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TOMÁŠ BELLA

Launching a paywall: What you and your team need to know

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION 4
HOW TO THINK ABOUT PAYWALLS 6
WHAT KIND OF PAYWALL AND SUBSCRIPTION MODEL IS RIGHT FOR YOU? 8
  Readers‘ clubs – just pay, no wall (The Guardian model) 8
  Metered paywall (The Economist, The New York Times model) 10
  Hard paywall (The Times model) 11
  Crowdfunding 12
TECHNICAL ASPECTS – WHAT SOFTWARE WILL YOU NEED 14
  CRM and managing your customer database 14
  Paywall software 15
  Payment processing and payment methods 16
  Pricing flexibility 17
  Nice-to-have advanced tools 17
  Analytics 20
  Most popular paywall systems providers 22
PRICING STRATEGIES 24
  Basic price – what most people will pay 24
  Expensive package – what your biggest supporters will pay 25
  Discounting 26
  Micropayments and microsubscriptions 28
MARKETING AND PR – HOW TO PERSUADE PEOPLE TO PAY 30
  Fighting logic and fighting emotions 32
  Internal communication in your newsroom 34
  Email marketing 36
  Performance marketing 37

INTRODUCTION

I could easily – and happily – fill a handbook just with the foolish mistakes that I have made on my way towards launching different paywall subscription systems. Indeed, when I think back to 2007, a time when I fought strongly (and successfully) for my employers to withdraw their first paywall on the basis that 'almost nobody pays for content and never will', it might be considered a miracle that I got to this stage at all.

Even after I had fortunately 'seen the light', there was still a steep learning curve. In 2011, we at Piano simultaneously launched a subscription system in which we integrated nine competing Slovak media sources under one umbrella, pitching the move to end-consumers with the rather unfortunate justification that 'paid content means improved media'. The system was launched on Friday and the first complaint arrived on our desks that Monday; a reader telling us in no uncertain terms that he had not seen the promised improvement in quality. He promptly demanded his money back.

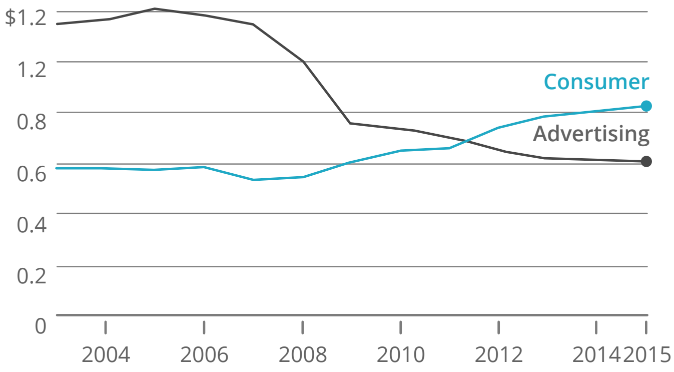
A year later, when launching paywalls in Poland, we were so afraid of negative feedback from readers that some media providers only found the courage to inform their readers about the option to subscribe months after the initial launch.

In 2014, I and most of my colleagues resigned from the leading daily newspaper in Slovakia, unwilling to potentially compromise journalistic integrity under a new owner with a somewhat questionable reputation. Instead, we decided to create our own daily newspaper. Despite any number of traumatizing experiences from the past, we relied almost exclusively on income from subscriptions. Unlike an advertiser, a subscriber cannot be threatened into not doing business with you. Unlike an advertiser, a subscriber will never pressure you to be more careful and less controversial in your articles. We also hoped that a subscriber would be able to appreciate high quality journalism when they see it.

We were not alone in this hope. Whilst many media are, and for a long time will be, dependent on income from advertising, the pendulum has been swinging towards subscription funding more and more, particularly as many media companies are focusing increasingly on serious journalism rather than 'boulevard' sensationalism.

For example, The New York Times has published the following breakdown of its income sources:

New York Times revenue, in billions



Whilst the New York Times might have the weight of one of the most recognized media brands in the world behind it, we would argue that if you do your journalistic job well, you do not have to be The New York Times to get paid for web content by readers.

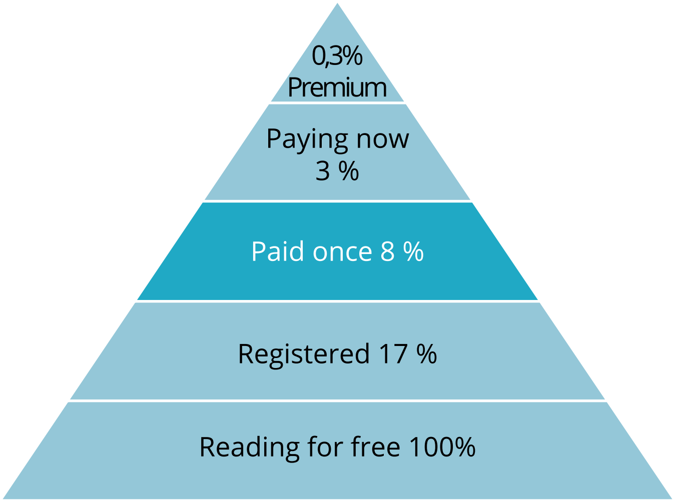
The aim of this text is to help you avoid the largest traps that lie ahead as you seek to launch a subscription system, and to help you understand what needs to be done to build a successful project.

Tomáš Bella
(Author bio on page 39)

HOW TO THINK ABOUT PAYWALLS

Subscription approaches are not a magic switch that change non-paying readers into paying readers in an instant. Not only would the task of this conversion be practically insurmountable and therefore incredibly demotivating for those seeking to try it, but more importantly, the reality of the situation is that readers simply don't act in this way. Many will tell you in a survey on Monday that they would never pay for content but, on Friday, find themselves unable to resist a special subscription trial deal for 99 cents.

Think of subscription as a pyramid, where many small steps lead to the top. A few readers jump straight to the top but most need patient leadership every small step of the way.



If during your process of paywall implementation you find yourself thinking, 'why don't we have more subscribers?', then your first port of call needs to be a careful analysis of your pyramid, to identify where the process is failing.

For instance, have you ever tried unlocking articles for one day in exchange for registration, but still found that your e-mail database did not increase? This is an indication that your locked content is poorly chosen and readers do not find it attractive.

Have many people tried your subscription once and never extended it? This could mean that

In our newspaper, after three years, the situation is as follows:

- Those who currently have a premium subscription: 2,000 people
- Those who currently have an active subscription: 23,000 people
- People who paid at least once (any sum): 55,000 people
- People who gave us e-mail addresses: 120,000
- Free readers on our web: 700,000 people per month
- Number of internet users in the country: 3.3 million

you are failing to communicate with your paying customers about how you utilize their money during their subscription, or that you have not helped them to make full use of the features that their subscription unlocks.

Alternatively, from a technical perspective, there might be usability issues that mean the process of extending the subscription is not simple, straightforward or intuitive. Identifying why readers are not converting to subscribers is a matter of step-by-step analysis of the process, identifying where and why readers are dropping off the pyramid.

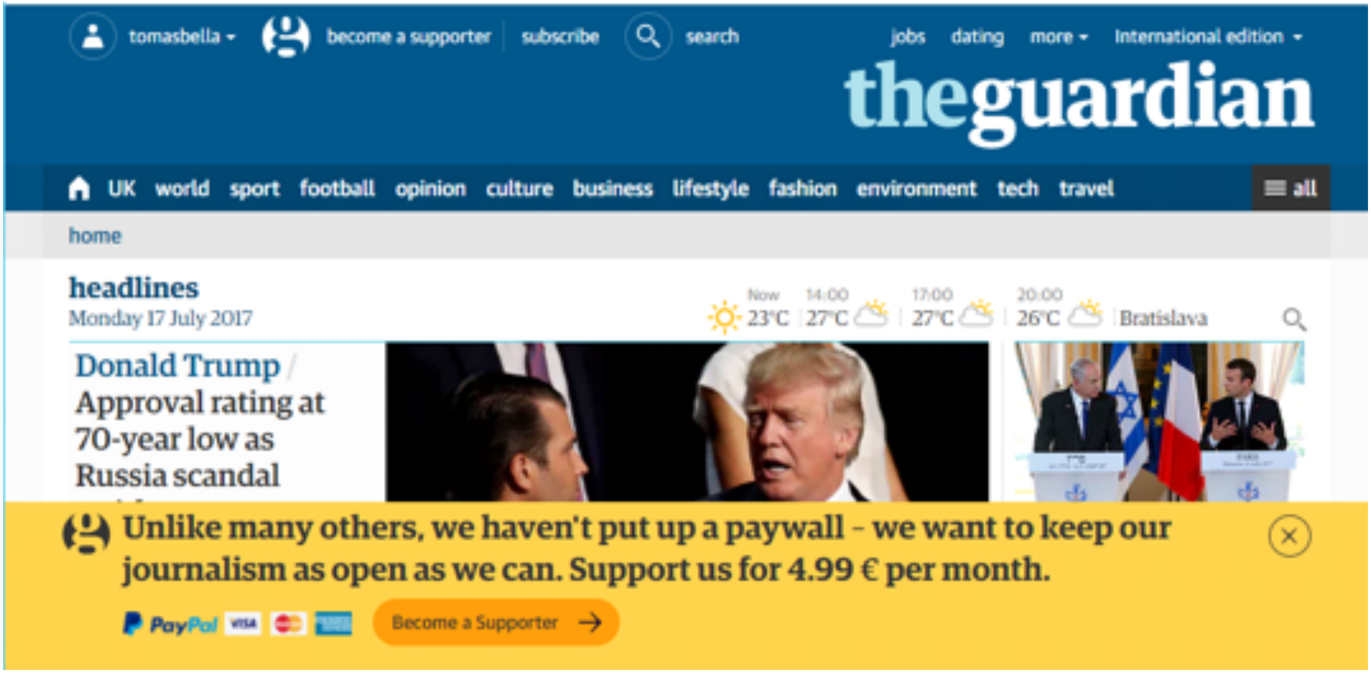
WHAT KIND OF PAYWALL AND SUBSCRIPTION MODEL IS RIGHT FOR YOU?

