



## **Improving Digital Subscription Adoption: A Look at Two Newspaper Approaches**

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Newspapers offer subscribers content beyond print through digital offerings. Oftentimes, having readers adopt content on digital platforms can be a challenge. Two newspapers, *The Sacramento Bee* and *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, have successfully leveraged their digital products through several strategies. While both of their approaches are different, both newspapers have seen growth in digital subscribers and net revenue.

### ***The Sacramento Bee* is generating buzz about its digital offerings**

*The Sacramento Bee* has a comprehensive strategy to get print subscribers to activate and use their digital products. At least 39 percent of *The Bee's* print subscribers have activated their digital account. The number is growing and a larger number use the products, at least occasionally.

*The Bee* has a Sunday circulation of 298,000 and offers a variety of subscriptions including seven-day, three-day (Friday-Sunday), Sunday-only and digital-only. The digital component for the print subscriptions is optional.



"We're continuing to grow our digital subscription, and we are growing digital usage," said Maria Ravera, vice president of audience development at *The Bee*. "Overall, our audience continues to grow. We really want every reader to be interacting with us on a variety of platforms – whatever suits them best."

### **Register and Activate: Building Cross Platform Readers for Retention and Profit**

The majority of the industry's new subscriptions are now sold with a digital component. Nielsen Scarborough data indicates that less than half of print subscribers are accessing the digital content on platforms beyond print newspapers. Encouraging print subscribers to activate and use digital products should be part of newspapers' fundamental marketing objectives.

The challenge for newspapers has been to get print subscribers to activate the digital part of their subscriptions and access the digital products. The reasoning is simple, in addition to building digital audience, multiplatform readers correlate with higher levels of subscriber retention.

**Percentage of Paid Starts that are:**

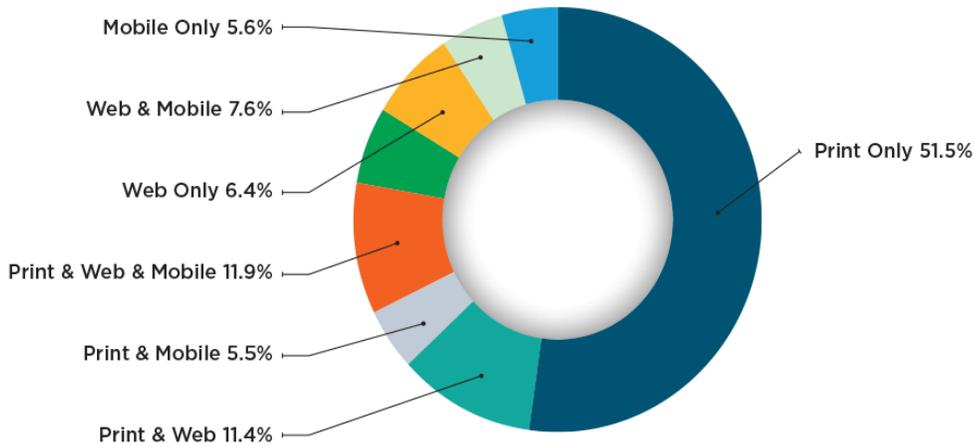
	Print Exclusively	Digital Exclusively	Print + Digital
	2014	2014	2014
<b>Industry</b>	<b>37%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>58%</b>
25,000 and under	48	4	48
25,001-50,000	18	6	76
50,001-100,000	30	9	61
100,001-200,000	22	5	73
200,001+	15	14	71

**Newspapers Subscription Sales that Include a Digital Product**

Source: NAA's 2015 Circulation Facts, Figures & Logic

Digital products have also been leveraged in a number of ways to enhance net revenue. During the last five years, newspapers have raised the median seven-day home delivery rate by 57 percent. The logic, in part, is that this higher price provides the reader with an array of digital products and access to more content. This value equation breaks down if the subscriber is not utilizing these resources beyond the daily print subscription. Another example is that six out of 10 newspapers no longer provide credit for vacation stops based on the assumption that the subscriber continues to have digital access to the newspapers' content while out of town.\*

**Composition of Newspaper Media Audience by Platform (Past 7 Days)**



Source: Nielsen Scarborough, Release 2/2014

At the beginning of 2015, the overall activation rate for subscribers was reported at just 26 percent. Yet, research also tells us these readers are using their mobile device or desktop to access content on other news sites.

