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New Survey of Recent Newspaper Subscribers Shows Why People Chose to Pay and Identifies Key ‘Paths to Subscription’

Report highlights nine distinct ‘paths to subscription’ based on motives such as trust and accuracy, metered paywalls, wanting to support journalism, or coverage of passion topics

CHICAGO, February 27, 2018—The decision to subscribe to a local newspaper involves a mix of motives and trigger factors that can be described by nine key “paths to subscription,” according to a report released today by the [Media Insight Project](#), a collaboration between the [American Press Institute](#) and [The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research](#).

At a time when the news industry is turning to consumers to pay for news, a survey of 4,113 recent subscribers from 90 local newspapers across the country highlights which mindsets led them to subscribe.

Certain background factors make people generally willing to pay for a news source — such as wanting access to local news (60 percent), noticing a lot of useful articles (40 percent), and wanting to support local journalism (31 percent). There are also triggers that push a person to finally subscribe — the largest being a discount or promotion (45 percent). Once they have subscribed, reliability and accuracy of the coverage are very important to most new subscribers (78 percent).

To understand their many motivations, the report describes nine paths to subscription and offers suggestions for how publishers can target potential subscribers.

The paths include people who:

- Hit paywalls online
- Closely follow a single topic
- Develop a strong relationship through social media
- Closely watch civic affairs
- Passionately defend a free press
- Were influenced to subscribe by a friend
- Like to read the news in print
- Enjoy clipping coupons
- Recently moved to the area



“The move toward subscriptions requires newspapers to identify potential subscribers with analytics that measure motives and engagement, not just page views,” said Tom Rosenstiel, executive director of the American Press Institute. “Newspapers need to understand the paths to subscription and guide each reader along his or her journey by delivering the types of value and engagement desired and tailoring their acquisition and retention strategies to each group.”

VARIOUS BACKGROUND FACTORS ARE PRECONDITIONS TO SUBSCRIBE
60% WANT ACCESS TO LOCAL NEWS 40% NOTICE A LOT OF INTERESTING, USEFUL ARTICLES 31% WANT TO SUPPORT LOCAL JOURNALISM
BUT ONE FACTOR STANDS OUT AS A COMMON FINAL TRIGGER
45% FINALLY SUBSCRIBED BECAUSE OF A PROMOTION OR FREE TRIAL
THOSE WHO USE A PAPER BEFORE SUBSCRIBING DO SO FOR A LONG TIME
74% WHO ENGAGED PRIOR TO PAYING USED IT FOR AT LEAST A FEW MONTHS
AFTER SUBSCRIBING, QUALITY FACTORS MATTER FOR RETENTION
78% VALUE GETTING RELIABLE, ACCURATE FACTS 68% VALUE PAPER DEALING FAIRLY WITH ALL SIDES 29% VALUE PAPER SAVING THEM MONEY
PEOPLE USE PAPERS MANY WAYS AFTER SUBSCRIBING
52% USE COUPONS 43% REGULARLY SHARE THE PAPER'S CONTENT 18% SUBSCRIBE TO SPECIALIZED EMAIL NEWSLETTERS

Among the study's other key findings:

- **Quality and accuracy matter to nearly every subscriber group, especially *after* they subscribe.** When asked for the most important reasons they read the newspaper now that they subscribe, people are most likely to cite a publication's accuracy (78 percent), its willingness to admit mistakes (69 percent), and its dealing fairly with all sides (68 percent) as most important.
- **The findings offer an opportunity and also a warning for publishers.** They suggest that cutting back on newsrooms resources now (as many publishers do to maintain profit margins against declining revenue) imperils any long-term subscription strategy. Publishers may have to accept a smaller profit margin -- or none -- now, to invest in the content quality that potential subscribers demand.
- **Regardless of their underlying motivations, many subscribers are triggered by discounts at just the right time.** Nearly half of all recent subscribers (45 percent) cited pricing promotions as the immediate trigger, more than double any other factor.
- **Market size matters.** There are some important differences between what drives people at small or medium-sized papers and metros (large and small). New subscribers to small papers are more likely than those at large metros to prefer print over digital (85 percent vs. 56 percent) and to subscribe after moving to town (23 percent vs. 13 percent). Subscribers to large metros are more likely than those at small papers to subscribe after noticing a lot of interesting articles (45 percent vs. 30 percent).
- **Print and digital subscribers are different.** Digital subscribers in this study tend to be younger, male, and more educated than print readers. Digital readers are more often attracted by good coverage of a particular topic than are print readers (38 percent vs. 25 percent), and by noticing especially useful or interesting content (47 percent vs. 36 percent). Half of digital subscribers are triggered to subscribe by hitting a paywall meter, and they are more likely than print readers to be motivated by a desire to support local journalism (38 percent vs. 29 percent).

"This study captures local newspaper readers' attitudes at a key time – shortly after they made the decision to subscribe," said Trevor Tompson, director of The AP-NORC Center. "The results show that there are many types of recent newspaper subscribers and each type is motivated to pay for news for different reasons."

About the report

This research comes from a recent Media Insight Project survey of 4,113 recent newspaper

subscribers interviewed online between November 9 and December 13, 2017. For this study, the Media Insight Project partnered with 90 different newspapers across the country from 12 different newspaper companies. The publishers ranged from some of the largest newspaper chains in the country to smaller companies with a single paper. Each publisher provided contact information for all people who began subscribing to their papers between August 1 and October 31, 2017. This convenience sample includes many recent newspaper subscribers from various size papers across the country; however, the findings of the study might not apply to all subscribers or newspapers.

Details about the Media Insight Project can be found at: www.mediainsight.org.

A full description of the study methodology for the surveys can be found at the end of the report.

The proper description of the survey's authorship is as follows: This study was conducted jointly by the [American Press Institute](http://www.pressinstitute.org) and [The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research](http://www.apnorc.org).

About the Media Insight Project

The Media Insight Project is a collaboration between the American Press Institute and The AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research with the objective of conducting high-quality, innovative research meant to inform the news industry and the public about various important issues facing journalism and the news business. The Media Insight Project brings together the expertise of both organizations and their respective partners, and involves collaborations among key staff at the American Press Institute, NORC at the University of Chicago, and The Associated Press.

<http://www.mediainsight.org/>

About the American Press Institute

The American Press Institute advances an innovative and sustainable local news industry by helping publishers understand and engage audiences, grow revenue, improve public-service journalism, and succeed at organizational change. API is a national 501(c)3 nonprofit educational organization affiliated with the News Media Alliance. It works with and draws on the best ideas from technology, business and publishing.

<http://www.pressinstitute.org>

About The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research

The AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research taps into the power of social science research and the highest-quality journalism to bring key information to people across the nation and throughout the world.

www.apnorc.org

The Associated Press (AP) is the essential global news network, delivering fast, unbiased news



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The two organizations have established The AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research to conduct, analyze, and distribute social science research in the public interest on newsworthy topics, and to use the power of journalism to tell the stories that research reveals.

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