



Book Landing Page Optimization

The Definitive Guide to Testing and Tuning for Conversions

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Recommendation

Tim Ash provides long-term strategies that solve the guessing game of Web page improvement and give you an effective battle plan – but don’t expect overnight, quick solutions. Landing page optimization – a process of diagnosing, tuning and testing – is detail work. Although Ash refers often to his own Web page “tuning” firm, he also shares ample valuable information your business can use. He wrote this book for the team behind a Web site’s design, including those involved with content, user experience, media, marketing, advertising, product management and affiliate management. *BooksInShort* believes that anyone who wishes to do a thorough job of refining a site’s landing pages can rely on this precise, detailed and knowledgeable manual.

Take-Aways

- Your landing pages are the first ones visitors encounter on your Web site.
- Page performance data – where visitors come from, how long they stay, if they return and how much they buy – indicates which landing page changes you need.
- The purpose of your online marketing is to acquire, convert and retain customers.
- Conversion means getting customers to take actions you want them to take. Your conversion rate is a crucial benchmark.
- Seek executive buy-in for your landing pages optimization project in case you need more resources, such as internal staff or external expertise.
- Make small changes to your landing pages; compare results to the original pages.
- Use all available data to get to know your customers and tailor your landing pages to their needs.
- Identify online problem areas by checking which elements have the most impact, how users travel through your site and what consumer activity you desire.
- Use the best combination of sales results, “sweep” and other variables.
- When your new pages go live, collect performance data and keep making improvements.

Summary

The Landing Strip

Your Web site’s landing pages are the ones consumers get to first. Your landing pages can be your home page and a few pages inside your main site, stand-alone pages or pages that combine to form a “microsite” targeting a specific audience. Study what your site’s visitors tell you through actions you can measure. They provide the best feedback on what works and what doesn’t. Use that data to guide your landing page optimization project.

“All of your hard work comes down to the few precious moments that the Internet visitors spend on your Web site.”

Many home pages try to address all visitors' needs equally and to direct visitors where they want to go. But that isn't all you need to do to create effective landing pages. Instead of helping every kind of visitor, craft landing pages that help your priority visitors, the repeat customers who seek "mission-critical content" from your site. If your "business's performance would grind to a halt if you removed certain content from your Web site," that content is mission critical.

Planning and Strategizing

To get landing page optimization right, the manager of the optimization project needs to create an action plan and prepare for possible snags. He or she is responsible for the team, as well as any project profit or loss. If you are the project manager, once you have an initial plan and a team, identify the pages on your Web site that have the highest impact on your business and profits. Determine what elements to tune and list the site's current problems. Sort them into common themes based on raw page performance data that identifies where your visitors come from and how long they stay. Then, make precise, informed changes to your pages and see how the results compare with the original versions.

"Many companies are now beginning to understand that Web site and landing page conversion can have a dramatic impact on online marketing program profits."

To begin, clarify your Web site's business goals and financial targets. Next, consider the effectiveness of any steps you are taking to attract and keep customers. Pull together your team and secure executive support in case you need a budget for additional inside or outside staff. Project managers often bring in team members from outside. For example, a landing page optimization project may call for hiring a "user experience professional" to study how people interact with your Web site's pages and systems. The team also needs a Webmaster to maintain the site, a system administrator to keep the server running, a programmer to handle the site's nonvisual functionality, a graphic designer to create and change graphics for testing, a copywriter to edit the text and a quality assurance tester to verify that all components of the Web site work as expected.

"Pay-per-click is a very popular online advertising model...Most PPC search engines charge advertisers using some variation of a live auction model...The more you pay, the more prominently your ad will appear."

The optimization team may have to deal with other internal groups who are responsible for branding, information technology, legal and regulatory compliance, administration and finance.

Write a test plan, implementation plan and quality assurance plan. Prioritize Web site issues that have the greatest impact. Most likely, you will tune and test pages relevant to those issues first. Now, you must deal with the following concerns in detail:

The Main Components of Online Marketing

Online marketing is the act of convincing customers to come to your Web site, making them feel compelled to act and getting them to come back. These three pivotal online marketing activities are called customer "acquisition, conversion and retention."

