



DCN DIRECT AUDIENCE REVENUE CASE STUDIES

Building Subscriptions and Memberships for Quality Journalism

Whether they're selling subscriptions or memberships, these publishers are finding success by prioritizing direct consumer revenue for their digital products.

January 2019



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Executive Summary

Much is written about the challenges publishers are facing today in terms of their digital business models. The rise in programmatic advertising, the decline of print and changing consumer behavior has shifted advertising revenues to platforms, ad tech companies and other third parties. In response, publishers are testing a wide range of alternative revenue streams.

One of these revenue streams — direct consumer revenue — is being tested by many publishers. The American Press Institute notes that 78% of newspapers with at least 50,000 circulation have some form of paid model, most commonly a 'metered' model in which users can access a limited number of articles for free and then are asked to subscribe for unlimited access. At the same time, a number of nonprofit and membership-based news operations have started to prioritize digital membership revenue. This includes new players like Spirited Media, that are built on the proposition that reader payments will fund their journalism.

So far, digital reader revenue results have been mixed. Data show that publishers can convert the most engaged 5-10% of their audience into paying subscribers, but the vast majority of publishers still fall well below this mark. Benchmarks from The Lenfest Institute for Journalism, for example, show a wide range of performance on key benchmarks such as conversion rate, retention rate, and paid users per unique visitor. The most successful publications perform about ten times better on key metrics than publishers at the median levels — and outperform publishers in the 90th percentile by more than 3 times, suggesting that most publications with paid content models still have significant room for improvement.

In addition, recent benchmarks from Digital Content Next show that many publishers are still relying primarily on advertising revenue, even as they work toward increasing their direct consumer revenue. Eighty percent of DCN publisher revenue is based on advertising, while 20% is based on non-advertising sources (including direct consumer revenue).



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The [DCN Paid Content Benchmark and Best Practices Report](#) released to DCN members in 2018, identified and outlined opportunities for growth. We have included the five best practices here as a reminder.

The 5 key practices include:

- 1 Support commitments to paid content initiatives at the highest levels of top management.
.....
- 2 Invest in premium content — including the creation of original content — for direct consumer revenue subscription products that inform, educate, enrich, benefit, entertain and thrill consumers to drive subscriptions, high levels of engagement and renewal.
.....
- 3 Support direct-to-consumer subscription products with opportunity for growth by investing in dedicated staffing, marketing, and technology and developing disciplined subscription marketing operations to optimize your marketing spend.
.....
- 4 Where possible, push for a high level of accommodations from key third parties – Amazon, Facebook and Google in particular — for subscription content and products. These platforms need to continue to develop policies and tools that provide for the data capture, paywall management and the direct customer relationships required to manage a subscription business.
.....
- 5 TV/cable companies should consider launching strongly-branded Subscription Video on Demand (SVOD) services.

In this research report, we present case studies outlining strategies that drove success for three publishers' digital consumer revenue business.

Our first case study explores how the Tribune Publishing Company focused on their metered model, closed loopholes, and invested in sophisticated marketing operations, to greatly improve their digital subscription results over the course of a two-year period. The second case study looks at two organizations with successful membership programs — The Guardian and Slate — and the ways in which they mix exclusive, members-only content with compelling appeals for reader contributions.

