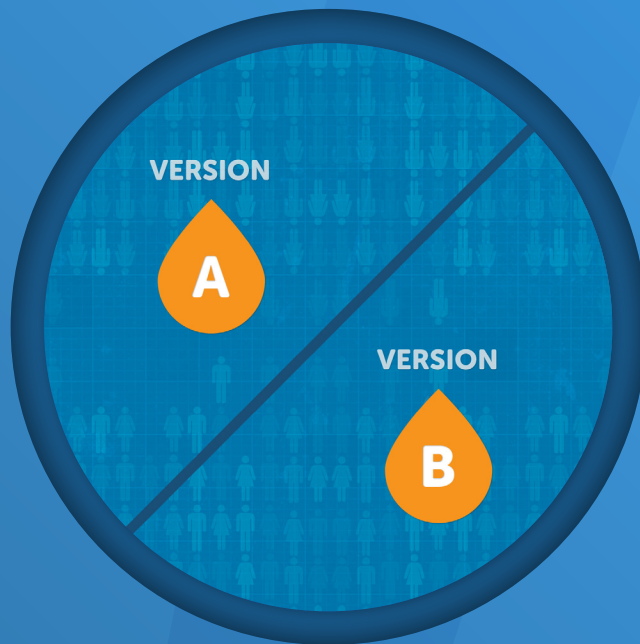




The Ultimate Guide to A/B Testing

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The Language of A/B Testing & Optimization

To make sure that we're all on the same page, let's set some basic vocabulary:

- **Element** - a discrete unit on the page: a block of text, a form, a button, an image, etc.
- **Page** - a web page or landing page that is considered the control page for your test.
- **Variation** - a version of a page that has some changes made to page elements. Also referred to as a variant.
- **Test** - a hypothesis that one version of an element will change the conversion rate in a significant, hopefully, beneficial way.
- **Conversion** - when a visitor takes a desired action on the page.

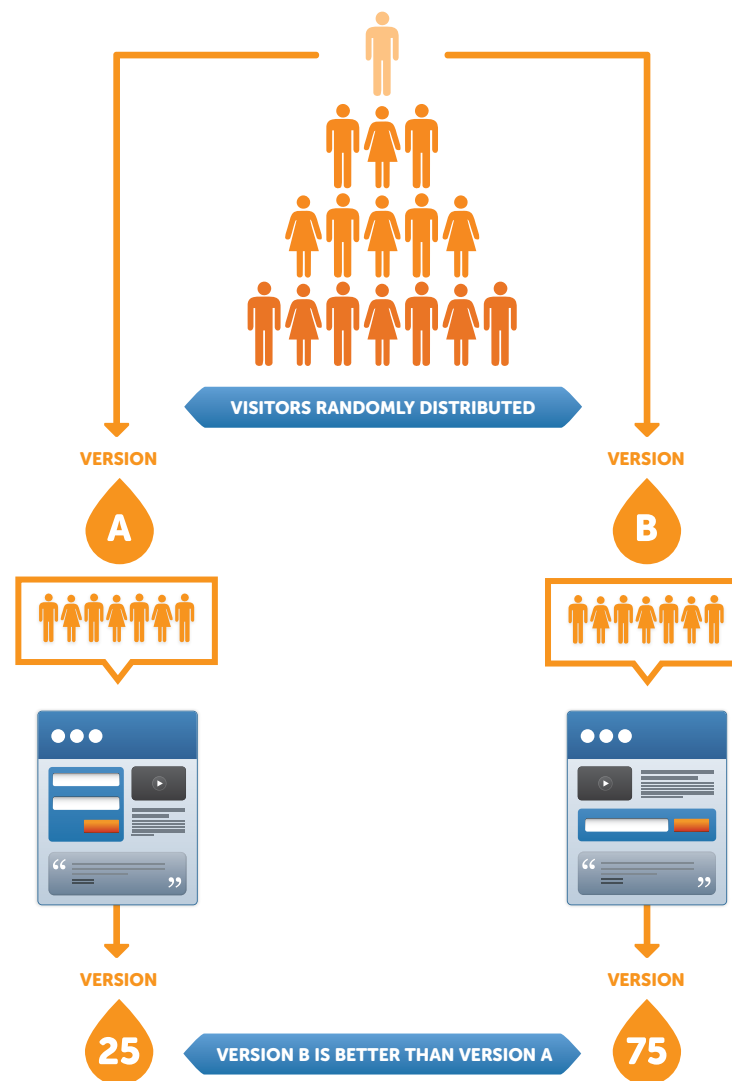
The most common means of testing to improve conversions online are **A/B Testing** (aka Split-testing) and **Multivariate Testing** (aka MVT), which we'll talk about in more detail below.

