

San Francisco Chronicle

Overview

With more than 4,000 employees, Hearst Newspapers, the operating group responsible for newspapers, local digital marketing services, and directories from Hearst, reaches more than 42 million unique visitors with digital products.

Results

Following these changes, **San Francisco Chronicle improved their mobile subscription rate by 54%.**

AUTHORS:

- **Kelli Dakake**
VP, Digital Acquisition, Hearst Newspapers
- **Valentin Cornez**
Partnerships Lead, GNI Data Tools, Google

San Francisco Chronicle improves mobile subscriptions rate by 54% with help from News Consumer Insights.

Data-driven audience insights and an optimized checkout flow helped the San Francisco Chronicle boost conversion rates.

Partnership

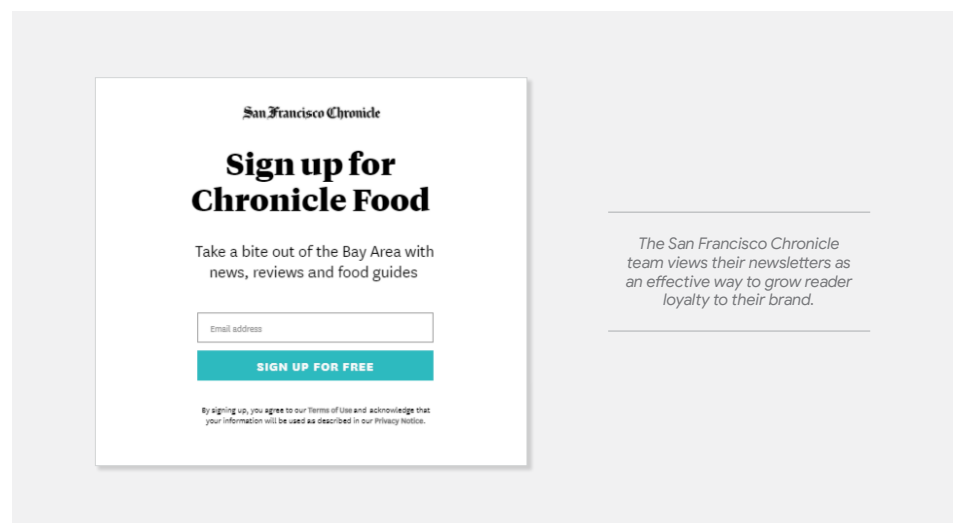
For newspaper publishers, leveraging data to optimize their subscription funnels on digital properties can be complicated—and even more so on mobile where readers have a shorter attention span. [San Francisco Chronicle](#), a leading newspaper from Hearst Newspapers, used [News Consumer Insights](#) (NCI), a free analytical tool created by the Google News Initiative (GNI), to help its teams better understand their audience and improve their engagement strategies, resulting in an increase of paying subscribers.

The Project

Building emotional bond with newsletters to drive more subscriptions

Like many news publishers, the San Francisco Chronicle team views their newsletters as an effective way to grow reader loyalty to their brand. Using the News Consumer Insights framework, they discovered newsletter readers were not only their most engaged audience, but they also had the highest subscription conversion rate. This insight led the team to double down on their newsletter-subscriber acquisition efforts.

- They honed in on more effective lead generation platforms, such as Facebook, and stopped using platforms that brought in lower-propensity-to-subscribe audiences.



- The team kept the onsite designs simple (as shown above) by removing images and shortening copy. They also optimized messaging based on audiences to remain relevant in fast news cycles. Now, newsletter signup messages are updated monthly and only appear based on a reader's signup history and the content they are reading.
- After auditing the lifecycle of a newsletter reader, they utilized design and user experience best practices to make it easier for readers to sign up for more newsletters through multiple placements onsite. They launched exit modals as well as inline and bottom-of-article signups. Through their analysis, they found that readers were most likely to subscribe to their website after signing up for three newsletters.

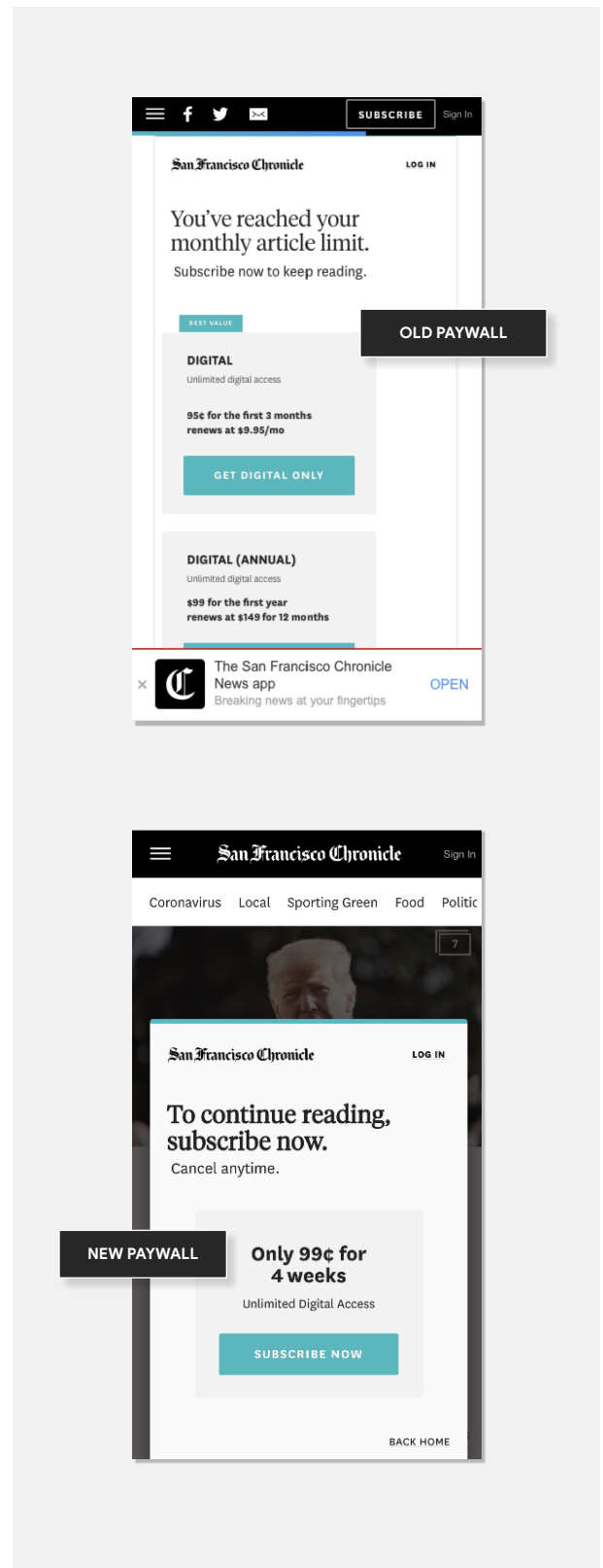
With these efforts in 2020, the team was able to increase their unique newsletter signups 2x year-over-year. In addition, newsletter referral starts increased 3x due to better quality leads.

