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ARTICLE  
SEARCH

[  ]

[ALL ]

[GO]

Advanced  
Search »

Destination Feature

Hawaii

News Index

Agent Issues

Airlines

Cruise

Business & Government

Travel

Tour Operators &

Wholesalers

The Web

Hotels & Resorts

Destinations

Government Affairs

Travel Technology

Cars, Buses & Rail

HOME

NEWS

 Change travel date

DESTINATIONS

BUZZ

RESEARCH

FORUM

SEMINARS

WEBINARS

SPONSORED SERVICES

EVENTS

CLASSIFIEDS

REGISTER

 Hotel & Travel index  
hotelandtravelindex.com

 OHG  
OFFICIAL HOTEL GUIDE

[  ]

[By Hotel Name ]

[GO]

## THE WEB

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### What cruise sites get the most traffic? (10/09/2007)

*The results may surprise you*

By Johanna Jainchill

If Nielsen/NetRatings' data are to be believed, Imperial Majesty's Web site, which details the voyages of the cruise line's only ship, got more hits than the sites of Norwegian Cruise Line, Holland America Line or Celebrity Cruises.

In terms of Web traffic it came in fourth, behind three industry giants: Royal Caribbean International, Carnival Cruise Lines and Princess Cruises.

As the Internet increasingly becomes the most important global information medium, the accuracy of Web traffic rankings becomes more important to any business with a Web site.

So is Imperial Majesty wildly popular or do the top cruise lines need to hone their Web strategies?

"Imperial might be much more well versed at the search engine work that they do," said P.J. Cammarata, managing partner of [ThinkBigSites.com](#), a Web site optimization firm. "They know what they're doing. Something about this site is getting a lot of hits."

The problem is that the ratings differ significantly depending on which ratings service you check. Moreover, companies aggressively manage traffic flowing to and through their Web sites to optimize their Web statistics.

For example, Cruise.com topped the results of a Sept. 25 search for "cruise" on Google, followed by the large cruise lines: Carnival, Royal Caribbean, Princess and NCL. But NCL didn't even make Nielsen/NetRatings' top five.

That's because how Web sites get ranked is a science in itself that differs depending on the ranking method.

#### Top 15 most visited cruise sites, week ending Sept. 29

VacationsToGo: 19.07%  
Carnival Cruise Lines: 11.79%  
Royal Caribbean International: 9%  
Princess Cruises: 5.24%  
Norwegian Cruise Line: 3.97%  
Cruise Critic message board: 3.42%  
Cruise Critic: 3.34%  
Cruises Only: 2.65%  
Travelzoo Cruises: 2.63%  
Cruise.com: 2.24%  
Carnival.com FunPass: 2.19%  
Holland America: 2.15%  
Celebrity Cruises: 2.14%  
Cruise Deals.com: 1.56%  
Disney Cruise Line: 1.54%

Source: *Hitwise*

*The data in this chart are based on U.S. market share vvisits, which is the percentage of online traffic to the domain or category, from a sample of 10 million U.S. Internet users*



Companies have always used a variety of methods to measure a Web site's traffic. Some count hits, which are the number of visits made to any page on a site. Then there is the unique visitors measurement, which counts a visitor to a Web site by recording the unique Internet address of the user's computer. Even unique visitors can be counted in different ways.

"Whoever is doing the ranking has to make their own judgment call," said Pauline Connelly, owner of Pauline Connelly Web Design and e-Marketing service in Pittsburgh. "They make rules about what's considered a unique visit. If I'm looking at a travel site, and then 20 minutes later I look at it again, is that a unique visit? That's up to the different tracking companies."

Nielsen/NetRatings said that it measured "unique audience" visits and counted a unique visitor as anyone who goes to a Web site once in a month.

Google's Web page ranking system is a college course in algorithms. The company said it used the Internet's link structure as an indicator of an individual page's value. The more a page is linked to from other sites, the more valuable it is in Google's ranking.

Google also analyzes the pages that link to the page being measured. Links from more valuable pages are weighted more heavily.

"All search engines crave one thing and one thing only: relevant, keyword-rich, consistent and current content. Period," Cammarata said.

