

New web metric uses behavioral data to compare and track visitor interest

Challenge

Current web metrics provide hints at what site visitors are finding interesting, but fail to provide consistent and reliable evidence of a page's value.

Solution

The Content Interest Index (CII), developed by Nelson Schmidt and its marketing technology arm, ec-connection, uses two behaviors as proxies for reader interest: (1.) How many visitors print a page, and (2.) How visitors email that page to a friend or colleague. The CII is particularly useful for these two applications:

- Observing how changes in a page's content, over time, affects user interest
- Comparing inferred reader interest in one page or section with other pages or sections

The result is a metric that allows managers of web content to learn from their incremental changes. Although nothing is a perfect measure of reader interest, the CII shows content managers, in statistically reliable measurements, how their incremental changes to a page's content has influenced reader behavior.

A Search for Reliable Measures of Visitor Interest

Today the need for improved ways to measure visitor interest in a site's content is acutely felt. For example, page views – a longtime industry yardstick of value – was recently abandoned by Nielsen/NetRatings for another metric, average time spent on a page.

Other measurements provide more questions than answers. For instance, visitor exit rates for a page present this quandary: Did visitors leave the site at this page because they got what they needed, or were they giving up in droves at a perceived "dead end?" Even polling results ("Rate how valuable you found this page") carry with them questions of interpretation. For instance, do high marks indicate interest that will lead to a desired action, such as a purchase?

The CII takes a fresh approach.

The CII counts instances of a page's "Printer Friendly Format" or "Email a Colleague" icon receiving a click. This observes what are arguably the two most common ways that visitors save or share information – either through printing or emailing content. To factor out a page's level of overall readership, the sum of clicks is divided by page views.

This formula provides a score that can be tracked over time, for the same page, or compared during a fixed period with other pages' CII's. No metric is perfect, and the CII's chief limiting factor is statistical reliability. Since the CII watches behavior only exhibited

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by a fraction of total readership, pages with few clicks cannot be included in a CII analysis.

However, when the CII can be reliably measured, it fills a significant void in web metrics. It measures the “Interest” step in the conceptual ladder known as AIDA. Here is how Wikipedia defines AIDA:

AIDA is an acronym used in marketing that describes a common list of events that are very often undergone when a person is selling a product or service:

A - Attention (Awareness): attract the attention of the customer.

I - Interest: raise customer interest by demonstrating features, advantages, and benefits.

D - Desire: convince customers that they want and desire the product or service and that it will satisfy their needs.

A - Action: lead customers towards taking action and/or purchasing.

In web metrics, **Attention** can be easily measured by page views. This is the marketer’s opportunity on a site to begin the selling process. Later in the process, **Desire** can also be measured, because this stage involves someone entering a “conversion funnel.”

Those who *desire* a product or service will typically demonstrate that heightened interest by conducting research related to pricing, shipping and warranties. Conversion funnels do an excellent job of tracking this behavior.

Finally, although most people in a conversion funnel who exhibit *desire* never take the **Action** of purchasing, those who *do* take this step are definitely trackable through modern web metrics.

CII Completes the AIDA Picture

What is missing from a comprehensive web metrics system is a way to monitor the many pages designed to generate **Interest**. The content in these pages is crucial to drawing consumers into the conversion process, but are difficult to fully optimize using standard web metrics.

Unlike *desire* pages, these are more often a web session’s exit page – they are one or two sessions removed from the session that will result in a sale. If the content of these Interest pages can be optimized, consumers should be more likely to return to the site, and into a conversion funnel.

The CII assists content managers in optimizing content, in an effort to improve the chances of a purchase or other desired commitment.

NOTE: Further studies are being planned to see how individual consumers behave when exposed to this optimized content, to confirm the theory that improved interest – in terms of heightened CII – indeed boosts demonstrated *desire* and *action*.

Content Optimization Coaching With CII

Those who contribute content to a web site are often hungry for feedback on how they are doing. Page views, time on a page, and other measurements tell little of real value. By comparison, CII's help content managers to see how their enhancements to content over time have altered visitor behavior. These reports can also assist in coaching a content manager, by showing how one manager's optimization efforts compare with others in terms of connecting with readers in a way that can be measured.

Below is a case study where CII observations were taken over two consecutive years, and how these indices helped, in three instances, with coaching and further content improvement. (Some measurements have been changed to simplify examples.)

Case Study: Year-to-date Evaluation of Content

A web site that markets both acquisition and cross-sales products was evaluated for its content value. Measurements of CII were taken using data gathered by Nelson Schmidt / ec-connection.