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SLATE



**The
Guardian**

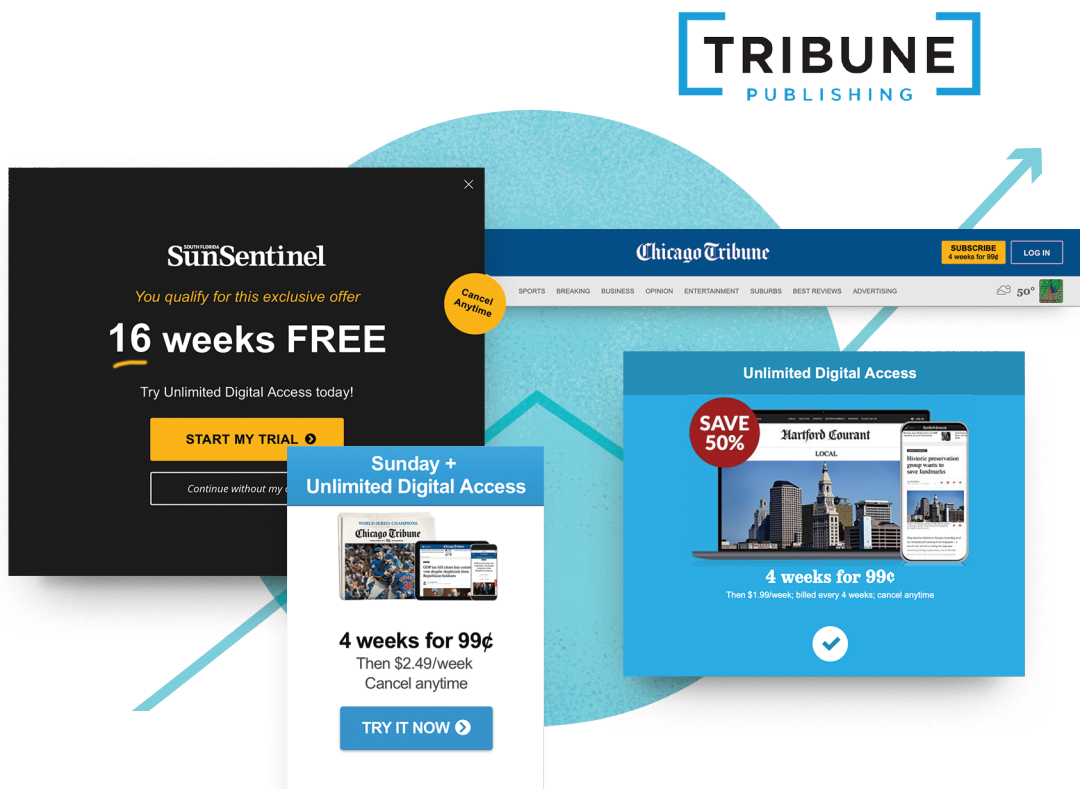


TRIBUNE
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DCN thanks all of those who took the time to share their data, thoughts and opinions for this research. It is greatly appreciated.

Case Study 1

How Tribune Publishing Company let go of its fear of pageview loss and tightened its meter rules — resulting in significant subscription growth.



Tribune Publishing Company was among the first major newspaper chains in the United States to launch a paid model for their digital content. On September 24th, 2011 — almost six months to the day from when The New York Times launched its metered digital subscription model — Tribune properties The Baltimore Sun and The Morning Call

announced that they were doing the same. “As the numbers clearly show, digital consumers recognize the website’s value,” said the Sun’s publisher, Tim Ryan, at the time. “We are confident they will subscribe to maintain access to all of our unique, in-depth local news and information.”



CASE STUDY 1: TRIBUNE PUBLISHING COMPANY

Moving Beyond Pageviews

By most standards, Tribune's confidence did not show in the way they configured their meter. Like many newspapers' metered models at the time, their meter was designed to limit risk by allowing each user a large amount of free access before they were "stopped" by a metered paywall. By doing this, publishers hoped to avoid driving away users, impacting pageviews, or limiting advertising revenue.

At the time of their launch, Tribune allowed readers to view 15 free articles per month — nearly three times the average meter limit in place on publishers' websites today, according to The Lenfest Institute's benchmarks. In addition, a wide range of content on both sites was excluded from the meter, meaning that views to those pages did not count toward a user's limit. A number of other loopholes existed that allowed users to circumvent the meter and avoid being asked to subscribe. For example, clicks from Google, Facebook, or Twitter did not count toward a user's meter limit. As a result, as of February 2017, only 0.8% of the company's unique visitors were ever stopped by a meter and asked to subscribe, less than half of the median among publishers today (1.8%) or the recommended level (5-10%) according to The Lenfest Institute's benchmarks.