What is an A/B test?

When you run an A/B test, you compare one page against one or more variations that contain **one major difference in an element** of the control page. After a set amount of time, or visits, you compare the results to how the change affected your results.

A/B testing is actually a nickname for a variety of testing that involves single element changes across multiple variations, so it might actually be A/B/C/D testing, but it is still called A/B testing and if you see A/B/n or Split Test that is just a more accurate expression of one control with many variations.

Every visitor will see one version of the page or another, and you'll measure conversions from each set of visitors. A/B tests allow you to test one version of copy, images, forms etc. against another. Layout choices such as where you place the elements can also be tested, or functionality choices like when and how you show error messages.



How Much Traffic do You Need for a Valid Test?

A common question is how much traffic you need when running a test. This will depend on a few factors. If you can run 100-200 visitors to your pages, you can sometimes make gut decisions about pages that are obviously underperforming and initiate a new test. But **generally you'll want to wait for about 1,000 total visitors and make sure you run the test for a week to cover daily variances.**

Use A/B Test Results for Major Site-Wide Decisions

Split tests can also be used to temper drastic changes like redesigning a homepage by only serving it to a portion of your visitors. Companies like Twitter and Facebook use this strategy to test major interface changes by only rolling out the new version to a segment of their visitors and measuring how that group reacts.

A/B test results are influential in making good decisions in site redesign because **they help you see what elements are important for your audience**

and customers in a controlled environment. Once you have seen the results of a test you can take the new knowledge to your site wide design.

One of the best things about A/B testing is that it can be very fast and dramatic. It is also less complicated to set-up and reach significant results in order to make informed decisions.

Advantages of A/B Testing

- They are fast
- Advanced analytics can be installed and evaluated for each variation (e.g. click tracking, heatmaps, etc.)
- Can achieve more dramatic conversion rate lift results
- Requires less traffic

Disadvantages of A/B Testing

- More dramatic failures
- Less specific understanding of element effects

What is a Multivariate test?

When you run a multivariate test you use one page and dynamically supply multiple versions of multiple elements. For instance, testing 3 versions of your headline, 2 versions of your call to action, and 3 button colors simultaneously. That would give you 18 versions (3-headlines x 2-CTA x 3-button-color) of the page that you are testing.

As you can see, with each successive element and variation on an element you multiply the number of versions that you are testing. **This means that the amount of traffic required to reach confidence increases.** If you are testing 2 versions of 3 elements you have 8 variations (2 x 2 x 2) and if you have 3 versions of 3 elements you have 27 variations (3 x 3 x 3), adding extra tests adds up very fast.

The purpose of multivariate testing is to refine pages that already perform well by looking for compounding effects between elements.

Multivariate testing is something that you should only be looking at if you have large amounts of traffic.

Advantages of MVT

- Better measurement of element interaction
- Failures are less dramatic
- More comprehensive testing

Disadvantages of MVT

- Can require many more variable combinations to be run than A/B
- Requires vastly more traffic to reach statistical significance than A/B
- Major layout changes are not feasible
- Less layout change is possible
- The restrictions of the test setup constrain marketing creativity
- Dynamic elements decrease the effectiveness of 3rd-party tracking tools
- Less layout change is possible
- The restrictions of the test setup constrain marketing creativity
- Dynamic elements decrease the effectiveness of 3rd-party tracking tools

What is Multi-Armed Bandit Testing?

Recently a new type of testing has appeared on the scene. It's called the multi-armed bandit. This type of testing is essentially the same as an A/B split test and works very much the way that Google Adwords ad delivery works. **It starts with an experimental phase where it gives an even split of traffic across all versions of the page and then it goes into an exploitation phase where it give more traffic to the version that is currently performing the best.**

Over time if the winner starts to decline in conversion the system automatically gives traffic to another version. **The drawback to automated systems like this is that they can make counterproductive decisions**, especially if they have a short experimental phase or choose a conversion event that is not on target for your bottom line needs.

There are varying opinions on whether this type of testing is actually successful. Some people like Visual Website Optimizer say that in the long run [multi-armed bandit](#) requires a large conversion difference to be successful.

