WebTrends: Show Me the Traffic

BY JOHN CLYMAN

With the irrational exuberance that buoyed many Web sites long gone, it's performance that matters in today's business climate. So deriving the maximum benefit from your Web presence means gathering accurate data to help support your decisions and investments.

NetIQ's WebTrends Reporting Service 6.0 aims to fill that need with a hosted solution that simplifies collection, analysis, and interpretation of Web site usage data. Both the Enterprise Edition (priced from $1,000 a month) and the scaled-down eBusiness Edition (starting at $35 a month) offer appealing alternatives to traditional client-side log analysis software, though both also show some of the interface limitations that still bedevil many browser-based applications.

With WebTrends 6.0, as with its predecessor service WebTrends Live, you set up data acquisition by embedding JavaScript tracking code into your Web pages. When a visitor's Web browser loads a tagged page, it reads the code and reports details to WebTrends' SmartSource Data Collector. You then use your own browser to view reports derived from that data, rather than by processing a typical server log file produced by a traditional analysis tool.

This ASP approach to tracking usage entails some up-front effort; it's easiest if your site is template-driven or if you can bulk-insert the JavaScript code into pages. On the upside, it eliminates the work that would otherwise be required to install log analysis software, carefully manage your servers' log files, and spend hours of CPU time crunching those logs.

Using information actively reported by browsers (rather than crunching a server log file) also promises improved accuracy, particularly when it comes to accounting for users behind proxy servers. And it lets you collect and analyze a variety of data that normally wouldn't be available in server logs.

One drawback is that the JavaScript-based tracking tags can be embedded only in HTML files, not in other file types such as PDF documents. This approach adds about 3K of markups to each page, which may be a consideration for sites whose audience primarily uses dial-up.

As befits its subscription price, WebTrends 6.0 Enterprise Edition has industrial-strength reporting capabilities, with dozens of standard reports to choose from. Beyond the basic reports you'll find in any Web analytics tool—page views, unique visitors, referring sites, and the like—the Enterprise Edition provides sophisticated analyses that let you break down e-commerce activity in detail. You can examine traditional business metrics like conversion ratios and even incorporate geographic-location technology to try pinpointing your customers' locations by metropolitan statistical area.

You can also track popular paths through content, aggregate results from "content groups" of related pages, and create highly customized reports to filter information and tabulate precisely the details you need to know. To handle large sites, you can set up parent-child profiles that run reporting against multiple subsites, or you can create subaccounts for separate divisions.

Most of the reports are shown as bar or line charts within the browser, but you can export data to Excel for further analysis or generate polished and professional-looking reports in Word or Adobe Acrobat. You can schedule a single summary report to run automatically each day and send results via e-mail. Data normally becomes available after 8 hours (in time for next-day viewing), although NetIQ will negotiate real-time reporting capabilities if needed.

For small- and medium-size businesses, the company's eBusiness Edition can provide a useful subset of the Enterprise Edition's capabilities at a fraction of the cost. The eBusiness edition offers a full range of basic reports, as well as path analysis and content-group reports. But it omits many of the advanced commerce- and custom-reporting capabilities of the Enterprise Edition.

The eBusiness Edition can collect data from multiple Web sites, but it isn't designed for use with far-flung Web teams. It doesn't support subaccounts, for example.

With both editions, we found that WebTrends' browser-based hosted interface had some disadvantages compared with traditional client-side reporting software. The Web interface simply can't match the richness and ease of use of a good native GUI, and responsiveness sometimes lagged. Additionally, we found that the Java applets that WebTrends uses to display graphical reports failed on machines that had Java 2 Version 1.4.x installed, though we were able to work around the problem by disabling it in Internet Explorer's advanced options dialog.

One benefit of WebTrends' strategy is that if you later decide you want to switch to WebTrends' client-side products, you can still use the SmartSource data you've already collected.

Although the WebTrends Reporting Service options have some rough spots, they offer appealing alternatives to log-file analysis for Web sites that need highly accurate usage data or don't want the trouble of installing and managing a traditional client-software solution.

WebTrends Reporting Service 6.0

Enterprise Edition, $1,000 per month and up.

eBusiness Edition, $35 per month and up.
