

# Digital Media Audience Development White Paper

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## Introduction

Developing audiences for digital media properties presents challenges apart from traditional, printed, offline media. This white paper attempts to identify techniques for building online audiences. This paper mainly focuses on business-to-business media, but many of the techniques can be used for consumer and enthusiast media.

Audience development for offline print subscriptions or face-to-face events is just as important. However, the focus of this paper is audience development for digital media. The techniques listed here are mainly for non-paid content, but many can be applied to paid content as well.

Another focus of this paper is registered user email address acquisition. Anonymous web site traffic is also important, but having an email address attached to subscriber demographic data can be more profitable in the long run for publishers. Indeed, the two work hand in hand. Many publishers need to attract anonymous traffic first, before converting a portion of it to registered.

## Acknowledgements

To write this white paper, I interviewed a number of audience development experts from many well-known publishers including IDG, McGraw-Hill, PennWell, Crain and PostNewsweek Tech Media. Also, I spoke with Internet-only start-ups including TechTarget, Marketing Sherpa, Watershed Publishing, and others. Plus I've incorporated what I've picked up at industry conferences held by Folio: and American Business Media. Thanks to all who participated and contributed.

## Challenges

The benefits of delivering content by email are now widely understood. In short--no printing, paper or postage costs. And on the sales side: detailed subscriber data for advertisers, especially in lead generation campaigns. The low costs and highly demonstrable ROI for advertisers (compared to print) makes email deliriously attractive versus the traditional distribution model.

However, delivering by email is fraught with challenges:

- 1. Email deliverability** -- just because your email software says a message was delivered doesn't mean it made it through to the inbox. Regular email deliverability audits are a must. A new breed of vendors have emerged (apart from email service providers) to help precisely with this need. (Marketing Sherpa publishes a guide to such vendors.)
- 2. Balancing commonly accepted permission marketing tenets with business growth requirements.** In other words: avoiding list burnout and backlash from sending too much email.
- 3. Email attrition.** Industry experts say that e-mail addresses simply go bad at rates of 25% to 35% annually. A little known, yet ugly, fact of email delivery platforms.
- 4. Wary subscribers.** Precisely because our audiences are receiving so much email, they are more reluctant than ever to give out their email address when we ask for it.
- 5. Audience in control.** Instead of driving our offer to the audience, we must enable our content or offer to be found when the audience chooses to look.
- 6. Search engines.** Even expert circulators must start making search engine optimization and search engine marketing (SEO and SEM) part of their strategy. It's an entirely new skill set.
- 7. Tracking and measurement.** A final challenge experienced by many publishers is not having the proper tools to track and measure online audience development.

Publishers must work harder than ever simply to maintain their email file, let alone grow it.

## Goals for online audience development

- Obtain more registrations/email addresses
- Build e-newsletter and digital magazine circulation
- Acquire new print subscribers via online
- Renew more print subs through email (versus telemarketing, direct mail or fax)
- Generate more lead-gen opt-ins for advertisers
- Generate more paid content sales
- Build Web site traffic, RSS subscriptions

## Thirteen techniques for digital media audience development

### 1. "It's the content, stupid"

It's obvious that the content must be of interest to the audience. The following assumes that the basics have been taken care of...that the content matches what the audience wants. However, sometimes this warrants a reality check, especially for editors who've been writing for the same publication for 20 years. ("We know what our readers want.") Times change! So do readers' content needs. Encourage your editors to do some basic reader research to make sure you're still in touch with your readers' content needs. See "content strategies", below.

### 2. Review offline, written qualification forms

Seems obvious, but this can be easily overlooked. Experiment with different star bursts, treatments, and privacy assurances to collect the email address right on the form, or better, drive readers to renew online. Experiment with premiums, such as special reports from the editors, for renewing online (see #6).

### 3. Review telemarketing scripts for email address solicitation

Tweak the scripts to find out what wording works best--factoring in privacy assurances with premium offers in exchange for the email address.

### 4. Bump up the presence of subscription enticements on your sites

Magazine subscription enticements often take a back seat to editorial and advertising. Consider starting the sub form right on the home page. Intrusive techniques such as page curls, roadblocks, or pop-ups are often loathed by users, but many publishers report these techniques work well. If using pop-ups, use a DHTML popup because it won't be blocked by pop-up blockers now common in modern Web browsers.

### 5. Offer e-newsletters, and require registration in order to receive them

Fairly basic, but many publishers still have the e-newsletter system separate from the audience development database. Collect email address AND demographic information. Helps with targeting future products, as well as email list rental.

