

Free Analytics are Not Always the Best Deal



Summary

The choice between utilizing a free Analytics solution versus a paid Analytics solution is not as straight forward as it may appear. Indeed, free Analytics from Google can cost a company far more than if they had chosen an independent Analytics solution, such as HitsLink from Net Applications. Net Applications provides a complete line of Website Analytics through its HitsLink product. HitsLink is offered in several versions ranging from HitsLink Professional to HitsLink Enterprise, and the recently released HitsLink Platinum. As a partner, you may sometimes be presented with a client who is considering free Analytics from Google. As such, it is helpful to be up-to-date on some basic comparison points between HitsLink and Google.

Background

Google purchased Urchin in 2005, cut the price in half, and then converted the product to Google Analytics by stripping out the high end features. They decided to give away Analytics to users of Google AdWords, and eventually decided to give it away to the general public.

The question a client considering both HitsLink and Google Analytics (GA) might pose is "Why would I pay for HitsLink when I can get GA for free?" The answer to that question begins with another question to the client:

Why do you want Analytics for your website?

If the answer is that your client only wants to know how many visitors are coming to their website and from where, then a free *independent* Analytics solution may be appropriate for their website. The answer that you will receive from most clients however, will often be along the lines of, "I want to maximize my website's effectiveness, understand visitor behavior, track visitor sources, track marketing campaign results, and monitor click fraud." Many of these same clients will also have sizable advertising budgets on Google AdWords, AdSense, Yahoo, MSN and other sources of advertising.

There are several fundamental questions that have to be asked at this point:

Do you want Google providing the Analytics to track how your Google ad campaigns are doing? Do you want Google reporting the performance of your ad campaigns with their competitors?

There's an obvious conflict of interest here. Google makes nearly all of their revenue from advertising. They have every incentive to overstate their results, and to understate the results from competitors.

Do you want Google reporting just how many fraudulent clicks you are paying for with your ad campaigns?

Google recently wrote a paper discussing the conflict of interest in 3rd party Analytics firms that provide click fraud data, saying that they *all* vastly over-reported click fraud to provide a justification to have independent Analytics. But, doesn't that raise the question as to why they spend vast amounts of money and time building the infrastructure required to give GA away for free? Google is in a position where they actually profit heavily from click fraud. This is another conflict of interest. The more click fraud that goes undetected or unreported, the better Google does financially.

Are you comfortable with Google knowing exactly how much you make from each click on each of your ads?

Again, this can be a huge conflict of interest. If you are spending \$1 for each AdWords click that comes to your site, and GA shows that you are making \$2 on average for each of those clicks, Google would know that you are able (and probably willing) to spend more than \$1 per click. Your next quote might well be a lot closer to \$2 per click.

Are you comfortable with Google sharing your data openly?

Google Trends is the culmination of the fears many have had about Google's abuse of data privacy. Trends will show your competition:

- Your website traffic
- Your visitor locations
- And, most importantly, the search terms used to find your website by your visitors

So, after all of your marketing efforts to find the best search terms to get the most effective traffic to your site, Google is going to give that information away to your competition.

I don't use Google advertising, and like the idea of free Google Analytics on my website. They have no way of using my data against me, right?

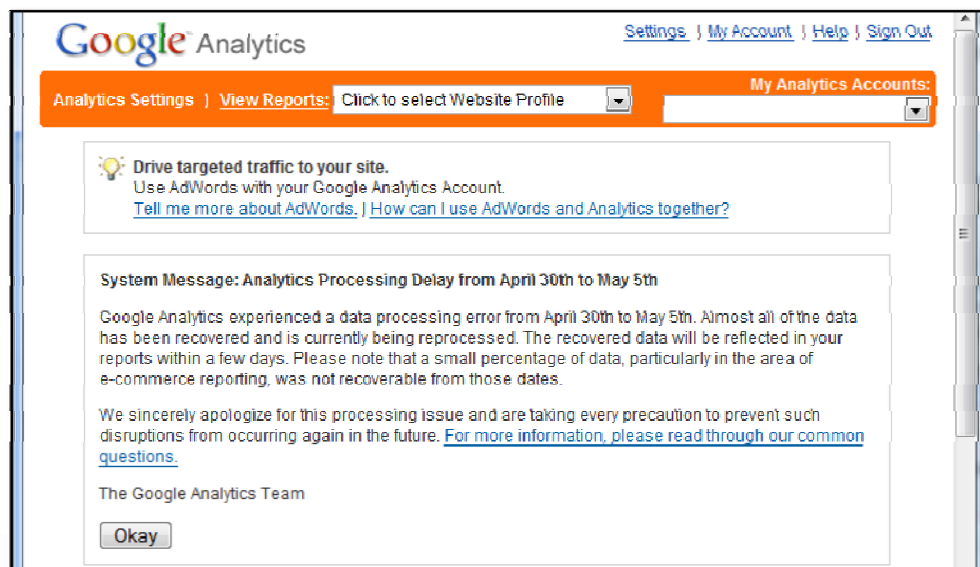
Unfortunately, that's wrong. Let's look at an example:

1. You have a small local furniture store with a loyal customer base, and decide to launch your website with free Google Analytics.
2. You send a mailing to your customer base announcing your great new website.
3. Customer X visits your website, and is excited by the new cream leather couch you offer, and plans to visit the store the next day.
4. Google Analytics on your website stores this website visit, and also stores that the customer searched for "cream leather couch" on your website.
5. Customer X continues their internet browsing, soon landing on a different site that has Google AdSense ads.
6. Google now has enough information to present competitive ads on this site such as "cream leather couches on sale – click here" from the data gathered from your customer visiting your website.

Using GA *virtually guarantees* that your customers will see competitor ads. (Remember, Google makes nearly all of their revenue from advertising!)

Google is really big, and will take care of GA clients, right?

Google Analytics is free, and has absolutely no guarantees with regards to customer support or safekeeping your historical data. Their cost for losing a client is nothing. HitsLink support staff is not only available via email, but via phone as well to handle any range of support requests.



What does Google have to say about these conflicts of interest?

Google openly 'warns' everyone with their online [Privacy Overview](#):

Google Privacy Overview

Scope

This statement applies to Google's products, services and websites worldwide (collectively, Google's "services").

- Google collects [personal information](#) when you register for a Google service or otherwise voluntarily provide such information. We may combine personal information collected from you with information from other Google services or third parties to provide a better user experience, including customizing content for you.
- Google uses [cookies](#) and other technologies to enhance your online experience and to learn about how you use Google services in order to improve the quality of our services.
- Google's servers automatically record information when you visit our website or use some of our products, including the URL, IP address, browser type and language, and the date and time of your request.
- [Read more](#) in the full privacy policy.

Uses

- **We may use personal information to provide the services you've requested, including services that display customized content and advertising.**
- We may also use personal information for auditing, research and analysis to operate and improve Google technologies and services.
- We may share [aggregated non-personal information](#) with third parties outside of Google.
- When we use third parties to assist us in processing your personal information, we require that they comply with our Privacy Policy and any other appropriate confidentiality and security measures.
- We may also share information with third parties in limited circumstances, including when complying with legal process, preventing fraud or imminent harm, and ensuring the security of our network and services.
- Google processes personal information on our servers in the United States of America and in other countries. In some cases, we process personal information on a server outside your own country.
- [Read more](#) in the full privacy policy.

At least feature-wise, GA measures up, right?

HitsLink has many feature advantages over GA, including:

- Google Analytics is not "real-time." There is a delay of 24 hours or more before data is recorded. With HitsLink, as soon as a visit occurs, it will appear on your log. And, report generation with HitsLink is nearly instantaneous. The frustration that delay generates is the main reason we hear as to why a customer tried GA, and then came back to HitsLink. Who wants to wait 24 or even 48 hours to see how a change to their website is working?
- HitsLink provides a much higher level of "click detail" than GA does. We are able to track down to the user level and monitor the navigation paths of individual users. As a result, we are also able to track click fraud. You can, for example, setup an alert to notify you if you get x number of repeat visits in y time period.
- HitsLink also provides much more robust referral reporting, and can segment campaigns in much greater detail than GA.
- HitsLink does daily data backups, while GA does not guarantee data availability at all.
- Net Applications provides HitsLink clients with multiple customer support avenues, including phone support. GA support is provided by Google Partners for a fee.

Conclusion

Based on the information presented here, we hope to have demonstrated that a free Analytics solution is not necessarily the right Analytics solution. At Net Applications we take pride in our Partners, Clients and products. HitsLink is a powerful, yet affordable and easy to use Analytics solution for maximizing website effectiveness, understanding visitor behavior, tracking website visitors, marketing campaign results and click fraud. As a company, we are committed to keeping HitsLink the premiere independent web Analytics tool on the market, with continual enhancements and superior support.

About Net Applications

Since 1999, Net Applications has been a leading source of Website Analytics, Internet Marketing and Internet Metrics applications and services. Headquartered in Aliso Viejo, California, and with data centers and operations in California, Nevada and Michigan, Net Applications distributes its services through over 8,000 partners and affiliates worldwide. For more information, e-mail us at: support@netapplications.com or visit our web site at: www.netapplications.com.