Readers' clubs – just pay, no wall

(The Guardian model)

This is one of the most curious ideas in business: give us your money and we will not give you anything in return. At the same time, it is arguably the least painful way to start collecting money from readers if you need to minimize the risks connected with launching a subscription system.

Under this model, all texts continue to be available for free to all readers, often with an honorable explanation along the lines 'we want journalism available for all', or even 'we will never launch a paywall on our site'.


tomasbella
become a supporter
subscribe
search
jobs
dating
more
International edition
theguardian
UK
world
sport
football
opinion
culture
business
lifestyle
fashion
environment
tech
travel
all
home
headlines
Monday 17 July 2017
Now 23°C
14:00 27°C
17:00 27°C
20:00 26°C
Bratislava
PayPal
Become a Supporter

Donald Trump / Approval rating at 70-year low as Russia scandal

Unlike many others, we haven't put up a paywall – we want to keep our journalism as open as we can. Support us for 4.99 € per month.

At the same time, readers are encouraged to support the media with a single payment or, ideally, monthly 'subscription'. If they do so, they do not gain access to texts, but rather get symbolic rewards: tickets to events, or a present from the publisher. The most important reward is the feel-good feeling that readers get inside; that they are helping journalism, supporting their favorite authors, and single handedly saving democracy. This model is used, for example, by The Guardian in the UK (offer: https://membership.theguardian.com/) or the Spanish ElDiario.es.

The success of this model depends on:

- The emotions your brand evokes. Companies that display differentiation and uniqueness in their content and perspective when compared to their competitors are more likely to develop a loyal customer base who exclusively seek out and depend on the brand (and their journalistic messages). These types of media providers are more likely to succeed in the use of the readers' club model.

- How effectively you can identify people who are more inclined to pay, and not needlessly bother other readers. A very optimistic target might be to achieve 1% of paying readers, and there are various ways that you might identify them. With an aggressive, carpet-bombing campaign, you will pointlessly anger 99% of your readers.

▷ Hint

IF YOU ARE LOOKING FOR MORE IDEAS ON HOW TO RUN A READERS' CLUB SUBSCRIPTION MODEL, A GOOD PLACE TO START IS MEMBERSHIPPUZZLE.ORG, A SITE CO-RUN BY THE DUTCH DE CORRESPONDENT, ONE OF THE MOST SUCCESSFUL NEW MEDIA RELYING ON READERS' DONATIONS.

A more intelligent approach is to target the people who visit your site repeatedly. However, building on this model may require sophisticated analytical software tools that help you to try to 'guess' who is willing to pay.

Of course, the content of the subscription package itself can have a large impact – whether the reward really is just symbolic (or none), or whether the package offers genuine value. It is difficult to offer more than simply that 'good feeling that I'm saving the free press', but you can and should try. You can find tips on services for creating packages in chapter 4.2.

Advantages of the model:

- Low or no risk of losing readers.
- Allows for a switch to other, more profitable models once readers get used to the idea of monthly payments.

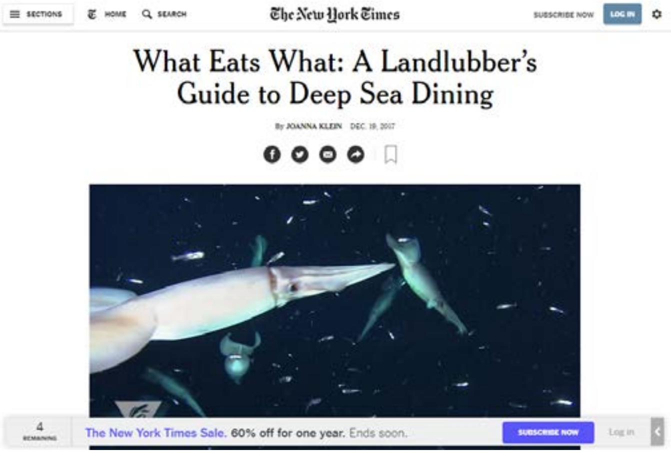
Disadvantages of the model:

- Fewer subscribers and lower incomes compared to other models.

Metered paywall

(The Economist, The New York Times model)

This is currently probably the most used paid subscription system in the world. Each reader can read a few free articles of their choice. Once this limit is reached, the other articles are blocked and the reader is required to pay to unlock them. The number of free articles used to be fixed (for example 5 or 10 per month, 3 per week), while the modern trend is to set dynamic limits, based on the reader.



What Eats What: A Landlubber's Guide to Deep Sea Dining

By JOANNA KLEIN DEC. 19, 2017

4 REMAINING

The New York Times Sale. 60% off for one year. Ends soon.

NYT reminding the reader about number of remaining free articles and offering special discount (bottom of the page).

- For example, it is more difficult to get a reader to make their first payment than a repeated payment. Therefore, you can give a new customer five free texts, but if someone had already been a subscriber and has since stopped, then perhaps only two or three texts might be needed to get them to change their mind.

Advantages of the model:

- A standard model in the English-speaking world, meaning readers tend to have a more instinctive understanding of the underlying logic.
- Low risk of discouraging random visitors from Facebook or other readers who visited the site for the first time, as they typically don't even find out that there is paid content.

Disadvantages of the model:

- It is very easy to avoid the paywall and get the content for free. This is typically not a problem with developed markets, but it can be a problem in countries where content is traditionally free, where paywalls are only just being introduced, or where there is a high piracy rate.

Hard paywall

(The Times model)

The term ‘Freemium’ can have various meanings across the internet. In terms of subscription systems, it usually means that the editors decide whether each article, or group of articles, is free or charged.

The example of a strictly freemium model is The Times in the UK, where the vast majority of articles are charged and it is only possible to read short abstracts of the articles for free.

Further examples of separating pages into ‘free’ and ‘premium’ include:

- Articles by your own reporters are paid, but articles taken from news agencies are free (because the first category has a higher added value).
- The Business section is charged, while other sections are free (because the Business section is interesting to people who are most likely to pay).
- Texts are free and video/audio content is charged (or vice versa, depending on your advertising business model).
- Readers from your country have free access, readers from abroad have to pay – or vice versa (if one group is less profitable from the advertising income perspective or any other reason).
- Access through the web is free but access through mobile applications is charged.

Advantages of the model:

- More data is generated regarding content and its appeal, and the factors that turn readers into subscribers. You are also able to work with your content more closely – gradually testing which articles, authors, and genres are more successful at gaining paying readers, and which are more advantageous to maintain as free content by drawing people in.
- The ability to flexibly release or toughen the paywall (for example, make the paywall more open if you need to increase page views in a given period).

Disadvantages of the model:

- Rapid decrease of visits on the web if all content is charged.
- More demanding for the editor: they have to decide which texts are free. There is also a need for a watchdog, so that editors do not gradually unlock all content.

Crowdfunding

Unlike subscription systems, crowdfunding does not usually try to secure regular payments for daily operations, but rather seeks to raise funds for a specific and well-defined project. The project materializes only if a minimum required amount is raised. The main advantage is that, from a psychological perspective, for many people it is easier to support a specific cause (for example, writing a specific report) than to give an undirected donation through a subscription.

Equally, crowdfunding is a great way to raise more money from existing customers – many times, exponentially more. (In countries, where a typical payment for a subscription is $5-$10, a crowdfunding campaign can raise about $15, while many individuals will donate tens or hundreds of dollars).