### 6. Offer premiums for subs

As a subscription premium, package up special reports from the editors in PDF form and offer them in exchange for registration. Top 10 lists, tips and tricks, any "must-have" content work well. Experiment to show what works best. Continually fine-tune such offers, because what works today may not be what works tomorrow. Offer this throughout the site.

### 7. Offer premium content in exchange for registration

Premium articles, special reports, white papers, videos, audio, webcasts, structured databases work well in exchange for registration.

### 8. Use online subscription clearinghouses.

TradePub.com and FreeBiz.com are two examples of third-party Internet vendors for business publication subscription acquisition. Look to partner with related but non-competitive Web sites in the industry for co-registration. An example of this is GlobalSpec, which partners with many publications in engineering-related industries.

### 9. Co-registration with related sites (even competitors)

In the print world, there is a strong aversion to co-registration with competitors, though this is common in the online-only world. Co-registration has become sophisticated, with tools like Co-Reg complete ([www.coregcomplete.com](http://www.coregcomplete.com))

that allow you to limit how many more subscribers you send your partner compared to how many they send you. Other parties to co-register with: associations and user groups. Co-registration is reported to be a leading source of new registrations by many online-only publishers.

#### **10. Co-registration with vendors/advertisers**

When doing a vendor Webcast, white paper, video or audio, have the vendor promote to their own list. Recipients must register with you, the publisher, in order to access the goods. That way the publisher captures the lead, and often the advertiser captures more complete demographic information versus what they originally had. Other ideas: vendor offers something, a free product, premium, etc. Sweepstakes an option too. Or give vendors good stories to run in their email newsletters. Advertisers can be a good source of opt in names. Some of have huge lists.

#### **11. Paid search engine marketing (SEM).**

Also known as CPC (cost per click) advertising. This can get expensive unless you figure out a way to place a dollar value on new subscribers or web site registrants. Progressive publishers do this by determining revenue value (either subscription or advertising) for each new subscriber. Then it becomes a math exercise to figure out how much to pay in CPC advertising (factoring in the conversion rate) for each additional web site registrant. One digital-only publisher does paid search campaigns that drives readers to landing pages for a specific topic. Once there, readers have to register to go deeper to access white papers, webcasts, etc. on that topic.

**12. Contests for your high-value content giveaways.** One publisher gives away five copies each week of a high-value handbook that normally sells for hundreds of dollars. They get thousands of addresses each year this way.

**13. Free, no-risk, 2-week trials.** For access to paid online databases.

## **Traffic building strategies**

Here are some strategies to drive anonymous traffic to your site. From there, you can use on-site promotion techniques to convert anonymous traffic to registered users.

#### **1. Generate lots of search-engine friendly content.**

More content = more visibility in Google = more traffic. Traditional reporting-style editorial is time-consuming. Blog-oriented content is quick and cheap to create and can drive significantly more traffic over time. One publisher reports that one year after adding a network of blogs to an existing Web site, such blogs now consist of half of all entry points from search engine visitors. Another publisher went from zero to 150,000 unique visitors per month in six months by using the aggregation/interpretation model versus the traditional reporting model (see content strategies, below).

#### **2. Extensive in-book promotion to unique Web-only content**

Ideally to multimedia or interactive content (audio, video, data) that simply cannot be reproduced in print. House ads for sure (doesn't have to be full page!), but ideally, woven into the fabric of the editorial itself. Each article can and should be a beacon for online companion content (beyond mere text).

#### **3. Budget dollars for SEO.**

One Web site publisher grew traffic 300% solely by investing in search engine optimization. Make sure your content management system is search engine friendly. If not, get a new one, or deploy "mod rewrite" techniques to convert awkward, lengthy urls into search-engine-friendly ones. Don't do SEO in-house. Outsource it to a firm that specializes in SEO/SEM.

#### **4. Syndication with third parties.**

Either formal syndication networks, or co-registration partners (Global spec), or a widget containing your content that you can use to place on other people's sites.

#### **5. Community/Viral**

Viral marketing. Doesn't work as well with traditional media. Works much better with social media. This is an entirely new area that publishers must learn to master, and it starts to get pretty far afield of traditional editorial and circulation roles.

#### **6. Online press releases**

Press releases about news on your site tend to get picked up by the search engines, because they're very keyword specific, and very newsy. Search engines see press releases as news. Try to do one once per month. PR web is good for this, and among the most affordable. Ideally make sure the click link landing page is optimized (keywords in the link). One publishers says she routinely gets 30,000 clickthroughs off a single press release. This technique was

mentioned by several advanced publishers.

### **7. Link building**

Have it be someone's job to call vendors and ask them to link to stories you've written about them.

### **8. RSS**

It's cheap and easy. Offer it.

