

Vermont Primary Tracker
 Final Report: Submitted by Vermont Public
 Television (VPT)



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Additional Material attached:

- Primary Tracker Usage**
- Visitor Analytics**
- Maps of Visitors**
- Web Use Survey**
- Content Analysis**

I. Background

Vermont Primary Tracker was Vermont Public Television's (VPT's) online information exchange, designed to help keep Vermonters up to date with the March 4 presidential primary. From the beginning, we envisioned the website as a place for information exchange, or two-way communication, as opposed to a place to simply raise awareness or read information, or one-way communication. We chose a core viewing audience, age 50+, to test whether a public television station could engage this age group in a platform other than broadcast television. The project was an experiment for VPT – going in, we had no guess as to whether the project would be successful.

Vermont Primary Tracker had four primary goals:

- Create an online “virtual community” that encourages Vermonters to create networks and become more proactive in using the Internet as a communication vehicle.
- Extend VPT's reach by creating a valued service for a core viewing audience.
- Create an environment where communities come together for the purpose of civic discourse.
- Develop a useful tool in raising awareness about election issues and candidates.

The project kicked off on September 1, 2007, and we spent three months building and testing the website. We rolled out the site with a soft launch in December, during which time we continued to test, collect feedback and make changes, and officially launched on January 1, 2008. We intentionally waited until after the first of the year to launch, as we felt Vermonters would be focused on the holidays in December but in January, would turn their attention to the March 4 primary election. We were fortunate that the importance of the 2008 presidential primary election extended beyond Super Tuesday for the first time in many years, otherwise we may not have experienced as much interest and participation.

II. Results

Overall, VPT is pleased with the results of the project, yet there were many lessons learned through the process. In terms of numbers, we had 125 active participants in the discussion area (goal was 100), with an additional 75 participants in the web chat series (over eight weeks). Through the course of the project, the website enjoyed 11,151 pageviews from 2,199 unique visitors, and new visits increased slowly from January to March, from 44.26% to 66.11%. Some interesting trends included a decrease in returning visits in February and March, but a steady increase in posts to the discussion area as the project moved forward, from 31 in December to 84 in March. The highest traffic day on the website was March 4, the day of the Vermont primary election, when 325 people visited Vermont Primary Tracker. Traffic to the website came from nine states and 10 countries. The largest user group of the discussion area was age 50-64. More detailed reports and numbers are attached.

III. Successes

Community Coalition: One of the key successes for Vermont Primary Tracker was building a community coalition of organizations to help carry out the project. This group met monthly and advised us all the way through the project. The coalition was also key in developing content and promoting the project to their constituents. We believe that our partners taking an active role in promoting the project is the reason the largest user group for the discussion area was age 50-64. Our community partners were: AARP of Vermont, American Association of University Women, League of Women Voters, Snelling Center for Government, Vermont Area Agency on Aging, Vermont Maturity and the Vermont Office of the Secretary of State.

Content Developer: We were fortunate to hire Jon Margolis, former national political writer for the *Chicago Tribune*, to post weekly columns (often more frequently than weekly) and spark/feed the discussion area. Jon fell within our target demographic of age 50+, which also lent credibility to the project.

Web Chats: One of the most interesting and engaging components of the project was the series of web chats we hosted, every Wednesday night in January and February. Although the chats started off slowly, with only four to six people participating, participants built up over time, and for the last chat, we had 25 participants and had begun seeing return users. The chats were more engaging when we had more than one discussion leader; for example, two opposing views for our “Civil Liberties in a Changing World” discussion, and our final chat was led by three representatives from the offices of the remaining presidential candidates. For the most part, we had high-profile discussion leaders, including the Vermont Secretary of State, Vermont State Treasurer and a former Governor.

Flexibility to Change: Throughout the project, we were constantly trying new things and taking different approaches to try to increase participation on the website. For example, after the first web chat, we were disappointed with the number of participants, so we increased the number of on-air spots we were running. The next week, we tried running a crawl during the chat to drive people to the website. The next week, we removed the registration requirement. We believe all of these actions helped increase participation over time.

Internal Working Group: Another area of success for the project was the formation of an internal working group, with representation from various departments at VPT. This group met monthly to guide the project and included membership from outreach, web services, creative services, production, programming and community relations.

IV. Challenges & Lessons Learned

The primary lesson learned from Vermont Primary Tracker is that it takes time and flexibility (trying new things) to build and sustain an online community. In retrospect, the project timeline was too short, and it felt like just as things started picking up, the project ended. If the project had been carried out over a one-year period instead of a three-month period, we believe we would have been more successful in attracting and sustaining ongoing participants. Other challenges and lessons learned include:

- It is more challenging for a public television station to draw people to a live, online chat that is not connected to a broadcast.
- It takes six months to build and populate a website – we did it in three but could have really used the extra time; additionally, we were turned down by several web developers/contractors because of our fast timeline.
- Developing relationships and community partners to help spread the word to their constituents helps dramatically in building and sustaining an audience. It is also important to have members on the coalition who fall within your target age group.
- Blog format vs. Discussion Area: In retrospect, we should have gone with the blog model instead of the discussion area model, as a blog is easier to navigate and requires less information to sign-up/use.
- Our target audience, age 50+, is a challenging audience for an Internet-based project, especially in a rural state, where many people still use dial-up. At the Vermont 50+ Expo, where we demonstrated Vermont Primary Tracker, we found attendees were hesitant, even scared to try out the system. We received feedback like, “I don’t use the Internet; I’m too old,” and “I have dial-up, so I wouldn’t use something like that.”
- Promotion/getting the word out – Putting efforts into non-traditional media (blogs, HTML e-mails) pays off more than traditional print ads. Additionally, we promoted Vermont Primary Tracker at community events, some of which proved integral in bringing users to the website.
- It takes a full-time staff to maintain and sustain an interactive website (one full-time developer and one full-time content person to continually push out new information).
- Attracting people age 50+ to be volunteer trainers of the system within their communities. We had planned to sponsor four trainings but cancelled three due to lack of sign-ups.

Our biggest challenge remains how to keep the audience we’ve built engaged after the project is over.

V. Future Plans

We are still working with our partners to determine the best way to continue engaging the audience we have developed with Vermont Primary Tracker. A few ideas have risen to the surface. First, to convert the system we've built into a complement to a monthly television show, called *VPT's Public Square*. *Public Square* addresses issues of importance to Vermonters and covers anything from health care issues to affordable housing. Topics for this show are chosen based on feedback from our annual community listening sessions, where VPT solicits information about the challenges and successes within different communities. By integrating the Vermont Primary Tracker online system into this show, we'd add another level of community engagement to one of our mission-based broadcasts.

An unexpected result of this project is that VPT will begin to offer our technology and know-how in running web chats as a service to nonprofit organizations in the state. During our next fiscal year, we will provide that support to run a monthly chat for a given organization on a specific topic. For example, a chat that allows high school students to talk directly with the Secretary of State about election and voting issues.

VI. Miscellaneous: Responses to Required Questions

What are the issues related to setting up the live online chats? Was this easy to do? What worked?

Setting up the online chats proved relatively easy for VPT, as we have experience in conducting these. What proved more difficult was drawing an audience to the chats. In the past, our web chats have been held in conjunction with a broadcast, so that during the broadcast we are able to direct viewers, those already interested in the subject, to our website. Hosting web chats that are not connected to a broadcast is more challenging, as you don't already have a built-in audience.

In terms of web chat leaders, we were fortunate to be able to attract many high-profile leaders. Many of our chat leaders were genuinely curious to see if we could attract participants, and others were simply interested in how chats work, as they hadn't participated in one before. We learned over time that asking the discussion leaders to promote the chat to their constituents was key in drawing participants. We also learned that having more than one chat leader, and particularly in the case where leaders have different views on the issue, results in a more engaging conversation for everyone.

Additionally, we learned that 25 participants on a web chat is about the maximum number to have in order to keep the conversation on track and everyone participating. For our last chat, with representatives from the three presidential campaigns, we were concerned about the number of people who might join in, so we were prepared to break the chat into three separate rooms if necessary. As it turned out, the McCain representative requested that we open up a separate room for him, as he wanted to chat

more directly a Ron Paul supporter. The representatives for Clinton and Obama wanted to stay together in one room, as that discussion centered on the differences between the two candidates.

Finally, we were surprised and pleased that all of our chats remained respectful, even when people were disagreeing with one another. The ending few minutes of the chats were frequently a time of thanks to one another, and gratitude to VPT for making the dialogue possible.

What methods of promotion were most successful in delivering the target audience to the new web services?

Although we tried various promotion methods, including on-air, radio, print and electronic promotion, the outreach our community partners did to their constituents proved the most successful method of reaching our target audience. We believe this is the sole reason that the highest user group was age 50-64. The method that proved most effective in getting the word out about the web chats was the chat leaders themselves, notifying their constituents about the chats.

What did you learn about which services generate the most awareness, engagement and credit for the station?

The web chat series was the service that generated the most engagement and credit for the station. Although there were fewer people who participated in the chats than on the discussion area, the chats were more timely, interesting and fast moving.

What qualitative information did you receive about the impact the project had on the election process?

We did not receive any qualitative information about the impact the project had on the election process. Unfortunately, we don't believe Vermont Primary Tracker helped participants make up their minds about which candidate to vote for. Rather, they found it an interesting and informative way to connect with other Vermonters around election issues.

What do you think would improve the impact of the project on the elections?

Time: Our biggest lesson learned from this project is that it takes time and flexibility to build an online, interactive community. Ongoing participation in online communities builds up over time and by word of mouth. Although the website officially launched in December, we considered it a soft launch, and the bulk of project activity, including promotion, was carried out over two months (January and February). We believe the project needed at least six months, and perhaps a full year to develop into a well-known and well-used service.

VII. Measurements

Survey of Internet Usage at Registration and Project Completion

Through the planning process with our community partners, we decided against measuring Internet usage at the time of registration. There was significant concern from our partners that given our target audience, the registration process needed to be fast and simple, otherwise we'd lose people at the beginning. We had many long and in-depth discussions about this point before making a final decision. Some felt that those using the Internet for information exchange and dialogue are accustomed to registration processes, but we heard very clearly from advisors within our target demographic a concern about our audiences' general unfamiliarity with using such a system, which outweighed our desire to collect this information at the time of registration.

