

Behaviorology.org: An Action Plan

David R. Feeney

Temple University

An estimated 20-30 million people in the United States use electronic mail (email).¹ Online written communication tools like email, commercial online services,² and the World Wide Web (www) have become part of the daily routine of a vast and growing number of people, worldwide. Online communications serve as a convenient, low cost way to share documents, supplemental graphics, mail, and real-time conversation.

Such a far-reaching technological revolution affects the way scientists behave, including behaviorological and behavior-related (social) sciences. HTML, the programming language of the www, originated as a simple way for researchers to share documents, with pictures, over worldwide computer networks. Science is heavily verbal, and online writing tools in particular (such as email, listserves, newsgroups, and chat) bring rapid, worldwide document-sharing and conversation into offices and homes.³ Online communications are being used to deliver education and therapy,⁴ including professional education credits.⁵ Online behavior is increasingly the object of research and theory,⁶ as well as judicial scrutiny.⁷

Regardless of the size of our behaviorological community, our professional and personal development can be facilitated by the routine use of simple online commu-

nications. The small size of the local behaviorological community, combined with isolated behaviorologists worldwide, may especially benefit from using simple online communications for professional development and training. For a small organization with typically limited resources, low-cost behavioral strategies for effective, international professional outreach are needed.

The BALANCE Website

As Webmaster for BALANCE (Behavior Analysis League for Accuracy in News, Commentary and Education) I designed a simple website for small group communications. Two main goals were to distribute the BALANCE Newsletter in www format, while increasing www-based subscriptions to the paper Newsletter. With BALANCE editor Roger Bass (RFB53074@aol.com), I designed the BALANCE Website and installed it at <http://www.onlearn.com/balance.html>.

The website was designed to display all prior issues of the BALANCE Newsletter and other original writing by BALANCE members. The website gave visitors the opportunity to subscribe to the paper Newsletter free of charge. Website visitors could also use email to converse with me concerning printing from the www, or to submit manuscripts to Roger Bass via email.

The BALANCE website went online on Wednesday 21 May 1997. Here is an informal analysis of its impact up to 8 October 1997.

The week following 21 May was the 1997 ABA Convention, which featured the BALANCE SIG meeting and the demo of the initial site to the BALANCE members. On 27 May I began taking data of the BALANCE Web Site "hit count" (hits = number of times the site is accessed by a web browser). Figure 1 below illustrates a cumulative record of those hit counts.

