

# Subscriber Retention Research & Best Practices

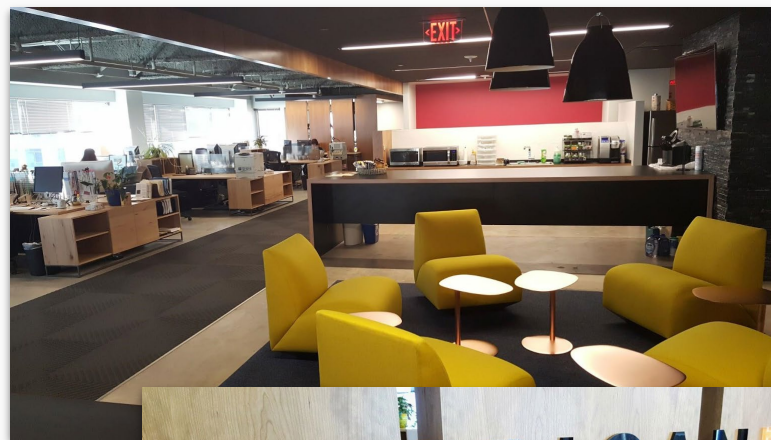
Media Finance Focus  
May 24, 2022

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2013-present

Reader Revenue  
Trust & Accountability  
News Strategies  
Culture and Skills  
Analytics



# Retention is the new acquisition

After aggressive digital-  
subscriber growth, publishers  
now confront a challenge of  
retaining them



# The Research

bit.ly/api -retention

OVERVIEW

# What news publishers do to retain subscribers

BY JEFF SONDERMAN AND GWEN VARGO | March 22, 2021

**A**s the future of the news focuses more on reader revenue as its economic model, retention of subscribers and members is becoming more critical. It is one thing to get users to subscribe, particularly with discounted introductory offers. It becomes essential to keep those consumers. To continue growing net revenue, publishers need help to evaluate what they are currently doing and where there are opportunities to improve retention and decrease churn.

CONTENTS

**WHAT NEWS PUBLISHERS  
DO TO RETAIN  
SUBSCRIBERS**

Overview

What publishers do, and don't do  
about retention

# What we asked in the retention survey

We assessed how adept news publishers are at each of **nine key strategies** for retaining subscribers—including such operations as:

- Onboarding new subscribers well
- Studying subscriber behavior
- Testing price options

Within those strategies, we asked about nearly **40 discrete tactics** to see what techniques are common or uncommon.

We also asked publishers, in their own words, to share what methods are helping them the most with retention.

Publishers rated  
their organization's  
proficiency

And the value of  
each strategy



**Sharing these six  
best practices**

Collect information about subscribers' interests and behaviors



# 1. Collect information about subscribers' interests and behaviors

- Gather feedback and **track subscribers' behavior and interests** , both individually and collectively
- Adapt your **content strategy** and business practices to serve those subscriber needs as best you can
- Identify **habit-forming actions** like subscribing to a newsletter or downloading an app, loyal consumption of a particular topic or author

# Subscribers like local not viral

Topic	Subscribers rank	Casuals rank
Local government	#1	#8
Consumer / shopping news	#2	#5
Dining / restaurants	#3	#9
Shipping industry	#4	#12
Social issues	#20	#1
State government	#11	#2

## Identify subscribers who are at risk of cancellation



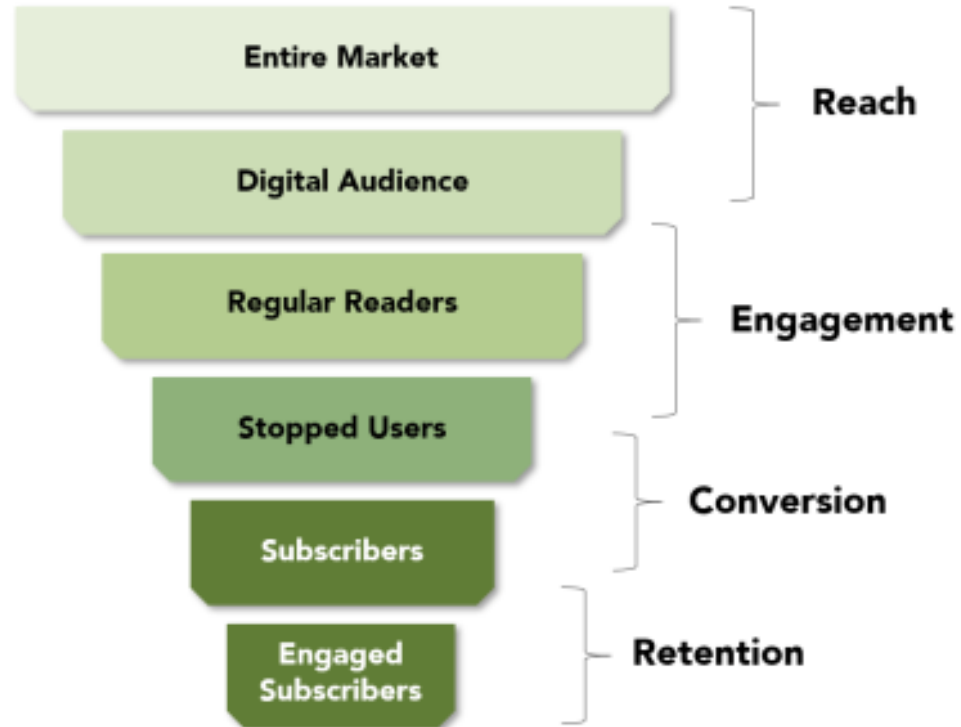
## 2. Identify subscribers who are at risk of cancellation