A Web Poll of a Sample from the VPT Membership to Check Evidence of Use and Impact

Using Survey Monkey, VPT sent a survey to 7,500 VPT members, about one quarter of our membership, to measure awareness and impact of the project. Following are some of the results:

- 21% of registered users on Vermont Primary Tracker were VPT members
- 6% of those who received the survey responded
- 10% of those who responded to the survey were aware of the project
- 0% of those who responded to the survey and were aware of the project said Vermont Primary Tracker did NOT change their Internet use in any way
- 69% of those who responded to the survey and were aware of Vermont Primary Tracker did NOT use the system

The primary reason given for not using the system was, "Didn't have time" (35%). Other reasons given included, "Not interested in the topic" (6.3%), "Not interested in using the Internet for information exchange" (10.4%), "Had already made up my mind," "Get my information from C-Span," and several comments from VPT members from Canada, New York and New Hampshire about the project not being relevant to them because it was Vermont-focused.

In terms of how VPT members became aware of the project, the breakdown in order of most common method to least common is as follows:

- Internet or E-mail
- On-Air Spots
- Newspaper
- Radio
- Event

Sixty-five percent of those who were aware of the project and responded to the survey said it was important for Vermont Public Television to be involved in an initiative that encourages online dialogue about public issues; 32% weren't sure, and 4% said no, it's not important.

Highlights from the general comments follow:

“Public broadcasting is too far left to consider what it offers as dialogue” (two people made this comment).

“I don't much care about what other people think (so I didn't participate).”

“I appreciate your initiative and hope public broadcasting in New York will pick up on your efforts.”

“I appreciate VPT being in the leadership role and keeping their watchers informed with ongoing dialogues about the candidates, which helps us make informed decisions.”

“I congratulate you for this initiative.”

VIII. Hypothesis and Was the Investment Justified?

Our hypothesis for Vermont Primary Tracker was that a statewide public television station could serve as a facilitator for the creation of an online community of older citizens, and in particular, serve this function in the context of an important national election.

Although only 21% of the Vermont Primary Tracker users were VPT members and 0% of them said the project changed their Internet use, we believe we successfully proved the hypothesis. And given a longer timeline on the project, we feel strongly more users would have built up over time. Our hypothesis was also proven by the fact that the largest user group of the discussion area was age 50-64. With only 21% of the registered users being current VPT members, the project presented an opportunity to engage non-VPT members, creating membership prospects.

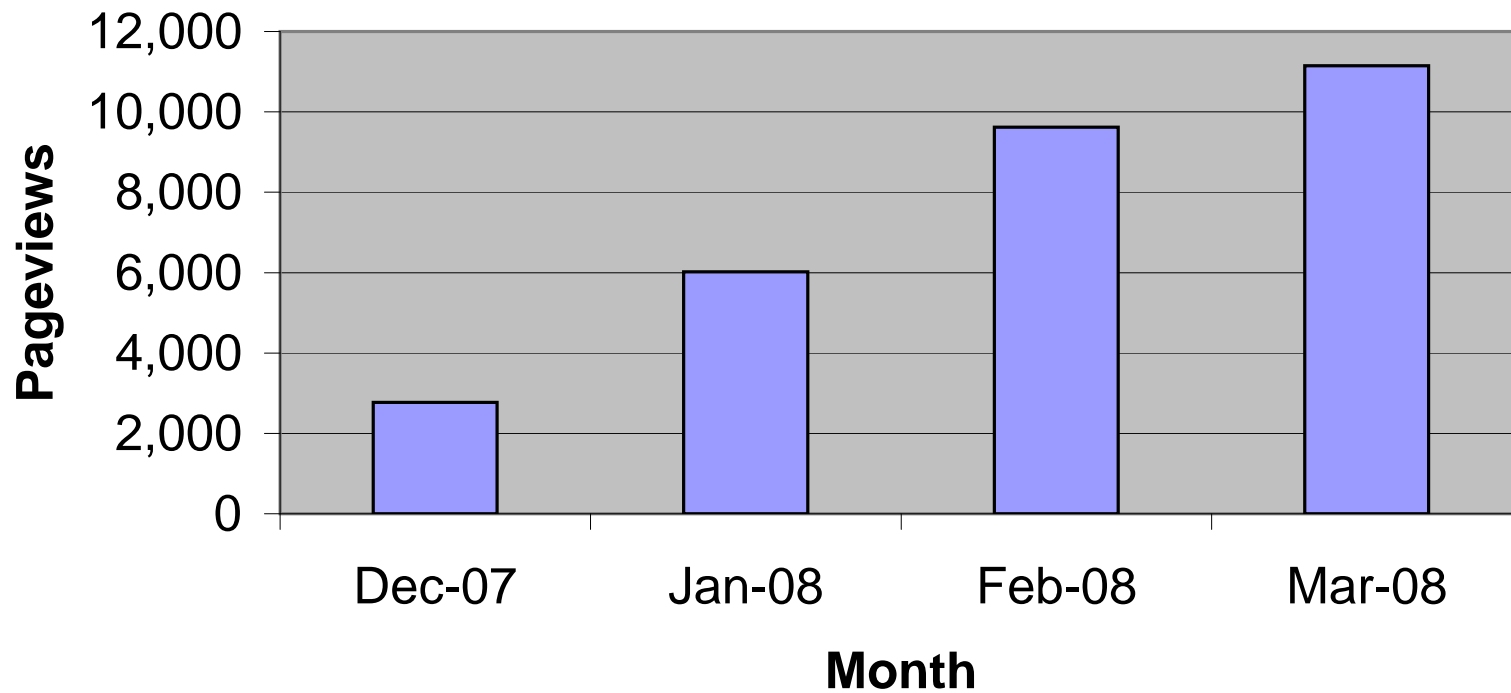
VPT believes the investment in this project was justified, based on the fact that we met our goal of the number of Vermont Primary tracker active users. Additionally, we had some unexpected results, like the Secretary of State asking VPT to lend our expertise in speaking online with Vermont students about voting issues and registration. The relationships we developed with and through our community partners have already resulted in proposals from them of future collaborations.

