**Tip#9: Cleaning up all that lost referral data**

Most resorts & DMO's have an online lodging component and even an online retail store for passes, tickets, and gear. Most, if not all, also use an online email broadcast service. Very rarely are these custom developed in house. Most likely you are using Inntopia, Ryan Solutions, ACTIVENetwork/RTP's eStore, MailChimp, Constant Contact, or Blue Hornet. All of these 3rd-party products come with their own domain or at best, a sub domain of yours.

Google Analytics tracks a visitor the minute the snippet is read on the first page they visited on your site. A cookie is created and a slew of data is stored including what page/domain they were on JUST BEFORE coming to the first page they viewed on your site.

When a visitor leaves your site (through a sign-up form, booking widget) and heads on over to thirdparty.com, which typically is branded like your site. We'll pick on the MadRiverValley.com site again to show the process:
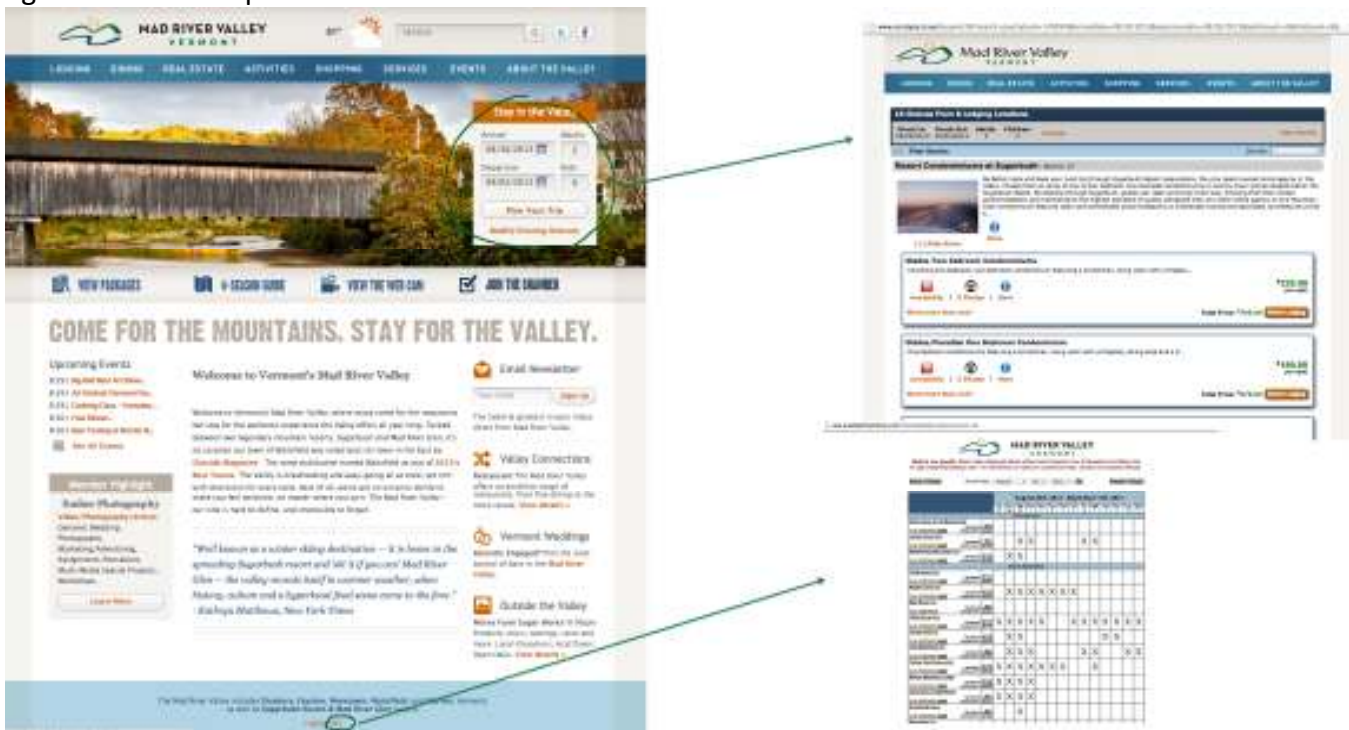
We have two items that send the visitor (in the same browser tab) to 2 lodging services: Inntopia and AvailabilityOnline.com. The 'branding' is supposed to make the visitor feel like they are still on our site. So the Google Analytics should track them when they cross these domains as if they never left. We call this Cross-Domain tracking.
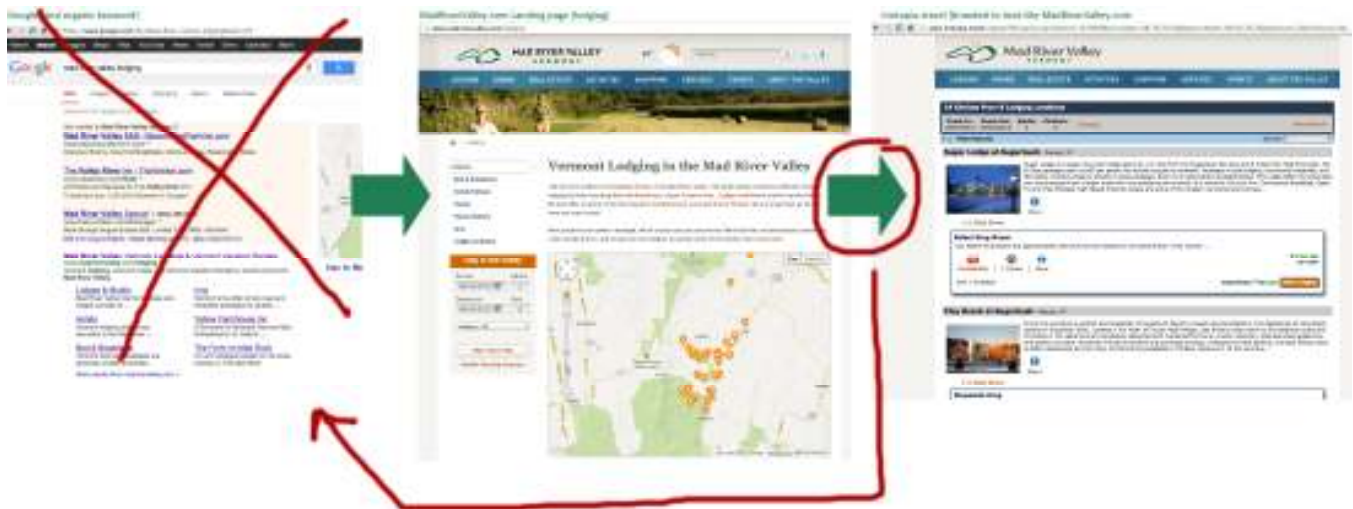
Most third-party software has some setup for tracking their pages as if they were pages on your site. Not very many of them do it well. When it is not setup properly, the process of clicking and travelling from your domain to the other domain (and back again), overwrites the Google Analytics Tracking Cookie (GATC) with your domain as the new source. You lost the original source of how they arrived at your site – the juicy, tasty bits of information that are crucial to determining where to spend that next marketing dollar!