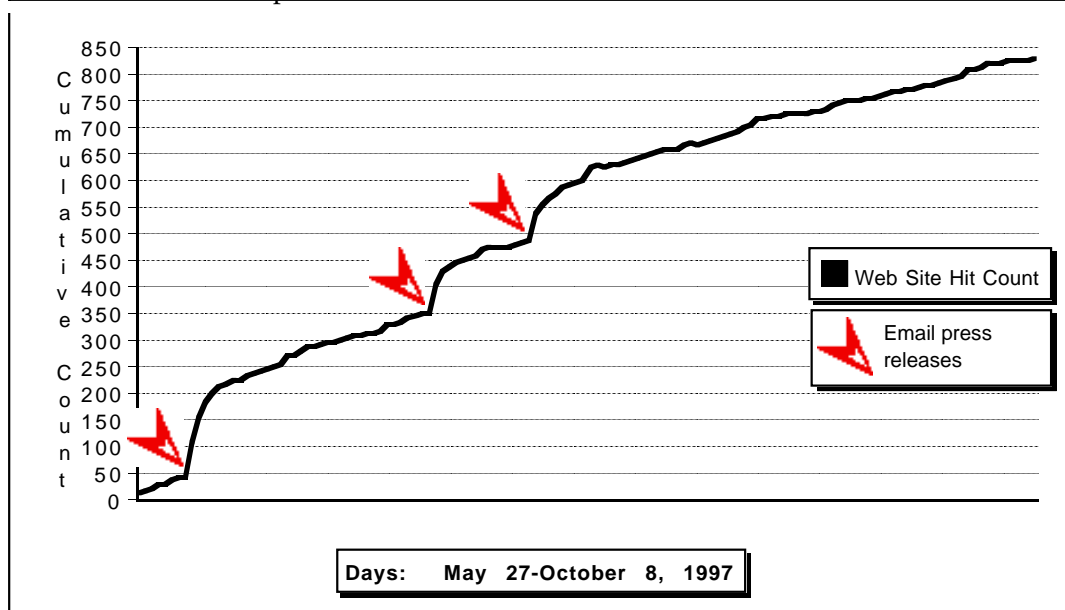


Figure 1: Cumulative Hit Counts of BALANCE Website

To increase the rate of daily visitors, “press releases” were written for email distribution via listservers devoted to behavior-analytic and related issues. The first BALANCE press release was sent on 3 June 1997. Two more press releases were done, on 9 and 24 July 1997. Press releases to listservers served as informational advertising to a target group of interested professionals, since each listserver typically distributes email to hundreds of listserver subscribers. Press releases are notated in Figure 1 with an arrow marker.

It is interesting, if not surprising, to note the “uptick” in hit counts after each press release. However, larger listserver audiences did not result in larger increments of hit counts to the site. The first press release was to the Behav-An listserver.⁸ This was associated with the steepest climb on the graph. The second press release was sent to two listservers: the Behav-An list and the new Standard Celeration listserver⁹—*more recipients, but fewer subsequent hits to the site*. Finally, the modest increase after the final press release (announcing the publication of the BALANCE Online Library monograph) is especially intriguing, since that press release targeted five listservers: Behav-An, Education Consumers Clearinghouse,¹⁰ LEARNING listserve, Standard Celeration (SCList), and Society for Computers in Psychology (SCiP-L).

Increasing Newsletter Subscribers

On the same day as the debut of the BALANCE site (21 May 1997), I emailed a small personal press release to 20 select individuals. They included Murray Sidman, Og Lindsley, Joe Cautela, John Church, Dennis Wahlgren and 15 others.

The first BALANCE subscription request to be emailed from the website was on Thursday 22 May; the day after the BALANCE site went online. That was Dennis Wahlgren (wahlgren@mail.sdsu.edu) at the Center for Behavioral Epidemiology and Community Health (C-BEACH) in San Diego.

From May to October 1997, I processed 78 new subscription requests. The BALANCE Newsletter (paper version) grew to 202 subscribers, 38% of whom were drawn from visitors to the BALANCE site during its first five months of operation.

With an eye to international outreach, of those 78 new BALANCE subscribers, 18 (23%) were from outside the continental United States. Here is the distribution of those 18 subscribers from 12 countries and Alaska:

| | | | |
|---------|---|--------------|---|
| Alaska: | 1 | Brazil: | 1 |
| Canada: | 3 | France: | 1 |
| Israel: | 1 | Japan: | 2 |
| Mexico: | 3 | N. Ireland: | 1 |
| Norway: | 1 | Phillipines: | 1 |
| Poland: | 1 | Scotland: | 1 |
| Spain: | 1 | | |

The BALANCE website procedures have had a sustained and remarkable impact on the number of subscribers to the BALANCE Newsletter, a sizable percentage of which were international. BALANCE can serve as a pilot experiment guiding uses of New Media by TIBI. Both TIBI and BALANCE are small organizations, with comparable resources and comparable missions: to supplement and shape accurate verbal behavior regarding a natural science of behavior. Both BALANCE and TIBI desire increased international participation, with TIBI being explicitly organized to foster it.

An Action Plan for *www.behaviorology.org*

TIBI has reserved *www.behaviorology.org* (.org being the Internet suffix for nonprofit companies), and is committed to using available online tools to teach and advocate behaviorology. Here are steps TIBI might take to generate disciplinary interaction and outreach, at modest costs:

Offer a free paper newsletter via a TIBI Website. With proper software coordination, the desktop publishing document used to print the current TNT Newsletter can be published to the *www* quickly and easily.

Advertise free to target audiences. Academic and private listservers (such as Behav-An and Education Consumers Clearinghouse, respectively) accept a single email document, then resend it to hundreds of listserver subscribers. A short, factual press release introducing TIBI and its features, guiding readers to a web site, can generate web visitors and set the stage for verbal interaction. Also, hundreds of search engines accept and list sites at no cost beyond the response-cost of submitting forms. That “behaviorology” be a searchable term in various internet search tool would be a powerful payoff for modest effort.

