ComMetrics

Benchmark smarter. Perform better.

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Just the facts

Title	**Why benchmark social media?** **=> ComMetrics eBook series #2010-01**
Author	Urs E. Gattiker – benchmark your blog(s) at My.ComMetrics.com – powered by CyTRAP Labs
Short description	This report focuses on defining the purpose of a company's social media activities. Major obstacles are identified and possible venues for resolution are outlined. Tips and mini case studies are used to further facilitate application of the discussed concepts in practice.
Version number	2010-03-15 ComMetrics eBook series #2010-01

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ComMetrics eBook series

The ComMetrics eBook series helps readers benchmark smarter to improve performance. Topics and issues may range from risk management and social media monitoring to blog benchmarking.

> *It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.*
> – Charles Darwin

An important focus is to provide insights that empower readers to develop customized approaches that suit their needs. In turn, these insights can be applied in for-profit as well as not-for-profit organizations. It provides the framework to make any necessary adjustments to consider important organizational context issues (e.g., industry, resources and other key parameters) that affect one's options.

This book is part of the section on **benchmark essentials**, which includes

- #2010-01 – Why benchmark social media?
- #2010-02 – What is your social media mission?
- #2010-03 – Getting solution-driven answers
- #2010-04 – Focusing on quality traffic with social media
- #2010-05 – How it all makes your data matter

*You can **get these books for FREE** by registering yourself at My.ComMetrics.com -* ***benchmark your blog*** *=> improve performance.*

These days, even the most successful organizations face new and unexpected challenges. Traditional approaches to marketing and customer relations that worked in the past are no longer sufficient to meet the demands of a changing marketplace.

The ComMetrics eBook series provides the latest insights, strategies, and tools needed to navigate uncertain times and position your company for the next evolution of social media and the Internet.

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What is the issue?

This ComMetrics eBook on **benchmark essentials**[1] (#2010-01 – Why benchmark social media?) explains why you should even worry about tracking things.

In 2008, 2009 and early 2010, consumer confidence in corporations and their leaders steadily declined. The concept of ***too big to fail*** resulted in government bailouts for financial institutions that will be paid for by taxpayers for some time to come.

During an economic downturn, budgets are tight and resources must be spent carefully to assure your company's survival and businesses must meet or exceed customers' expectations. Thus, engaging with clients is critical to building and maintaining relationships. As importantly, understanding customers' needs and problems to provide the right products or services is vital.

Increasingly, customers are using social media in various forms. Smaller businesses may resist this trend by saying, "**This is not a priority for us right now; we just do not have the time**."

However, that may be said in conjunction with, "**Our website never worked that well and did not bring us any business… What could social media possibly do for us**?"

This is unfortunate because using social media effectively requires the company and its employees to go through a learning process. Those who start earlier are more likely to reap the rewards and find themselves further along the learning curve. This means reaping the rewards first while leaving latecomers to pick up the pieces.

These trends indicate that companies have to meet customers on their turf, and that requires a different kind of communication.

Businesses, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), must gain a better understanding of customers' needs, wants and concerns by continually gathering, analyzing and acting on customer feedback. This ensures that client needs are incorporated into the design of customer experiences and the company's products and services.

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[1] You can receive the ComMetrics paper series within 48 hours by registering yourself at My.ComMetrics.com. #2010-02 will be emailed to you once you begin benchmarking your blog using our software, at no cost to you.

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Chapter 1: What is the purpose of benchmarking

In **computing**, benchmarking means running a number of standard tests and trials to assess how software or hardware functions in comparison to others of a similar kind.

In **management**, benchmarking usually describes an organization's evaluation of various processes in relation to best practice. This is usually done within a company's own sector.

In **social media,** benchmarking means comparing one's own efforts (e.g., Twitter, Facebook or a corporate blog) to those of other companies from your own or other industries. For instance, primary competitors are a great start because they may be more innovative or have other interesting approaches to engaging clients with the help of social media.

Competitors are usually very reluctant to provide a wealth of factual information that enables a game of 'catch-up'. Fortunately, this is not much of an issue with social media, as we explain below.

If you are part of a larger organization, you can also benchmark against similar activities within other divisions.

