

How leveraging rapid paywall tests helped Highland News & Media drive digital subscriptions

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— Steve Barron, Publishing Director, Highland News & Media



Executive Summary

Scottish news provider Highland News & Media went live with Zephr within six months.

By focusing on revenue from content and building up their subscriber base, they were breaking even on their investment with Zephr after just four months.

Since launch, subscriber and registered user acquisition rates have been double their best case modelling.

They're now able to implement dynamic offerings to increase conversions. Resulting in as much as a 400% increase in subscribers for a recent weekend campaign!



Introduction

Highland News & Media prides itself on sharing impartial, trusted local news that informs, entertains and enriches people's lives in the communities they serve. With eighteen newspaper titles across the north and north-east of Scotland, they provide more depth and breadth of news than anyone else in the area.

As many newspaper businesses evolve towards a digital future, Highland News & Media looked to take a long term view of their publishing model.

The ultimate goal of this decision was to aim for a sustainable and viable digital business model that would future proof the business.

Knowing that print advertising was more at risk due to shifts in the industry, they embraced a digital subscription model. This meant focusing their strategy on increasing the share of revenue that comes directly from their online content.

Challenge

As with many newspaper publishers, the recent changes in the industry presented a new challenge for Highland News & Media that required the business to pivot. With fewer people purchasing print newspapers, they explored other ways the business could thrive. This business pivot required a cost-effective solution that they could launch quickly.

With limited digital capabilities to sell content online and without having an in-house tech team, it was challenging to reach a goal where online content made up the vast majority of revenue.

All of their content as of yet was open-access, meaning they were missing out on the opportunity to collect valuable first-party data and build a subscriber base.

Launching a business project that centred around regular subscriber revenue required a platform that allowed Highland News & Media to track the quality of their page views, provide a personalised user experience for every reader, and encourage engaged readers to pay for content.

Solution

Being a small team, Highland News & Media needed to employ a flexible solution that didn't need tech expertise to manage. They didn't have an in-house technical expert and wanted to avoid relying on hiring one to update the system, as this could have caused a point of failure for the business.

“The simplicity of operating [Zephr], the fact you don't need to be a tech expert to use it, and the no up-front development fee were clear factors when choosing Zephr as a platform.”

— Steve Barron, Publishing Director

With the help of Zephr's intuitive platform, Highland News & Media were able to develop a subscription strategy based around asking their most engaged readers to pay for digital content. The solution was to implement a metered paywall across their platforms that could be operated and managed without much tech expertise, and could be altered quickly if new strategic direction required a change.

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Implementing paywalls across both their websites and app enabled them to collect data from multiple devices and build a more complete picture of conversion activity, ready for optimisation and testing.

“One of the challenges in our business was understanding data, where to get it and how to analyse it. [Thanks to zephr] we're getting better at that and we're constantly testing and making changes to what we're doing and trying out different strategies.”

— Steve Barron, Publishing Director

Testing their pricing strategy with Zephr's Rules Builder allowed them to optimise and alter their paywalls depending on shifts in business objectives or changes they saw in user behaviour.



Outcome

With the help of easy integrations with their CMS (Content management system), in-house app, Stripe billing system, and Mailchimp, Zephr enabled Highland News & Media to meet their budget requirements without requiring extensive technical support. They can now confidently manage their subscribers' experience from the Zephr platform, using dynamic offers to increase conversions.

This was especially true for one of their most recent campaigns, where Highland News & Media used Zephr to create a special version of their packages for a limited weekend offer, resulting in a 400% increase in subscribers compared to a normal weekend!

Overall, the paywall implementation took six months to go live. From that point, Highland News & Media broke even on their investment for the project after just four months. They're off to a great start and are acquiring subscribers and registered users at a much quicker rate than expected.

In the future, Highland News & Media will be aiming to gain an even better understanding of the user data they collect, using Zephr to hyper-personalise their content and focus their marketing efforts on readers with the highest propensity to subscribe.

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