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Intro

The problem for many marketers is not deciding if they should test but, rather what should they test specifically? Which testing ideas are worth investing in? Plus, after you test the really obvious stuff (ie., making buttons bigger) what else should you test? Here are my personal, 'What's worth testing?' guidelines.

Testing Strategy Step I. Determine Conversion and Bottom Line Goals

I don't advocate testing for the sake of testing alone. The goal of a testing program is to improve your bottom line. Period.

That doesn't mean all tests worth conducting inevitably will be winners. If you don't have some tests that fail, you're not trying hard enough – your overall testing program is not aggressive enough to discover the big winners that are surely out there waiting for you. (Testing is like life in that way, if you never make mistakes, you never learn the most valuable lessons.)

Prior to deciding which pages, layouts and elements to test, first you need to investigate the bottom line. Your testing strategy cannot be devised to be as effective as possible, nor can you boast about your results later on to cover yourself with glory, unless you have investigated the following four facts and figures:

#1. Primary Conversion Goal

What's the conversion goal of the site, site section, page, or marketing campaign in question? Most sites (and sometimes landing pages) have multiple conversion goals. If there's more than one place to click or interact, there's more than one potential conversion activity. A few examples of goals: promoting current marketing offers, gathering email opt-ins, inspiring social networking (comments, Twitter this link, etc), generating leads, getting product added to a cart, or perhaps getting a click to the next page in the conversion funnel.

Although a page can and often does present several conversion paths, you can only optimize for one primary goal at a time. Make sure everyone on the committee agrees with what this primary goal is. In addition, they should also agree on the order of importance of any secondary goals and/or potential page activities... and if any of the activities may be eliminated.

Without this overall agreement, your tests will fail because you won't know what you are optimizing for.

#2. Current Conversion Rate

I'm continually surprised at how many marketers don't know this number for particular pages they'd like to test. You'll need this as a baseline when considering testing, if only to see how badly you need help – and thus what the potential upside of testing that page could be.

#3. Estimated Immediate Value of Conversion

Only in rare cases is your conversion going to be a direct sale on that page, unless you're an ecommerce marketer testing the last check-out page in your shopping cart. Usually, the page conversion pushes a prospect further down a path toward an action that ultimately improves your bottom line. For example, someone might opt-in for email and then forward your messages to a colleague on a committee that authorizes spending.

To determine if a test is worth conducting at this time, you should assign an immediate value to that conversion even if that value is not an actual 'dollars made on the spot'. More often the value is mathematically determined by how the people who convert may ultimately be worth money to your company. Cost savings can also be a significant value. Two very basic examples of value:

Email opt-ins:

If the 100 people currently on your email list buy a total of \$1000 of product a year from you, you could assign an immediate estimated value of \$10 to each new opt-in. (Of course, you'll need to continue tracking later to see if they're really worth that much.)

PPC advertising:

If you pay an average of \$1 per click, and your landing page converts at 2%, then your average conversion costs you \$50. If your tests can improve your conversion rate to 3%, then your average conversion will cost you \$33, a savings of \$17 per conversion. That \$17 is your potential gained value.

#4. Long-term Value of Conversion

Since most conversions are further out in the sales funnel, you'll also want to gather some numbers so you can apply them to determine how much your test results may affect the true bottom line of your organization. This may be a statistic revealing what percent of people who add a product their cart (or sign up for a white paper) ultimately wind up buying. It might also show their potential average lifetime account value if they are new customers.

Testing Strategy Step II. Pages Worth Testing

You can only test one page at a time in a particular conversion funnel. If there's any chance a prospect or customer might visit another page during their site visit, you can't test that other page while you test the first, unless you're using extremely complex testing tools and have a very experienced team running the tests. Kids, don't try this at home because you may invalidate results.