Finally, it is also important to compare oneself to world-class performers, companies that blazed a trail and have been known to use social media in creative ways to support corporate strategy and the bottom line. For instance, if your CEO blogs he or she may want to compare their blog against Jonathan Schwartz's (CEO of Sun Microsystems). Manufacturing plants wondering how best to blog using employees from various divisions can look to Daimler's blog (in German).[2]

Defining and describing benchmarking in more detail

A daily challenge is people's different interpretations of terminology, resulting in confusion, conflicts and misunderstandings that waste valuable time and resources. So let us clarify a few things and outline how we see them.

Benchmarking is the process of **comparing business processes and performance metrics**, including

- cost,
- cycle time,
- productivity, and
- quality

to another data point or company widely considered an industry standard, benchmark or best practice.

Essentially, **benchmarking provides a snapshot of your business' performance** and **helps you understand your position in relation to a particular standard**.

[2] Find a range of high-performance blogs by CEOs and/or their corporations, including B2B, by viewing the FT ComMetrics Blog Index => FTindex.ComMetrics.com

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The result is often a case study and triggers changes to achieve improvement.

History calling

Historically, **shoemakers used benchmarking to measure people's feet**, marking out the pattern for a shoe by placing someone's foot on a 'bench'. Today, benchmarking is most used to measure performance using a specific indicator (cost per unit of measure, productivity per unit of measure, cycle time of X per unit of measure or defects per unit of measure), resulting in a metric of performance that is then compared to others.

Some refer to the term as *best practice benchmarking* or *process benchmarking*. This encompasses a strategic procedure used to evaluate various parts of processes used in comparison to best practice firms. For instance, the FT ComMetrics Blog Index takes the FT Global 500 list of public companies and ranks their corporate blogs. Here, size is used as a criterion for defining relevant peer groups for blog comparison.

In turn, this process and analysis allows a company to make improvements or adapt specific best practices, usually with the aim of increasing some aspect of performance.

Works best

Benchmarking is most effective if treated as a continuous process through which organizations continually seek to improve their practices in various processes. An example is better customer engagement through more effective use of social media, such as Facebook and corporate blogs.

Context makes data relevant

Without context, it is rather difficult to comprehend a statistic or show the relevance of numbers. Accordingly, context is key and can be described as

- explaining the **circumstances** under which an event occurred, and
- linking an **event** to other things people relate to, thereby
- **making data meaningful to your audience** (e.g., your boss).

To illustrate, a blog may see a spike in traffic because one particular post on your company's blog got tweeted about by many users or linked to by a blog with lots of traffic (e.g., Mashable or TechCrunch). Another example is a television interview with your CEO or a write-up in a national daily, such as *Corriere della Sera* or the New York Times, that includes a link to their blog.

These **events or circumstances** may be the explanation needed to understand the surge in traffic. However, maintaining these traffic levels after the initial three-day traffic spike might be difficult, if not unrealistic.

Similarly, traffic might be reduced during a holiday period because people simply do not use the Internet as much as they seem to at work. [3]

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[3] Read more about context at HowTo.ComMetrics.com/?page_id=105.

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In short, presenting benchmark data without putting it in context and making it meaningful to your audience is not helpful. Instead, try to provide context to make benchmark data more meaningful to your audience, including superiors.

Mini case study – context and benchmarking

Imagine you are writing a proposal for the budget committee to **get more funding for your corporate blog**. In this case, context and meaning are critical:

> **The assertion**: Many organizations have corporate blogs.
>
> **The naked statistic**: It is estimated that 18.7 percent of companies will have corporate blogs by 2011.
>
> **Data in context**: It is estimated that 18.7 percent of companies in the US will have a corporate blog by the end of 2010. That's about one of every five Fortune 500 firms and one out of every three self-employed citizens.
>
> **Data in context with audience-relevance**: It is estimated that 18.7 percent of companies in the US will have a corporate blog by the end of 2010. That's about one of every five Fortune 500 firms and one out of every three self-employed citizens, who **comprise about 30 percent of the US workforce**. By the end of 2010, it is expected that **five of our 10 biggest competitors will have one or more corporate blogs**.

All of the above is important, but half of your biggest competitors blogging is probably the most important, since that fact may be what convinces management to increase your funding. It's the final clincher to convince somebody to join the party or be left behind. And as we all know, no one wants to eat their competitors' dust.