It is important to keep in mind:

- It is time consuming – from the preparation of the first explanatory texts and videos all the way to the updates required during the campaign, the process is work intensive. You should seek to have a plan outlining what you are going to do at 30 or 50 per cent of the target sum, and how you are going to motivate donors to make further donations or recruit their peers to also donate. Personal communication with donors throughout the campaign and even once it is finished is important to the success of that venture and potential future crowdsourcing efforts. It is possible to start by experimenting with small campaigns (low target sums) but, eventually, you will need to have a plan for a large project (thousands or tens of thousands of dollars) to make the process worth it.
- Do not collect only money, collect also information about what people are willing to pay for – this can carry an even greater value than money.
- Crowdfunding software is not complicated but it is a good idea to start with an existing external crowdfunding portal that is popular in your country, and get some advice from its founders on how to prepare a campaign to make it work.

Hint

THE BEST-KNOWN GLOBAL CROWDFUNDING PORTALS ARE PROBABLY KICKSTARTER.COM, INDIEGOGO.COM AND GOFUNDME.COM – GET INSPIRED BY PREVIOUS SUCCESSFUL CAMPAIGNS. YOU CAN FIND MORE INFORMATION ABOUT CROWDFUNDING FOR JOURNALISM HERE: WWW.JOURNALISM.ORG/2016/01/20/CROWDFUNDED-JOURNALISM/

TECHNICAL ASPECTS – WHAT SOFTWARE WILL YOU NEED

In terms of paid subscription systems, you can either create your own software, buy something simple and cheap, or buy something complex and almighty. Specific solutions will depend on what software you already have and if you want to launch subscription as a careful experiment or if you expect it to generate a large portion of your overall income.

If you buy your software, the usual form is Software as a Service (SaaS), with its monthly fees reaching hundreds (for simple, small solutions of partial tasks), or thousands of dollars. In the case of larger media, this might even amount to tens of thousands of dollars. The price usually includes a fixed component (the launching fee, in thousands of dollars) and a variable component, which depends on the number of subscribers or paying users, the number or volume of financial transactions, or number of visits to your site.

In this chapter, we will list the most important functions of the software you are going to need at the beginning, and those that you might require later on.

CRM and managing your customer database

One of the most overlooked changes that comes with launching a paid subscription system is that, up until this point, you have been financially relying on ‘just’ tens or hundreds of people – namely, advertisers – and now you are going to have hundreds, thousands, or, ideally, tens of thousands of people contributing towards your paycheck.

Having a reader and having a subscriber is not the same thing. A reader visits a number of sites, they are used to the fact that sometimes things don’t work; when they are unhappy, they try their luck somewhere else. Subscribers, on the other hand, have given you their money and when things don’t work, they expect an immediate response and solution.

From the software perspective, you are going to need customer-relationship management software (CRM), which will allow you to:

- **Have an overview of each reader's history:** what, when and for how much has he or she bought services, which offers have they received, which problems have you solved for them. In an ideal case, (and this is technically more demanding) what have they read on your site and every link they have ever clicked on.
- **Communicate with the subscriber (mainly via e-mail):** creating automated system emails (here is your new password), regular newsletters (our best articles this week), or one-time email campaigns (a special Christmas offer on subscription). This function can be part of separate marketing software but it always has to communicate with the CRM.
- Divide readers into **segments** based on their purchases, how much they pay, their price sensitivity, etc.
- **Regulate back office access:** depending on the legislation regulating personal data protection, you might need various levels of access, for example, the Editor-in-Chief should be able to have access to subscription sales but not to users' personal data.

If you already have an existing reader database, the price for cleaning and importing to a new system could be even higher than the price of the rest of the CRM combined, and integration of the old database will be the most time-consuming task of the whole process. Therefore, assess the current status of your existing database and find out what kind of help the software supplier offers in porting over and harmonizing different systems.

When designing the CRM, before you sign the agreement, make sure that user data remains your property and, should the agreement be terminated, the supplier will provide you with the data in an acceptable and usable format, which can ideally be defined in advance.

Paywall software

A paywall allows paying customers to have access to content and prevents non-paying customers from having this access. Programming a paywall can be very simple – it could be a matter of days – if you have a single web, single server, and single subscription.

Alternatively, it can be very complex, with development taking a few years, depending on what other features you need. The complexity of software increases if:

- You serve readers from multiple servers, you use cache for content, or any more complex server configuration.
- You want to lock more than just text, for example other types of media (video, audio).
- You want to have freemium/hard paywall available, or metered paywall, or just registration paywall (instead of paying for content, the reader gains access to content by registering their email – various texts can be available for a limited period of time in order to gather the e-mail addresses of potential customers).
- You need more levels of access (cheaper and more expensive subscription packages).
- You want to have the best protection of your content against unauthorized access (for example, the paywall cannot be circumvented

by deleting cookies or disabling JavaScript in the browser).

- For marketing purposes, you want to have various ‘holes’ in your paywall – for example, have different rules for readers redirected from Facebook and Google, who are permitted to have greater access to otherwise paid-for articles.

Payment processing and payment methods

One of the first things that needs to be considered is the methods of payment that are available.

In many countries, repeated or regular payments are not standard, in which case you should do everything in your power to find a technical solution for such payments, so the user becomes accustomed to automated renewal.

In many countries, companies exist that offer aggregation of payment methods: instead of having an agreement with individual banks, PayPal, and similar organizations, you make an agreement with a single company that provides a number of various payment methods and they send you the payments from aggregated sources, received in a single, simple and straightforward package.

If you are preoccupied with launching a subscription system, closing a deal with an aggregator can save you time; time that you would otherwise have to spend implementing multiple payment systems. Typically, the aggregator

Key point 1

Does the software support the most popular payment methods in YOUR country? (Ask somebody from a popular e-shop in your country which payment methods are the most popular. There can be tens of payment methods but the most popular are limited in number – these should suffice for the start). Many large software suppliers support only, for example, credit cards and PayPal, which is fine in the US but not in many other countries.

Keypoint 2

Does the software allow **repeated (recurring) payments in your country?** It is key for your subscription process to allow the user to key in the payment details only once and then future payments can be processed automatically (usually monthly).

takes a few percent from every transaction. An aggregator is a good solution if you are planning a slow, careful introduction of payments. On the other hand, if you are planning a 'big marketing bang', where there is a chance that many readers will pay you in a short period of time for a long-lasting subscription, you might want to save some money by having agreements with individual banks directly.

You can use either a local aggregator, which offers payment methods popular in your country, or an international player, especially if you target a large market, such as PayU.com or CCAvenue.com, should they be available within your market. When implementing payments, you will always face the decision of whether to support more expensive payment methods, which will typically offer commensurate increases in the convenience offered to both the reader and to you. Typically, the most expensive forms include payment by SMS or through the phone, whilst PayPal is much cheaper, and the cheapest option is usually by a card or directly through a bank.

A very popular compromise is offering only the most advantageous payment method at the beginning (for example, anything that is not payment by SMS), and introducing more expensive methods later to facilitate conversions, for example from potential customers who are willing to pay but are encountering a 'conversion barrier' relating to the added inconvenience of making payment ('I would pay, but I can't be bothered to leave my seat and find my credit card, I'll do it some other time').

Pricing flexibility

This should be an obvious feature but it is not – a surprising number of software offerings have a problem with pricing flexibility. Ideally, you are looking for a system where the publisher's marketing manager wakes up in the morning with a new idea for a subscription offer, and is then able to create it himself, set the new prices, and launch the offer without any help from the developer. A step further would be the option to set who will have access to the offer (for example, a reader who has never had a subscription, or whose subscription expired 30 days ago) and receive real time analytical data regarding the profile of people that have taken-up the offer, where they found it, and so on.

Nice-to-have advanced tools

There are further nice-to-have tools that you do not need at the beginning but which might increase future sales. For example:

Administration of company subscriptions.

Companies who buy more than one subscription want to have the option to administer their subscription – remove access of a departing employee and delegate it to a new one, or purchase new accesses. For business- and finance-focused media, which expect a larger number of corporation clients, this could be a feature required from the start.

Coupons or other discount systems.

Once the initial wave of new subscribers and registered readers is over, you might want to experiment with new ways of engaging readers and converting them to subscribers by leveraging partnership relationships (for example, 'buy a book at our partner's bookshop and benefit from a free subscription for two weeks).

For this purpose, you need to find a system which allows the marketing department to generate any number of electronic coupons (for example, 300 codes for partner X with a 10 day pass to the Economy Section) and then readers will be able to exchange this coupon for a subscription on your site.