As Tribune rolled out digital subscription models to its other properties including The Orlando Sentinel and The Sun-Sentinel in 2013, and the Chicago Tribune in 2015 — it initially continued this conservative approach, with meter limits generally at 10 or more articles per month. The company's results in its early years of charging for access were modest. Yet over the past several years, Tribune has seen a renaissance in its digital subscription program. After reaching less than 50,000 digital subscribers across all of its non-California properties in 2015, over the next three years the company's digital subscription revenue started growing steadily. Tribune reported 89% year-over-year revenue growth in the first three quarters of 2018 totaling 227,000 digital subscribers according to its latest publicly-available financial report.

So, what changed?

According to Mark Campbell, Tribune's SVP of Digital Marketing, the improvement in results is due to Tribune's increasingly confident approach — and a willingness to truly prioritize digital consumer revenue at all levels of the business. "As an organization, we began to understand that

advertising revenue is not necessarily a singular pillar on which our digital future can be rested — and so there has been an organizational priority on diversifying that revenue with a consumer digital revenue stream," Campbell said. Tribune has gone through great organizational change over the past several years, including coming through a Chapter 11 bankruptcy and selling The Los Angeles Times. New

"...there has been an organizational priority on diversifying that revenue with a consumer digital revenue stream."



executive leadership brought with it a greater willingness to experiment with more aggressive and proactive measures for generating digital subscriptions. The company also built out its digital team, hiring Campbell as SVP of Digital Marketing in 2016 and a vice president for digital subscription marketing.

Testing Tighter Meter Rules

As Tribune's team evolved, so did its willingness to experiment with how much free access it would grant users. "There has been a tremendous acceptance and willingness to test an increasingly tighter meter on our Tribune sites, understanding that digital consumer revenue is so critical to the future of our organization," Campbell said. He cited the support of the CEO as being crucial in the company's digital transformation.

Since mid-2016, that greater willingness to test meter tactics manifested in several ways. The most important, according to Campbell, was the company's decision to drastically tighten its meter limits and access rules across the board. "Everything else pales in comparison to those tectonic shifts," he said.

The first and most significant change came in February of 2017 when the company reduced its meter limits from 10 articles per month to five articles per month. According to The Lenfest Institute's benchmarks, this lower meter limit brought Tribune in line with the industry norm — about 57% of publishers with meters have a limit of five articles or fewer



CASE STUDY 1: TRIBUNE PUBLISHING COMPANY

— yet within Tribune, the change was a big one. There was a big concern, myself included, about how advertising revenue would be impacted,” Campbell said.

There remained some fear that the company would lose audience, pageviews, or advertising revenue at a large scale. Although, the results of the meter change quickly quieted most fears. Following the adjustment, the percentage of users stopped by the meter doubled — from 0.8% to 1.8%, which is roughly the median level among publishers according to The Lenfest Institute. While a slightly smaller percentage of stopped users converted into digital subscribers — 0.5% compared to 0.8% with the higher meter limit — the increase in users being stopped by the meter was enough to drive a 32% increase in new subscription sales month over month. Put another way, Tribune increased its subscription yield from

63 monthly starts per million visitors to 83 monthly starts per million visitors, a substantial increase.

According to Campbell, after having taken a big leap in cutting its meter limits in half with positive results, the company was then able to make other changes with far less internal concern or debate. “Once we got past that 10 articles to five articles change, smaller changes became much easier,” he said.

Once they began to see the results of lower meter limits, Tribune’s team also began to experiment with tightening the access rules for their content in other ways. “At the same time we were reducing the meter, we were shutting back doors to free content and metering mobile platforms,” Campbell said.