I recommend you chose pages to be tested in the following order of priority:

Priority A. Start with the money

Your best marketing prospects are people who've made it almost to the end of your conversion process ... before they dropped out. Don't waste testing on strangers, until you do the best you can converting these people who are the closest to you. For example the end of your site's conversion process might be:

- a shopping cart
- an email opt-in DHTML overlay
- a lead generation form (the actual form itself)
- any other type of registration form (the actual form itself)
- a download link

Next look up the pathway that the money comes from. This means conducting regression analysis on your best customers and/or most highly qualified leads. What traffic source did they originally come from? Where did they enter the site? Which pathways did they take through your site? Which touchpoints did they convert via? These entry pages, pathways, and touchpoints are already proven winners, so they're absolutely worth investing more money in to test and optimize further.

Note: The above is counterintuitive to most marketers. You may want to test what's broken, instead of what's already working. To understand why you need to change your thinking, consider the stock market. Would you invest more money in a stock that's diving, or in one that's been paying high dividends? Optimize what already works first, so it works even better.

Some of the pages I've noticed are consistently on many marketers' best performing pages lists are:

- Search results page

Benchmarking studies have shown typically visitors who use your site's internal search box may be measurably more likely to convert than other visitors are. Therefore, if you invest in optimizing the layout, design and results shown on that page, it's probably money well spent. Many marketers don't bother with this because it may be an IT plug-in page.

- Thank you pages

Due to the marketing power of recency, people who most recently converted with you are more likely to convert again to other offers. No one's more recent than a customer or prospect who just converted and is now looking at your 'thank you' page on their screen. Test places additional offers on that screen, to keep the interaction going. Your offers could be anything relevant, from white papers and webinars to best-of newsletter articles, to actual products for sale. Or, perhaps best of all, ask for a referral. Thank-you pages can be excellent for tell-a-friend offers.

Testing Priority #2. Widen the Entry of Your Conversion Funnel

Next you'll want to lower entry page bounce rates so more visitors move into the conversion funnel. Entry pages that may be worth testing include (in order of typical importance to the bottom line):

- Campaign landing pages

Warning: traffic source is the most critical factor in landing page response rates. For example, traffic from source A will perform differently on the exact same page as traffic from source B. So, although you want to optimize your landing pages prior to spending a lot on advertising to drive traffic to them, you need to receive a sliver of that traffic to run the tests with beforehand. Never optimize a page for current customers, and then expect that same page to work as well for strangers. The newbies that your ad campaign will drive to your site will convert far more readily on a page that's optimized for their unique anxieties and information needs.

Talk to your media buyer about how you can get a small amount of traffic for the purposes of tests and then roll out a greater campaign to the same exact traffic source as soon as the landing page is optimized for them. Most media companies will help you with this happily.

- Popular deep entry pages

You'll have to review your own site analytics to be sure about this, but I've found in many cases your homepage may be less important as an entry page as are pages further "inside" your site. These pages may have great search engine rankings, or been popularized through emailed links, or social networking (Dig, Twitter, StumbleUpon, etc.)

If you want to convert more prospects into customers – or at least into the sales funnel that leads there – you need to test and optimize the deep entry pages they come in on. Unfortunately many may not have the traffic you need to reach conclusive results in a reasonable time period (a month or less), so you may devise your strategy carefully – perhaps only running limited A/B tests on the most popular page layouts and then extending "learnings" to other pages with similar layouts and types of traffic (the latter being the most critical element.) Note: What works best for one page can't ever be

guaranteed to work best for all pages, but some lessons when carefully applied, especially to "like-traffic" pages, can help overall site conversions.

- Home Page

Depending on how well known your brand is and how much you advertise your brand name, especially offline, your home page may get loads of first-time-visitor traffic or it may only be visited by current customers and partners. Prior to testing, review your analytics and marketing campaigns to determine what type of visitor is in the majority. Then, get approval from all involved departments to set a single primary and secondary conversion goal for the page. This probably will be painful.

If your homepage traffic mix is mostly new visitors, you may want to test focusing 90% of the design on converting them. As an example, look at Classmates.com, Netflix.com, or even Facebook. The home page is geared nearly solely to gaining new registered users or trial customers. Current customers get a tiny log-in area in an inconspicuous spot, and that's that.

If your traffic mix is mainly current customers — and you have a way to monetize their visits — then gear your home page around that assumption, with perhaps one corner reserved for a special offer for newbies (it can even be labeled "First-time visitors") with perhaps a site tour, or product intro hotlinks, etc.

