

Stats and Users: Lies, damned lies, statistics, and Internet statistics.

One of my first required Journalism classes in college was Statistics 101. A bland title for a boring subject - NOT. At least not once we got past the basic differences between a poll, a statistically valid survey, and a focus group.

That's when the real course began, and we began to learn "How to Lie With Statistics." More than, less than, mean and average stopped being bridge phrases that turned columns of numbers into grammatically correct English sentences and took on new lives as weapons we could wield to make the numbers fit our "story."

Fast forward to these many years, and I have to laugh at how the world has turned, and at how the numbers tail is wagging the Internet "dog." How we dearly love our online statistics. We're particularly fond of taking them whole and raw, in log form for the purists, or in colorful graphs and charts marking months, days or even hours. We pride ourselves on being able to justify spending million of dollars online every year to generate billions of dollars in online sales based solely on unemotional, statistical facts

All without reading any of those "damned" statistically unreliable bridge words.

Every action you take to build a successful business online can be statistically tracked, some even instantly. You can see how many people are visiting which page of your website at any given moment, how many are skipping through which search engine; how many are buying which widget, in which color, with which credit card.

It's fascinating, addicting, and ultimately...still much less than what you really need to know to succeed.

This time the reason is that the numbers themselves might be lying, or at least not telling the whole story. Looking at your website stats may tell you where a person enters or exits your site, but they cannot tell you why.

Here's another example. Consider the latest phenomenon of the web...MySpace. Do they really have 90 million users engaging in a frenzy of social networking?

- Yes, if you look just at the bottom line total of accounts that have been created.
- No, if you talk to a single user or two.

I once signed up for an account to track what my teenage children had posted on their MySpace blogs. When I returned to do the same several weeks later, I'd forgotten the password I made up the first time around. So I created another new account, again with no intention of using it.

My 12-year-old son said he's set up six or seven different accounts when that happened or when an account got deleted because he violated some rule or another (usually trying to eliminate the big ad that has to sit at the top of his page). Sometimes, he said he would

get so tangled up in trying to fix the code he was copying from this place or that to include this or that new tune or picture that it was just easier to start over.

And yes, you read that correctly. At age 12, my son is doing his own page designs. Serious designers don't have a lot to worry about quite yet, but he showed me the page he put up on Xanga (with more liberal advertising rules) to showcase his layouts and some of the requests and comments he's gotten from users.

So you tell me...what does that say about the state of the web today? Or the stats of the web today?

Has this new/old web 2.0 matured to the point that it is finally becoming what it was meant to be – a simple, yet powerful, communication tool that even a child can manipulate?

Does it mean that we should take all the numbers we read about the Internet with a grain of salt, dividing them by a probability factor to arrive at a more realistic expectations for ourselves?

Or could it mean that we need to step back and see if we can't weave the numbers and the stories of the people together to get a clearer picture of what is really happening?

And if so, wouldn't that make this Web 3D, not 2.0?