"If your audience consisted of a six-year-old in San Diego and a 74-year-old in New York City, it would be silly to describe your 'average' visitor as a forty-year-old from Kansas."

Online customer acquisition methods include advertising, "search engine optimization (SEO)," "pay-per-click (PPC)" participation, affiliate outreach, social networking and e-mail lists. The acquisition process doesn't stop online. Offline support activities may include traditional advertising, media and industry coverage, promotions, referrals and print marketing.

"The skill sets to get the best results from your landing page testing program are very diverse."

Conversion occurs when you persuade visitors to take a measurable action you want them to take, such as asking for a catalogue, sending an e-mail or buying a product. Landing pages are not the only factor that shapes a conversion rate. Others include your brand, your competition, the time of year, site design, your security and privacy practices, the product's ability to sell itself to visitors, and the visitors' own physical and emotional states when they reach your site. Remember that no program, no matter how good, ever earns a 100% conversion rate.

"Departmental silos and territorialism are often the biggest obstacles to successful landing page optimization."

Retention means that a customer comes back after the first conversion. Retention programs use e-mails, newsletters, Web site feeds, blogs and loyalty rewards.

In determining where your Web site's traffic comes from, try to cover all the routes to boost your chances of higher conversion rates. Conversion rates are a key indicator of a site's effectiveness and a good benchmark, though you must assess other measurable factors as well. To measure conversion, track these quantifiable actions.

- **"Advertising"** – Look at the number of times people clicked on ads on your site.
- **"Click-through"** – Measure how many times visitors land on pages they seek.
- **"Education"** – Look at the time visitors spend on informational pages.
- **"Downloads and printouts"** – Review the number of requests for content.
- **"Form-fill rate"** – Count completed forms, even if they only require an e-mail address.
- **"Purchase"** – Study rates for people who add items to their shopping carts without completing checkout. Also measure completed orders by revenue or profit per sale.

"The best landing page version will be found statistically (by watching behavior of thousands of people), not through qualitative or small-scale usability testing."

The “lifetime value” (LTV) of a relationship measures a customer’s value for the duration of his or her relationship with your firm. Most businesses need to look at the average length of these relationships, rates of repeat buyers versus new ones, sales volumes, referrals and success in upselling or cross-selling other products. If you sell a product that customers are not likely to buy twice, calculate only the profit margin for each sale.

“It’s not the picture, and it’s not the headline that determines the performance of the ad. It is their particular combination.”

To measure the impact of a landing page’s conversion rate on a company’s profits, experts work with three figures: variable cost percentage” (the “total of variable costs on an incremental sale as a percentage of revenue”), conversion improvement percentage (has the new landing page generated more conversions?) and annual revenue only from Web-based sales.

Knowing Your Target Audience

As you work to understand your market, you’ll be surprised by what you learn. Just be open to whatever comes. Begin by figuring out the “five Ws” (who, what, when, where and why) as they apply to your market and Web site. Your Web logs will tell you volumes about your visitors, including which browsers they use, what pages they view, how long they linger and if they’re first timers. Web analytics software gathers these tallies. Some programs let you export the data into your customer relationship management (CRM) software for further analysis and reporting.

“If you choose to ignore variable interactions, you have no one but yourself to blame for suboptimal results.”

Studying your audience’s personas and behavior gives you the insight you need to create Web pages that address their lifestyles and needs. Read up on personality assessment tools, such as Myers-Briggs and Keirsey-Bates, and learn about empathy-enhancing ideas, such as the Platinum Rule, which says, “Do unto others as they would have you do unto them.” This will help you understand how individual traits can affect people’s response to your site. Use interviews, observations and other interactive tools for “persona” creation, crafting a fictitious biography of a person who uses your site, the roles he or she takes on, and how he or she completes tasks.

“Trying to rationalize results after the test is a dangerous activity because it may cause you to inappropriately fixate on elements of your design that had nothing to do with the performance improvement.”

To get a “comprehensive view of who needs to accomplish what,” weigh user’s jobs, what they are trying to do and their decision-making processes, summed up in the acronym AIDA: “awareness (attention), interest, desire (decision) and action.” When relevant, add *S* for “satisfaction.” Use this information to ensure that your site designers have “thought through in detail how to guide the right people through the right activities in the correct order.” Understanding visitors’ decision-making methods helps you guide them to what they want. Help them make decisions smoothly by giving them good reasons to act. Don’t make people wait or overwhelm them with unimportant distractions or calls to action. Check the effectiveness of your banner ads or pop-ups; they don’t always work.