"They want you to be able to go to Google when you are searching for something and find it on the first page. They don't want you to get frustrated and back out of Google and go to Yahoo."

Cammarata's company uses a proprietary blog-marketing and social-networking linking method to get its clients onto the first page of a search engine's results.

Rankings clearly can be manipulated. Until it was fixed last October, any Web user who typed the words "miserable failure" into Google's search engine would discover that the most popular result was President George Bush's White House biography.

Still, many people in the Web game said that while rankings may include an anomaly, like Imperial Cruise Line, the basic rankings should be consistent.

While diverse criteria employed by ranking services can make the numbers vary, "relative positioning shouldn't change that much," said Connelly.

Connelly, who has been involved in Internet enterprises since 1999, now helps clients drive business to their Web sites. She noted that whichever way it was measured, traffic does not necessarily correspond to number of sales. That depends on a conversion rate, or the ratio of a Web site's visits to the number of times visitors actually do what the Web site wants them to do. The conversion could be viewing an ad, making a purchase, acquiring product information or calling the company.

An important measure of a Web site's effectiveness, or ineffectiveness, is the bounce rate.

"If someone looks at it and goes right off of it, that gives the site a high

bounce rate," Connelly said. "We always like to see people spend time on the Web site."

A closer look at Nielsen/NetRatings' data reveals that an asterisk should be placed next to Imperial Majesty's high ranking: The average user spent only 47 seconds on its Web site.

Visitors to Princess.com, No.3 on the chart, spent about 44 minutes on its Web site. And visitors to HollandAmerica.com, which was No. 5 on the chart, after Imperial Majesty, spent 12 minutes on the Web site. So Imperial Majesty could be driving people to its site, but its conversion rate is likely very low.

Hitwise, a company that compiles data on online usage and search behavior from a sample of 10 million U.S. Internet users, has been collecting weekly data for Travel Weekly on the top travel and cruise line Web sites since March of this year. *(Its latest rankings appear in the chart at right.)*

Hitwise partners with Internet service providers to collect the data, giving it what the company describes as the largest and most representative sample in the U.S.

In these reports, Hitwise gathered the top Web sites in the travel-cruises category, which includes Web sites of cruise operators, agencies with a focus on cruise vacations and Web sites that offer information on cruises.

Travel sellers fare well in these listings, with VacationsToGo.com consistently topping the list. Cruises Only and Cruise.com are usually in the top 10, while online giants Travelocity and Expedia don't even make the top 20.

In May, Orbitz came in at No. 14 and Hotwire at No. 20, but this month's report showed they had been bumped from the list, replaced by new Web sites like All Seasons Travel. Cruise Critic, the online cruise review Web site, and its message boards each took top 10 slots, as well.

In these reports, the cruise lines' Web sites consistently rank commensurately with their size: Carnival, Royal Caribbean and Princess take the top three cruise slots. Here, in contrast to Nielsen/NetRatings, NCL ranks much higher than Holland America and Celebrity, neither of which cracks the top 10.

The two-ship Disney Cruise Line always makes the Hitwise chart, sometimes ahead of Celebrity, indicating that it likely gets traction from the uber-branding of its parent company.

Hitwise's results remained relatively consistent until the week of May 19, when, for the first time, the one-ship Imperial Majesty Cruise Line showed up at No. 15, beating Celebrity, Disney, Orbitz and Hotwire.

Imperial Majesty might not be a big player in the cruise line sector, but it has clearly learned to play the Internet game.

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## Glossary

**Bounce rate:** The percentage of Web site visitors who visit a site and exit, usually

quickly, without accessing any further pages of the Web site.

**Conversion rate:** The ratio of visits made to a Web site with any actions taken on that site that would be considered a conversion of what the Web site wants people to do. A site's conversion might be a sale, acquiring further information or entering information.

**Hit:** A visit to a Web page.

**IP (Internet Protocol) address:** A computer's identifier on the Internet.

**Traffic:** An aggregate of the number of visitors to a Web site, based on hits, page views and other measurements.

**Unique visitor:** A visitor to a Web site as recorded by the unique IP address of that visitor. Unique visitors can be counted in different ways. For example, an IP address might be counted one time during a certain period, even if it visited a site 500 times during that period.

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