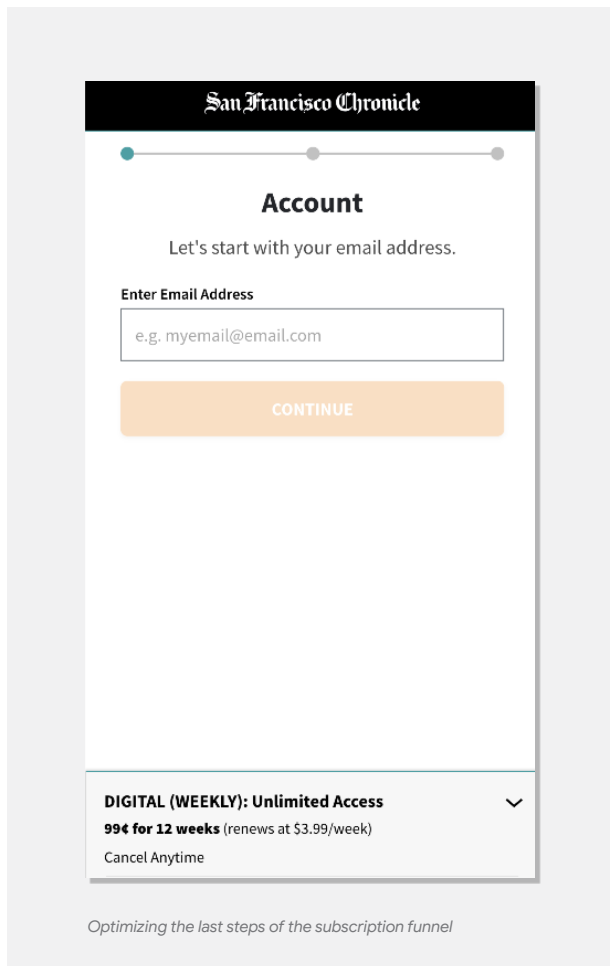
A simpler paywall pushing readers straight to the checkout

To optimize their metered-paywall strategy, the team analyzed the subscription rate of their two key audiences: readers within their designated market area (DMA) and those outside. The analysis showed that online readers from both groups—even those who lived locally (within the DMA)—preferred a digital subscription to the print offering.

To meet their readers' needs, the team optimized their promotion strategy and made it easier for readers to subscribe to the digital package.

- First, they decided to only highlight the digital package in their paywall to avoid the paradox of choice—the notion that “the more options you provide prospects, the less likely they are to convert.” This unconventional approach contrasts with a common strategy in the news industry, where publishers ask readers to choose between multiple packages early in the funnel. Presenting a specific package upfront helped reduce cognitive load time and improved visibility on the digital subscription value proposition.
- This strategy also allowed them to remove one step of the subscription funnel: the subscription landing page that hosts subscription offerings. San Francisco Chronicle could now redirect their readers straight to the checkout flow. Readers could still review other subscription offerings, like print, later in the subscription funnel, if needed.
- They brought “cancel anytime” messaging to the forefront to reduce the sense of commitment.
- Pricing is a key component when promoting subscriptions, so they made sure to highlight their digital offer pricing using a bigger font and promoting a compelling discount for the first four weeks.
- As for the paywall format, they switched their embedded paywall to an overlay to increase the viewability of their subscription value proposition.





Optimizing the checkout flow to increase subscription rate

With more users landing on their checkout flow, San Francisco Chronicle decided to apply News Consumer Insights recommendations to optimize the last steps of the subscription funnel and fully capitalize on this new opportunity:

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2. Less keyboard, happier readers: The team enabled Autofill for all their checkout steps, including the credit card details fields.
3. Look & feel: They also implemented a progress bar in the header and a sticky order summary to add clarity about the package selected and keep readers informed on where they are in the checkout process. These elements are crucial to keeping readers motivated to purchase, increasing their likelihood to complete transactions. The “cancel anytime” label is now always visible in the order summary and below the final “start subscription” button, a strategic location where users can still abandon their cart.

RESULTS

54% In improved mobile subscription rate by following these changes.

“ NCI’s data-driven recommendations helped us optimize the checkout flow by concentrating on the essential items and removing unnecessary steps and behaviours. Their analysis and insights helped uncover where we could reduce overall friction on the site and significantly improve our conversion rate. ”

KELLI DAKAKE, VP, DIGITAL ACQUISITION AT HEARST NEWSPAPERS

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