Make high probability requests of site visitors, then rapidly consequate. “Subscribe to our free Newsletter via email” can be viewed as a high-probability request.¹¹ While using a Netscape browser, clicking an email link and writing your name and mailing address in a pre-addressed email has a low response cost. Either an automatic or human email response is generated, and the site visitor gets his or her reply from TIBI almost immediately. From this high-probability request strategy, a subscriber database of names, mailing addresses and e-dresses can be gleaned. Since the response cost of writing and sending email is similar regardless of geographic distance, international visitors have as much opportunity to participate as national visitors. Finally, it leaves TIBI with a wider market for its most valuable export: behaviorology.

Offer avenues for site visitors to contribute and shape productivity. A percentage of the subscribers to a newsletter will have more to say, which may be relayed via email to TIBI. Such writing may be shaped into publication-quality text, articles or other verbal contributions, then

fed back into the web site or other TIBI publications. Reader-derived material can keep a site “fresh,” while developing new verbal material via audience involvement.

Routinely advertise site changes and new features. Since the cost of “targetcasting” via email press releases is nil, new releases can be sent at regular intervals, announcing valuable changes and additions to a site.

Distribute references of behaviorological work in basic, applied, and conceptual areas. A list of references and resources documenting the emergence of behaviorology in professional and popular literature already exists... on paper. Even a non-interactive web page listing the same information would be available worldwide for reading or printing, 24 hours a day. Adding email or hypertext links for the various authors serves to enhance the interactivity of such a list.

Build, with active email feedback, a “Frequently Asked Questions” list (FAQ). Both professionals and lay people react to the novelty of behaviorology with similar reactions: *What’s that? Where did it start? How long has it lasted?* FAQs feature basic answers to questions encountered in real-life (but also via online contact). A FAQ is generally cumulative, with new materials added over time. Instead of asking people with basic questions to read technical literature, let’s “catch ’em being good,” and reward basic questions with plenty of basic answers (with clickable opportunities for more involved answers available).

High interactivity and verbal productivity need not require expensive online resources. Mundane email and web tools can be combined with simple behavioral technology to get audiences immersed in the verbal repertoire of a natural science of behavior. Online communications offer behaviorologists worldwide opportunities to shape and be shaped.✻

⁵ See WebEd (<http://ceus.com>) or The Psy Broadcasting Corporation (<http://www.psybc.com>).

⁶ See <http://www.pitt.edu/~ksy> for Dr. Kimberly Young’s work on Internet Addiction Disorder or <http://www.computeraddiction.com> regarding compulsive internet use. Also, the Journal of Online Behavior at <http://www.behavior.net>.

⁷ See the Electronic Privacy Information Center (<http://www.epic.org>) for reviews of legal cases related to online speech, including this year’s landmark us Supreme Court ruling on the Federal Communications Decency Act.

⁸ To join the Behavior Analysis (Behav-An) forum, send the command SUBSCRIBE BEHAV-AN YOURFIRSTNAME YOURLASTNAME to LISTSERV@LISTSERV.NODAK.EDU

⁹ To join the Standard Celeration (SCList) forum, send the command SUBSCRIBE SCLIST YOURFIRSTNAME YOURLASTNAME to listproc@lists.acs.ohio-state.edu.

¹⁰ To join the Education Consumers Clearinghouse (ECCList) forum, contact Dr. John Stone (professor@tricon.net).

¹¹ See Mace et. al. in *JABA*, 30, 1 (Spring, 1997) p. 1-20 for behavioral applications of high-probability requests.✻

¹ See <http://etrq.findsvp.com/internet/overview.html>

² Such as America Online, Compuserve, Prodigy, Microsoft Network and others.

³ For a working example of using commercial online services for sharing and reviewing Standard Celeration Chart data, see <http://www.onlearn.com/scchat.html>.

⁴ See <http://www.onlearn.com/lmodlibrary.html> as well as: Feeny, D.R. (2002). Creative life-style management through on-line and real-time application of the behaviorological education practices of precision teaching. In S.F. Ledoux. *Origins and Components of Behaviorology—Second edition* (pp. 259-295). Canton, NY: ABCs.