Tribune made a number of specific changes to test tighter access rules:

- Removing the “First Click Free” provision for Google, which exempted the first click from a Google search from counting toward a user’s meter limit.
- Removing the “whitelist” for Facebook and Twitter referrals, meaning that clicks to Tribune articles from those sites would begin to count toward a user’s meter limit.
- Experimenting with blocking “Incognito” users in Google Chrome.
- Developing a project to extend their meter to cover Google AMP pages, which Tribune hopes to launch soon.

“What we’re trying to do in every place is say, ‘Our journalism is valuable, you have to pay for it, and there’s no getting around that,’” Campbell said.

The company lowered its meter limits again in August of 2018, reducing the meter limit from five articles per month to three. Once again, their “meter stop rate” — the percent of users stopped by a meter limit — rose to 2.6%, bringing them from median performance to about the 70th percentile among publishers on this metric. Tribune saw no decline in their conversion rate for users who were stopped, and as a result their digital subscription starts increased 104% when compared with numbers from Q1 of the same year. (Campbell noted that a comparison to Q2 results was not available due to his team’s aggressive A/B testing during that time in

preparation for the meter limit change.) Put simply, the company more than doubled its monthly subscription yield per unique visitor.

Marketing Digital Subscriptions Continuously and Aggressively

Tribune paired its tighter access rules with greater digital marketing efforts as well, building out a team that could more effectively sell subscriptions to potential subscribers with more frequent and targeted messaging.

“I have people on staff whose entire job is to manage an



CASE STUDY 1: TRIBUNE PUBLISHING COMPANY

ongoing slate of exciting sales,” Campbell said. “And it really matters.” Campbell said that while the company has tested high-minded messages about the importance of quality journalism, its most successful promotions have been simple: offering readers an attractive introductory offer for a limited time, paired with a compelling message about the benefits of a subscription. “The best explanation and the best promotion of our journalism is the content itself,” Campbell said, noting that having a high-quality newsroom is among the most important factors in driving digital subscription sales. “For me, as a marketer, what matters is giving readers a great introductory offer that removes the stress of subscribing.” Campbell said that Tribune’s “ardent cycle of campaigns” has changed the game, increasing the company’s results from 1,000 to 3,000 starts per week over time. He credits one of Tribune’s key partners, Bounce Exchange, a marketing company specializing in behavioral website personalization, for allowing Tribune to produce and target quality campaigns in a more flexible way.

Aggressive Retention Pricing

In addition to greater focus on acquisition marketing, Campbell noted that Tribune prioritized retention and price as well in recent years, describing this renewed focus as a second “tectonic shift” in their approach to the business. “Retention is all about welcoming new subscribers and making sure that they are taking as many features of the subscription as possible early on,” he said, citing efforts to get users to sign up for newsletters, download a native app, or follow the brand on social media as key. By increasing engagement among subscribers in this way, Tribune has been able to become more aggressive with its subscription pricing.

“What we’ve found is that we can be pretty aggressive in price as customers tenure. And if they raise their hand and say ‘No, I can’t pay that price,’ then they can call a customer service rep who will work with them on a product and pricing plan that is more palatable,” he said.

Campbell said Tribune’s team was emboldened by other publishers such as The Boston Globe, that have been aggressive in raising subscription rates for customers over time with significant success. “For us,” he said, “that would be the high-end price point. After you have gone through an introductory period, and then six months at \$1.99 per week, and then six months with \$3.99 per week.” This strategy has led Tribune to increase its rate per subscriber by 33% year over year.

So, what comes next for Tribune? Campbell said the company plans to continue testing aggressive, proactive approaches to driving increased subscription sales. One such effort may involve a shift to “dynamic” meters that target users based on propensity scoring or other factors, rather than applying a set meter limit to the entire audience. Campbell said that the company has experimented with such approaches on a small scale but would most likely not pursue a greater rollout until sometime in 2019.

Most importantly, though, Campbell cited the need for publishers like Tribune to better understand what makes readers engaged enough to subscribe or stay subscribed — and how to measure it. “The thing I think I have not cracked yet, and that the industry has not yet cracked yet, is engagement,” he said. “What does that really mean? What should we be doing concretely? I want us to have a roadmap.”