Why A/B testing is the right answer most of the time

Part of why we use A/B testing is because it is less complicated for marketers that use it and is generally more fruitful as a testing method. Chris Goward at [Wider Funnel](#) says that they do 8-10 A/B tests for ever 1 multivariate test that they do for clients, and they only do MVT on pages that get a very large number of unique visitors. **Most of the time A/B split-testing is the best answer for improving conversions and testing hypotheses, so we want focus on that.**

Getting started with A/B Testing

This is one of those things that is hard for a lot of people. How do you start? The simple answer is to make one page detailing the simple facts about your product or service. These simple facts are the features of your product. These features have consequences. Those consequences are benefits. Secondly, ask yourself why are you better than the other options (the competition) for solving the problem? Is it a lower price, better shipping, better return policy, etc?

Online you have two primary ways to communicate information: image and copy.

All good pages are going to cover the following 5 things:

- 1. A headline with a Unique Value Proposition**
- 2. A demonstration of the product or the benefit - preferably in the context of how it would be used**
- 3. A clear value for the viewer**
- 4. Support of value**
- 5. One action**

Your action and your headline are the only things that need to be copy driven, everything else is wide open. When you create your control page, make sure all 5 of these elements are represented. If you have done this you **will have a solid foundation for testing**.

Building a Control Page

Control pages are your first step in creating a generation of tests. Your control is the parent and variations are the children. The winning variation becomes the next generation's control for further variation.

A good place to start your control page is a wireframe. Take a look at KissMetrics' [Landing Page Blueprint](#) (seen on the right).

But, don't let that stop you from using your own vision in how you layout your elements. Just because a certain structure is popular doesn't mean it's right for you, also, standing out can be a very effective strategy for good results.

Once your basic structure and content is in place you will have a starting point for tests. **Good structure will make a world of difference in your testing success, because it will make each change less time consuming.**



Building Page Variations

Each variation should have one hypothesis of change: color of background, different major image, different CTA in the headline, different CTA in the action button, etc. It doesn't matter how many hypotheses you have, but **you will always get the best data by only having one hypothesis per variation.**

Once you get used to how your target market behaves you may be able to get away with a multi-hypothesis test, but when you start out [stick to a framework that maximizes test cleanliness](#).

What Makes a Test Champion

In simple terms your champion is the page variation that converts the best. Once you've crowned your champion though you'll want to dig a little deeper and gauge the quality of your prospects too; **The reality is that no matter how much time you put**

into designing your test, if you are communicating to the wrong audience, you will acquire the wrong customers or leads. Keep an eye on what your new customers or leads do, and if they're not the right ones, run a new test with different messaging to be more inline with your most important business goals.

A good technique for tracking your test performance is to keep a record of your hypotheses and your results, so you know where you're going right and where you went wrong. That will make your next test better, and serve as a record for stakeholders, as well as yourself.

Note: You should use descriptive experiments names like **Form Length 2012 Catalog** or **Call To Action: Registration**, something that makes the test parameters apparent, not *Steve's Test* or *PPC Test*.

A Case Study for A/B Testing

After the launch of the [Noob Guide to Online Marketing](#) we made a landing page that used PayWithATweet.com to help expand the distribution of the guide, which averaged a 13% conversion rate. We then decided to see if we could get better results from the landing page.

[We had gathered some data](#) by inserting a KISSinsights (now Qualaroo) widget on the page that suggested many people (about 45%) would rather provide their email to get the PDF download, so we decided to see which would convert better, “pay with an email” or “pay with a tweet”. In addition, some feedback indicated that it was fairly common for people to pay with a tweet and then immediately delete it from their stream.

Our Test Hypothesis

Will allowing visitors to download the PDF by providing their email address perform better than receiving it in exchange for a tweet? Considering that not everyone has a Twitter account, or is willing to share such information with their followers.

Pay with a Tweet Averaged
an 18% conversion rate.

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Moving on from this test we've decided to discuss a possible hybrid option that might produce the best of both worlds; A single version that lets the user decide whether they want to pay with a tweet **or** provide their email.

What To Test

Developing a hypothesis of what to test

The first step in any A/B test is to create a hypothesis for what will make the page perform better. There are two very common approaches: one revolves around data, the other involves people.

The data approach uses statistical data like bounce rate, exits, conversion starts, and funnel analysis. Data driven hypothesis use tools like [Clicktale](#), [Google Analytics](#), [Omniture](#), and [CrazyEgg](#).

The people approach employs tools like [Qualaroo](#) (formerly KISSinsights) and [SilverBack](#) to gather user feedback. These are all about addressing the quality of the experience on your site or specific pages.

Your most effective hypotheses will come from combining both the data and people approach.

On the data side you may see something like a high bounce rate and know that there is something wrong. You might look at time on page too, since this can be a good indicator of how people are interacting with your page. If you have a high bounce rate and a high time on page you probably have a problem near the bottom of the page, maybe the call to action button. If you have a high bounce rate and a short time on page it means that you have something repelling at the beginning of the page, maybe your headline.

