

Search Engine Watch

Keyword Research from Hitwise

By [Christine Churchill](#)

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Ever wanted to spy deep inside a competitors search marketing campaign? A competitive intelligence tool from Hitwise shows you exactly which search terms are driving the most traffic to your competitors' web sites.

This article examines the Hitwise [Search Intelligence](#) tool, a hybrid keyword research and competitive intelligence tool. Search Intelligence delivers metrics and reporting views so you can easily evaluate and track a term's usefulness from a marketers' perspective.

Overall, the tool is powerful, useful, and convenient. It provides a type of competitive intelligence that is user-oriented and delivers comparison data in a form ready for immediate analysis and application. Convenient one-button export features let you send sorted data into Excel or CSV formats so you can weave it into existing reports or custom analysis views.

A suite of tools

The Hitwise Search Intelligence tool is actually a suite, rather than a single tool. It includes lifestyle, demographic, ranking, charting, clickstream as well as the aptly named Search Intelligence tools. The well meshed integration and the distinct features make it particularly useful for online marketers. There are in-depth demographic profiles built in, as well as month, year and 2+ year search capabilities, so a marketer can do competitive analysis on hard-to-track but high-sales-potential seasonal or holiday specific keyword searches.

Hitwise developed the Search Intelligence tool in 2003 and has continually added new types of search reports, driven largely by customer feedback. Though not the only web-based competitive intelligence tool on the market today, Search Intelligence does offer a robust delivery that makes it a worthwhile package.

According to Bill Tancer, General Manager, Global Research for Hitwise, Search Intelligence provides information on over 800,000 websites in more than 174 industry categories. The data is derived from partnerships with internet service providers and represents 10 million US Internet users (25 million worldwide).

This is an impressive and wide swath of data and the tool lets you slice, dice, and report in a variety of ways. One entry point I found particularly useful is their view of "website details." This search point allows you to enter a URL of any site you are interested in tracking. Most large sites are already in the Hitwise database. If the site you are requesting isn't included in the 800,000 sites categorized, you can enter it into the database and wait a few weeks for the tool to gather enough information about the site to make the results meaningful. As there are so many smaller sites, this data-gathering delay is not uncommon among competitive intelligence tools and the Hitwise database comes well stocked.

Multi-faceted click data

For a marketer, one of the more interesting reports focuses on clickstream data—the path

users take when clicking links. Hitwise lets you look at clickstream data in a clear and unambiguous way. It's powerful information. Flow lines don't lie and clickstream data can be used to spot leaks in customer retention or bounce-offs to competitors in an easy and accurate way. The power of this feature is its up- and downstream data from a particular website.

Most sophisticated logfile programs can provide site-centric data about domains sending traffic to your own web site, but the Hitwise tool provides a bigger picture. Not only could I see clickstream data coming to my site, but Hitwise shows you where users go after they leave your site. Although this information can sometimes be painful to learn (as in cases when you see a competitor ranking high in your downstream list), it gives the marketer feedback on how well their site is performing. What makes this revealing glimpse especially insightful is that this is not information you can get from your own logs.

Getting this view can also be a source of creative inspiration for new information items, products, or services to add to your site. For example, if your site carries high-cost items and many of the downstream clicks are to finance companies, you might want to consider adding financial information on your site or partnering with a financial firm. Additionally, the tool allows the marketer to see clickstream data on competing sites. It's an insightful peek into how competitors are getting traffic, where they are losing it, and how their flow patterns compare with your own.

Search term comparison tool

Marketers are always concerned whether they are targeting the best phrases to deliver qualified traffic to their web sites. One tool that offers insight into the volume potential value between several different terms is the search term comparison report. This tool allows you to enter up to 10 phrases at a time for comparison or bulk import search terms via the portfolio tool. It provides nice charting options and you can view historical data up to 2+ years depending on your access level so it makes spotting seasonal trends easy. For the marketer, this information is also very useful in forecasting demand and projecting paid advertising budgets.

This same comparison tool allows you to chart traffic for both individual websites as well as entire industries. This makes it easy to view traffic to a site over time and monitor the direction of the trend line. The power of the tool's close integration came in handy here. At one point I compared two competing websites and was curious about what caused the spike in traffic for one site. By hovering my mouse over the spike in the chart I was given event options. This option links you to news, press mentions, and other web trackable events so you can assess the reason for the traffic volume spike. By selecting the clickstream option, I was also able to see what domains had caused the traffic surge and infer what caused the peak in interest.

Search term reports

A second report the marketer will find valuable is the website search term report. This report lists the most popular terms actually typed into a search engine which resulted in traffic to the website being tracked.

Using this tool makes you feel like you've tapped into your competitor's logfiles. But you haven't. It's all above-board. There are simply no secrets on the Internet anymore. This report exposes the full tail—all the high volume traffic words driving traffic to your competitor's site, as well as all the often overlooked words at the end of the tail that often

are your best words to lead to conversions.

This report is very useful to expand keyword lists, uncover new search term opportunities, and derive a better understanding of how your competitors are using search to gain traffic.

Related to the search term report is the search term gap analysis which instantly provides comparison on two websites to determine what search term strengths and opportunities exist for each site. This report was my favorite because of its great potential to help a marketer expand the keyword list being used in their search campaigns, while also giving feedback on how well a site is driving traffic on primary targeted terms.

Marketers looking to expand their search campaign keyword list will find the search term suggestion report useful. It is similar to other keyword tools in that you can enter a search phrase and Hitwise provides suggested variations containing that phrase. This report is most successful on single or highly trafficked terms.

Over all, the reports are well integrated and intuitively linked. For example, if you were looking at the search term suggestion tool and wondered what website received traffic from a specific term, clicking on the term will display the search term analysis report that shows a list of websites that received traffic from the term, as well as the most popular terms containing that particular search phrase. The whole system is well thought out and easy to use.

Pricing for access to the Hitwise data ranges from \$50k to \$60k annually, and scales down based on narrower deliverables (number of seats, categories, etc).

Overall the Hitwise tool was easy to use. They have built in considerable online help, including webinars that walked a new user through the tool. I'd give the tool an "A" for information and search term competitive intelligence. The other comment I feel compelled to make about the tool was I found it is addicting. Be forewarned: marketers will need to set time limits or risk being sucked into a fascinating but time-consuming data abyss.

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Search Headlines

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