The second typical function pertaining to coupons are those that do not provide a free subscription but rather offer a discount from a subscription. This system should be linked to an analytical module that, over time, will allow you to evaluate which coupons from which specific partner made readers convert to subscribers, or which discount attracted the type of a reader who is willing to pay full price for a subscription in the future.

Tip

IT IS ALMOST ALWAYS A BAD IDEA TO ALLOW MULTIPLE PEOPLE LEGAL ACCESS BY SHARING A SINGLE USERNAME AND PASSWORD. IF YOU ALLOW THIS, YOU WILL NOT BE ABLE TO CUSTOMIZE THE USER'S EXPERIENCE FOR EACH INDIVIDUAL, SEND THEM SEPARATE NEWSLETTERS, YOU MIGHT LOSE THEM WHEN THEIR COMPANY SUBSCRIPTION EXPIRES, AND IT WILL BE EVEN MORE DIFFICULT TO FIGHT ILLEGAL USERS, WHO SHARE ONE ACCOUNT ILLEGALLY. EVEN WHEN COMPANIES ASK YOU FOR THIS, DO ALL YOU CAN TO AVOID SHARING A SINGLE PASSWORD; RATHER, HAVE A DATABASE WITH LISTED EMPLOYEES, WHO HAVE ACCESS THROUGH THIS COMPANY'S SUBSCRIPTION BUT MAINTAIN THEIR OWN INDIVIDUAL ACCOUNTS.

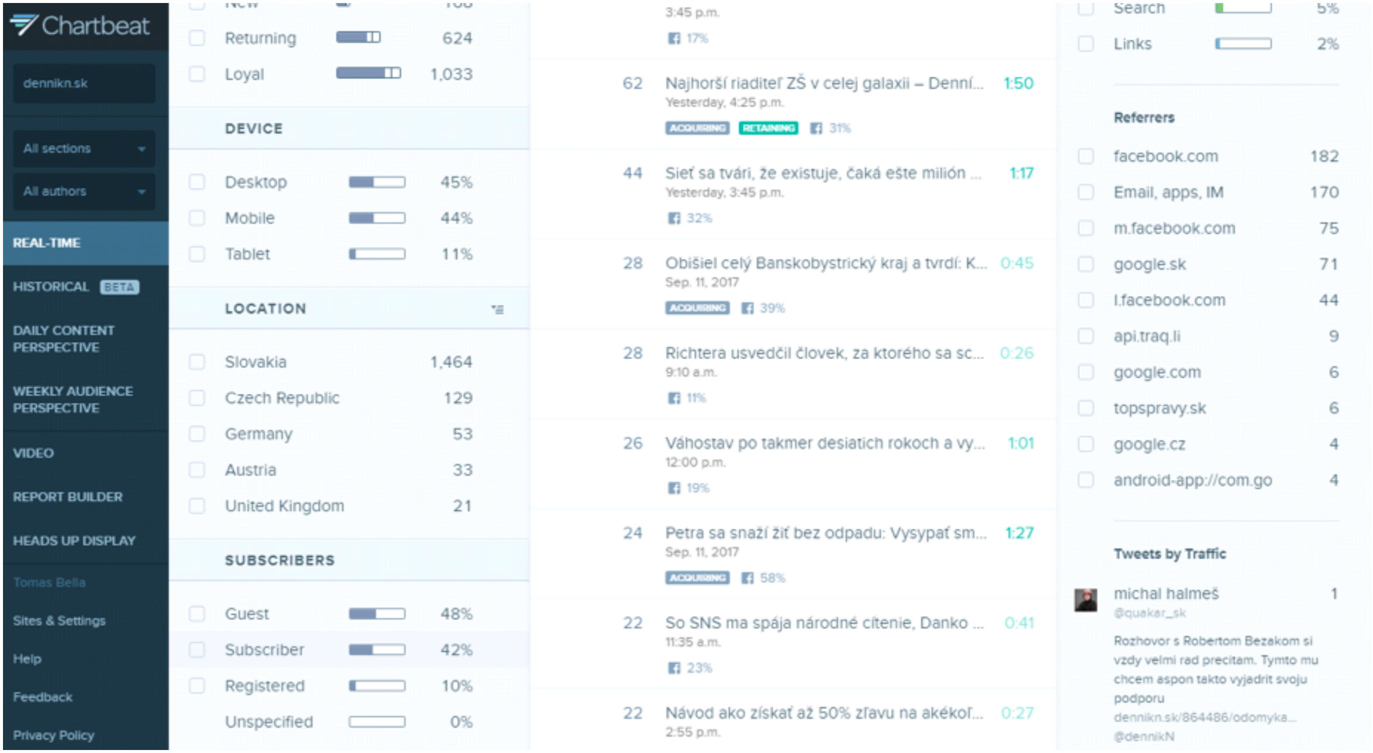
Gifting and sharing a subscription.

Many media content sources provide the option to add a family member to one's own account (with the family member granted their own login details) or to gift a second subscription to anyone (1+1). It tends to be beneficial to link the history of the accounts from the beginning so you can later evaluate how effective the promotion was.

A/B testing.

Whatever you do, you will want to know whether it can be improved. There are a number of external tools that can be used to test your website or e-mail campaigns (for example [Optimizely.com](), [Google Optimize](), or [CrazyEgg.com]()), but their integration and evaluation is often not a trivial exercise, and can require the devotion of significant time and resources. Direct support of A/B testing or connection to a popular A/B testing tool can be very beneficial.

Chartbeat software allows you to view habits of paying and non-paying readers separately.



☐ Returning	624
☐ Loyal	1,033

DEVICE

☐ Desktop	45%
☐ Mobile	44%
☐ Tablet	11%

LOCATION

☐ Slovakia	1,464
☐ Czech Republic	129
☐ Germany	53
☐ Austria	33
☐ United Kingdom	21

SUBSCRIBERS

☐ Guest	48%
☐ Subscriber	42%
☐ Registered	10%
Unspecified	0%

3:45 p.m.
17%

62	Najhorší riaditeľ ZŠ v celej galaxii – Denní... Yesterday, 4:25 p.m. ACQUIRING RETAINING 31%	1:50
44	Sieť sa tvári, že existuje, čaká ešte milión ... Yesterday, 3:45 p.m. 32%	1:17
28	Obišiel celý Banskobystrický kraj a tvrdí: K... Sep. 11, 2017 ACQUIRING 39%	0:45
28	Richtera usvedčil človek, za ktorého sa sc... 9:10 a.m. 11%	0:26
26	Váhostav po takmer desiatich rokoch a vy... 12:00 p.m. 19%	1:01
24	Petra sa snaží žiť bez odpadu: Vysypať sm... Sep. 11, 2017 ACQUIRING 58%	1:27
22	So SNS ma spája národné cítenie, Danko ... 11:35 a.m. 23%	0:41
22	Návod ako získať až 50% zľavu na akékoľ... 2:55 p.m.	0:27

☐ Search	5%
☐ Links	2%

Referrers

☐ facebook.com	182
☐ Email, apps, IM	170
☐ m.facebook.com	75
☐ google.sk	71
☐ l.facebook.com	44
☐ api.traq.li	9
☐ google.com	6
☐ topspravy.sk	6
☐ google.cz	4
☐ android-app://com.go	4

Tweets by Traffic

michal halmeš 1
@quakar_sk
Rozhovor s Robertom Bezakom si vzdy velmi rad precitam. Tymto mu chcem aspon takto vyjadrit svoju podporu
dennikn.sk/864486/odomyka...
@dennikN

Analytics

Even with this guide at your fingertips, whilst engaging the process of paywall launch and subscription selling initiatives, you will likely try a number of options, many of which may prove to be dead ends. Therefore, a fundamental element of any subscription provision service will be the need for a real time overview of the success of your campaigns (looking at the books at the end of the month is not enough).

The basic parameters that will provide you with a basic picture (yet which remain relatively easy to follow) are:

- The number of active subscribers; if you offer more products (for example common and premium subscriptions), you should monitor each product independently over time
- The number of subscriptions sold today, this week, this month, and their comparisons with previous periods (it is important that you differentiate between the number of subscriptions sold and the number of subscribers since these may differ – for example, if you undertake a 'give away' subscription promotion there will be a mismatch between the two metrics, and it's therefore useful to monitor these two parameters separately)
- average revenue per user and the development of this metric over time

Further useful indicators are:

- the number of expiring subscriptions – what will happen within the next few weeks, how big is the group whose subscriptions are due for expiry? (For example, a year ago you perhaps had a successful campaign for an annual subscription which drove high take-up – the system should warn you that many of these subscriptions are going to expire at the same time and you should motivate these people to extend them with a new offer)
- retention rate – how many customers are you loosing and what do you know about them
- actual revenues per week and per month (excluding revenue from future periods – an accounting view of the revenue)

Basic Charts
Interactive Chart
Data Comparison
2-Axis Chart
Scatter Chart
Bubble Chart
Share
Tips
Column, bar, and pie charts compare values in a single category, such as the number of products sold by each salesperson. Pie charts show each category's value as a percentage of the whole.
Fundraiser Results by Salesperson
PARTICIPANT
UNITS SOLD
Andy
Chloe
Daniel
Grace
Sophia
11
15
9
14
21
Column Chart
Pie Chart
30%
16%
21%
20%
13%

Most popular paywall systems providers

Whether you want to build your own system or you want to buy or license an existing one, having a detailed look at what the most successful systems in the world have to offer is free – most suppliers will be happy to give you a long distance video presentation.