Vermont Primary Tracker

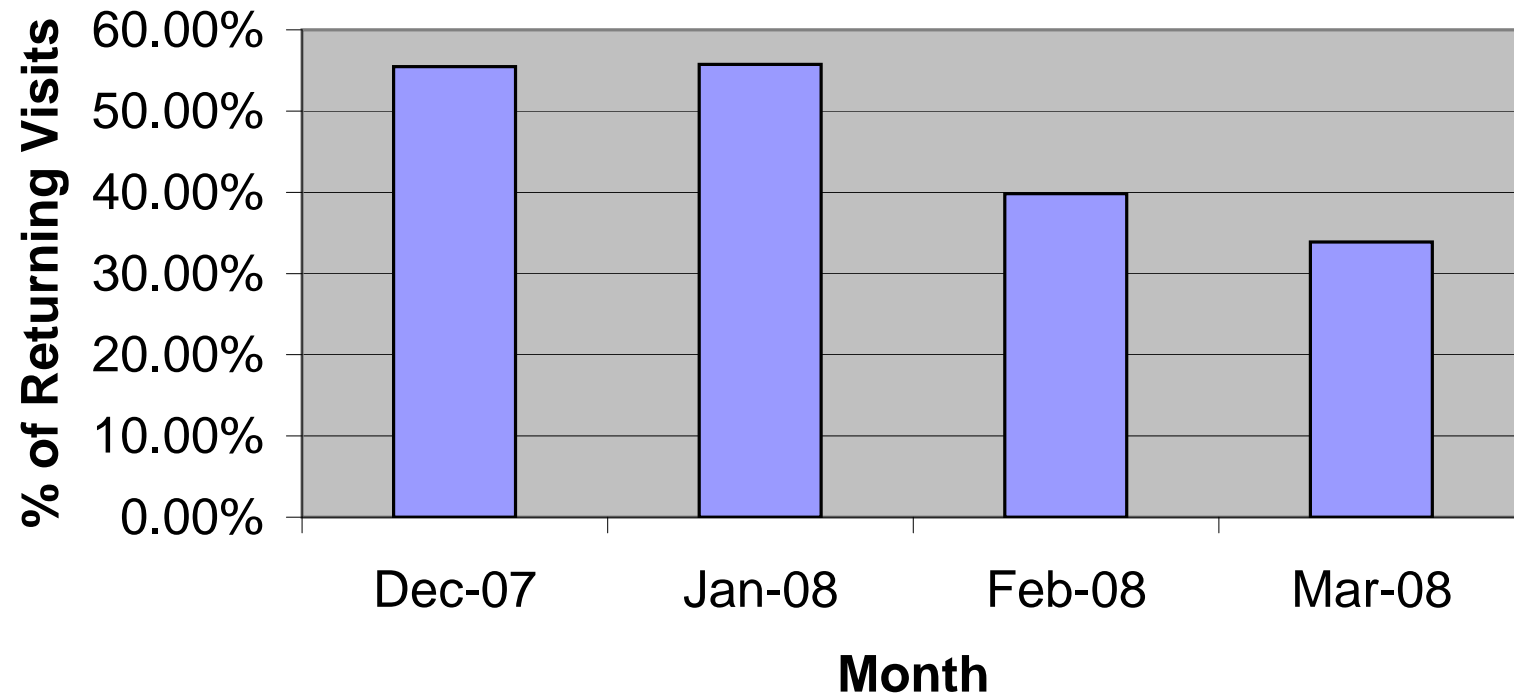
Website Usage

	Dec-07	Jan-08	Feb-08	Mar-08
Site-Wide				
Registered Users	52	92	119	125
Visits	467	4,421	2,594	3,296
Unique Visitors	216	808	1,581	2,199
Pageviews	2,771	6,023	9,623	11,151
Pages/Visit	5.93	4.24	3.71	3.38
Avg. Time on Site	7:43	5:06	4:12	3:37
Returning Visits	55.46%	55.74%	39.82%	33.89%
New Visits	44.54%	44.26%	60.18%	66.11%
Homepage				
Pageviews	944	1,675	2,734	4,147
Time on Page	1:52	1:54	1:40	1:37
Discussion Area				
Forum Posts	31	50	77	84
Pageviews	1,107	1,832	2,913	3,233
Time on Page	0:59	1:01	1:03	1:02