If you have competing divisions or product lines all of whom want their fair share of the home page, suggest testing a page design that focuses on helping visitors swiftly review all options and click on to the perfect internal destination for their needs. Often this may be a vertical list of text links (sometimes with accompanying buttons), instead of a collage of competing promotional graphics posted all wherever your site designer could find room for them. (BTW: For more information on B2B home pages in particular, I suggest you review MarketingSherpa's B-to-B Website Home Page Design Research Study of 2007 which I was personally involved in and can recommend highly.)

- Segmented landing pages

I'm continually shocked by the number of marketers who use the same exact landing page for a wide variety of campaigns or even widely varying PPC keywords. Relevance helps conversion — so your landing page needs to be as relevant as possible to the particular link or ad the visitor came from. If there's a keyword in the ad, it should be in your headline and possibly in body and button copy too. If there's an image, then that should also be on the landing page. Don't get creative — match your original creative instead!

I'd also strongly recommend doing separate tests for pages that are most popular with first-time visitors versus pages popular with current customers. For first time visitors, you might need more "about us" educational information and trust icons as well as a powerful free- opt-in email offer — anything to make them feel safe and begin interacting with your brand. For customers, I might stress a convenient site map, larger search box, a referral offer (such as 'Twitter this' or 'email a friend') and perhaps even some personalization such as offers tailored to their account. Start brainstorming by asking your customers!

Other segments can be by demographic, job function, industry, etc.

- SEO Content Pages & Blogs

The majority of marketers who publish blogs for their companies say it's for SEO, so I'm lumping blogs and other content pages developed for SEO here. The main problem I see with SEO and blog pages is that marketers often measure results based on search traffic alone, instead of conversions. Also, many do not have a thought-out conversion goal or even any conversion elements on these pages. (An RSS icon alone is not enough of a conversion tool to count.) And of those, even fewer test to improve conversions.

Many blog and SEO-content pages are templated, so you have one common page design shared by many pages. Even if each page only gets a little traffic, a smart test designer can devise tests to improve the template's performance as a whole. Elements to consider adding and testing include (but are not limited to):

- email opt-in and other lead generation offer elements
- "top 5" or "favorites" hotlink lists to lead visitors deeper into the site or store
- PDF download offers (PDFs are strangely popular, more so than most other content)
- Quizzes with answers emailed to respondent
- Twitter This, Email a Friend
- Phone numbers displayed prominently (yes!)

Testing Priority #3. Attack Abandons

Now that you've optimized your best money-making pages and widened your entry funnel, it's time to attack the sore spots. Look for pages anywhere inside the site with unusually high abandon rates. Some of these may be positive—a quick abandon from a Q&A or Help section may indicate visitor's questions were answered efficiently. Other pages may be problems at a mid-point in your conversion funnel. These may be product pages, category pages, customer service FAQs... every site is different.

Their visitors have converted from at least one other page (the entry page) to make it this far, but now are giving up. What can you do to keep more visitors in the funnel? Start testing to see if you can turn things around.

Testing Strategy Part III. Elements and Layout Changes Worth Testing

Now that you've identified a bottom line goal along with a particular page to test, next you need to hypothesize what's layout, copy, offer and other creative elements on the page may be depressing its conversions.

Every test starts with a particular hypothesis that says you suspect conversions could be better if something that's non-optimal is changed. Then you launch the test to see if it's true or not. Even the world's top testing experts are never sure of what the results will be until conclusive stats are in.

In order to form “non-optimal” hypotheses for the page in question, you may want to consider data from any or all of the following sources, among others:

- Web analytics from the page itself showing what was clicked on, scrolling patterns, cookies of past activity, etc.
- Time spent on page prior to abandon (especially if this is the ONLY page in the site visit)
- Traffic source data, especially anything indicating keywords, demographics, expectations
- Search terms page visitors plugged into your search box
- Relevant inbound customer service call and emails
- Eye tracking study results of the page or similarly templated pages
- Usability study results
- Exit survey results
- Best practices in page design for the particular primary goal
- Past test results for similar traffic, brands, and offers
- Your gut (but be prepared for it sometimes to be proven incorrect)

After reviewed all of this quantitative and qualitative data, it's time to take a step back and look at the page again with fresh eyes. View it on a laptop screen with the lowest resolution setting that visitors typically use at your site. Don't view it blown up on a projector or on your designer's mega-sized monitor. You want to see it as an actual visitor would.