Information self-reported by vendors via online questionnaire in November 2017.
? – information not available

	Typical customer	Typical price range	Typical integration time	Key features – competitive advantage (self-reported)
Piano.io	media houses, OTT providers, bloggers	?	4 weeks	A powerful software platform, Bespoke and normative data analysis, An expert marketing services team, Adblock detection and interception, Identity Management, Industry Standard Security compliance, Customer care and helpdesk, Native App integration, Audience Segmentation
PigeonPaywall.com	newspaper and magazines, radio, video streaming	$1,500 USD one-time, $99 monthly plus 10% on transactions	2-4 weeks	Flexibility, hands-on approach and extensive help with integration.
Creative Circle Media	Mainly small to medium sized local newspapers, also bloggers, magazines and corporate sites	- Setup $750-$2500 - monthly fees $100 to $1000. - Revenue share also possible, typically around 20%.	Up to 4 weeks	Easy to use and very flexible. When paired with our web CMS, our paywall is the most dynamic in the industry.
Varnish Software	Large publishing houses/media	Starts from €30,000	?	Extreme flexibility and edge side logic
Zeen101.com	News and Magazine publisher - mid market	- setup min. $20,000 - monthly min. $300	8-25 weeks	Powered by WordPress, ready-to-go iOS and Android apps

Other notable software vendors who did not respond to our email requests for information:

- Getdrizzle.com – free open-source paywall
- Mppglobal.com – a system used mainly by British media, such as Sky, DailyMail, and The Times.
- Zuora.com – a system for larger companies (also outside the publishing business)

	Company name				
What features does your software offer?	**Piano Software Inc**	**Pigeon Paywall**	**Creative Circle Media Solutions**	**ZEEN101**	**Varnish Software**
Metered paywall	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Hard paywall	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Support for payments for video, multimedia	✔	✔	✔	✖	✖
Credit cards processing	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Localised payments options	✔	✔	✔	✔	✖
CRM capabilities - subscriber management	✔	✔	✖	✔	✖
Support for group/company subscriptions	✔	✔	✔	✔	✖
A/B testing tools	✔	✖	✔	✔	✔
Business analytics	✔	✔	✖	✔	✖
Email marketing tools	✔	✔	✔	✔	✖
On-site marketing tools	✔	✖	✔	✔	✖
Support for migration of existing database to your platform	✔	✔	✖	✔	✖
APIs, SDK, plugins for existing CMS systems	✔	✔	✔	✔	✖

PRICING
STRATEGIES

Most people have an idea of how much a loaf of bread, a book, or a car should cost. However, very few of your readers are likely to be able to estimate how much they should pay for reading articles from a single media outlet on the internet. This is a problem – since there is no habit or familiarity with paying for this content, consumers can feel wary about the price point being set in a way that does not concern them with familiar or daily purchases.

However, it can also be seen as an opportunity; since consumers are not themselves able to use preconceptions to guess what constitutes an 'appropriate' sum then there is a chance to set prices according to your needs. Importantly though, this opportunity is likely to only arise once in the history of your media company, so it is vital that you gauge it correctly.

The key to not making an irreversible mistake is not thinking about a single price but rather thinking about a system of multiple prices from the start.

Basic price – what most people will pay

Some of your readers will already be familiar with the concept of subscription services for other forms of web content – such as Netflix and Spotify – and may expect that subscription to be pitched at a similar price point (8-10 dollars per month).

Another section of your readers will have – or be familiar with – subscriptions to printed newspapers, and will maintain that the online price should – of course – be lower, since they don't receive any bits of paper to hold and spill coffee on. In reality, the most reliable way to recognize an unsuccessful online subscription product is to see its price set up in order to 'not lose anything' when a reader moves from a paper version to the digital version. However low the price of printing and as much as the publisher's accountant might approve, the reader will not accept this. Their focus on the idea that there are costs associated with a tangible product that are supposedly not present for a digital product significantly impacts the way in which they perceive value, costs and pricing. Media sources that base their online subscription pricing strategy on creating a parallel to their paper version claim, in principle, that they do not want people to migrate from paper to digital, and that they want the readers to continue buying their daily paper newspaper.

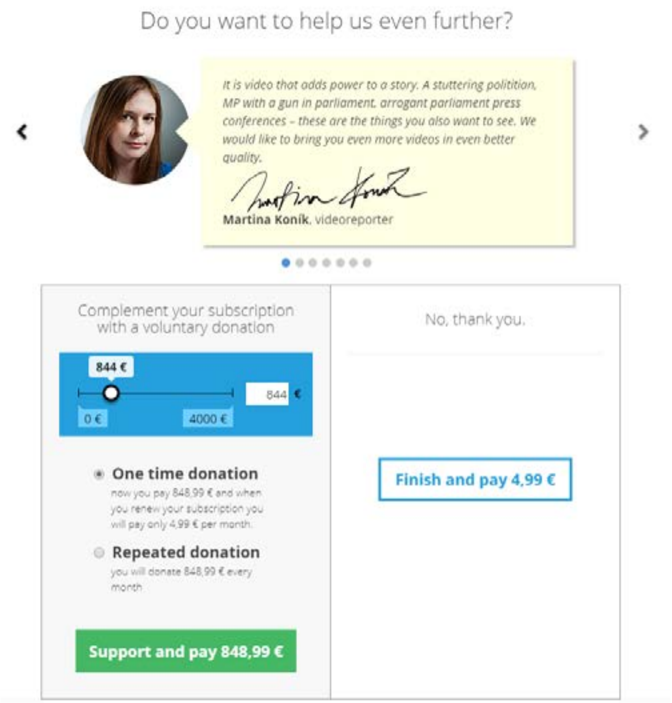
As a guideline, people subscribing to some of the largest global media in English expect a price point of roughly $10-15 per month. However, the operational and language context of your publication has strong potential to affect this. Ultimately, it is likely that you will want to undertake your own survey that seeks to identify how many people would be willing to pay and what they might be willing to pay. Even with this effort though, there is a risk that in reality you will not be any-the-wiser, due to the fact that;

- The vast majority of people will indicate that they will never pay
- Readers will know why you are asking and they will chose the lowest prices in order to push your prices down
- You are going to ask a typical sample of readers, which is a different group to the 1-5% of your most loyal readers, who are, in fact, your most likely subscription candidates. In reality, you should be mostly interested in the opinion of the second group, which is, unfortunately, very difficult to recognize in advance.

At the end of the day, you are going to end up with your own estimate of your readers' spending power; a price that is not far from $5-15 per month, not far from the prices offered by major competitors (if such competitors exist), and possibly a price that ends with the familiar, comforting and bargain-communicating $X.99.

Expensive package – what your biggest supporters will pay

Here is the good news – many readers want to give you their money. These might not constitute a huge number of your most loyal readers, but they will exist and they will support you as soon as you ask them, and, very often, with a large sum of money. You can collect the money through crowdfunding (see chapter 2.4). Once they have paid their regular fee, you can ask them for a voluntary donation, just as the Dennikn.sk does:



Do you want to help us even further?

It is video that adds power to a story. A stuttering politition, MP with a gun in parliament, arrogant parliament press conferences – these are the things you also want to see. We would like to bring you even more videos in even better quality.

Martina Koník, videoreporter

Complement your subscription with a voluntary donation

844 €

0 € — 4000 €

844 €

● **One time donation**
now you pay 848,99 € and when you renew your subscription you will pay only 4,99 € per month.

○ **Repeated donation**
you will donate 848,99 € every month

No, thank you.

Readers perceive the methods above as a request for the reader to give a ‘present’. Presents usually happen once, sometimes they repeat but they are never regular. Therefore, there is a need to have, apart from the basic price, also a ‘premium’ package for those willing to pay more. There are two basic ways to distinguish the basic package from the premium one:

- Content (for example, general news costs $5 but business news costs $5 extra)
- The level of comfort of the extra services (for example, a mobile application is available only for paying customers, see examples below)

The typical solution of this type is called a ‘premium subscription’ or ’supporters‘ club’: all readers have access to all content but those paying premium fees (or making one-time donations) have access to extra services, such as:

- Earlier access to some news.
- More prestige (for example, comments under articles are highlighted, premium supports are listed among the site’s supporters).
- Mobile application and access to content in different formats (for instance, e-books).
- Invitations to events, ranging from debates organized by the editing staff to exclusive meetings with the Editor-in-Chief.
- Tangible presents (a book once a year, a calendar, a monthly exclusive magazine).
- Access to the archive.
- Further ways of interaction (special Facebook group just for subscribers, comment section unlocked only for subscribers).
- Discounts for other products (books, tickets to the cinema).
- Advert-free website or fewer adverts.