- Determine in advance which subscribers are at highest risk of nonrenewal, and then intervene
- Engage “zombies” and “sleepers” use analytics to inform content changes that engage these audiences and increase retention



This strategy of identifying at-risk subscribers was one of the biggest areas where publishers could improve their tactics

# Audience Engagement Funnel



# How to identify subscribers who are at risk of cancellation

Model subscribers' propensity to churn by tracking behavior patterns by a given subscriber is likely to cancel a subscription

Key engagement metrics:

- Recency of unique visits
- Volume of content read or consumed
- Frequency of unique site visits



Welcome, engage and onboard new subscribers

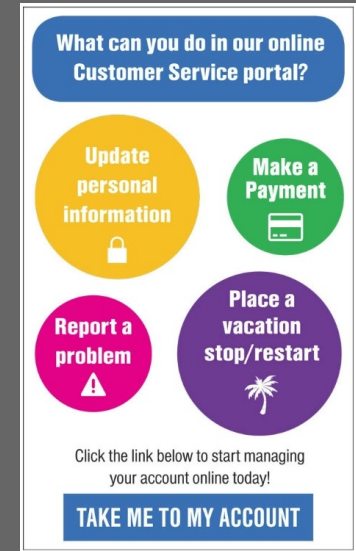
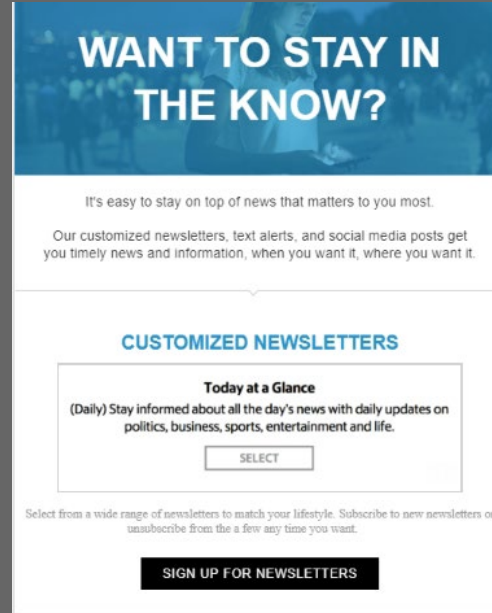


### 3. Welcome, engage and onboard new subscribers

- A thorough and thoughtful **onboarding process** to welcome new subscribers is a great way to maximize your chances of retaining them
- It is especially important for **new subscribers who start on a short-term trial** and will soon have a decision to make
- Building and **creating habits** start in the onboarding, habits to keep subscribers engaged and therefore more likely to renew

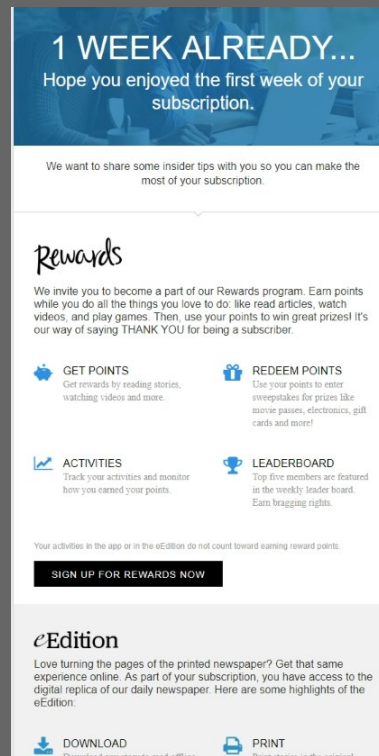
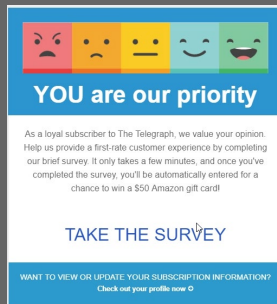
# Key components of onboarding

- Welcome and thank you
- Letter from the editor
- Digital welcome tutorial
- Newsletter recommendations



# Key components of onboarding

- Article suggestions
- Subscriber benefits
- Rewards and discounts from partners
- Survey



Measure and test initial subscription promotions or offers



## 4. Measure and test initial subscription promotions or offers

- Testing initial promotional offers is a common practice for acquiring new digital subscribers, however, these initial offers also can affect retention rate
- Aspects of introductory pricing and promotions have potential to affect retention rates and should not be tested in isolation (Lifetime Value)