Strategy Recap

- *Build a digital marketing team whose primary focus is to increase digital subscribers.*
- *Consider tightening meter limits and other access rules to achieve an optimal “meter stop rate” that drives new subscription sales.*
- *Continually present potential subscribers with aggressive, attractive introductory offers to get them in the door.*
- *Test price increases on tenured subscribers, balancing the risk of some increased churn with the greater revenue yield that comes with a higher subscription price.*
- *Design and execute a retention strategy that welcomes readers to your subscription product and encourages them to use as many features of the subscription as possible.*

Case Study 2

How The Guardian and Slate got readers to pay for memberships by offering premium features and appealing to readers' desire to support quality journalism

Support Slate's Journalism
If you value our work, help us keep producing it.
Join **SLATEPLUS**

The Guardian

Discover
Great stories you missed, for when you have more time

SLATE

Your subscription helps support independent investigative journalism
Independence means we can pursue a story without fear of where it might take us. We are dedicated to holding power to account, to reporting the truth, and exposing corruption wherever we find it.

While many local newspapers were exploring various forms of metered digital subscription models in the early 2010's, executives at companies with larger national or international audiences were still capitalizing on growing digital advertising revenues. But by 2014-15, executives at organizations like Slate in the United States and The Guardian in the United Kingdom were beginning to look for new forms of digital revenue.

"We wanted to diversify our revenue base like everyone else," said David Stern, Director of Product Development at Slate. "But we weren't comfortable with a paywall in the classical

sense. We weren't sure our content was quite right for it." At The Guardian, similar conversations were going on. "Our journalism was as strong as it had ever been, but our financials were not as strong as they had ever been," said Brendan O'Grady, Communications Director for Guardian News & Media. "We were running a financial loss each year that was quite substantial." Though the company's digital audience was continually growing as a result of its award-winning investigative reporting and investment in its digital product, The Guardian was not seeing a direct connection between its growing readership and its digital advertising revenues.



CASE STUDY 2: THE GUARDIAN AND SLATE

Both companies began exploring strategies for driving reader revenue — and both were resistant to the idea of simply charging for access to all of their content. “If you spoke to our editor and CEO, the two pieces of advice they got from everyone outside The Guardian were to cut costs and to put up a paywall,” O’Grady said. “But they started to think about whether there were other ways to do this.”

Building a Quality Membership Product by Balancing Premium Features with Reader Support

Slate surveyed its members and found that while readers were interested in some categories of premium or exclusive content, the top reason their readers told them they might pay would be to support Slate’s high-quality journalism, analysis and commentary. The Guardian examined its business and came to a similar conclusion.

Both companies began to pursue similar strategies, albeit starting from different places. In 2014, Slate launched its membership product, Slate Plus, with a set of features that Stern described as “mostly transactional in nature,” such as additional members-only content. “We surveyed people and the major reason they were signing up was to support the company,” he said. “But there was a non-trivial amount of people who subscribed for some benefit.” The product generated 7,000 memberships in the first year, which, while not insubstantial, paled in comparison to the size of Slate’s massive audience. According to The Lenfest Institute’s benchmarks, that membership rate — about .05% of Slate’s unique visitors at the time — falls at the median level. However, over time, as publishers build their membership bases, the top performers typically can convert 5-10% of their unique visitors into paying members. As such, Slate believed that their membership program had more potential.

At The Guardian, the team began to center on a strategy, O’Grady described as the “Relationship Strategy” approach. “Good strategies tend to be quite simple,” he said. “This one said, ‘we will see our readers become members and supporters and make more significant contribution to our business model.’”

At the time, the publication had a small pool of digital subscribers who were paying for niche products, such as

apps or digital newspapers, as well as a small pool of so-called “members” who were paying, generally, for access to in-person events. In 2016, the company began to rethink what it meant by the term, “membership.”