The problem with the first approach is that it can be all but impossible to explain to people that some texts are charged, and even though they have paid, there are yet other texts that are paid for separately with a different system. This constitutes both a marketing and UI nightmare. As such, unless you maintain a gigantic website with many different brands and hundreds of articles a day, the second approach pertaining to ‘comfort’ additions is likely to constitute the most effective option.

There is no universal solution, nor a single service that would satisfy all of the readers all of the time, that will motivate them to pay more: instead, the process is iterative - you will come up with ideas, test them, come up with some more, and keep doing this. Forever.

Discounting

This will not happen in the first month, but maybe in half a year, maybe after a year, or even in two years, a moment will come when the number of subscribers will stagnate and you will start offering discounts in order to find new ones. There have been whole books written about discounts so here are a few of the most important notes regarding discounts in subscriptions.

- A bad discount is the discount that is used by your regular customer who was willing to pay the full price. You cannot always know in advance which discount will fall into this category but you have to be able to find it out retrospectively and learn from it. **Do not offer discounts until you have the right analytical tools to verify if the discount really targets the right segment of customers.**

- A bad discount is one that your regular customers can see and it devalues the product from their perspective because it will make them think 'when my subscription expires, I will not renew it but instead I will wait for a discount'. If you send this discount by e-mail, targeting can be achieved most effectively, and the collateral damage and erosion risk is at its lowest. If you display a banner on the website only to people who have not subscribed yet, targeting will be less accurate (not all subscribers log in at all times) but probably still acceptable. If you do not have the technical capacity to target the customers in this way, do not offer discounts.

- The better your **reasoning for the discount**, the smaller damage it will be likely to cause. A subscription for $10 for the 10th anniversary will not cause any damage because nobody will expect it to repeat and therefore wait for a new discount opportunity without extending their expired subscription. This is the reason why companies in highly competitive markets offer discounts on public holidays; for example, American mattress sellers typically have a special offer for Independence Day – the correlation with a random event gives the feeling that the offer is unique and therefore that it will not repeat for at least a year.

  A discount for students and pensioners will not cause much harm either but you do not have to offer this discount automatically: try offering a discount for students only on a specific week or month during the year.

- People hate companies that reward new customers with discounts and punish loyal customers with higher prices. The best way to deal with this is to make the discount available to anybody (who finds it) but you can actively advertise it (for instance, through banners) only to a certain group of customers.

- People's price perceptions differ: some might like 20% discount for the annual subscription, others might prefer having the first month free and then paying full price, while a different group might find the regular price attractive if it includes a free book. At the same time, the financial value of all these offers can be the same. You need to find a system that allows you to test, measure and rotate as many ideas as you want.

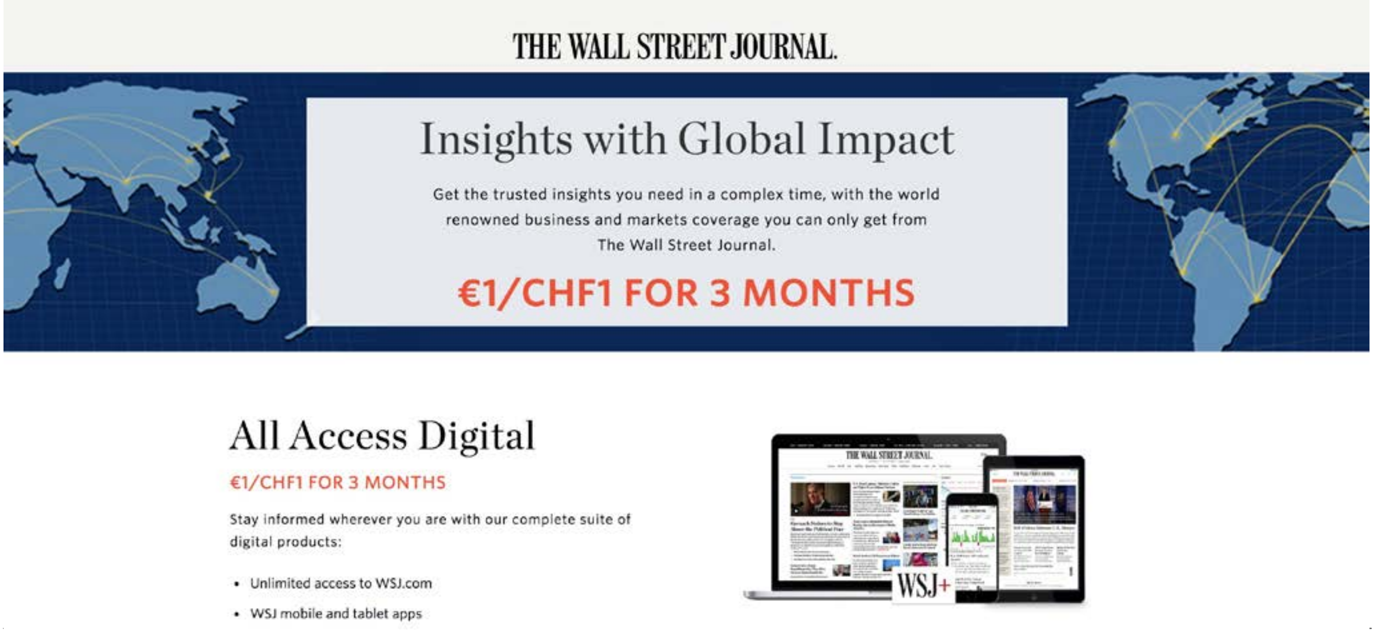
Micropayments and microsubscriptions

It is not easy to keep telling your customer that you will not give them what they want (the mantra of ‘the customer is always right’ is very strongly engrained). But one of the occasions when you need to stand your ground is in relation to whether readers should be granted the opportunity to buy just one article, or to undertake a subscription just for one day or just for one week.

The problem with ‘day for a dollar’ subscriptions is not that it attracts only a small payment. Instead, the problem with ‘day for a dollar’ or ‘per-article’ payments it that they fail to instill habitual behaviors in your readers – meaning that the ability to convert readers into long term, subscription payers is significantly lower.

In most cases, it makes more sense to sell your subscription for one dollar (or one cent) for a whole month – giving access to all subscription materials - and have a designed system which shows the customer all the advantages they have gained through this subscription. Consequently, you are able to form habit and dependence and thus win the reader as a future regular subscriber. The second problem with micropayments pertains to the psychological cost of the payment. In other words, your target group usually does not consider the one dollar to be the real problem, but rather taking out the card, filling out all the data, considering the security of your website, and so on (a point discussed above in section 3.3). Once this barrier is broken, it would be a shame to let the customer go after having read only one article.

An example of a discount designed to create a reading habit: the first three months of Wall Street Journal for $1:



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MARKETING AND PR – HOW TO PERSUADE PEOPLE TO PAY

First things first. **You are not trying to convince the majority of your readers** to pay for content. You are not even trying to convince half of your readers. If you convince 1 per cent of your readers, your project will be, in comparison to common subscription models, a success. If you convince 5% of your readers in five years, you will be one of the most successful newspaper sites in the world. (For example, out of 59 million online readers of New York Times, only 2.2 million had a subscription at the beginning of 2017 – not even 4%.)

What needs to shape your marketing strategy is the following logic: many people visit your website but only a small portion of them – usually, the most educated, rather wealthy, most loyal and frequent visitors of your website – are your target group. These are the people you want to communicate with. With the rest, it will be great if they do not try to sabotage you but you do not have to try to convince them of anything much at all.

Fighting logic and fighting emotions

It is difficult to convince people to pay for online content because:

- They have a (mostly correct) feeling that previously they received the content for free and would like to continue this tradition.
- They have a (mostly incorrect) feeling that people around them do not pay for content, that they can find the same quality for free, and whoever pays will 'look like a fool' because they are wasting their money.

