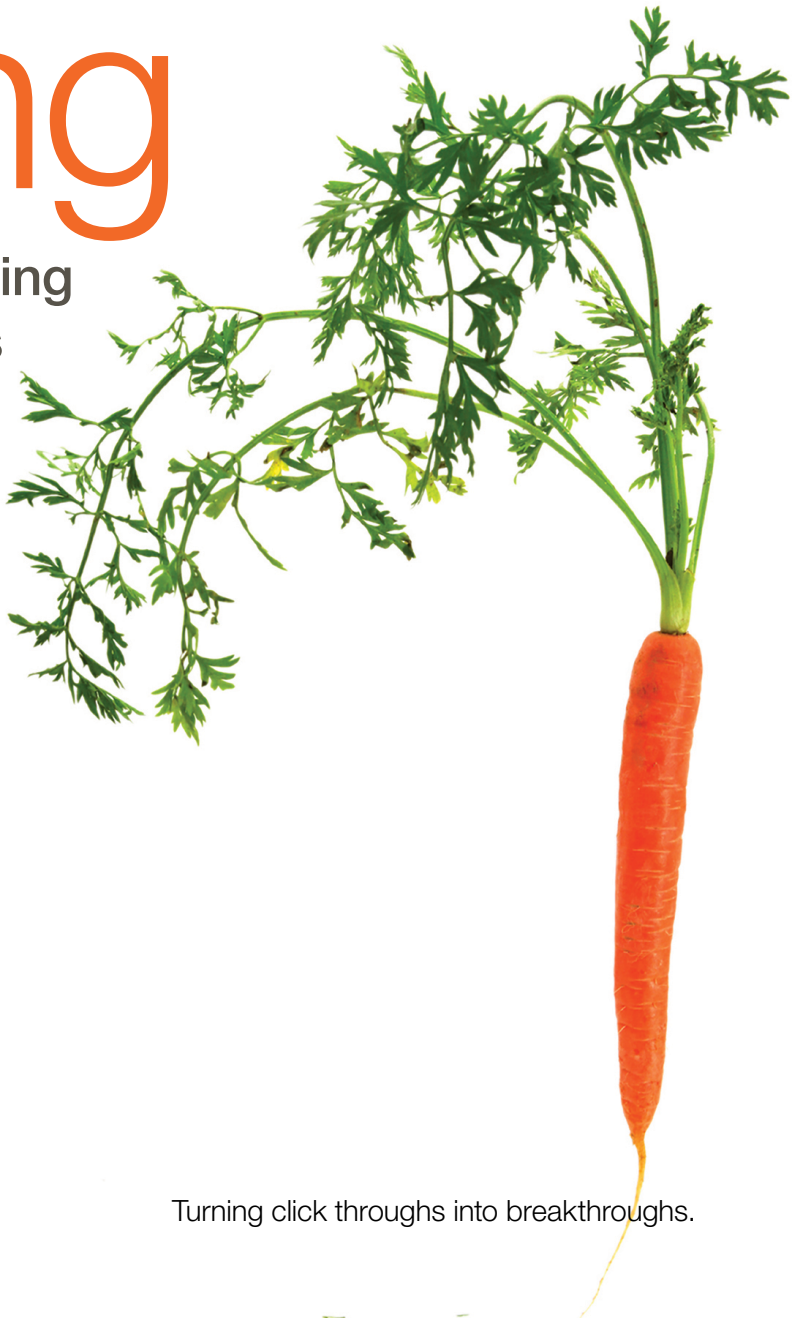
Guide to Online Testing

An Introduction to Testing for Higher Conversions



Turning click throughs into breakthroughs.

Key Testing Concepts

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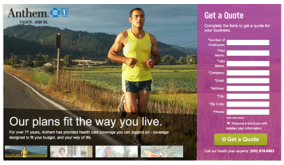
Key Testing Concepts

So, you'd like to start testing your landing pages? Great! Let's start with the lay of the land. It can be challenging to understand testing without a grasp of the basics. So, let's start with a few key definitions and explanations that will help build your testing foundation.

Types of landing experiences

There are four main types of landing experiences. Testing often begins with macro-level efforts aimed at identifying which type of experience works best in the context of the traffic you are sending. Here are some of the most common types of landing experiences:



Landing Page

The good, old fashioned landing page typically includes a call-to-action and a method of conversion (such as a form). Lead generation landing pages are ususally two pages — the landing page and its 'thank you' or confirmation page.