If you cannot determine from the data approach what is it specifically that is hurting your conversion rate, you should then use the people approach to gather direct user feedback to gain insight.

So What Should You Test?

The Headline

Your headline is your first impression. Its success is dictated by how closely it matches what your viewer expected when they made the decision to visit your page - whether from an ad, banner or email link etc.

You can try testing positive versus negative language in the way you express your value in the headline, for example:
Save Time By Downloading Now vs. *Stop Wasting Time, Download Now*.

People are impatient and will read your headline very quickly, so communicates your core value proposition in a way that makes it really obvious what your offer is.

To assess problems with your headline try a 5-second test: where you flash the page in front of a person unfamiliar with your brand for 5 seconds and ask "What is this page about?" If they don't know, it's not clear enough and time to revisit the messaging.

Headline Test Ideas:

- Long vs. short
- Positive vs. negative
- Benefit oriented vs. feature oriented
- Single headline vs. primary and secondary supporting copy
- Enhance the contrast to make your headline more visually powerful, to focus people's attention on it

An Example Test - Headline

In this [headline test by WhichTestWon](#) version A increased visitor form fills by 27.76% by changing the headline and subhead wording.

VERSION A

vs.

VERSION B



Images

Since images can convey complex ideas and emotions quickly they are a phenomenal source for testing.

This is one of the few areas that has clear best practices. Make sure you use high quality images ie. no pixelation or blurriness. If you use people, have their gaze directed to your call to action, and choose images that enhance the understanding of your offering.

It's also been shown that image annotations are one of the first things people read on a page, so make sure you write something compelling right below your primary image.

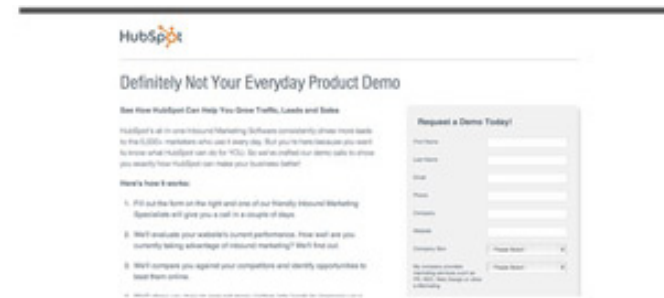
The most basic image tests will be:

- Color vs. black and white
- People vs. product
- One image vs. many images
- Masculine vs. feminine

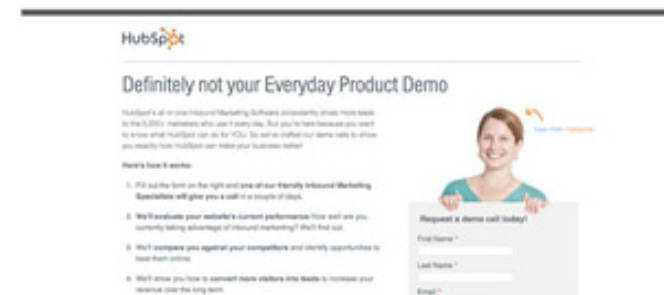
An Example Test - Images

Sometimes tests will surprise you (which is always a good way to interrupt your assumptions). [In this case study](#) removing the image actually resulted in version A increasing leads by 24% by raising more of the form above the fold.

VERSION A



VS.



VERSION B

Video

Using a video on your pages can have a dramatic effect on engagement and your conversion rate. But what do you test?

- 1. Autoplay vs. press play:** Usability guidelines advise against autoplay as it is an interruption technique that annoys people and makes them click the back button. However, it can also increase conversions. You'll have to weigh up the potential negative impact on your brand's perception versus the potential for increased conversions.
- 2. Calls to action (CTA):** This can be permanently visible, or be shown at strategic times throughout the video, or be presented at the end.
- 3. Length:** Try short and long versions to see what your customers need. Some products may need a detailed study, while others might be better suited to a 30 second "commercial" style.
- 4. Directional cues within the video:** Point your visitors at your landing page's conversion goal. This can be a physical action (a person pointing) or a verbal instruction.
- 5. Image vs. Video:** Try a static image in one page variant and a video in the other.
- 6. Spokesperson:** Not everyone is a natural speaker, and maybe your audience doesn't want to listen to the CEO pitching them. Find someone who comes across as natural and likeable.
- 7. Number of videos:** If you are using them for testimonials, you might want to consider having more than one to increase the trust factor.
- 8. Lo-fi vs. Hi-fi:** Professional videos are good at communicating your focus on quality, and are usually the best way to go. But with a tight budget and even a camera phone, you can create a convincing and authentic experience.