Careful – most measures are imperfect

Sometimes, data shown by a client or colleague regarding web or blog traffic shows cracks under the surface when examining the details. For instance, the **Alexa** service is sometimes used to show your traffic compared to others. One of our clients needed that limited data put in context.

When business people visit your website during working hours, Alexa is unlikely to register those hits because web browsers on business computers do not contain the Alexa toolbar.

However, people may install the Alexa toolbar on their home computers, ensuring their web visits are recorded by Alexa when surfing from home.[4]

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[4] More about this issue here: ComMetrics.com/articles/a-usage-varies-enormously-and-alexacom-may-not-be-right/

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If we put Alexa in context, it is obvious that business users and their browsing habits are hugely under-represented. **Visiting a website without the toolbar installed means Alexa does not count your visit**.

Google Analytics also fails to register all data exactly if the user's browser does not accept cookies. Increasingly, corporate users with Internet Explorer or Firefox have options that prevent cookie execution. Another concern is that neither server-based statistics programs nor Google Analytics can tell you much about individuals from a large organization in one location who all access the Internet from the same IP address, except that address.

We address this issue of data inaccuracy or bias later in the ComMetrics eBook series (#2010-05 – How it all makes your data matter, see Chapter 22).

The above illustrates that one should not expect miracles from data and, most importantly, one must understand what its limitations are. In turn, one can use the benchmark information to decide which actions should be taken to improve in the future.

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Chapter 2: How KPIs can do better for your blog

In Chapter 1 we defined benchmarking and explained its first use. We also pointed out that putting benchmarking data in context and making it relevant to your audience is an important step. Of course, regularly reporting your progress is part of strategic management. Unless we periodically verify whether we are still on track, we cannot know if we will reach our final destination.

Chapter 2 builds on the above while focusing on Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). KPIs help link our social media activities with strategic objectives and are useful if they coincide with your strategy, while helping improve blogging performance.

Metrics that address issues of time, quality, cost, and customer satisfaction seem to be generic across companies.

To illustrate how critical KPIs are, one of our esteemed clients proudly presented us with a list of objectives the team had come up with for their company blog.

These objectives included such things as making your blog as good as possible, and always reporting fairly.

But the difficulty with these kinds of performance benchmarks is that they are hard to measure, unless we re-formulate them with more detail.

> Common Mistake
>
> Discussing the Return on Investment (ROI) of social media.
>
> Instead, focus on operators and the how and why social media activities can help improve financial outcomes.

Some even say **unless your blog affects your bottom line it is a waste of resources**.

This means what is not measured is very hard to quantify and use to improve your funding. We also discuss how KPIs can help show how social media marketing could affect operators such as customer satisfaction, sales leads generation and more. In turn, these operators influence sales, revenues, and therefore the profitability of the enterprise.

Developing KPIs: operating drivers and financial outcomes

Operating drivers and financial outcomes are certainly not the same but they are joined at the hip. Those concerned with the bottom line or fiscal outcomes will appreciate using KPIs to assess social media's impact.

The reason why KPIs are so critical is that **what is measured is managed** and, conversely, **what is not measured merits little or no attention**. KPIs measure critical activities such as micro-blogging on Twitter or running your blog. Hence, **unless a blog's progress and**

performance are measured, top management will give it little attention, making proving how critical your activities are for the company even more difficult.[5]

The company's vision must be supported by its strategy. The latter is in turn made operational by the objectives set for activities such as using LinkedIn or blogging. When it comes to blogging we must identify success factors (i.e. what makes a blog a success or a failure) and then develop the metrics or KPIs that help assess performance.

The KPIs of strategic drivers must be aligned with the corporate vision and goal of the enterprise. If the **strategic driver is to improve customer service and sales**, **the KPIs must reflect that**. The point is to uncover any possible correlation between operating drivers and financial outcomes.

Insofar as they affect sales, customers at a restaurant who cannot be seated or must be turned away are an operating driver and any way to ease this overflow is critical. Accordingly, implementing a reservation system and hopefully convincing some of the regulars to come shortly prior to or after the restaurant's busiest times will allow the restaurant to turn away fewer clients. It may also mean that fewer clients are frustrated by waiting or disappointing food.