# Initial subscription promotions and offers

Some ideas to test:

- Initial promotions that will lead to subscribers that retain after the trial
- Free trials with or without a credit card
- Different billing cycles

Offer subscriber -only benefits





## 5. Offer subscriber -only benefits

- With more revenue coming from readers now and in the future, publishers need to focus on the value they are delivering for their subscribers
- Adding extra benefits for subscribers who focus on value keeps them engaged over the lifetime of their subscription
- Benefits such as rewards programs and meetups with subscribers and employees are under underutilized

# Track what content subscribers engage with



## 6. Track what content subscribers engage with

1. **Light:** Use analytics to track what subscribers as a whole are reading
2. **Medium :** Recommend email newsletters to subscribers based on what content they have engaged with
3. **Heavy:** Personalization to give each customer unique recommendations or experiences informed by their past behavior

# What drives subscriptions

The stories, and types of stories, that get people to subscribe.

## New Subscribers

Past 30 Days ▾

SHARE

People who just bought a subscription recently

Acquiring new subscribers is essential to growing our revenue

Jan 7 to Feb 6

1.08K

### Conversions

How many people purchased a subscription in this time period

Up 75% from previous 30 days

How to read this chart

#### LOCATION



#### AGE



#### GENDER



#### DEVICE



#### SOURCE



### Stories that engaged new subscribers 1,000 tap in this timeframe

Search for a story...

#### Trends in these stories

Here's what is working with new subscribers

##### AUTHOR TYPE

Staff

##### ENTERPRISE LEVEL

Daily news story

##### LOCATION

Norfolk

Virginia Beach

##### TOPIC

Consumer

Business / economy

Crime / courts / criminal justice

##### CHARACTERISTIC

Live reporting/ Breaking news

Here's what isn't working with new subscribers

HEADLINE	NEW SUBSCRIBERS TOTAL STORY VIEWS	TOPIC
Suffolk man charged with bestiality, animal cruelty following federal conviction Scott Daugherty January 30, 2019 CASUAL FAVORITE	501	Crime / courts / criminal justice
Nordstrom to leave MacArthur Center mall Kimberly Pierceall   Briana Adhikusuma January 23, 2019	464	Business / economyConsumer
Virginia Beach public libraries undergoing renovations Eric Hodies January 16, 2019 SUBSCRIBERS FAVORITE	443	
At WAVY/WVBT, a change in the weather team takes place Larry Bonko January 21, 2019 LOCAL PEOPLE FAVORITE CASUAL FAVORITE SUBSCRIBERS FAVORITE	394	Arts & entertainment
Three more stores closing in Norfolk's MacArthur mall by Saturday Briana Adhikusuma January 22, 2019 LOCAL PEOPLE FAVORITE CASUAL FAVORITE	322	Business / economyConsumer
Bold Mariner Brewing moving to Ocean View and closing Lambert's Point taproom Robyn Sidersky January 23, 2019	282	Business / economyConsumer

# Recap of best practices

1. Collect information about subscribers' interests and behaviors
2. Identify subscribers who are at risk of cancellation
3. Welcome, engage and onboard new subscribers
4. Measure and test initial subscription promotions or offers
5. Offer subscriber-only benefits
6. Track what content subscribers engage with

Questions?

# Resources

## Resources from American Press Institute



A web-based application and **strategic tool** that allows publishers to track journalism qualities that drive engagement

**With Metrics for News you can:**

1. Track all of your content
2. Listen to more audience segments
3. Track your readers through their journey to subscriber



Resources from American Press Institute

# SOURCE MATTERS

The sources journalists choose to quote in their stories affects and indicate:

- Whose stories get told
- How stories are told
- Who the news is for and about
- What communities are served
- Who is seen, heard and listened to

## Resources from American Press Institute



### Table StakesLocal News Transformation Program

[TableStakes.org](http://TableStakes.org)

Table Stakes programs include:

- **Major Market** for large metropolitan areas of the country
- **Poynter Institute** for small to medium-sized newsrooms
- **ASU** for local broadcasting companies
- **UNC** for all mediums in the southeastern US



Better News

# Resources from American Press Institute

THE ESSENTIALS ▾

NEWS & PRODUCTS ▾

AUDIENCES ▾

REVENUE ▾

LEADERSHIP ▾

## Invent Better News

Better News offers strategies and case studies to help transform newsrooms.

Fueled by the American Press Institute.

Funded by The Knight-Lenfest Local News

Transformation Fund.

## Recommended Resources to help you create a modern, digital newsroom

*Samantha Tomaszewski, Poynter, January 2021*



### A closer look at the important work of social and audience editors

Audiences cannot be an afterthought.

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*Stephanie Castellano, American Press Institute, January 2021*



### How collaborating helped two Idaho publishers engage Latino audiences

In a post on American Press Institute, Stephanie Castellano details how two journalists turned to a number of creative ways to reach students and families—before and during the coronavirus pandemic.

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*Thank you!*

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