Some Example Tests - Video

In this case study by VidYard they show how they got a conversion lift of 100% by using video on their landing page.

In this second test, [adding a video](#) made version B increase conversions by 216%!

VERSION A

vs.

VERSION B



Copy

The typical rule of thumb is to keep your pages short and concise, but don't dismiss the long form either - it's been proven to convert - but typically only for the sales letter type of page.

Whether you have 5 paragraphs or just a set of bullets it is important to focus first on benefits and then support with facts and function.

A good way to judge the effectiveness of your copy (if you can't tie your tests success or failure to it), **try reading it aloud to see how it sounds and flows.**

Even better, get a coworker to read it to you and see how much you cringe.

If you find that you are writing a lot of copy on your landing pages you should utilize the famous advice of Steve Krug, **"Remove 50% of your copy, then delete half of what's left."** Being overly verbose can hurt your conversions if your message can be described adequately in the short form. Again, test both versions to see which resonates best.

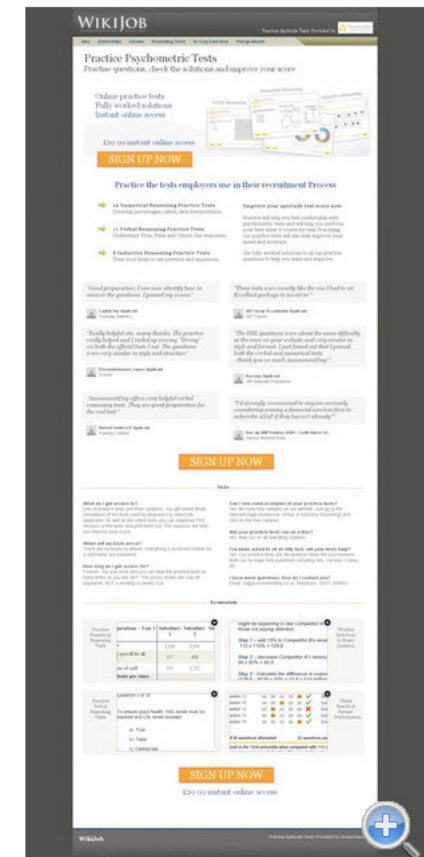
An Example Test - Copy

Sometimes all you need to do is remove just a small bit of copy to see an increase in conversions. [In this example](#), just removing one single block of text (not even that significant in terms of size), resulted in a conversion lift of 62%.

VERSION A

vs.

VERSION B



Forms

The majority of landing pages include some kind of form to capture data from your visitors. To make them effective you need to be offering something in exchange for the data. Examples would be an ebook, whitepaper or webinar registration.

But what do you test on the form? What you're trying to do is balance your need for data with the "size of the prize" (what you're giving away) to find the optimal point of conversion.

Some things you can test on your forms:

- The number of fields
- The relevance of the fields to what you're giving away
- The design of the containing element for the form (e.g. a box that encapsulates it)
- **Required vs. non-required fields (the test below examines this)**
- The position of the form (on the right or left hand side of the page)
- Adding directional cues that point to your form
- The form header (a description of what you're asking the visitor to do that matches closely what you say in your CTA)
- Placing a privacy policy link next to an email address field to improve trust (make it pop up in a lightbox to prevent people leaving your page)
- Splitting your form over more than one page
- The button copy (discussed next)

An Example Test - Forms

[Here's a surprising one.](#) The test was to see if making all the fields optional would increase conversions. Seems like a no brainer right? **And it did win - by 31%.** The surprising part was that the quality of leads actually improved too (the natural assumption being that you'd get a bunch of junk - perhaps trusting people really does pay off).

VERSION A

vs.

VERSION B



The Call to Action (CTA)

Your call to action IS your conversion. It's what you want your visitors to do (and nothing else). If people aren't converting your call to action may be in need of updating.

CTA's should be very descriptive, describing exactly what will happen when clicked. A good tip when writing your CTA is to finish the phrase "I want to..."; for example:

I want to...

- Read More
- Subscribe to the Newsletter
- Download the ebook
- Get Free Shipping
- Upgrade Now

Strong CTAs should reinforce the line of thinking introduced in your headline, content and imagery, effectively ending the story of your page with a solid "what to do now".

An Example Test - Call to Action

This example from our blog shows a series of case studies on how [to write CTA's that convert](#) including a simple one (shown below), where they achieved a 38% lift in conversions by changing a single word.