Here, the blog becomes part of a company's marketing funnel.[6] So if customers see value in the content published on the blog, they might ultimately end up taking your software for a test drive (see My.ComMetrics.com). Besides a blog that serves existing and potential clients, a specific product-related blog or website can also serve current clients by offering content that improves product use and better solves their problems. In turn, the blog helps clients get more out of your product.

To illustrate, if you have purchased a Kenwood appliance, cooking and baking recipes might stir interest. Today, time is critical to most people. Hence, if a blog post not only outlines a

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[5] The same applies to a personal weblog. Unless you set objectives, measure progress and take action you cannot know whether you are doing your best. In fact, you might use your time better by doing something else, but you cannot know unless you benchmark, which enables you to improve.

[6] This is a buzzword that refers to the process of gathering new prospects, converting them to clients, and keeping them by continually providing additional value. For example, try to use the blog to get as many interested readers as possible and convert them to subscribers. Next, they become clients by trying out your software, service or product. If the trial phase is successful, they will become lifelong customers. Of course, this is not easy. Nevertheless, some online marketers use unjust or unethical schemes and still get many users to become paying clients.

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recipe but explains how the appliance can be used to save precious time preparing dinner before your kids get home, almost certainly a few clients will find this information useful.

3 tips for best practice to implementing better KPIs

1. **No more than five KPIs**: KPIs can be distracting if people check performance according to KPIs several times a day instead of doing their job. In fact, it might be best to **report only three KPIs to management**.
2. **KPIs must be specific**: Unless KPIs are specific (timeframe, cost, who is responsible, what is considered acceptable performance = define!), a KPI is open to interpretation, possibly causing more extensive discussion or confusion than necessary.
3. **KPIs must result in action**: KPI reporting must become the foundation of decision-making, whereby metrics result in action. If KPI reporting does not get the company to take action, why use it?

We will address the actionable issue in more detail in the next chapter.

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Chapter 3: Making metrics actionable and insightful

In the previous chapter we outlined issues regarding the importance of KPIs and how these are linked to operating drivers. Moreover, unless these efforts result in the formulation and specification of actionable KPIs, these seem of little use.

Indeed, **operating metrics represent a company's blood pressure and weight**. Focus on the right ones, measure them regularly, and **if your operating metrics and KPIs are out of whack, do something before your company has a heart attack**.

What managers need

The first step to making your blog reports and KPIs more actionable is integrating these data with other sources, including operational and contact data.

If you place your blog data within the context of contact and key data that describes what your company does for its customers, it instantly becomes more relevant and less contradictory. Remember, your client regularly receives the latter two data streams so your report will be compared to that. If you explain the context and any contradictions, **you look smarter and your report will not be discounted**.

Of course, you must **set objectives** so you can **monitor progress** and take the necessary steps if you drift off-course and cannot reach your target on time. Here's how:

- get 4 percent more traffic each month through organic search to double traffic in about 18 months (= **Acquisition**),
- get visitors to read your blog post(s) (= **Engagement**),
- get 2 percent of these visitors/readers to register themselves for a trial of your product, such as My.ComMetrics.com – be careful not to set unrealistic targets (= **Conversion**), and
- get visitors to come back and sign up regular posts, thereby increasing email/RSS readership by 80 percent in 18 months, while keeping your current readership on board (= **Retention**).

We outlined preliminary KPIs for each of these areas and it is important that each tentative KPI results in action points. If one cannot find actions or remedies that could improve KPI numbers, then chances are it is NOT a KPI (i.e. not actionable).

The final list of KPIs you may choose could include some measures based on industry standards and some that are specific to your website, blog or company. The latter cannot be found in a report or book but must be your own.

From there, you must develop composite or aggregate KPIs to provide management with a broader view.

Avoiding robotics

For KPIs to be effective for your improvement efforts, you must see both dimensions:

1. data obtained will trigger a response, thereby **making the KPI actionable**, and
2. the degree to which the KPI **provides further insights.**

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Accordingly, KPIs are helpful if they are used for more in-depth analysis to figure out the why. In turn, we get a better feel of why changes can and will work. Reporting applies only to a single scenario. **Unless we can understand why things fail or work, we have learned nothing of use**.