“The rethink around this was, what if people just want to become members because they believe in the mission? What if we don’t have to offer a discount for access to an event or some other transactional benefit? What if a lot of people just want to join The Guardian’s ‘club,’ so to speak?” O’Grady said. “That’s when we started composing messaging aimed at getting people to contribute, which is what you see on the site today.”

“The rethink around this was, what if people just want to become members because they believe in the mission?”

The Guardian

The Guardian team began to reimagine memberships in this way, under the premise that what their readers would pay for was both the opportunity to be a part of the company’s mission and a more direct relationship with the brand. In doing so, The Guardian’s team made a firm decision that their membership program would be more than simply a “marketing play”—it would be owned in equal part by the newsroom.

The Guardian appointed one of their editors, with the support of reporters in the newsroom, to be in charge of membership and to help define the membership strategy in partnership with the commercial team. That team created several member features that have become highly popular over time, including a weekly email to members and a membership column that shares behind-the-scenes insights about how The Guardian reports on its biggest stories.

“We’d have a story about the Middle East, and the next week we’d have an interview with the Middle East editor about how we got that story,” O’Grady said, noting that this kind of content is highly popular with members. “People who became members want to know how The Guardian works.”



CASE STUDY 2: THE GUARDIAN AND SLATE

Offering Exclusive Member-Only Content

The Guardian team also produced a podcast for members, which included questions from readers recorded in their own voices. “When we had emails from Guardian members, or when that developed into a whole slew of emails on a particular topic, we would sometimes bring together some members and a few relevant journalists and have a live conversation and turn that into a podcast,” O’Grady said, noting that when possible they would try to get an audio recording of the member reading the question in their own voice, bringing them into the podcast directly. Editors would then answer the questions, creating a compelling “behind-the-scenes” experience for members. A recent example was a podcast on animal extinction. It features Guardian’s Membership Editor Lee Glendinning, columnist George Monbiot and a number of other experts and readers. Moreover, they made members feel as if they were a part of the organization by letting them play a part in producing content for The Guardian.

At Slate, the organization was experiencing similar learnings about what their readers would pay for. By summer of 2015, membership growth had leveled off and the company was looking for new ways to drive acquisitions. They invested in an ambitious project to produce members-only high-quality content that would be paired with free content on their website — a podcast called The History of Slavery in America. “We promoted it heavily on the site, and it led to one of our most popular stories ever — an interactive piece that showed slave ships over time.” The feature tracked the movement of ships as they moved from different places in Africa to the West. “It was a very powerful interactive graphic,” Stern said. “This was the first thing that Slate did that was ambitious in this way.”

More importantly, the interactive feature helped drive membership growth. After viewing the graphic, several thousand consumers went on to sign up to access the full

members-only podcast. In the four-month period after the podcast’s launch, Slate’s monthly membership increased by 110% compared to the four months prior. Their total membership base increased by 37% in that time period.

Following the podcast’s success, Slate rolled out a series of similar projects, all of them offered exclusively to members. But according to Stern, none of these had the same success as the first one. Slate then decided to try a new approach to podcasts similar to The Guardian’s “behind-the-scenes” features that had been effective at driving engagement. In 2017, the company debuted the Slow Burn podcast that chronicled the Watergate scandal. This time, rather than limiting the podcast to members only, they offered a mix of free and members-only access.

Slow Burn’s eight episodes per season were free to all users, and each had a “bonus” episode filled with extra content, insight and analysis from the podcast’s producers. The “bonus” episodes, available to Slate Plus members only,

were promoted heavily within each free episode.

The new model has been a great success for Slate. The free version of Slow Burn generated 1.5 million downloads per episode, and the podcast as a whole drove 6,000 memberships in 2018. Slate sees this model as the future of its podcasting strategy for members: to provide

enough value to attract and engage consumers in the free content, while offering premium, behind-the-scenes content as an added benefit to members.

The key to success for both Slate and The Guardian has been exactly this kind of balance. Both organizations told versions of the same story: one in which readers are becoming members for a mix of valuable benefits like extra content and a broader desire to support the publication’s mission and journalism.