## **Content strategies that drive audience development**

**1. Niche the content.** The more you niche content, the easier it is to attract an audience in that niche. Electronic media allows publisher to find profit in niches cannot be profitably served by print.

**2. Aggregate and interpret the news.** News is a commodity. Some publishers build content by picking the day's news and posting value-added commentary that interprets the news. This approach allows you to create much more content with a much smaller staff. That content in turn gets indexed in search engines and drives more traffic than the traditional approach. The inherent "voice" can build a more loyal audience, which translates into higher engagement. One publisher who uses this aggregate/interpret strategy enjoys 60% email newsletter open rates, vs. an industry standard of around 20%.

**3. Build multimedia content** (audio, video) that can't be replicated offline.

**4. Build a database.** Of products, suppliers, data, etc. If you find a way to make it search engine friendly, you can attract LOTS of traffic from search engines.

## **Other considerations**

**1. Progressive registration** - ask for a little bit of data each time you touch the subscriber, rather than all of it up front. Good in theory, harder in practice.

### **2. Confirmation emails**

Great way to cross-promote...sign up for upcoming webcasts, etc. these "transactional" emails are highly read, and most publishers don't exploit their power.

### **3. Build list responsiveness, not size**

Progressive publishers are focusing on cultivating lists of readers who open emails and click links, versus simply building as big a list as possible. Fewer, more active readers are preferable to a bigger list and lower open rates. A best practice is to actually *remove* recipients who never open or click. That lowers your email costs and increases your clickthrough rate.

### **4. Cultivate best practices for email within your organization**

Honor messaging preferences. Avoid bombarding readers with too much email in a given time period. Strive for opt-in rather than opt-out launches.

### **5. Landing page optimization**

The next step for publishers who master the basics is to borrow a page from e-commerce marketers: landing page optimization. Although A/B testing is the most common optimization technique, multivariate testing is much more comprehensive. Vendors like Vertster offer turnkey multivariate testing.

## **Audience tracking and measurement**

It is very difficult to grow email addresses without some sort of dashboard that allows you to track and measure your efforts. Savvy publishers are doing the following:

**1. Establish a dollar amount for what an email address is worth** to them, in terms of ad revenue or subscription revenue. (And a VP is worth more than a staffer. Ideally break out cost by quality of subscriber.)

**2. Track new registrants by source.** Publishers should know the source of every name on their lists--not only whether from telemarketing or cover wrap, but whether from a webcast, or white paper registration, or newsletter

sign-up, etc. This can break down into four conceivable components:

1. *Source* -- webcast, white paper, paid search campaign etc.
2. *Sub-source* -- *which* webcast, *which* white paper, *which* advertiser, etc.
3. *Referrer* -- Google, Yahoo, direct site traffic, customer A's list, etc.
4. *Position* -- where exactly in the newsletter the registration came from, or where on the Web site--on the home page, article page, section page, where on those pages (top, bottom), etc.

**3. Analyze responsiveness by source.** Publishers aren't paid for number of subscribers, they are paid for subscriber responsiveness--people who click ads, download white papers, or buy subscriptions. There should be a tool to see how names from different sources are performing, which can be defined as opening e-mail newsletters, requesting white papers, etc. This allows you to cultivate sources who provide the most *responsive* email addresses. This requires a feedback loop from the white paper registration engine, the email service provider, so that data points such as who opens the newsletter, who clicks the ads, who downloads the white paper, gets fed back into the main database.

**4. Analyze quality by source.** It is not enough to know that you received 100 new subscribers this month if 80 of them aren't the people you're targeting. There should be a way to analyze name *quality* (defined by any of the industry or job title demographics used by the publisher) from each source.

**5. Analyze bounces by source.** One source may be giving you more email addresses, but if more of those are bouncing, the source isn't as valuable.

**6. Monitor and track conversion rate.** Can be defined conversion as a registration, qualified subscription, paid content sale, etc.). It should be easy to optimize the landing page using A/B or multivariate testing techniques.

**7. Seamlessly integrate electronic registrations with print subscriptions with event registrations.** Publishers should have a 360-degree view of their data.

This data allows audience development executives to maximize higher-performing sources and prune lower-performing ones.

However, publishers should not have to focus on building the tools. That should be provided by the fulfillment vendors, who must shift from traditional audited circulation tools to the types of tools above. It also requires that all registration pass through a unified database. Proper audience development is made more difficult if the data is balkanized across multiple registration systems (web site, newsletter, white paper, webcast, etc.).

## Conclusion

No question, online audience development requires new skills and more work than traditional audience development. But for the publishers who master it, the profits can be significant.