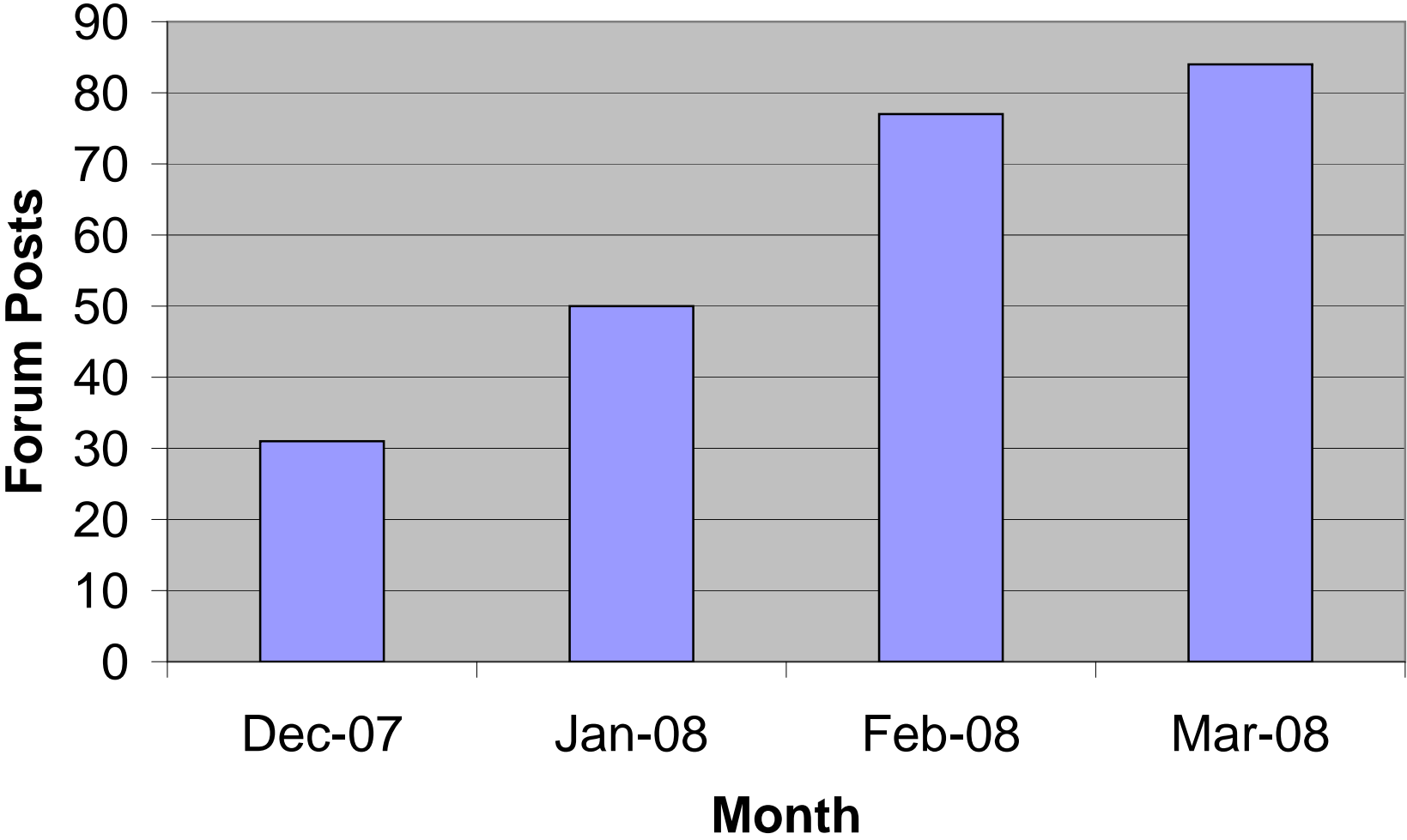
Vermont Primary Tracker Pageviews

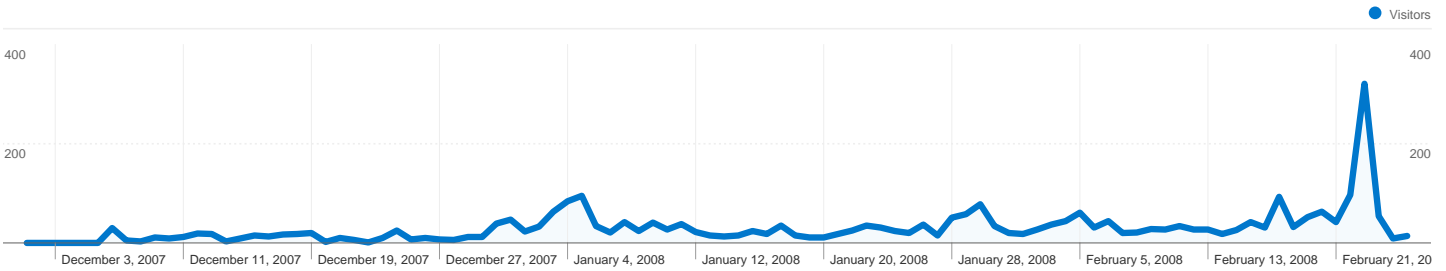


Vermont Primary Tracker Returning Visits



Vermont Primary Tracker Forum Posts






2,199 people visited this site


 **3,296 Visits**

 **2,199 Absolute Unique Visitors**

 **11,151 Pageviews**

 **3.38 Average Pageviews**

 **00:03:37 Time on Site**

 **52.91% Bounce Rate**

 **66.17% New Visits**

Technical Profile

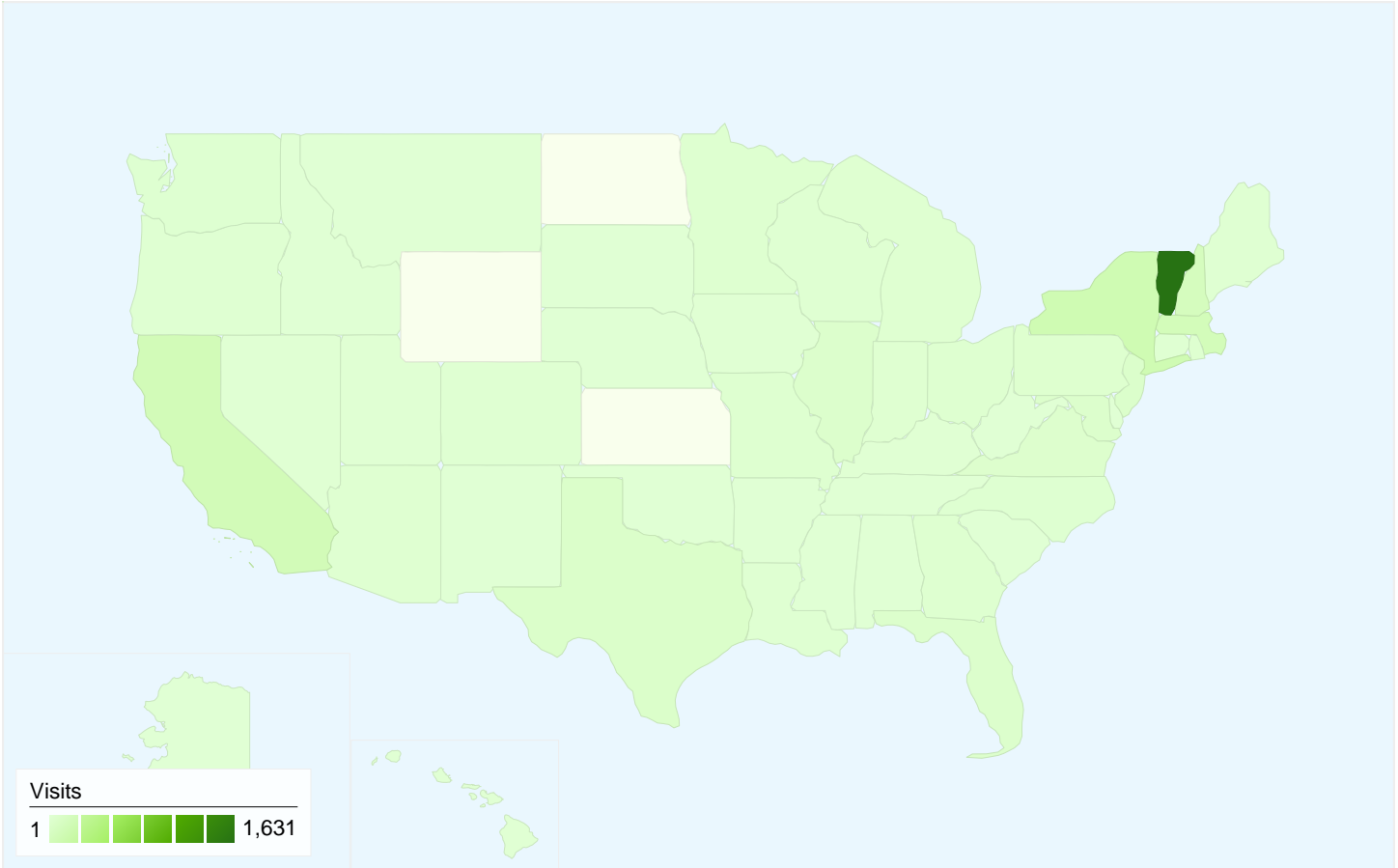
Browser	Visits	% visits	Connection Speed	Visits	% visits
Internet Explorer	2,137	64.84%	Unknown	951	28.85%
Firefox	813	24.67%	Cable	920	27.91%
Safari	308	9.34%	DSL	885	26.85%
Mozilla	14	0.42%	T1	344	10.44%
Netscape	9	0.27%	Dialup	156	4.73%

Country/Territory Detail:

United States

Dec 1, 2007 - Mar 7, 2008

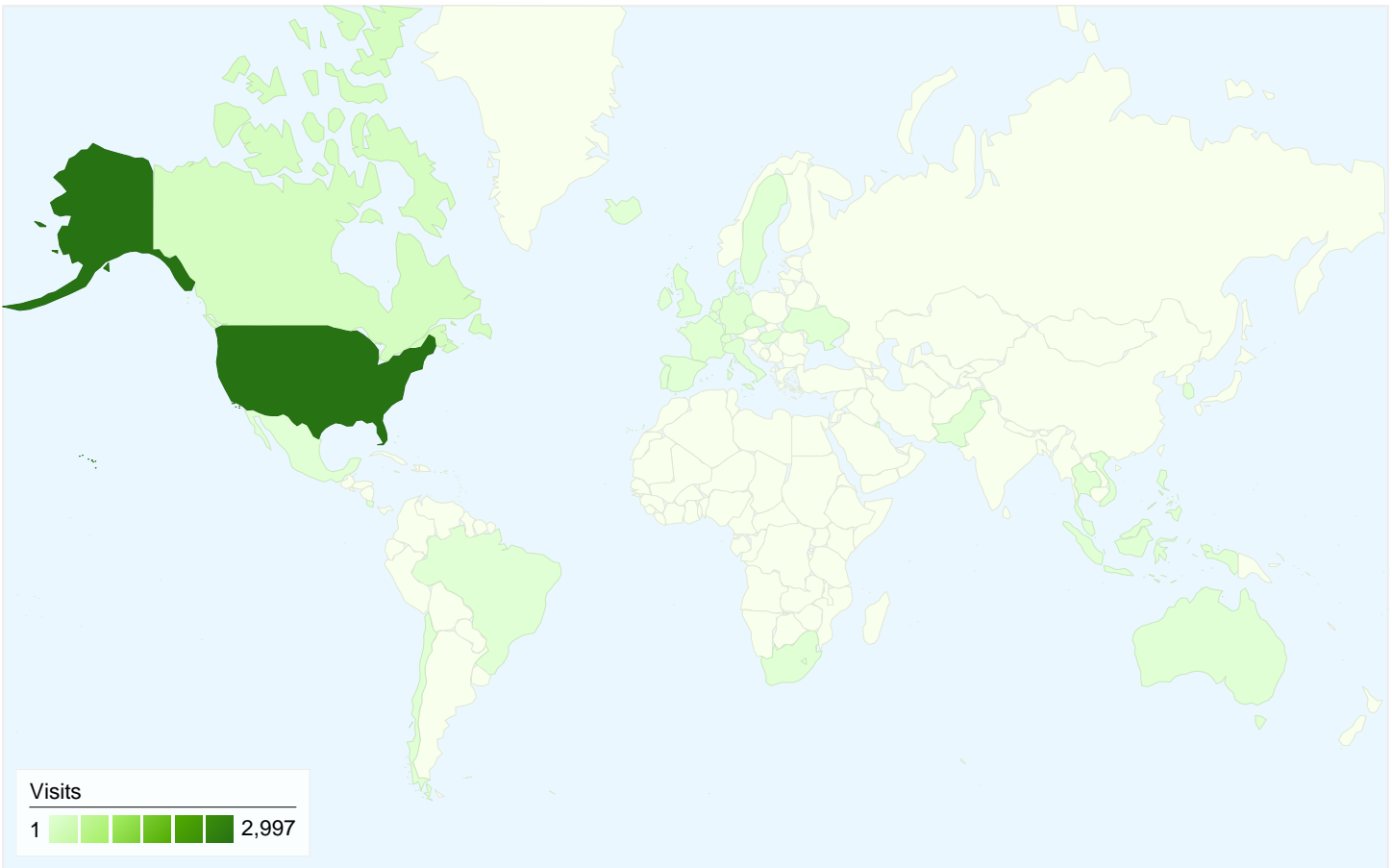
Comparing to: Site



This country/territory sent 2,997 visits via 49 regions

Site Usage

Region	Visits	Pages/Visit	Avg. Time on Site	% New Visits	Bounce Rate
Visits 2,997 % of Site Total: 90.93%	Pages/Visit 3.56 Site Avg: 3.38 (5.11%)	Avg. Time on Site 00:03:54 Site Avg: 00:03:37 (7.84%)	% New Visits 64.16% Site Avg: 66.14% (-2.99%)	Bounce Rate 50.98% Site Avg: 52.91% (-3.64%)	
Vermont	1,631	4.50	00:05:25	49.36%	41.02%
New York	164	2.55	00:02:23	88.41%	57.93%
California	137	1.87	00:01:31	91.97%	75.18%
(not set)	135	5.44	00:07:17	25.19%	24.44%
Massachusetts	128	3.27	00:02:31	83.59%	50.78%
New Hampshire	109	2.08	00:01:56	86.24%	56.88%
Texas	53	1.62	00:01:19	98.11%	75.47%
New Jersey	48	2.06	00:00:42	93.75%	60.42%
Maryland	44	1.59	00:01:58	45.45%	86.36%