**Median Percentage of Eligible Subscriber Base that has Activated Digital Products**

	2014
Industry	25%
25,000 and under	21
25,001-50,000	25
50,001-100,000	24
100,001-200,000	29
200,001+	61

Source: NAA's 2015 Circulation Facts, Figures & Logic

Newspapers are using a number of techniques, including direct response and maintaining constant contact with readers to achieve the objective of improving engagement.

**Getting print subscribers to activate accounts**

*The Bee* ran two summer activation campaigns, along with *The Modesto Bee* and *Merced Sun-Star* based in California. Their messages encouraged subscribers to activate their digital accounts by offering incentives like an iPad and Apple Watch. The marketing plan included weekly emails, online and print ads, social media mentions, posters and fliers at events, and rack cards. *The Bee* gained a total of 10,549 activations as a result of both campaigns.

Personal contact works too. At the California State Fair in July, *The Bee* had a booth where it showed readers how to turn on their accounts using iPads.



Maria Ravera

In addition to campaigns and events, *The Bee* gets its activation message across through regular reminders. Reminders appear in print and electronic correspondence with readers, such as subscription bills.

"We try to have the activation language on everything," Ravera said.

On the technology side, there is constant improvement to make the online registration process as simple as possible. The website features an online step-by-step guide and video to show the process.

## Getting print subscribers to use digital products

Ravera stressed the importance of communicating the benefits of digital products to print subscribers. *The Bee* reminds readers that the website has breaking and developing news stories, interactive databases, photo galleries and videos.

Ravera also noted that it is key to keep this message in front of readers in various ways including e-edition emails, e-newsletters and social media. *The Bee's* loyalty program, Buzz Points, encourages people to read a story online (in addition to the print edition). They can also earn extra points and have access to promotional offerings.

## Seizing an opportunity to further engage readers

There is an opportunity for newspapers to increase the usage of their digital products among a large group of readers who are already familiar with their brand.

Getting print subscribers to activate and use these digital products helps newspapers in several ways. First, it boosts online and mobile traffic. The digital component strengthens the value proposition for a subscription because subscribers get access to additional content across more platforms. Lastly, the engagement newspapers have when print subscribers access the digital products on a regular basis correlates with retention.

## Key takeaways from *The Bee*

1. Balance analytics and customer feedback.

*The Bee* watches user behavior and listens to readers, through conversations and email surveys.

2. Keep reminding readers about the digital products.

"You have to keep digital in front of them and be out in the community," Ravera said.

3. Keep testing products and campaigns.

"Readers make decisions every day about the content they want to see," Ravera said. "We've got to stay ahead of that with them and listen to them. Test new ways to reach out to readers – contests and methods of communication."

## **The Atlanta Journal-Constitution Strategy relies on the right content and data**

*The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* devotes resources and tracks the engagement level of their print subscribers with their digital offerings. There is a companywide commitment to improving upon what are already some of the best metrics in the country.



The AJC has a Sunday circulation of 298,000 and offers a variety of print subscription choices, all of which include access to the premium digital products like myAJC.com and AJCePaper for Atlanta. They also market a digital only subscription.

“We are highly driven by data and the actionable insights we receive daily from our analytics team,” said Laura Inman, director of audience and engagement at the AJC, who also has a leadership role in expertise across the Cox newspaper properties. “Our insights based on consumer usage and data is what drives our strategy and troubleshooting.”