Land & Jump

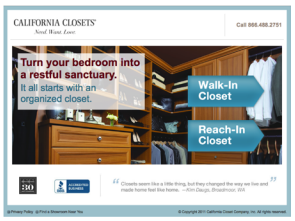
A 'land & jump' is a true single-page landing that acts as an interstitial page between the ad and the conversion. These are sometimes called warming pages as they warm the visitor prior to asking them to convert. E-commerce land & jumps often provide just a bit of information then hand off visitors to either a product page or a shopping cart.

Microsite

Microsites are small, topic-specific websites for the purpose of educating and converting the visitor. A microsite has navigation and usually 3-10 pages of content.

A note about campaign landing pages and website landing pages.

What's a landing page? Anywhere a web visitor might land after they click one of your ads, messages or links. But there are a 2 landing page categories to be aware of. An SEO landing page is usually a page within your site that a visitor lands on after clicking an organic search result. A campaign landing page — which is commonly referred to when discussing landing pages — is a landing page that is created specifically for ads or emails for the express purpose of getting a visitor to take a specific action like filling out a form, downloading a white paper, signing up for a free trial, or making a purchase. This guide to online testing primarily covers campaign landing page testing, but you can apply many of these principles to organic website page testing as well.



Conversion Path

Conversion paths are multi-page experiences (like micro-sites, but without navigation), designed to segment visitors into buckets to quickly funnel them to specific, relevant content. They begin with a segmentation page with limited choices for the visitor to click—choices based on intent, sub-target, product, price, need, pain, role, industry, etc.

Landing experience test states

In discussions of landing page testing you will hear the phrases Control, Champion and Challenger used frequently to denote the state (or hierarchy) of the landing experience within any particular test.

Control

A landing experience that establishes a baseline performance index is the 'control'. For example, the existing landing page for a traffic source is the control experience. A control runs at the same time, on the same traffic, in the same context as the landing experiences that are being tested against the control. Sequential or serial controls are considered invalid as there are environmental differences that can cloud causation.

- There can be only one control in a test wave.

Challenger

A landing experience(s) tested against a control is a challenger. A test can have a single or multiple challengers tested against the control. In a test of a control against a challenger, if a challenger achieves a higher statistically confident conversion rate over the control, then it becomes the champion.

- There can be one to many challengers in a test wave.

Champion

A landing experience that wins a test by achieving higher, statistically confident conversions over the control and any other test challengers is crowned the test champion. Usually, a champion of a test goes on to be promoted to the new control for the traffic source.

- There can be only one champion in a test wave.

Test Waves

A test group is a group of landing experiences that will receive the same stream of traffic at the same time. A test group is made up of a control and any number of challenger landing experiences. A test wave is the test group that is running over a particular period of time.

Types of Test Waves

A test wave can be characterized as either iterative or innovative. This is an important distinction as it affects both the effort necessary to produce the wave and the ability to assess causation once the wave produces a result.

An innovative test wave tests very different things against each other. In an innovative wave you are testing an apple against an orange, such as a microsite against a landing page. Innovative test waves require more resources, but can result in large conversion lift. Because very different things are being tested against each other, in an innovative wave it can be difficult to know exactly why a particular landing experience wins or doesn't.

In an iterative test wave you are testing variations of content on a page such as different versions of a headline, or combinations of different images and buttons. An iterative test wave requires fewer resources to execute, but the potential conversion lift is often smaller than an innovation wave.

Use an innovative test wave to get a big conversion lift from the test champion, then an iterative test wave to lift conversions even further from the champion.

Types of Testing

There are two main classes of landing experience testing. They are very different from one another and can be used alone or together (technology permitting) — you may run multivariate tests or A/B tests.

A/B or A/B/n

When you test an entire landing experience against at least one other landing experience, you're A/B testing. A/B/n is just a way of noting that the test includes more than two alternatives, like A/B/C/D for a test that includes 4 landing experiences in a test group.

MVT or Multivariate Testing

When you test many combinations of elements within a single page — for example, versions of a headline & versions of images— you are multivariate testing.

Testing Math

Some of today's testing software does a good job of insulating the test author from the statistics that are necessary to confidently predict results. That said, you still need to understand some basic concepts. Don't worry, there are no formulas in your future.

Statistical Confidence

How sure do you want to be in your test result? With landing page testing you want to be somewhere between 80-99% confident in the results. The higher you set your confidence, the longer it will take to declare results, but the surer you will be that your results are accurate.

How much time do I need to reach confidence?