Colors

This is a contentious one. Some people insist that the color of your buttons is highly influential in creating desire to act; Green for go, blue as the standard color of an interactive web element, or orange/red to illicit an emotional reaction.

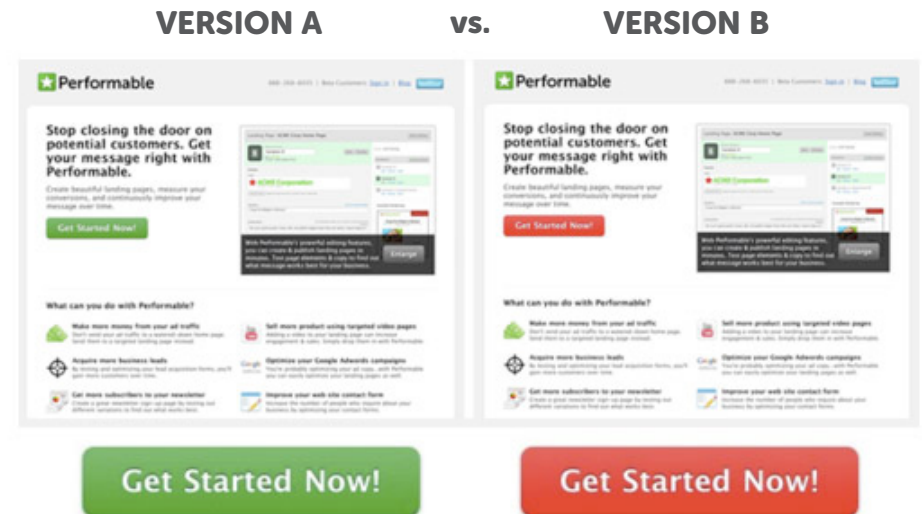
Others say it's not relevant and the more important aspects to consider are the contrast of the button so that it stands out clearly from the rest of the page. This is why A/B testing is so useful, because you can remove the conjecture and find out if it will make a difference with your audience.

Also remember that many people are color blind, especially men, so if you have a male demographic you will want to focus more on contrast rather than color.

Just remember, that **more often it's the text on the button that is going to have the most dramatic effect on conversions**, as described above.

An Example Test - Color

Going with the first idea, that button color does have an impact, [read this case study over at Hubspot](#) that shows how the red button outperformed the green button by 21%.



Social Proof & Trust

People are like sheep in many ways. They follow the herd and like to join in with what others are doing. To illustrate this, imagine walking down a street and seeing one person staring up at the sky. You probably wouldn't give it a second thought. But if there was a crowd of 30 people all staring at the same thing, you'd quickly divert your attention to see what was going on. That's social proof and it builds trust in your visitors, helping conversions.

So how do you add social proof to your landing pages?

There are many types of social proof you can include, such as:

- Testimonials
- Endorsements: Logos of important press placements, and customers with well known brands
- Social influencers: A great example is to show the number of registrants attending a webinar.

Other types include follower counts from Twitter or Facebook. You can also show social sharing buttons to illustrate how popular the page is - but it's often better to place them on your confirmation pages so that your main page retains it's ability to have a single CTA (we'll get into more detail in a moment).

Below, you'll find some things you can test on your page, and the ways to test them would be:

- How many you use - one main testimonial vs. five
- Position on the page - is it more important to establish trust right away or can it be an afterthought at the bottom of the page?

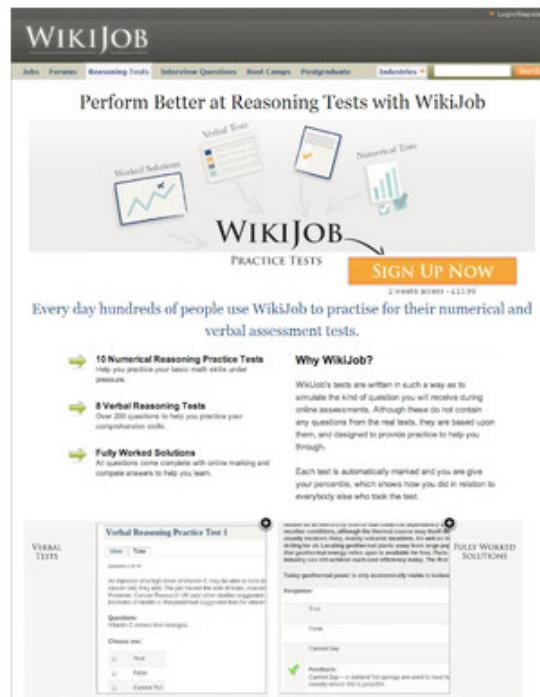
An Example Test - Social Proof & Trust

This example, run on [VisualWebsiteOptimizer](#), the use of testimonials in version B resulted in a conversion lift of 34% for all organic search traffic arriving at the page.

