveys, average sales, revenue reports, etc. For example, a customer survey might suggest dissatisfaction with a web site's renewal process. Or web analytics might show a severe bounce-rate on the "Contact Us" page.

These metrics suggest a problem and A/B and multivariate testing become a mechanism for discovering the best solution. However, when this testing produces a positive result, it's easy to cross-reference this outcome with existing reporting.
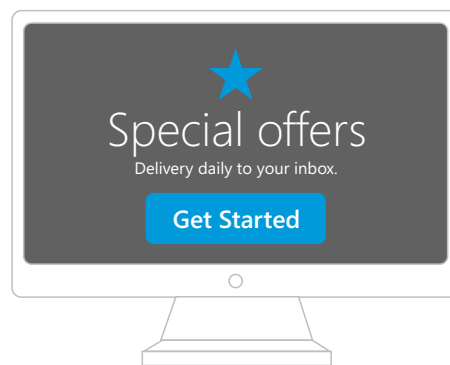
A/B testing vs. Multivariate testing

A/B and multivariate tests are based on variations. However, the difference stems from how these variations are packaged, tested and presented to visitors:

**The following example represents two sets of content variations**

★ Today's Deal
It's never been so easy to save money.

Sign Up

Page A

★ Special offers
Delivery daily to your inbox.

Get Started

Page B

Through an A/B test, Page B might perform more effectively. However, this result doesn't explain which element(s) were responsible for this increased effectiveness. In fact, a combination of Page A and Page B might be ideal.

★ Special offers
It's never been so easy to save money.

Get Started
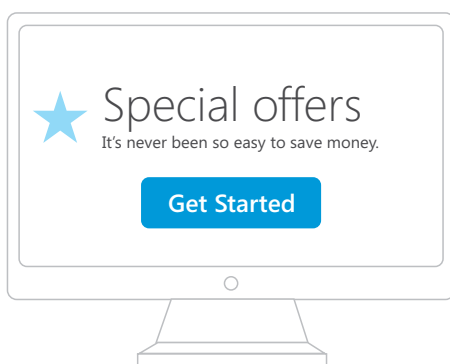
Page C

Multivariate tests allow these variations to be mixed and matched. This measures the contribution of each individual modification to the overall result. By contrast, A/B testing only evaluates a "package" of several variations. Each test produces valuable feedback, but multivariate tests produce more granular detail. For example recent reports show that the most often tested elements are headline copy and call to actions.

> *In 2011 MarketingSherpa published a Landing Page Optimization Benchmark Report, according to which "The headline has been repeatedly shown to provide high impact. Often, it makes the difference between the visitor reading any content and going for the dreaded "X" button. The call to action is not surprisingly twice in the top five – supporting the reason and providing a clear opportunity to act, which are critical to conversion."*

Choosing between A/B and multivariate testing

Use A/B tests if:

→ You're new to experimental design testing.
→ There are a small number of variations being tested.
→ The variations are very page-centric and not easily mixed & matched

Use multivariate testing if:

→ You're comfortable with experimental design testing.
→ There are several variations to be tested.
→ The variations can be randomly mixed & matched to assemble a variety of page outcomes.

Conclusion

An organization's web site is a vital part of how it interacts with customers. These interactions will result in favorable or unfavorable customer reactions. However, for many organizations their success or failure is entirely accidental and there isn't any formal process for testing ideas and systematically discovering better solutions.

A/B and multivariate testing enables organizations to discover the best ideas and make their web sites more effective. When this testing is combined with other reporting it creates a framework for pursuing continual improvements. Through these improvements organizations can outdistance their competitors and maximize the return on their online investments.

About the Author

Gabe Sumner works as an Evangelist at Telerik, with a focus on the Sitefinity CMS. Gabe has a decade of experience working with web technologies and a passion for helping others understand how to work with these technologies. His long technology career has exposed him to many industries, and he now focuses on sharing these lessons with others.

About Sitefinity

Sitefinity is a modern CMS platform designed to help organizations pursue their online goals. Today the system powers over 10,000 websites worldwide across various industries- from Financial and Government Services, to Communications, Retail, and Entertainment. Thanks to Sitefinity's flexible architecture and scalability, you can create successful commercial websites, community portals or intranets. Sitefinity offers a revolutionary easy-to-use interface, simplicity, scalability and unmatched performance – everything you need, beautifully crafted in one product.

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