...the future of its podcasting strategy for members: to provide enough value to attract and engage consumers in the free content, while offering premium, behind-the-scenes content as an added benefit to members.

SLATE



CASE STUDY 2: THE GUARDIAN AND SLATE

Promoting Quality Journalism to Drive Memberships and Donations

It is on that second point — the idea of contributing to support mission-driven, high-quality journalism — that The Guardian focused a lot of its messaging and marketing efforts. When the company publishes a story that holds truth to power and generates a lot of attention, it is paired with a highly-active membership drive.

“One of the first times that we went out with this approach was when The Guardian and other outlets reported on the Panama Papers in 2016,” O’Grady said, referring to a major story uncovering offshore tax avoidance schemes that involved a number of high-profile companies and political figures. “That investigation went live in April, which is very close to around the time we launched our first big membership push.”

Soliciting readers to support The Guardian’s work just after the publication breaks big stories has proven to be effective, according to O’Grady.

“We know that when we have these mega news stories, stories that drive a lot of interest to all media, like the Brexit referendum or the large exclusives we have such as our story around Facebook and Cambridge Analytica, those are always real moments where we expect and hope to see more people coming on board,” he said. “That has proven to be the case the last two or three years.”

Through this dual-pronged strategy, The Guardian generated 340,000 members and supporters giving on a monthly basis and more than 350,000 giving one-time contributions (plus more than 230,000 subscribers to their digital or print editions) in the past twelve months. Interestingly, O’Grady noted that more than 50% of the company’s one-off contributions, which typically coincide with the publication breaking big stories, come from North America. In all, over the past three years more than one million people have given some form of financial support to the Guardian — including one-off contributions, rolling memberships and subscriptions.

Similarly, Slate has seen a flurry of membership sign-ups that it attributes to readers’ appreciation of its tough and skeptical coverage of the Trump administration. “We saw a big bump around the election—a much bigger bump than we had previously seen around an election or inauguration,” Stern said. In the three-month period covering the 2016

election and President Trump’s inauguration, Slate sold nearly 13,000 memberships, 3x the number of the three months prior. “That was entirely because readers wanted to support Slate.”

By following data about reader response rates and adapting its messaging, Slate’s team has been able to capitalize on this desire among readers. “There is a very untargeted prompt that we run on all politics stories — a little end-of-article prompt that says ‘join Slate Plus, support our journalism,’” Stern said. “We did nothing different the day after the election but we saw a huge surge in sign-ups. Then we customized our messaging to say we’re going to hold the administration accountable, and we saw another surge. We’re just responding to the data about what readers want.”

Similar to The Guardian, Slate noticed that when it produces quality content about big, important stories, the result is a surge in membership sign-ups. “Whenever there’s a big traffic hit, and especially when it’s about a public interest issue, we see a bump,” he said. “For example, we had a story about children being separated at the border with links to where you can donate, and this article saw hundreds of Slate Plus subscriptions.”

Measuring Engagement and Reader Support

As membership organizations begin to explore the next stage of their membership models, they may look to better quantify how this blend between targeted appeals for reader support and valuable members-only benefits can be quantified, measured, tracked, and replicated. Both O’Grady and Stern noted that their organizations are in the process of becoming more sophisticated in how they use data to generate memberships. O’Grady cited The Guardian’s tracking of “regularity” metrics, or the number of audience members visiting several times per week, while Stern noted that Slate’s data shows that readers who view eight articles per month or more are far more likely to subscribe.

According to The Lenfest Institute’s benchmarks of publishers offering memberships and donations, for the typical publisher, only 4% of unique visitors are “Regular Readers,” meaning they view more than five articles per month, while 92% of users access only one piece of content. This suggests that many in the industry have room to grow in this highly important aspect of their business. High performers on the



CASE STUDY 2: THE GUARDIAN AND SLATE

same metric demonstrate that better results are possible: 14% of top-performing publishers’ unique visitors are “Regular Readers,” with the majority of users, more than 80%, falling between two and five articles per month.