Page Title	Last Year's		This Year's	
	CII	Page Views	CII	Page Views
Acquisition Product #4 Desc.	254	1,475	345	2,380
Cross Sales Product #1 Desc.	184	1,968	244	3,274
Acquisition Product #5 Desc.	336	447	149	807
Acquisition Product #1 Desc.	107	2,764	93	5,579
Cross Sales Product #3 Desc.	72	879	80	1,999
Cross Sales Product #2 Desc.	21	1,877	32	2,477
Acquisition Product #2 Desc.	9	2,635	17	4,796
Acquisition Product #3 Desc.	14	1,590	16	2,488

The table above lists a sampling of pages from both content managers. Color coding is by category, so managers could compare their results. Notice that this year's leading page in terms of CII (Acquisition Product #4 Description) would be a **trailing** page if all that was measured is Page Views (four other pages had higher page views).

To help understand how year-to-date changes in a page's content are affecting **Interest**, as measured by CII, that change is expressed in percentages.

Page Title	Year-to-date Changes	
	CII	Page Views
Acquisition Product #1 Desc.	-12.9%	101.8%
Acquisition Product #2 Desc.	85.3%	82.0%
Cross Sales Product #1 Desc.	32.8%	66.4%
Acquisition Product #3 Desc.	14.8%	56.5%
Cross Sales Product #2 Desc.	53.9%	32.0%
Acquisition Product #4 Desc.	35.6%	61.4%
Cross Sales Product #3 Desc.	11.2%	127.4%
Acquisition Product #5 Desc.	-55.6%	80.5%

Page View changes year-to-date are also important in the discussion. They demonstrate the current year's increase in consumer **Attention** (using the AIDA model) for each page that is being managed. Although content changes do not influence page views, page views do show rising opportunities for engaging readers through optimized content.

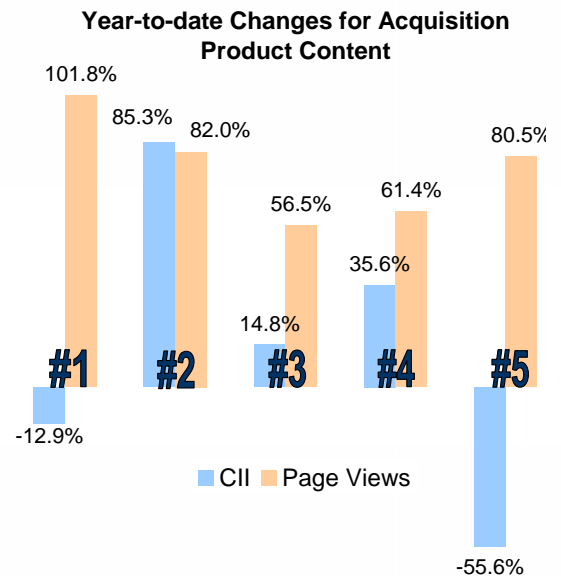
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The final graphic, below shows five pages that are managed by the Acquisition Product content manager. This graphic comparison of year-to-date CII and Page View changes (using the percentages from the table shown on the prior page), illustrates the type of fresh insights that can be pulled from this new approach to content interest.

At the very least, charting CII over time becomes an opportunity for a deeper understanding of how changes in a page's content can affect visitor behavior.

Here are the sorts of opportunities for coaching that come out of a Year-to-date CII Report, as shown on the right:

- Product #1 and #5 Pages increased in page views and but decreased in CII, suggesting that the changes made over the course of that year should be re-examined for effectiveness
- Product #2 Page content grew in its CII along with page views. Here is a page that has improved how it is engaging with readers, and at a time of increased awareness (as measured by page view growth)
- To a lesser extent, Product #3 and #4 pages are similar to #2: Increases in both viewers and CII over the course of the year are definite signs of success. Efforts to optimize the pages even further should be encouraged and tracked



Questions That the CII Raises

Like any new metric, this one raises many questions. Some can be answered now, others require further study. They include the following:

Are there demographic biases?

Most likely there are. For instance, younger or more web-savvy site visitors may be more inclined to copy and paste URLs or actual page content as a way to share and save content. If this age bias is true, pages attracting older or less web-savvy individuals would skew higher in CII than other pages.

Do high CIIs lead to more sales for those products?

This is implied by the AIDA model, but still needs to be proved through further study.

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Why isn't bookmarking part of the CII?

It was decided, because of the growth of social bookmarking, that this would be left out. If included, it might further skew results by age and "web-sophistication."

Further Investigations Will be Shared

In the spirit of collaboration with other marketing technology professionals, Nelson Schmidt and ec-connection will continue to share its findings about this exciting new metric. Questions and comments are of course welcome and encouraged.