“There is a disconnect between how our brains evolved and how we are forced to use them on the Web.”

Your pages serve “browsers” who “have an unmet need,” “evaluators” who are comparing choices, “transactors” who are buying and “customers” who may buy again. Build these visitors’ confidence by offering guarantees, accepting returns, providing alternate ways to buy, having good security and keeping their personal data private. For credibility, use testimonials, white papers, case studies, client lists and reviews. Once a visitor decides to buy, stay out of the way. Be wary of adding unanticipated steps, like upselling or cross-selling options. Registration may turn visitors away, even though it gives them the future convenience of not re-entering data. They may not come back or they may prefer not to divulge their contact information. Scrutinize your forms. What do you really need to know? What questions can you drop to avoid creating barriers?

Tuning Up Your Site

Think about your visitors’ “roles” (for example, a matchmaking Web site might have “prospective,” “new” and “experienced members”), “tasks” (what visitors want to do on your page) and “decision-making processes” to identify problem areas in your landing pages. Use Web analytics to study visitors’ locations, technology choices, frequency, duration and degree of interaction with your site. Analyze where they came from, what internal and external search words they used, and which pages they visited most. Test usability by having consumers (not employees) comment and note surprises or problems as they work with your site. Consider hiring usability experts to give objective feedback; such data tends to spur employee action. Enlist opinions from focus groups, surveys and blogs.

“All the planning in the world will not save you.”

When tuning your Web site, consider the three parts of the brain and the three learning styles. The reptilian brain manages fight-or-flight situations by acting on instinct; it can’t learn from the past. The limbic system decides on likes and dislikes using emotions tied to need. The neocortex manages voluntary movements and sensory data. Landing pages appeal most to the limbic system. Visitors learn and recall information using different learning styles. “Visual” learners rely on cues like graphics, charts and videos. “Auditory” learners need sound and voice support. “Kinesthetic” learners are doers who like interactivity, problem solving and evidence.

“Start testing immediately. A little bit of something is better than a whole lot of nothing.”

Standard Web design practices rely on usability assessments, information architecture, accessibility, scannable content, structure, an appropriate tone that avoids jargon, and visual design that makes the most of page layout, color and graphics. Within this framework, identify online problem areas and tinker with your landing pages by checking:

- **“Breadth of impact”** – Which factors have the largest impact on your site.
- **“Most important conversion actions”** – Which consumer actions matter most?
- **“Biggest possible audience”** – Identify and test the pages that capture the most visitors and, thus, generate the most revenue.
- **“Most popular paths”** – Use Web analytics to determine where most visitors arrive and to track their flow. Remember some visitors are more valuable than others.

- **“Most prominent parts of a page”** – Prioritize the most crucial page elements.
- **“Granularity”** – Determine how detailed your changes need to be.
- **“Sweep”** – Can you adjust within today’s framework or do you need radical change?
- **“Coherency”** – Do each page’s elements unite in a comprehensive whole? Look at your combination of presentation, structure, headers, footers, navigation and all other elements. Be sure that you’re emphasizing the genuinely most important things and then give everything else less attention. Edit out lower-priority elements.
- **“Audience segmentation”** – Test the new site for all visitors or focus on a specific group, tracking traffic.
- **“Longevity”** – Will your changes have long-term effects?

It doesn’t matter how strongly a single variable performs by itself on a page; success requires a team of variables that work together. Identify “input variables” that you can tune and “output variables” that you can test. Build a recipe from those variables, concocting different combinations and options to compare with the baseline. The easiest way to conduct a test is to use “A-B split testing.” Provide two versions of the same page at the same time. Use identical variables except for a single difference you are deliberately testing. Multivariate testing, in contrast, looks at more variables to see which recipe works best.

Once your successful, tuned-up landing page goes live, be ready to collect data about its performance and continue making ongoing improvements.

About the Author

Tim Ash, who leads SiteTuners, speaks often at Internet marketing conferences.