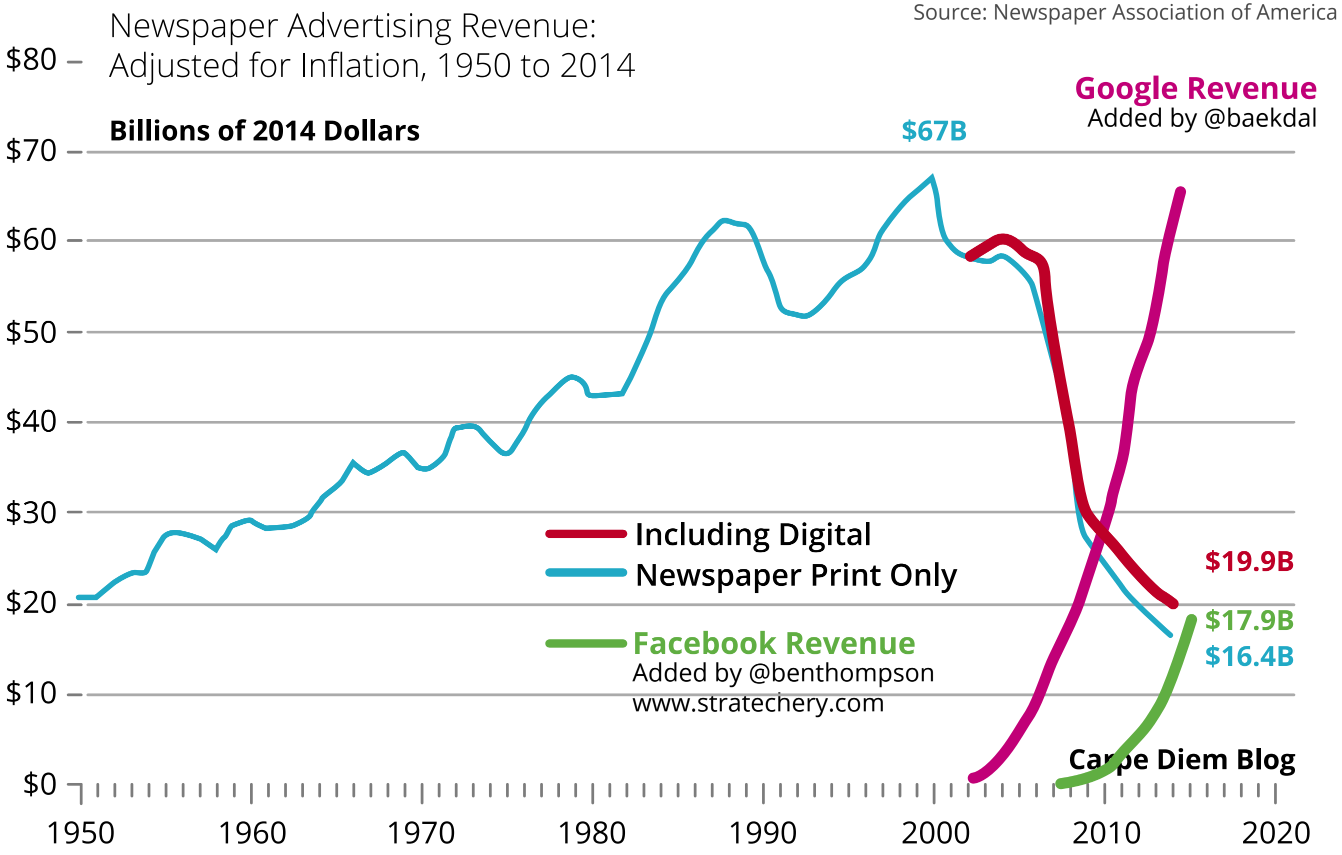
The problem is that the first issue is rational and the second is emotional, and in order to succeed, you need to conquer both. Therefore, this problem cannot be overcome by a single amazing campaign but rather through a long-term combination of various marketing methods and channels.

1. Fighting logical arguments: Why have they asked me for money all of a sudden?

The question as to why online media has been free for many years and now is suddenly charged is one that will be so frequent that you need to prepare a convincing and detailed answer. (You can dedicate a whole subpage to this single question.)

However, your advertising agency will be mortified at the subpage you eventually do develop, because the answer will be complicated and exhausting and simply cannot be summarized in a single slogan or banner.

Ideal (yet rare) is not taking away existing free content from customers, but adding more services. In this case, the answer is easy: We are charging for services in order to bring you these specific new sections, this specific new magazine, publish these specific authors who have been available only offline until now.



Source: Newspaper Association of America

The more common case is that you really are taking something from the reader, something that has been free until now. The answer involves complex excel tables with advertising income, an increasing revenue for Google and Facebook, decreasing advertising and others. You can show a graph such as like the one on previous page.

However, defeatist marketing hardly ever works – more people want to join the winners than save the loser.

Simply tell them the truth regarding why you are now charging for content; show them as much data and as many facts as you can and keep in mind that you do not need to win this fight, you just need a draw.

You need to neutralize active haters who claim that charged content will only mean larger villas and yachts for the greedy owners. The number of people who really will actually look at your economic arguments will be small but it is important to convince them to, if not fight for you, at least not fight against you.

Once you have neutralized logical arguments against charged content, you are free to bring in the advantages of charged content. In most cases, **a general appeal to 'buy our subscription'** (apart from during the first few weeks of launch) **does not work as well as a specific appeal to 'buy this specific article to find out where to invest next year'.**

Your content is your best marketing tool and most rational decisions to buy a subscription will not be made after seeing a banner but rather when a reader wants to open a text that he or she needs and the text asks for a credit card first. Therefore, in general, a TV, billboard, banner marketing campaign that you spent months planning is unlikely to constitute the most effective tool for increasing sales. Rather, you might want to launch a series of micro campaigns based on a daily overview of the most popular articles, which motivates people to buy a subscription to access them, and which can be promoted on sites such as Facebook, or via email.

2. Fighting emotions: What kind of a person am I if I buy a subscription?

Nobody wants to feel like a fool. Some claim that people who buy water in bottles are fools because tap water is equally drinkable, or people buying brands are fools, or people buying original DVDs rather than downloading a pirate copy from the internet are fools. But people are increasingly good at ignoring the opinions of the thousand baying voices on the internet – instead, people tend to value the opinions of those they hold in high regard. Therefore, **people will pay for online content if their friends also pay for it.**

It sounds abstract but in reality it works like this: a subscriber posts a link for your charged article on Facebook and his friend reacts aggressively 'I cannot read this article, a normal human being would not pay for this!' and your reader:

a) responds that a few dollars is a small price to pay for all the interesting content that they have access to in return
b) does not respond but out of spite will not post links to Facebook in future

(There is a third option: you can have a system that allows the subscriber to send this article to their friends for free, for example, in return for their e-mail address.)

There will be thousands of these micro debates (in huge intensity right after the launch of the subscription system – they will subside over time but never disappear). If you have to invest only in one marketing thing at the beginning, invest in people who will participate in these discussions and who will explain your arguments day and night. Each subscriber who is willing to publicly admit that he or she has subscribed or even fight for you is like a precious flower, which needs nurturing at the beginning and if the flower is losing a debate, you need to rush to the rescue.

Try to anticipate where these debates will take place. The first place will be your website and your social networks but most likely also on other places, like discussion forums and competing websites.

Of course, your goal is not just to make your readers avoid feeling like fools; ideally, the result will be a **positive emotion**. There are many options available relating to how you choose to help nurture types of positive emotion in your audience.

For instance, you can adopt the approach of a producer of luxury cars and turn your subscription into a **symbol of status**: I am the type of person who understands the value of information, I can afford to buy the best information, I do not want to waste time going through a huge pile of garbage information.

Similarly, you can appeal to the sense of **fair play** – I am the type of person who understands the value of human (mental) work, I know why journalists deserve reward for their hard work. (The crowdfunding model works particularly well for Wikipedia: ‘if you use us, it is fair to pay at least once a year’).

On the other hand, you can try to create **fear** of what would happen if your media did not exist or if it did not have enough resources to keep the mighty in check (the slogan of The Washington Post after the election of Donald Trump: Democracy dies in darkness). There are many other ‘fear’ messages that can also be leveraged; some of which will resonate effectively, and

If you fulfill the obligation of participating in debates and you prevent the massacre of your first subscribers, the second wave will consist of marketing techniques that will encourage the idea of ‘getting friends to pay’. For example:

- Allow your subscribers to invite their friends by, for example, giving them both free access for 2 weeks.
- Use a survey to ask your subscribers to tell you why they subscribe – then use their answers in your campaign with their names.
- Ask friendly opinion leaders and other people to join your campaign, grant them access.
- Reward people for sharing your articles on social media or by e-mail.

some of which might give the impression of manipulation, meaning that the approach should be adopted cautiously.

Ultimately, online subscription is not a cursed product for which ‘people will never pay’ (despite the fearmongering of many). People may be disinclined to pay, but with the right arguments, they can not only be convinced to pay, but also converted to the notion that payment is both positive and necessary.

