Chief Marketer TIP SHEET

CLEAN UP THOSE WEB TAGS!

Placing web tags on a management platform can help you see what's really working

Website data collection has gotten more complicated over the years, as reliance on those metrics has grown. Where once site owners used to examine web server log files to see how visitors were interacting with their sites, nowadays that job is done with web tags: small pieces of JavaScript programming code placed within a web page's HTML.

More useful than server log data and easier to read, at least in concept, web tags have been particularly useful as sites continue to build features and functions into their online presences. Web tags can be easily integrated into a wide range of marketing tasks, from behavioral targeting and web analytics to ad serving, affiliate marketing and search marketing. Just about any measurement that can give marketers a view of the performance of their interactive marketing efforts may be found on a web tag.

"Tags were created as a fix to a problem 13 or 14 years ago," says Paul Cook, CEO of TagMan, a tag management solution provider. "Companies wanted to find ways to share data with third-party organizations that could then report whether their marketing was working. Since the only real online marketing was done through banner ads, you only had to put one tag on one conversion page, and life was simple." Nowadays, online ads can appear on networks, in search, in social media or in email.

But multiplying web tags also meant a growing number of problems associated with that increase: impaired visibility, the risk of errors and waste based on faulty or old tags, and slow-loading websites weighed down with tags that no longer serve a useful purpose.

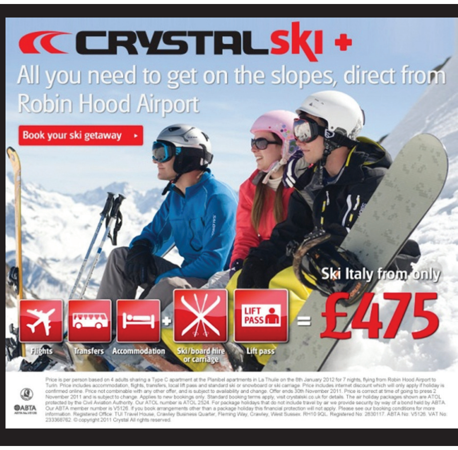
Enter tag management solutions, platforms that let marketers create, manage, monitor and take down web tags without calling on the resources of the IT department. That's what TUI Travel Plc is using the TagMan platform for on all the sites run by its Specialist Holidays Group (SHG). U.K.-based TUI operates in more than 180 countries and 27 key source markets, and its Specialist Group offers ski, destination and luxury holidays under a number of brands, including Crystal, Hayes & Jarvis and Citalia.

Specialist had been deploying and managing tags for those sites and others on both site-specific and channel-specific bases—different management for campaigns in display, paid and organic search, affiliate marketing, retargeting, social media and email. In January 2011, SHG contracted with TagMan to manage the tags on its websites.

"I'd love to say that we were looking for the most amazing tech solution to marry up a single view of how customers travel through our sites," says Tess Bedard, head of online marketing for SHG. "But our first driver was trying to reduce the overspend on our affiliate program." Most affiliate agreements pay for the last click that brings visitors to a site, but discounting duplicate ads on a site posed real budgeting problems for the firm. Even more, the inability to track conversions back from that last click—say, to an email or paid search ad that led to retargeting a prospect—concealed a view of the true integrated performance of SHG's online marketing.

Working with SHG, TagMan placed its proprietary tags on all its brand sites, removing the existing third-party tags. The TagMan tags were then housed in the provider's independent tag management and reporting system, where they were able to report not only last-click conversions but also assisted conversions in which an ad channel played a role on the path to conversion. The unified reporting interface was also able to produce attributed conversions, awarding partial credit to all user events that took place on the way to a sale.

Specialist Holidays replaced a scattering of web tags from third parties with a solution that gives a unified view of how consumers got to a conversion.



The results have been more than satisfactory, Bedard says. In the last year, SHG has been able to reduce affiliate commission payments by 30% through better de-duping. Beyond that, the heightened visibility into channel impact has led the group to triple spending on paid search ads and to increase spending on search optimization by a factor of six, and to make improved SEO rankings for its website a major internal goal.—BRIAN QUINTON

Too Much?

Winterberry Group managing director Bruce Biegel foresees a 5.1% uptick in direct and digital marketing spending, to $215.8 billion, in 2012. But that increase will in part be spurred by marketers' confronting "big data" issues—the amount of data being collected, and the speed at which it is being accumulated, may overwhelm their ability to analyze and use it.