The answer to this question is much more complex than it may seem. If the things you are testing are very different from one another, you are likely to reach confidence faster if the landing experiences have very different conversion rates. If you have a lot of traffic, you should also reach confidence faster. But, the more similar your test subjects or the lower your traffic flow, the longer it will take for trends to turn into statistically confident results. Oh, and the higher your confidence level, the longer it will take. And the more things you are testing in your test group — either A/B/n or MVT — the longer it will take.

Typically, A/B tests will reach confidence faster — because there are fewer alternatives that are very different from one another. MVT takes longer as there can be many more alternatives and the differences between them is less significant.

	Longer Test Period	Shorter Test Period
Number of Alternatives	More	Less
Difference in Results	Lesser	Greater
Traffic Volume	Less	More
Confidence Level	Higher > 90%	Lower < 90%

Understanding Testing Risk & Reward

Online testing can be a fascinating, illuminating and rewarding undertaking. It can also be overwhelming and confusing. It's a discipline that lies at the intersection of marketing, statistics and art — three bedfellows that don't necessarily understand one another. Testing for conversion optimization should be a long-term commitment. And for that commitment to yield success, it must meld the three disparate elements with full understanding of the inherent risks & rewards.

All Test Types are not Equal

Strategic decisions made at the onset of a testing program have a profound impact on both the pace of the program and its results. Fundamental to this understanding is the idea that all test types do not have the same potential upside or downside

Comparing & Contrasting A/B and MVT

Testing experiences against one another in A/B tests offers the opportunity to create wildly different things. Think in terms of testing apples and oranges. The upside of this style of testing is that it gives you the freedom to find big winners — huge conversion lift. And the downside is that you can also find big losers. Win or lose, since so much is so different, it's unlikely that you'll be in any position to answer 'why' your apple beat your orange. Was it the shape, the color, the texture? Who knows. And for A/B testers who get a big conversion lift — who cares? You got the lift and that's what matters most.

With multivariate testing you will likely be testing a higher number of variables, but they're still limited to the context of a single page — in contrast to varying an entire experience with A/B. So the potential gains and losses are less extreme as well. A lot of lift can be found using MVT when the interaction effects of multiple variables come together in a powerful and perhaps unexpected way. In relatively minor MVT scenarios — where you're testing a few versions of a headline for example — you'll likely come out of your test with a pretty clear understanding of causation. In more complex cases — where many elements are varied on a page to produce a winning combination — your inference of causation may be more difficult. But again, why something won or lost is less important than the reason we're testing in the first place — to generate more business from less marketing spend.

The Risk of the Endless Test

A risk to be aware of is the never-ending test—alternatives that are too similar may

not deliver a statistically significant result within a reasonable period of time. When waiting for results takes too long, a testing program can run into paralysis that is a disservice to the program investment. The purpose of testing is to get more business from less spend. Waiting months for small lifts between very similar options is not going to serve the top line business purpose of the testing program. When you find yourself in a test wave that appears to be a statistical draw, call it as such and move on to a new test wave. Often, when you step back and look at your alternatives, you realize that you were timid in your approach — testing nothing of significance — playing it safe. Every test — win, lose or draw — is an opportunity to learn and improve. Waiting for statistical confidence on a test that is yielding nothing is a tremendous waste.

What kind of tester are you?

It may sound silly, but it's good to know what your testing personality type. Organizations also tend to have testing profiles — predispositions or cultural norms that affect planning, documentation and reporting. We've found that marketers exhibit characteristics that ultimately push them towards being rock stars, pragmatists or purists.

	Rock Star	Pragmatist	Purist
View of Testing	ROI	Work	Knowledge
Pre-Test Focus	Strategy & Revenue	Creative & Production	Metrics & Attribution

	Rock Star	Pragmatist	Purist
Performance Granularity	Campaign	Landing Experience	Page or Element
Post-Test Focus	Next Test	Next Wave	Last Wave
Confidence Level	Mid (85-95%)	Low (80-85%)	High (95-99%)

Test Planning

The key to effective test planning is to have a vision of the if/then scenarios that come from your initial waves. It's counterproductive to over plan, and chaotic to under plan. At ion, we've developed a test planning framework that balances foresight with agility to consistently create high-performance programs.

Reminder: Each wave of testing shares a stream of traffic, and all test landing experiences must be run in parallel with visitors allocated at random to each landing experience within the wave.

Before you can design test waves, you need to divvy up your traffic streams by medium, vehicle and message. And then you need to determine if you have controls for each stream. Most of the time, tests are being plugged into existing streams of traffic with existing landing experiences — even if those existing experiences are rudimentary, like a home page or website deep link. Regardless of what your control is, you should probably test against it for wave one. You want to get to a reliable baseline and running a parallel control is the only way to get that.