Actual Visitor Flow:

Google
Typed keyword phrase
our page came up as result
MadRiverValley.com/lodging
used widget to pick arrival/departure dates
Inntopia.travel/aspnet/09/search.aspx results

Google Analytics broken visitor flow: When cross-domain traffic isn't setup properly, the click between domains ends up overwriting the source/medium/campaign data in the GATC and our visitor now shows up as a 'self-referral'.

Here's what it looks like in the Google Analytics reporting system.

As you can see, our own domain appears to be sending us referrals. In reality, these were originally from another source, but the GATC was overwritten and we lost that referral.

Thankfully, there is a very easy way to find the code/pages that are causing the problems. If we go the the TRAFFIC SOURCES | SOURCES | REFERRALS report, we can see all the domains that sent us traffic. Click on your own domain – this takes you to the Referral Traffic report segmented to your self-referrals.

The default view will show you the paths the visitor came FROM when the cookie was overwritten

Referral Path	Visits	Pages / Visit	Avg. Visit Du
	16 % of Total: 0.95% (1,686)	2.19 Site Avg: 2.80 (-21.86%)	0 Site Av
1. /	6	2.67	
2. /webcam	5	1.40	
3. /lodging	3	3.33	
4. /packages	1	1.00	
5. /vt/activities/disc-golf/disc-golf-at-sugar bush	1	1.00	

Now, use the "Secondary dimension"button and select "Landing Page".

This beauty of a report shows you WHERE THEY WERE and WHERE THEY WENT TO when the GATC was overwritten. It shows the offending page and where the faulty link/post sent them to.

Referral Path	Landing Page	Visits ↓	Pages / Visit	Avg. Visit Duration
Visitor was on this page	**Visitor was sent to this page**	**16** % of Total: 0.95% (1,686)	**2.19** Site Avg: 2.80 (-21.86%)	**00:05:4** Site A: 00:03: (71.8!
1. /	/showalldaily.php?associd=32	4	2.25	00:07:(
2. /lodging	/showalldaily.php?associd=32	3	3.33	00:19:!
3. /webcam	/webcam	3	1.00	00:00:(
4. /webcam	/aspnet/09/supplier.aspx?supplierid=1312113&salesid=1450949	2	2.00	00:00:(
5. /	/	1	6.00	00:02:(
6. /	/aspnet/09/search.aspx?salesid=1450949&arrivaldate=09/15/2013&departuredate=09/17/2013&adultcount=2&childcount=0	1	1.00	00:00:(
7. /packages	/showalldaily.php?associd=32	1	1.00	00:00:(
8. /vt/activities/disc-golf/disc-golf-at-sugarbush	/showalldaily.php?associd=32	1	1.00	00:00:(

In this particular case, we can see that we have very few problematic self-referrals, but there are still a few lingering issues out there.

Most of them involve the sending of visitors to the AvailabilityOnline page '/showalldaily.php?associd-32' coming from the home page, the lodging page and the packages page.

If we look at the footer of our site, we can see that little AO link sends the visitor to http://ao4.availabilityonline.com/showalldaily.php?associd=32

Morse Farm Sugar Works Vt Maple Products, tours, tastings, store and more. Local characters, local flavor. Open Daily. **View details »**

The Mad River Valley includes Duxbury, Fayston, Moretown, Waitsfield, and Warren, Vermont, as well as Sugarbush Resort & Mad River Glen resorts.

Login |

ao4.availabilityonline.com/showalldaily.php?associd=32

Digging into the source code, we can see that, while we are tracking this as an event, we are not properly using cross-domain tracking in Google Analytics.

```
▼<div class="heading">
  ▶ <p>…</p>
  ▼ <p style="margin-top:10px;">
     <a href="http://www.madrivervalley.com/admin" target="_blank">Login</a>
     " | "
     <a href="http://ao4.availabilityonline.com/showalldaily.php?associd=32" target=
     "_blank" onclick="_gaq.push(['_trackEvent', 'Outgoing', 'AvailabilityOnline',
     'Website']);">AO</a>
  </p>
  </div>
  <!-- skip -->
  ▶ <span class="skip">…</span>
  </div>
</div>
```

We should be calling the GA method '_link' when sending the visitor from domainA to domainB. If we don't the cookie is overwritten and all is lost.

You can use this customized Referral report to find the offending self-referral pages/links. This is just scratching the surface, but it is a good place to start. Proper setup involves much more work than can be explained in this blog post. Talk to your developer, call the third party service's support line, read the documentation.

Some advanced features, clean-ups and integrations take dozens of hours and should be seriously planned before just jumping in and making changes. Remember, GA processes data on the fly, so any filters, goals and profile setting changes take effect from that point forward. The only modifications that will show past data are Google-specific items like Webmaster Tools integration.

The lesson here is big and bold: **GET YOUR CROSS-DOMAIN DATA NOW, NOT LATER!**

The longer you wait, the more garbage data and lost source/medium/campaign information you will have.