The Art of Interpreting Apartment Website Traffic Stats
OVERVIEW

Lots of third-party web traffic measurement tools calculate visits, usage, engagement and other types of data analysis for various consumer sites across the web—including apartment listing sites.

If you’re an apartment property owner or manager looking for the best site on which to advertise and reach the best prospects, you may see different apartment listing sites claiming to be “number one,” “most visited,” and so on. That can be confusing, and it’s because those claims can be based on a variety of different third-party sources. There are similarities and differences in the methodologies these various sources use to gather their competitive intelligence data. In this paper, we’ll explore four of those traffic measurement tools and their methodologies, so you can interpret site traffic claims better and make the best advertising decisions.
Why do web analytics matter?

The short answer: They tell you who’s visiting your website; whether they’re visiting once, or multiple times; what they’re doing when they get there; how much time they’re spending there; what they’re typically trying to find; and what they’re doing once they find it.

The long answer: That’s much more complicated. And if you’re a property owner or manager, the long answer may be the key to reaching and winning qualified renters faster and setting optimal rents. Analytics can tell you whether you’re getting the right eyes on your site to drive the right results, right now. Understanding the basis for various apartment listing site claims can help you make sure you’re using the right advertising platform to drive the visits, engagement or experience you want to achieve.

When deciding where to advertise your properties online, you have a lot of choices. Sites that claim to have the most traffic, the most visitors, or the most page views are attractive propositions. But those claims can be hard to verify. The data isn’t easily transparent. That’s why it pays to understand the methodologies and sources from which site traffic claims are based. Always take note of the asterisk – and which source is supporting those statements.
The data behind those “number one” claims is measured in different ways.

Understanding how apartment listing sites generate their traffic, visitor and page-view claims is both a science and an art. There are a number of websites wholly devoted to measuring site visits and traffic by analyzing and quantifying browsing activity, tagging and demographic data.

The analytic approach differs across most of the top third-party services; some use site-centric tagging while others use data sampling from their own panel of internet users. They then apply their own unique statistical analyses to deliver their metric reports. Each methodology offers its own strengths and weaknesses and as a result, comparisons differ from service to service—often dramatically.

If you advertise online, as most do, getting your properties in front of the most motivated, qualified prospects is the name of the game. When you understand the methods and focus of each source, you can gain a relatively confident view of apartment listing site performance—which can allow you to make the right advertising decisions.

Here, we’ll take a look at a few of the top internet listing site (ILS) traffic authorities, including comScore, Hitwise, Alexa and Compete.com. We’ll explore and compare the sites’ approach to reporting, in an effort to provide a comprehensive understanding of the methods used by each.
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comScore combines census-based site analytics data and panel-based audience measurement data to deliver a blended collection method that’s helpful in generating a fairly well-rounded view of search and user activity on apartment listing sites.

The site’s analytics engine includes a panel of two million global internet users, with individual reporting in 44 countries. Users on this panel have voluntarily installed software on their computers which reports internet browsing activity on an anonymized basis. The reporting is provided to comScore in exchange for certain benefits including security software, cloud storage, virus scanning and other incentives.

The data is not a random sample. Once the panel measurements are collected, they are adjusted to reflect the demographic profile of the countries in which the panelists live. These demographic measurements are generally based on national censuses, though in some cases comScore does its own demographic surveys.

By analyzing the panel’s browsing data and then layering on key demographic data such as geography, income and age, comScore provides comprehensive estimates of overall traffic statistics for each measured site.

In addition, comScore offers companies the option to install tags and applications that permit comScore to directly measure their traffic. By combining this census, or site-centric, data, along with the information gathered from their panel of users, comScore arrives at their traffic data and demographic results. This “hybrid” approach allows comScore to avoid some of the potential biases that come from using data extracted exclusively from a group of volunteers.
Compete utilizes data from millions of US-based users, derived from a combination of proprietary panels and internet service provider and application service provider partners. These multiple sources are harmonized into a single panel, and Compete then uses algorithms and advanced analytic techniques to normalize the data against the population as a whole.

One important thing to note about Compete’s data collection methodology: they do not explicitly separate at-home and at-work users. This may skew Compete’s data slightly. In terms of apartment listing sites in particular, it means there may be a lack of data representing those who search for apartments while at work.

Compete measures the sites visited by its panel each month and weighs user demographics to approximate overall traffic. The large size of its panel provides a level of granularity that’s helpful in uncovering deep consumer behavioral insights.

Additionally, Compete collects its panel members’ clickstream data—essentially, a trail of digital breadcrumbs that illustrates what web pages they’ve visited previously—to better understand online behaviors.
Hitwise collects data from a panel of 10 million internet users in the United States, which includes 3.5 million mobile devices. The panel represents a cross-section of the online population in an effort to ensure the dataset is representative of all online users, including those who access the internet via mobile devices. The sample provides representative consumer intelligence that allows Hitwise to report on and determine trends across multiple sites and search variations.

Hitwise sources data from a wide range of internet user panels with different types of audiences, and then uses site-centric data from individual websites and third-party data to calibrate and validate the samples.

Internet user panels consist of those who agree to have their internet usage anonymously monitored through various software programs or tools. These applications collect web-based behavioral information at a device level that is used to represent how individual consumers behave online. They consist of multiple, large, privacy-compliant, passively tracked panels, contributing desktop/PC and mobile device internet behavioral data.
Alexa ranks sites based primarily on tracking a sample set of internet traffic, i.e., users of the Amazon Alexa toolbar on Internet Explorer, Firefox and Google Chrome web browsers. The Alexa Toolbar includes a popup blocker, a search box, links to Amazon.com and the Alexa homepage, and the Alexa ranking of the site that the user is visiting.

Alexa’s traffic estimates are based on data from its global traffic panel, which is a sample of millions of internet users using one of over 25,000 different browser extensions. In addition, traffic data is collected from direct sources in the form of sites that have chosen to install the Alexa script and certify their metrics (site owners can choose to keep their certified metrics private).

Alexa’s global traffic ranking system measures how a specified website has performed relative to all other sites on the web over the past three months. The rank is calculated using a proprietary methodology that combines a site’s estimated average of daily unique visitors and its estimated number of page views. Alexa provides a similar country-specific ranking.
Conclusion and Insights

As a property owner or manager, your main goal is getting qualified renters quickly, at the best listing rates. If you advertise online, as most do, that means getting your apartments or communities in front of the most motivated and qualified prospects with confidence.

When you’re considering which apartment listing site is the best for advertising your properties, it’s important to understand the claims those sites make in terms of how widely used, well visited, or highly ranked they are. That begins with understanding both the meaning of the terminology used in the claims, and extends to understanding the methodologies used by the sources themselves.

As we’ve seen, traffic analysis authorities leverage different methods and data sets to analyze the performance of various sites. Some derive their statistics through specifically weighted sets of data. Some leverage a combination of statistics provided by an established user panel as well as additional traffic data. Some incorporate demographic and clickstream analysis. The conclusion gained here is not whether one set of results is more accurate than another, or whether one specific measurement approach is "right"—it’s about understanding the methodology that was used in aggregating the results.

In the case of web traffic analysis, one thing you can always trust is that results will vary. The best way to extract a true understanding of site performance is to be sure you compare apples to apples. When interpreting traffic claims from apartment listing websites, look closely to confirm they’re using the same source for their own traffic and their competitors'. Then, you can make advertising decisions that drive the best traffic, leads and business to your door.
As a property owner or manager, your main goal is getting qualified renters quickly, at the best listing rates. If you advertise online, as most do, that means getting your apartments or communities in front of the most motivated and qualified prospects with confidence.