Laura Inman

Each of the Cox Media Group (CMG) newspapers have specific goals for levels of engagement based on the characteristics of their markets. Engagement is measured with metrics that focus on resources as well as management attention. Inman can document that subscriber retention levels among multi-platform readers are twice the level of print exclusives. This factor, combined with the company’s establishment of a timeline for attaining a targeted number of digital subscribers has led to a good understanding of what it takes to activate readers and keep them coming back as measured in 30-day increments.

“We rely on email as our primary channel for driving engagement,” said Inman. “We send numerous emails to subscribers based on their product preference and usage. We also run several automated touchpoint programs via email for new subscribers, existing active and inactive subscribers and non-registered subscribers.”

The AJC strategy is highly data-dependent. Inman noted that they recently changed their touchpoint program for new subscribers to include a welcome series, registration series, authentication series and engagement series.

According to Inman, there are four primary points within their strategy to get print subscribers to activate their account and use digital products:

1. Creating relevant, premium news and digital only content that is a destination for readers.
2. Designing and distributing effective messaging informed by the subscribers’ product engagement level and experience.
3. Developing contesting tactics that tie back to sampling our premium content at the method of entry.
4. Expanding the audience and exposure to our premium content through marketing, paid site metering and social networks.

The strategy has provided measurable results. AJC has 58 percent of their subscribers registered for digital access. *The Austin America Statesman* has utilized the same strategy, and has had 69 percent of all subscribers register for digital access.

### **Activation does not equal “engagement”**

The ‘engagement bar’ at the AJC and other CMG newspapers is a bit different than using activation as a metric of success.

“If a subscriber has not actually used a product in the last 30 days, you aren’t counted as engaged. Our login prompts the subscriber to verify their login after 90 days unless a user has previously logged themselves out,” said Inman. “For our current measure, to be counted as ‘active’ (therefore engaged) the subscriber has to be in a logged in state.”



On the other side of measuring engagement are newspapers with a meter that provides anyone, including subscribers, 10 or 15 page views a month. With a meter set at a level that provides the casual digital visitor access, the print subscriber may not have a need to register, but may be using the digital products.

This is now an issue for the CMG, too. Inman explains that “Our definition creates a new challenge for us due to our recent launch of metering on the paid sites. We are now exploring ways to effectively track ‘anonymously active subscribers’ meaning that we sent a subscriber an email to engage with content and they did so but weren’t logged in... tracking them will produce a new ‘class’ of engagement that we hope to measure very soon.”

### **The process requires constant innovation and friendly technology**

Engagement is not a goal in itself. Inman explains a more holistic approach, “The AJC has started to execute tests against the sales funnel as a way to improve the customer experience and conversion rate. We’ve recently also changed our ecommerce subscription flow so that a new subscriber is automatically a registered user and can immediately access digital products.”

“Additionally, we have added a feature within the account management section of the customer portal so that subscribers can add up to four family members or friends to their account, thereby extending their digital subscription benefits at no additional cost to the new users. These new users count toward our engagement base when they use the premium digital products.”

## **Moving the “Engagement Needle” is an achievable and necessary goal**

Improvements in cross platform usage at newspapers such as *The Bee* and the AJC is a result of the commitment and the acceptance that it is critical for today’s newspapers to bring their own readers to their digital products as well as building a digital exclusive audience.

Using data to understand consumer interest, to identify new product opportunities and shape journalism topics that encourage user engagement and increased reader contact through the outlined tactics does make a difference.

Marketing digital products is essential to three related objectives and sales strategies that almost every newspaper embraces.

1. Sell complete print/digital bundled subscriptions
2. Drive current print subscribers to activate digital subscriptions
3. Sell digital stand-alone subscriptions for improved profitability and reach.

The most immediate and measurable goal is fulfilling the value proposition inherent in today’s premium priced print and digital subscriptions. That is “Engagement = Retention.” While the ROI of improved retention may be sufficient incentive, increasing the newspapers total digital reach is the longer term reward.