Credit the Internet with the jump in data quantity: Marketers are asking legacy systems to store an ever-widening expanse of behavioral data, such as clickstream activity, intent data (opt-ins, registrations and referrals), and Web analytics. And that's on top of what these systems were initially intended to house, such as customer contact and prospect data; demographics; transactions and loyalty program data.

"Too much data is coming too fast," says Biegel. "Data storage is expensive, and what needs to be stored is a big question. [Marketers] haven't sorted out the use question."—RHL

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READY, AIM, SELL

IMPROVED ECOMMERCE CAPABILITIES BOOST RESULTS FOR GREEN TOP SPORTING GOODS

Enhanced shopping cart and customer path analytics are helping Green Top Sporting Goods boost its pay-per-click search results and increase sales in several product categories.

As recently as 2008, Green Top's website offered product listings, but no way to make purchases. Visitors clicking on specific items were often brought to the manufacturers' sites. At the time, the company's sole brick-and-mortar store, in Glen Allen, VA—staffed by sports enthusiasts with deep product knowledge—was Green Top's primary business, says Bob Strepka, Green Top's director of advertising/store merchandising.

Knowing how shoppers behaved once they landed on the site proved just as important as what drew them to it, especially once Green Top set its hand to reducing abandonment rates. Consider, for example, holsters: At the time of the upgrade, Green Top offered 250 items within that category.

"Google Analytics showed the way people navigate," says Myke Lynch, Green Top's general manager. "The primary decision is based on the type of firearm you own. As a consumer, when I looked at the lead-line copy, I couldn't tell which type of holster fit a specific firearm.

"If you own a Glock pistol, we didn't know if you wanted an ankle holster, a paddle holster," Lynch adds. "Now you can click on Glock, shoulder holster, and the site takes you to frame heights. Click on that and it takes you to the different types of holsters the firearm fits. Then you can filter it by brand."

The changes to the holster category went live in late summer. "We had them online [before the changes to the site], but had virtually no conversion," says Lynch. "It was too cumbersome to navigate. Now it's an up-and-coming category for us."

The site's redesign has also allowed Green Top to refine its pay-per-click strategies. Being able to focus on shopping cart value and margins helped build the business case for which product-related keywords it should bid on. Instead of engaging with competitors like Walmart for high-level terms such as "fishing rod," Green Top bids on very specific words that bring in customers with open wallets.

"Winchester brass gets you buyers," says Lynch. "It's not something you can buy everywhere, and not something highly competitive in pricing. Therefore, it's a good match for pay-per-click campaigns. Pay-per-click doesn't have to be about the cheapest high-velocity product."

Analytics has also allowed Green Top to tailor the incentives it offers on an item-by-item basis. Giving free shipping to someone coming in from search may cut too deeply into the profit margin, especially when sending out a tricky-to-ship item like a 40-pound cooler or a seven-foot fishing rod.

"As part of its ongoing marketing, Green Top was doing a good amount of paid search," says Lappe. "In the paid search world, you have to be really careful about profit margins. If we are paying more than a dollar a click, unless we are getting massive conversion rates, we can't do paid search on [a given] product category.

—RICHARD H. LEVEY

SEO MYTHS

▶Using a service that promises to register your site with "hundreds of search engines" is good for your site's rankings. If you believe that, then you may also be excited to know there is a Nigerian prince who desperately needs your help for which you will be richly rewarded.

▶The clickthrough rate on the search results matters for ranking. If this were true then those same third-world link builders would also be clicking away on search results all day long. *Registering every room + phone extension in our office building as a separate location with Google Places helped us rank for (insert generic search term here).* Can you believe an in-house SEO presented this at a recent conference? (*cringe*)

▶Google uses the bounce rate as a ranking signal. The bounce rate metric primarily reflects how well-targeted a traffic source or keyword is or isn't for the destination page. It doesn't say much about the overall quality of the site, and is too noisy to be used as a ranking signal unless is part of the personalization feature. Bounce rate can reflect one of three things or a combination of all:

1) The searcher didn't express the intention clearly, i.e. poor query.
2) The search snippet promised something the page doesn't deliver, poor snippet.
3) The page did live up to the promise made on the snippet and provided a quick and complete answer to the searcher's query. For these reasons bounce rate is ineffective as a ranking signal.

—STEPHAN SPENCER, author of "Google Power Search" and co-author of "The Art of SEO"