Therefore, comprehensive KPIs offer data that may result in a response and, as importantly, provide further understanding and insight by delving a bit deeper to get the answers to why and how.

3 tips for developing actionable KPIs

1. **Focus on what is required**: Like any functional analysis, your first focus must be on what is required before sketching out the implementation of KPIs.
2. **Suggest specific actions**: Provide information about the KPIs and suggest an interpretation. In case of underperformance, a suggested solution must be appended to the report that is in context. This helps decision-makers not have to start with a blank sheet of paper concerning action plans and fixes.
3. **Spend 3 to 7 percent on measurement:** We suggest staying at the low end of this range. Collecting, analyzing and interpreting data should not take any more of available resources, including work hours. Actual expenditures may not be an issue, but time spent figuring things out can quickly skyrocket.

Common Mistake

Busily responding to KPIs without **first digging deeper to gain a complete understanding**.

Please investigate: Why did traffic increase? Can this pattern be maintained and if so, how?

Nokia offers a great example for managing the above, though complete comprehension takes some time.[7]

Mini case study

A company recently noticed that its blog traffic had increased by 25 to 35 percent every month for several months and did not understand why and how it happened.

The data revealed that organic-search traffic had not improved over the last few months, nor had their ComMetrics Footprint (HowTo.ComMetrics.com/influence/size/). However, several posts were highly noted on Digg.com and users with large followings had given posts a thumb up on StumbleUpon. This resulted in a growth in traffic but we explained why such drive-by traffic was of little value to the company.[8]

This case illustrates that just looking at a KPI does not explain growth and whether it will continue.

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[7] From Jim Novo, find out more about why automatic KPI reporting is dangerous while figuring out the why is key: http://blog.jimnovo.com/2007/02/07/reporting-analysis/

[8] More about why such traffic might be of limited use: ComMetrics.com/articles/google-diggcom-and-twitter-why-such-drive-by-traffic-is-of-little-value/

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However, some digging revealed that traffic would likely drop in a couple of months. In turn, efforts to improve visitors through organic searches (see Chapter 2) continued at full speed to reach targets a few months down the road.

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Chapter 4: What tools to use

In Chapter 1 we defined benchmarking and how it applies to social media, while Chapter 2 focused on developing KPIs and Chapter 3 discussed why KPI data with depth is critical to gaining more insight into what happened and why.

What tools to use to collect data needed to measure KPIs and report to management is the focus of Chapter 4.

First, it is clear that everybody has a preferred set of tools, but there are so many that choosing the best is difficult. To get you started we invite you to sign up with Xing (European equivalent of LinkedIn) and join our Social Media Measurement group. Among other resources, you will find white papers and a list of free tools.[9]

Besides the above, we tell people they should keep two important things in mind before embarking on social media benchmarking:

- use no more than three tools for starters, and
- never spend more than 15 minutes viewing data every work day.

There are plenty of free tools to be found, some of which we mention below.

Web-based software as a service (SaaS) versus software

It is always smart to have a server-side web analytics tool installed. A great one that will provide you with much information is Awstats.org.[10]

Nevertheless, while installing Awststats.org on one of the servers to collect data for your blog might be easy in smaller companies, things get more complex for larger companies. One of our corporate clients recently asked:

> *Is there a tool I could use that does not require me to have anything installed on our servers? If I have to ask corporate IT to install anything, including Awstats (http://awstats.org), it will cost me about €600 each year. Of course, Awstats is free, but our corporate IT services charge us for having an open source or commercial software installed on their systems.*

One way to solve this issue is to use Google Analytics. The program issues a unique code that must be entered on every page or post.

[9] After you join Xing, join our group to see what you have missed so far: http://bit.ly/1Ac20f

[10] People increasingly disallow cookies, resulting in much traffic getting missed by programs like Comscore and Google Analytics: ComMetrics.com/articles/consumer-profiling/

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A WordPress plugin is available that solves this issue by automatically inserting the Google Analytics code for your blog on each page and post.[11] Since this occurs in the background, no work is required.

In the case of our client, their corporate IT services did not have to install or maintain anything, allowing my client to save €600. This helped achieve quick approval from the Vice-President of Communications.