If your typical visitor is in a very different demographic than you are, consider getting at least one person in that demographic in the room as well. In particular this is important if there's an age difference.

Lastly, get another monitor set up beside the page you're looking at and display the page or ad the visitor would have seen just prior to coming to this page. You'll need this as a reference.

Now, look for non-optimal elements and layout in four main areas of concern:

A. Relevance

Do the page elements – in particular copy and images – match the prior page or ad as closely as possible so it's obvious at a glance that you're in the right place? Is there any irrelevant information or offers on the page that may be eliminated to focus on what's relevant? If two different segments visit this page, and you can't (for some reason) give each segment their own page, are there highly relevant paths and copy points for each?

B. Offer and Call to Action

Is the layout designed to lead the eye on a clear path toward the call to action and the conversion vehicle? If the content extends below a typical fold, is there a call to action both above the fold and at the bottom of the page? Have you considered testing the

wording of your offer to make it more compelling? How about urgency? Is there any compelling reason for a prospect to convert now instead of later? (What can be done later may be easily forgotten.) How about the sheer size of the conversion element? Is there anything clickable near the call to action that you definitely don't want people to click? (I see this frequently with "empty cart", "reset form", "technical specs", etc links and buttons horribly close to the conversion link.) Does the offer wording match the headline wording?

C. Distraction vs. Clarity

Is the primary conversion goal very clear even at a quick glance? Does the visitor know what's asked of them and where to click (or call) next? Are secondary conversion offers and informational elements confusing the eye so people have to really study the page to figure out what to do? Are there any completely extraneous elements on the page – text, navigation, advertisements, or graphics that are irrelevant to the task at hand? Is the copy too long for important points to be read in fewer than 30 seconds? What may be read in fewer than 15 seconds? Is the typeface big enough and uncluttered enough to be readable? Are images to the right of the copy (images at the right may distract from reading.) Could the page wireframe be simplified, with fewer columns and vertical (vs horizontal) display of options?

D. Anxiety

Do page elements eliminate conversion anxieties? Are there testimonials, trust icons, well-known brand logos, customer reviews, enough information to make an informed decision, etc. ? What could be added, moved on the layout, or taken away to reduce anxiety?

As you review the page, make a list of potential element and layout concerns. Next, prioritize it based on what appears to be the biggest concern, and how much can be tested at this time given your limitations (software, traffic, testing team time, office politics, etc.)

You may find you want to test an entirely new page design versus your control, or you may want to test tweaking just one element.

Lastly, if this page receives considerable traffic from organic search listings, you **MUST** consult with your SEO team prior to running any tests. The ultimate goal is to have a page that's optimized for human beings at the same time as being optimized for search engines. If these two priorities must duke it out, I'd recommend pleasing humans first. After all, search engines don't buy anything and no matter how much traffic they send you, it's not much use if human beings don't convert.

A Quick Summary of How to Pick Which Tests to Run

Step I. Research the bottom line

- (1) Pick a primary conversion goal
- (2) determine your current conversion rate
- (3) estimate an immediate value per conversion
- (4) estimate a longer-term value per conversion

Step II. Pick pages to test in order of:

- (1) immediate money
- (2) entry pages
- (3) high abandons.

Step III. Pick elements and layouts to test based on a review of current quantitative and qualitative evidence, along with your hypotheses based on in four areas of concern:

- (1) relevance
- (2) offer and call to action
- (3) distraction vs clarity
- (4) anxiety.

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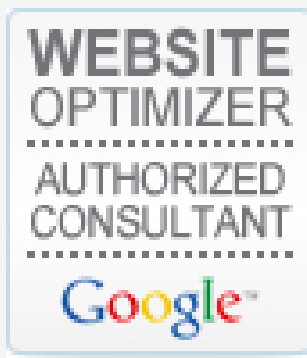
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