“I think the next step for us is to get a little more detailed about the segmentation,” Stern said. “We’re working on a system for telling when someone is visiting our website from an IP address that has downloaded our podcast. Then we’ll be

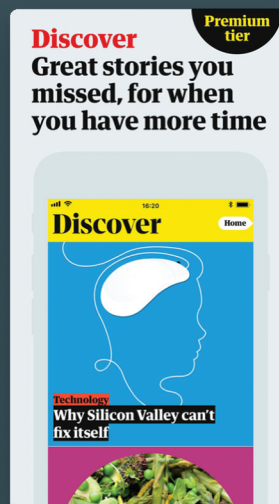
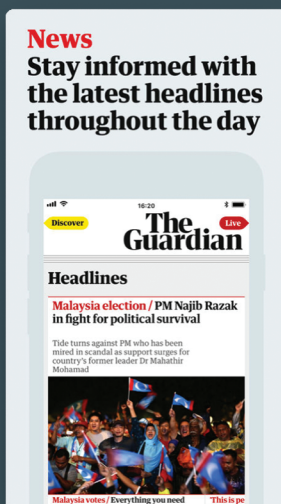
able to serve them promotions for Plus relevant to that.”

O’Grady emphasized that to get to that next level, publishers have to approach memberships with a ‘test and learn’ approach. “For those big chunky questions, like ‘how do we encourage readers to give more money?’, we target a small tangible achievable question and then work on it in a group known as a “huddle” — a small, cross-functional team from the newsroom, engineers, data and UX experts, marketing people, etc.”



Strategy Recap

- Create bonus content and experiences (such as behind-the-scenes, extended interviews, etc.) that offer your readers extra value and bring them into the process and culture of your organization.
- Experiment to find the right mix between free content and content that is only available to paying members.
- Find ways to put your members’ voices directly into your product, such as posting their letters or including their recorded questions (using their voice) in podcasts.
- Market and promote the value of your journalism, particularly after publishing investigative, public-interest stories.
- Measure, test, and experiment to understand what kind of content deeply engages your members — and segment your audience based on engagement levels.





Conclusion

Publishers' direct audience revenue offers opportunities for growth and diversification, as well as the stability of recurring revenue streams. The case studies offered here provide insight into the commitment and strategies employed for effective consumer conversion.

The Tribune Publishing Company case study outlined how the organization's leadership built a strong marketing team that prioritized subscription growth through aggressive marketing, technology changes, and test-and-learn approaches. Tribune's team benefited from having buy-in at the highest levels of management. Their directive to focus on direct-to-consumer subscription products and growth opportunities enabled them to make bold decisions about lowering meter limits and increasing marketing campaign frequency.

The Guardian and Slate both demonstrated the value of producing original, high-quality content aimed specifically at their most loyal and engaged readers — those who were likely to become paying members. At The Guardian, this resulted in the form of a membership column, members-only newsletters, and a members-only podcast. Slate developed "behind-the-scenes" add-ons to highly-produced, in-depth podcasts about important topics and a mix of members-only content on the Slate website.



ABOUT DIGITAL CONTENT NEXT

Digital Content Next (DCN) is the only trade organization dedicated to serving the unique and diverse needs of high-quality digital content companies that manage trusted, direct relationships with consumers and marketers. The organization was founded in June 2001 as the Online Publishers Association (OPA). Comprised of some of the most trusted and well-respected media brands, DCN produces proprietary research for its members and the public, creates public and private Forums to explore and advance key issues that impact digital content brands, offers an influential voice that speaks for digital content companies in the press, with advertisers and policy makers, and works to educate the public at large on the importance of quality content brands. Digital Content Next's membership has an unduplicated audience of 256,277,000 million unique visitors or 100% reach of the U.S. online population.*



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* Source: comScore Media Metrix Multiplatform Custom Audience Duplication, December 2017, U.S.