VERSION A

vs.

VERSION B



Post-Conversion Confirmation Pages

This is my favorite and probably **the most overlooked area for testing**. Confirmation pages appear after the completion of a lead gen form or after completing a shopping cart checkout on an ecommerce site.

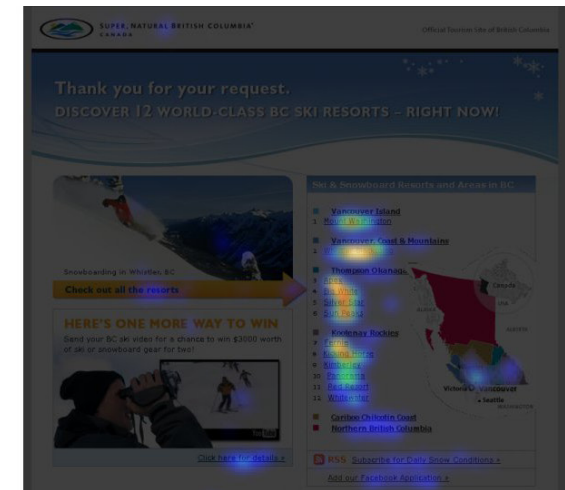
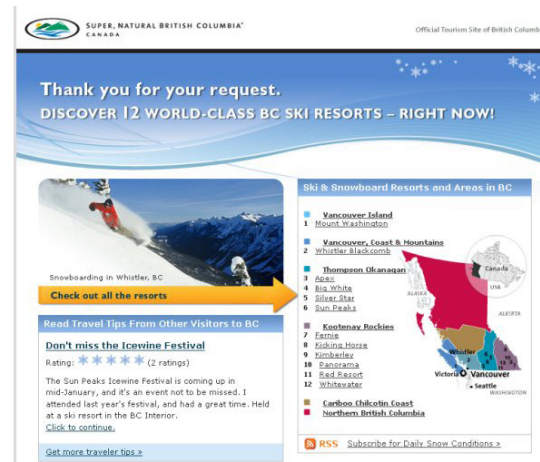
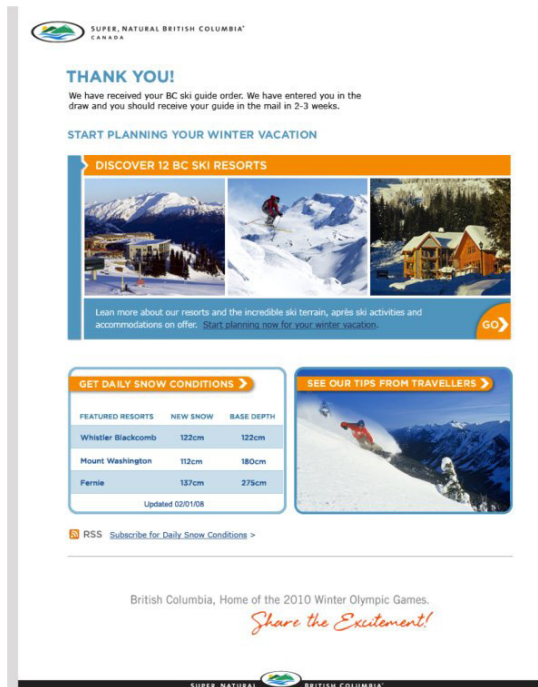
The reason it's such a hot spot is that it's the first page a customer sees after converting, meaning that they have invested trust, time, personal data or money with you. So you need to take advantage of this short window of opportunity to try and get a little more out of them.

Things you can test placing on your confirmation pages are:

- Social sharing widgets: As mentioned earlier, by placing them here you are removing the clutter from the main page.
- Newsletter subscription: Ask them to subscribe to your newsletter (and explain the benefits of doing so, i.e. what they'll get: tips, advice, discounts etc.)
- Suggested products: Follow the Amazon model, for ecommerce confirmation pages try adding the classic "If you liked that, you might like this."
- A bonus prize: If you are trying to establish yourself as a thought leader by giving away content, consider adding an extra free PDF download, it gives them extra incentive to spread the goodwill via word of mouth recommendations.

An Example Test - Post-Conversion Confirmation Page

WiderFunnel did a test for TourismBC on their confirmation pages and increased engagement by 44% with the interactive elements on the page.