Common Mistake

Believing that one needs more analytics tools than one uses already.

Unless one knows what to measure and why, the stream of data means you feel like looking for a needle in the haystack.

How to benchmark your blog

We offer a tool specifically designed to benchmark blogs. Since it is web-based software, installing or updating software is unnecessary. My.ComMetrics (My.ComMetrics.com) asks you to register yourself and then claim your blog, after which the system tracks your blog.

Again, except when you enter a code in the latest blogpost to claim a blog and our crawler checks before you can remove it again, nothing happens on your blog. Corporate IT is not really involved, since you manage the tool online and personally watch the trends.

There are a few tools that promise to monitor sentiment regarding your company's name(s) or brand(s). While some of these may work for English-language blogs, most fail miserably.[12]

3 tips to jump-start your benchmarking

1. **Why do tomorrow what you can do today**: Whatever you want to use to help you measure (e.g., Google Analytics, My.ComMetrics, etc.), start working with that tool today. Do whatever is necessary to start tracking your website or blog right away. You cannot improve performance or benchmark properly unless you watch trends.
2. **Analysis products rarely tell you what to do or how to do it**: To figure out what to do and how to do it, you must keep yourself updated on what is happening regarding measurement in the blogosphere and social media in general (see also previous chapters). A good starting point is ComMetrics.com and our social media monitoring group on Xing (www.xing.com/net/smmetrics).
3. **Never make the same mistake twice**: Unless you start benchmarking now you cannot make mistakes, but only mistakes allow you to learn and improve your performance. Just try not to make the same mistakes more than once. To start with, make sure that your blog meets all of these basic rules. If not, please fix the problem right away: HowTo.ComMetrics.com/articles/blog-metrics-1/

[11] Plugin written by Joost de Valk: yoast.com/wordpress/google-analytics/#utm_source=wordpress&utm_medium=plugin&utm_campaign=google-analytics-for-wordpress

[12] Sentiment analysis for online text => ComMetrics.com/articles/fails-validity-test/

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Chapter 5: Conclusion

Asking about tangible business outcomes resulting from blogging is common in business circles, since company leaders want to know, “What are we getting for the money that we are spending on our blogging program and social media initiatives? What impact is it having on our customers? How is it helping us improve customer service and increasing sales?”

Of course, the above is based on the truism that **you cannot manage what you do not measure**.

The previous four chapters outlined how benchmarking can help you use social media, in this case a blog, more effectively. To begin with, we defined benchmarking and explained how KPIs can be developed. We also discussed why looking at the metric without understanding it could be a serious mistake. Finally, in Chapter 4 we discussed possible tools to gather data relatively easily.

Similar to reaching a trailhead for a mountain hike using public transport, one must have a goal (climbing mountain A = destination). But you also need to know where to board the train, as well as where to disembark and start hiking. Finally, one must budget available resources for a successful trip, such as paying for food and the train and ensuring you arrive home at the desired time.

The above illustrates what kinds of things are needed to embark on a benchmarking program. Without the proper objectives, timeframe and allocated resources (e.g., making sure daily tasks are completed while remembering your blog), benchmarking cannot work.

While some people may argue that we need to do more about benchmarking using web analytics and proper statistics, in most cases, there is plenty of interesting data available. Unfortunately, people often lack the know-how, time and/or skill to distill and interpret the data to get the information they need.

The next book in the ComMetrics eBook series (#2010-02 - What is your social media mission?) will address further practical issues. Of particular interest will be your company’s social media purpose, its value proposition, the context within which this must be accomplished, as well as the requirements for effective social media benchmarking.

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About ComMetrics

ComMetrics, a division of CyTRAP Labs GmbH, is an industry leader in the analysis of corporate blogs in Europe, creating web-based software used by social media experts, in-house professionals and advertising agencies helping companies improve social media performance in the blogosphere.

As an independent consulting body, we have been monitoring best practice since its inception at the turn of the 21st century and advise corporations, non-profits and governmental organizations on their social media presence. For these tasks we have developed a range of web-based software tools, some of which are offered for public use. These are available at My.ComMetrics.com.

To find out more about ComMetrics' products and services, please contact us at www.ComMetrics.com.