Internal communication in your newsroom

You launch your new paywall at midnight and there is one thing that is guaranteed to happen to your editors when they get to work in the morning. There will be tons of emails from their friends asking them to send them ‘just this one article’ because they do not have a subscription. As soon as they send them this article, you have lost the first important battle. Not for the few dollars you have lost, but because nobody is a stronger opinion maker than your employees and if not even they can convince their friends and readers to buy the subscription, then probably nobody can.

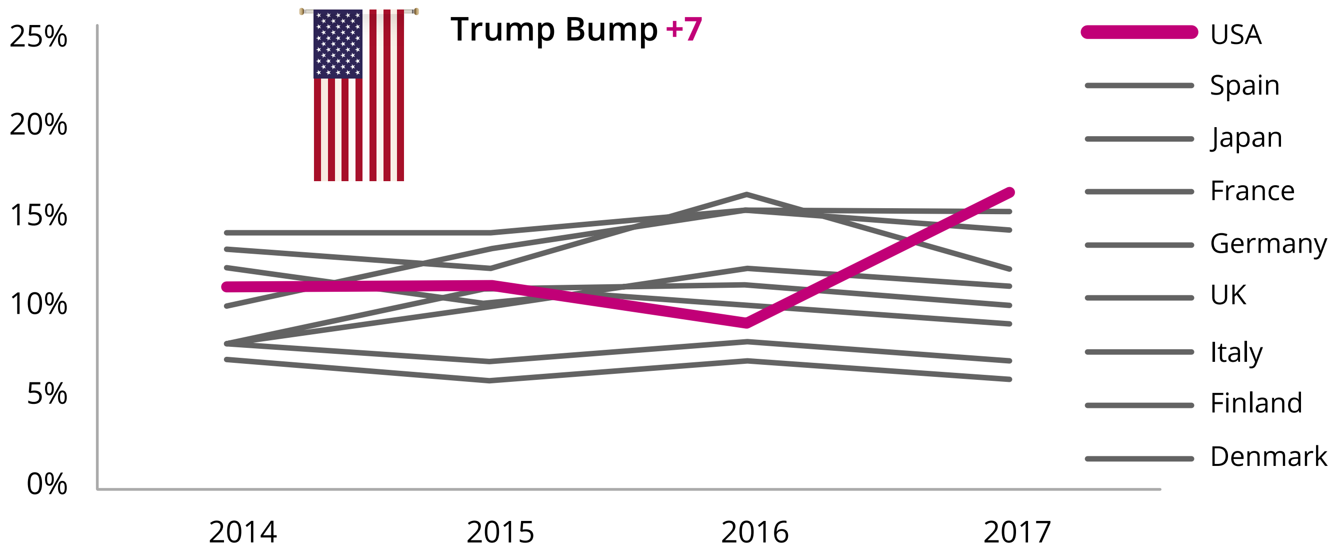
Your reporters and editors are not your natural allies; in fact, it is likely that they will like your subscription system the least. They want their articles to be read as much as possible and they are aware that charged texts are read less than free texts. When using a freemium (hard) paywall this will be an even greater issue because they will lobby with every article to offer it for free, to make a larger portion of the article a ’free peek’. Journalists – like peacocks – want you to see their feathers on show, and they don’t care about how much is being charged for entrance to the zoo.

The best ways to get your whole company on board include these examples:

- **Personal organization of the project.** If you find an ex-journalist to be in charge of the launch of the subscription system, their job will be much easier due to the rapport they will have with current journalists, and their ability to understand the project’s implications from the newsroom’s perspective. Even employees who do not have any direct task connected to the subscription system (for example, all editors), have to be collected in one room in order to give them platform to air their concerns and objections. The subscription system cannot be ‘a project for our marketing team’ or ’a project for our business analysts’.
- **Data.** Whatever is measured is what your employees will consider important. If you measure page views they will be more inclined to use tabloid headlines because they will attract page views – but not subscribers. On the other hand, if you measure, or even send them daily data about the sales of texts, they will consider sales important.
- **Incentives plan.** Whatever the employees are rewarded for is what they consider important. Stop bonuses for page views and replace them with bonuses for subscription sales. It sounds horrible but you will probably find out that selling texts is much closer to what the team considers to be good quality than any other parameter that you have used so far.

ONLINE
MARKETING
S.E.O
Content
Lists
Links
Titles
Blogs
VDO
Sales
Opt-Ins

News payment remains flat but there has been an upsurge in the USA - selected countries



- **Do not give your employees free access to your subscription.** Increase their paycheck by the price of the subscription and motivate them (very strongly) to buy a subscription, at least a few times. Firstly, they will be great alpha testers and therefore they will help you to find flaws and inconsistencies in your system. Secondly, it will change their own mindset and, furthermore, the argument ‘even I had to pay for it’ is bulletproof against their friends who might ask them for a free pass.

Email marketing

If you want a long-term subscriber, you have to form as personal a relationship as possible – therefore, e-mail is going to be one of your most important marketing tools. Here are a few tips on how to use e-mail effectively:

- **Send an e-mail to your readers even when you do not need anything from them.** If you win a journalism prize, congratulate them for letting your media become the best in the country or category. If your page visits break a record, thank them for spreading the word about your media to their friends. Your customers will be more accepting towards your future offers. A special category of this communication should be 'how we spent your money'. Do not consider your job done once the payment arrives in your account, but rather keep the customer convinced that they are making the right choice in their decision to subscribe, and that their contribution is making a difference in the world.

- An e-mail sent with the picture and signature of the Editor-in-Chief is more effective than an impersonal message from your marketing team. But be careful – it has to be possible to reply to **the Editor-in-Chief and the Editor-in-Chief should at least see this reply from the reader** even if he or she then delegates the answer to someone else.

- E-mail marketing is a sphere where any mistakes are very difficult to correct: once a reader files you under spam (or, even worse, an e-mail server starts considering you spam), it is very difficult to go back.

- If you do not have experience with large e-mail campaigns, try finding the basic template setting and techniques from someone who has this experience.

Performance marketing

There is one area where most entrants seeking to erect a paywall or implement a subscription service will find themselves significantly lacking the requisite expertise – this is in the field of performance marketing. Selling online subscriptions, especially in the later phases after the launch, does not look anything like selling printed newspapers.

On the other hand, even though the majority of media worldwide is only just starting out with paid subscriptions, many other industries already have long-term experience. Thousands of software developers and mobile application developers know all there is about customer retention – try visiting one.

Game developers are great at living off a small percentage of paying customers even when the majority of gamers still play their game for free (think Candy Crush or Clash of Clans, which maintain an almost identical model to online freemium subscriptions).

Groupon or its local clone in your country is at least five years ahead of you in e-mail marketing. Dropbox makes the best possible use of a system where existing customers benefit from inviting new customers to the system.

All these companies could teach you data-focused marketing which works in much shorter cycles than regular marketing campaigns. It requires professional measurements of quality and analytics and continuous adjusting of the campaign's parameters. You are going to need a person for your campaigns who already has all this knowledge.

Compared to the companies above, you have a great advantage. **Your product is directly concerned with current affairs which people are interested in. You do not have to persuade them that they want something and then get them to pay for it. They already want it. Now they just need to be happy to pay for it.** That is a further reason why your subscription curve will depend on the current affairs in your country. It is true for most hard news media that the worse the situation in their country is, the better their subscriptions do. For example, American media experienced a great subscription increase following the election of Donald Trump; in fact, this phenomenon has its own name, the 'Trump bump'.

Do not be afraid of using current affairs in your country and do not offer deals only at your anniversary or Valentine's Day. Try creating a campaign based on the occasion of the imprisonment of a local gangster or the birthday of an infamous minister. And, of course, keep in the forefront of your readers' minds the idea that paid subscriptions are fundamental in supporting a free press, which is exactly the reason that the aforementioned gangster has been locked up.

Without your readers paying for subscriptions, the deterioration of world order and civil obedience could be imminent! Whilst this is of course an exaggeration, maintaining a link between payment and the integrity of the content, not just its quantity or whizz-bang technical features, is an important component of your conversion message.

Guide Author

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Previously, he was Editor-in-Chief of the largest provider of Slovak web journalism, sme.sk, and co-founder and first director of Piano, now the world's largest company offering publishers paywall software.

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About Denník N: A Slovak online (dennikn.sk) and print daily newspaper that is supported mostly by online subscriptions, with editorial focus on high quality long-form journalism: reportages, interviews, analyses. Editorial policies are entirely controlled by its own journalists, who own 49% of the shares of the company. Denník N was founded in 2014 by journalists of the most popular Slovak broadsheet newspaper, Sme, who left the paper in protest at the acquisition of a significant portion of the company by local oligarchs connected with major corruption scandals.

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