A/B Testing Workflow

Whether you are an individual marketer wearing many hats or a fully fledged team, you're going to have a similar workflow.

Next is a sample workflow you can use to create, optimize and test your pages, and who is responsible for each step.

If you **do** have a team, it would look something like this:

- The Marketer (for social, email, PPC etc)
- The Copywriter
- The Optimizer
- The Designer
- The Campaign Manager

Each has a different role to play in the process of **running a successful marketing campaign that involves A/B testing.**

A/B Testing Workflow

Step 1 - Brainstorming

All members participate in brainstorming and discussion of potential elements. The designer creates major element assets and builds a control page layout with filler copy and every page element you think might be needed to convey your message.

Step 2 - Creating page variants

The optimizer and marketer then each take an independent stab at coming up with page variations they think will convert best, removing elements and working with the designer and copywriter to help with messaging and layout changes.

Step 3 - Running your test

The test is launched and traffic is driven to the page by the channels chosen by the marketer. Meanwhile, the campaign manager will be coordinating the team and any external contacts if there are co-marketing opportunities involved.

Step 4 - Promoting your winner

Once you have identified the winning page variation, it will be promoted to be the new control page (and receive all of the inbound traffic) and any side bets placed about who was going to make the best page will be settled (makes it more fun).

Step 5 - Start a new test

Add, rinse, repeat. It's now time to document your test results and begin work on a new hypothesis for your next test. Remember testing should be an ongoing series of experiments.

Dealing With Data

The purpose of A/B testing is twofold: improve the results of specific pages or campaigns, and derive insights to improve your future campaigns.

Your process of dealing with the data you glean from your tests will be something like this:

	I understand the results	I don't understand the results
Conversion Improvement	Woo Hoo! You are a genius start your next test. (Pass)	Really? Ok, do a test to figure out the next step. (Pass, kinda)
Conversion Decline	Good save. Stop the test and try a new hypothesis. (Pass)	Seriously, a kitten just died because of you. (Fail)

How to Deal With a Failed Test

The bottom line with data is that tests don't fail, analysts and test designers fail. The test can only report data that is as useful as the question that is being asked. There will be times when the data is surprising, but if you ran a clean test then you should be able to figure out what needs to be tested next to keep on track.

When Should You Stop Testing?

Your end parameters should be defined when you start your test. That means setting a minimum sample size, and a length for your test. Generally speaking (as mentioned earlier), you'll want to push at least 100-200 unique visitors through each page variant and ensure the test runs for 1-2 weeks to account for day and time variations in visitor and demographic behavior.

When you're nearing the end of a test, if your statistical confidence level is still low, but you're seeing a decent difference in conversion rate

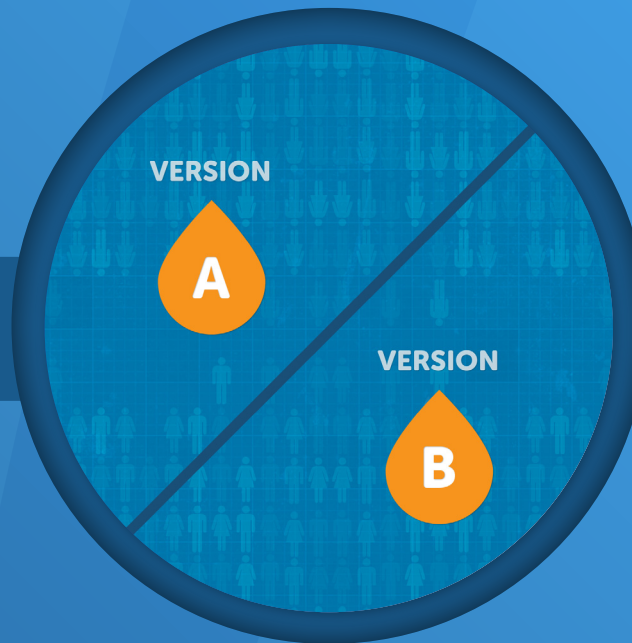
between the variants, make a gut-check call and remove the poorer performing pages. If you can't see an obvious winner, keep the test running until it reaches around a 90% confidence level - this is when you'll be able to make a decision based on data.

What next?

Just keep testing. Continue to make hypotheses and new experiments until you aren't getting acceptable improvement. Once you reach the point of diminished returns you should start looking for new sources of inspiration; A perfect example is your customer support team, who are in direct contact with your customers daily, and likely understand their needs better than anyone.

Finally, remember to have fun. A/B testing can be a great way to involve other members of your team and to share in the success of their ideas.

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