3,296 visits came from 37 countries/territories

Site Usage

Country/Territory	Visits	Pages/Visit	Avg. Time on Site	% New Visits	Bounce Rate
United States	2,997	3.56	00:03:54	64.16%	50.98%
Canada	171	1.74	00:00:48	82.46%	70.18%
United Kingdom	39	1.72	00:00:45	97.44%	66.67%
Germany	21	1.05	00:00:06	100.00%	95.24%
France	12	2.33	00:03:59	33.33%	50.00%
Switzerland	6	1.50	00:00:23	83.33%	66.67%
Australia	4	1.00	00:00:00	100.00%	100.00%
Ireland	3	1.33	00:00:10	100.00%	66.67%
South Africa	3	1.33	00:00:04	100.00%	66.67%
South Korea	3	2.00	00:00:29	100.00%	33.33%

Vermont Primary Tracker Awareness Survey

[Exit this survey](#)

1. Questions with an * are required

*** 1. Were you aware of Vermont Public Television's recent initiative, Vermont Primary Tracker, an online information and resource exchange focused on Vermont's March 4 presidential primary election?**

Yes, I was aware of it and used it

Yes, I was aware of it but didn't use it

*** 2. How did you hear about Vermont Primary Tracker?**

Internet or E-mail

Television

Radio

Event

Newspaper

Other (Please indicate how you heard about it)

*** 3. Did using Vermont Primary Tracker change your internet use in any way?**

Yes, because of Vermont Primary Tracker, I use the Internet more than I used to

Yes, because of Vermont Primary Tracker I use the Internet less than I used to

No, Vermont Primary Tracker didn't change my Internet use in any way

N/A (not applicable)

*** 4. If you were aware of Vermont Primary Tracker but didn't use it, why not?**

Not interested in the topic

Not interested in using the Internet for information exchange

Didn't have time

N/A (not applicable)

Other (Please specify)

*** 5. In your opinion, is an initiative that encourages online dialogue about public issues important for Vermont Public Television to be involved with?**

Yes

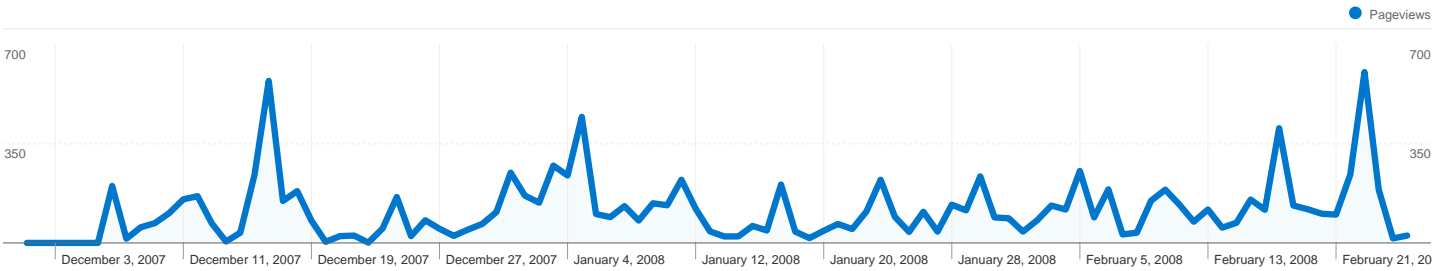
No

Not Sure

6. Do you have any additional comments you'd like to share with us?

Next

Survey Powered by:
SurveyMonkey.com
"Surveys Made Simple."



575 URLs were viewed a total of 11,151 times

Content Performance

Pageviews 11,151 % of Site Total: 100.00%	Unique Pageviews 7,717 % of Site Total: 100.00%	Time on Page 00:01:31 Site Avg: 00:01:31 (0.00%)	Bounce Rate 52.91% Site Avg: 52.91% (0.00%)	% Exit 29.56% Site Avg: 29.56% (0.00%)	\$ Index \$0.00 Site Avg: \$0.00 (0.00%)	
URL	Pageviews	Unique Pageviews	Time on Page	Bounce Rate	% Exit	\$ Index
/vermontprimarytracker/	2,132	1,291	00:01:49	40.29%	33.96%	\$0.00
/vermontprimarytracker/index.php	1,362	1,048	00:01:36	58.61%	53.74%	\$0.00
/vermontprimarytracker/discussion	1,006	563	00:00:55	51.39%	18.19%	\$0.00
/vermontprimarytracker/candidates	659	552	00:01:44	76.57%	49.17%	\$0.00
/vermontprimarytracker/index.php/home	653	333	00:01:27	19.18%	20.06%	\$0.00
/vermontprimarytracker/info	525	294	00:01:38	56.76%	24.76%	\$0.00
/vermontprimarytracker/issues	310	257	00:01:40	61.11%	34.52%	\$0.00
/vermontprimarytracker/live/index.php	269	181	00:04:22	73.21%	60.97%	\$0.00
/vermontprimarytracker/info/rolevtprimary	219	195	00:01:48	63.64%	46.58%	\$0.00
/vermontprimarytracker/index.php/component/user?task=register	191	136	00:01:53	0.00%	3.66%	\$0.00

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