How to know when it’s time to pay for search analytics tools

Search marketers have plenty of free search analytics tools available, from Google Analytics’ wide array of reports and features to pared-down versions of free tools from companies like Moz and SimilarWeb.

But eventually, marketers wanting deeper insights into their SEO and search marketing efforts – or those who simply outgrow the free tools they’re using – may need to invest in a search analytics solution.

Why pay for a search analytics tool?

According to Local SEO Guide founder and CEO **Andrew Shotland**, tools that help companies understand SERP results for target queries are a must.

“Google often changes what it considers the intent of a given SERP, so staying on top of what type of content Google is ranking (e.g. packs, snippets, media, e-commerce, etc.) can be critical to deploying a solid SEO strategy. There are certainly plenty of ways to get at that data for free (just search Google), but if you want to figure that out at scale, you’re going to want to invest in some tools that can help you get there,” said Shotland.

Greg Lee, SEO lead for Drum, a digital marketing and research agency, said free tools may be able to satisfy the “80/20” rule, but the decision to pay for an analytics platform depends on how important search is to your business.

“The question ultimately boils down to whether search is a strategic component of the overall marketing program or simply viewed as a tactic within a silo. Hopefully the answer is strategic business drive, in which case, businesses that have reached – or aspire to reach – a certain scale should consider researching enterprise-level search analytics tools,” said Lee.

Lee’s colleague **Vladimir Bradic**, who leads SEM at Drum agency, said the decision typically comes down to two criteria: scale and data, and feature requirements.

“Are there a larger number of physical locations – think stores, hotels, restaurants – or product offerings that incite unique search behavior, such as hyper-localized queries, etc? If so, Webmaster Tools and even the most robust of the entry-level tools will struggle to provide the necessary value,” Bradic said.

Location3 Vice President of Digital Strategy **Gloria Dutton** said her digital marketing agency doesn’t recommend investing until a company has utilized free tools to their full capacity and are taking action based on that data.

“There are, of course, reasons to upgrade to a paid platform, primarily if your site is large enough (hits per month). Also, if a company is advanced in their customer data, and other technologies and want to connect them all to one system through API integrations – they are probably ready for an upgrade,” says Dutton.

Knowing when to upgrade

Before recommending a client pay for search analytics solution, Dutton’s agency asks their clients three questions:

1. Are they currently using the data in their current analytics platform actively to both better inform

decision-making and take action based on the data account?
2. Do they already have tools set up to connect, segment and analyze their different audience data?
3. Are they doing any website testing?

Dutton said if marketers are not properly leveraging basic analytics information – an initial step would be to build out dashboards on a free platform like Google Analytics, and complement it with free tools like Google Sheets and Google Data Studio.

“Costs [for a paid solution] can be upward of $150,000, and for many clients, this is a very big commitment to make on behalf of technical costs and tools,” says Dutton.

Dutton says her agency considers how complete the client’s overall marketing strategy may be – and how many different channels are involved and need to be tracked. “If running a very complex, multi-channel and integrated tactics, then a possible upgrade may be needed,” Dutton said.

Sometimes, determining if it’s time to pay for a search analytics tool is as simple as asking, *am I getting the data I want?*

“It’s basically when the problem is significantly more complex or, at scale, beyond the scope of the solution you are currently using,” says Distilled head of PPC **Richard Cotton**.

Resources on Enterprise SEO

Getting the most out the tools

Cotton points out marketers need to have the right resources to analyze the data they are paying to collect.

“There’s no point paying for more data only for it to lead to nothing actionable,” says Cotton, “Does it actually push the business forward? There’s no point spending money to shed light on things that don’t actually lead to change. People want gadgets and tools, and feel like they are in control – I’d always want to ask, *is it actually making a difference*?”

Shotland said clients who work with agencies may have the option to take advantage of their agency’s tool licenses instead of having to purchase their own.

“On the flip side, we often see a lot of tool subscriptions fall into the ‘gym membership’ category where they get used for a month or two and then ignored, so be wary about getting locked into long-term deals for these tools until you are certain you are actually going to use them,” says Shotland.

A recent analysis of trends in 2018 consumer search behavior conducted by Yext found more and more consumers are interacting with businesses within search results. The search marketing platform reported a more than 20 percent increase in clicks to call, clicks for directions and clicks to business websites.

“Marketers need tools that go beyond traditional website analytics to unify the off- and on- website ecosystems. More than ever before, brands need to focus on mapping the digital customer journey to better understand how to curate an experience that will convert search interest into a transaction,” said **Zahid Zakaria**, Yext’s senior director of customer insights and analytics.

Savvy search marketers understand the right search analytics tool is a crucial component of any comprehensive search strategy. If you’re part of a team charged with driving enterprise SEO or search marketing initiatives, failing to invest in a search analytics tool could potentially cost you more than lost data.

“The best rule of thumb is to scale as need dictates and assess your search analytics needs annually, especially since feature sets of the major players evolve rapidly,” says Bradic.

About The Author

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