Once you have an inventory of the streams of traffic and their control landing experiences, you can prioritize them by traffic volume or expense. The more volume in a traffic stream, the more potential it has to generate incremental business. And, in many cases, the larger the traffic stream, the higher the expense associated with that traffic. More traffic means there's more at stake. The quickest way to show ROI in an optimization program is to lift the performance of the most costly stream of traffic. So put them in order by traffic volume — unless there's a high-value, high-cost, low-traffic stream that's a better wave-one candidate.

For wave one, start with your highest-value traffic source and test new challenger landing experiences against a control that's been running on that traffic source.

Deciding What to Test

What to test in wave one depends on where you're at with your previous testing program. Some organizations have mature optimization programs while others have

done little, if any, testing.

If you have a mature program, it's likely that you'll pick up where you left off with your prior efforts. ion typically recommends taking historical learnings into consideration and developing at least one innovative A/B challenger to run against your current control. Evaluate user behavior on the control page(s) to determine potential conversion influences, and optimize for those influences.

Many organizations are less developed and are moving into testing for the first time. In those cases, it's often good to run innovative challengers against a control.

Deciding How Many Alternatives to Test

The number of alternatives you choose to test — via either A/B and MVT combined — should be proportional to the amount of traffic you have. If you have a lot of traffic, then by all means, test more alternatives in a single wave. If you have limited traffic, you should be thinking in terms of one or two challengers against the control. Keep in mind that your overall traffic is not relevant — it's the traffic flow to the source feeding the test wave that needs to be large enough to provide an adequate sample size for each of your alternatives. What is 'adequate' depends on other factors — especially your chosen confidence level. See the section titled Testing Math for more on this. And when in doubt, just run an A/B test to keep it simple and ensure you can cycle through the test wave relatively quickly.

Anatomy of a Test Wave Plan

Test planning can be pretty abstract. To help with visualization and make it a bit more tangible, ion has developed a simple, but powerful test plan format that works for any testing program regardless of maturity or scale. The format includes the test wave name, who the test is being targeted to, where it will run, when it will run (including the level of statistical significance for the test), why this test is being conducted (the test hypothesis), and at the conclusion of the test, what happened documenting test results.

Test Wave Planning

In online testing, it is common to think about the current test wave, but not further beyond that. Or, inversely, it is common to have a long list of things to be tested, and to just cycle through each next test idea as a test wave concludes. Neither approach is quite right when the goal is a methodical, organized approach to testing. Here, we illustrate how you can anticipate the outcomes of your test and plan for your next

steps—giving you a mid-term view of your testing program, while adapting to actual test results of each wave.

As you plan your tests, consider if/then statements based on potential test results, so you can start to anticipate where you want to take your next test wave. For example, in an innovation wave pitting a landing page against a microsite, when one becomes the test champion you may not know exactly why it won the test (remember, in A/B innovation ways, the goal is lift, rather than learning). What will you do next?

If	Then
Landing Page wins	Wave 2: Test several variations of headlines and/or calls to action on landing page.
Microsite wins	Wave 2: Test short and long copy against control copy.
Statistical draw	Wave 2: Evaluate bounce rate of both to determine if experience or content is a factor. Use information to inform next wave. If bounce rate is higher on one, abandon that format and test versions of the lower bounce rate experience.

The above is just a sample of if/then thinking to do in advance of running a test wave

to help you become a more proactive tester who is able to bring organization to the testing process.

Conclusion

You now understand some key online testing concepts and you are ready to get the ball rolling with your testing program. 73% of ion's customers report a conversion increase of at least 100%! Use the principles outlined in this guide to help you achieve similar results.

ion

Meet the software that creates, tests and analyzes the web's most effective pages.

WYSIWYG Editing
I make it easy to see and style fonts, colors, sizes.

Image Editing
I crop, resize, and add transparency with my quick, easy image editor.

Drag & Drop
I make the world's best pages using these 16 drag & drop elements.

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- Images
- Links
- Widgets
- HTML
- iFrame
- Flash
- Interactive Layers
- Interactive Rotators
- Interactive Tabs
- Interactive Accordions
- Interactive Lightboxes
- Interactive Videos
- Facebook
- Twitter
- Social Share

Instant Swapping
I'll swap the position of two elements—like this image and headline—simply by dragging one over the other.

Mobile Simulation
I instantly simulate smartphones and tablets—and rotate them too!

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Freedom to Style
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