

It's not HOW to get people to pay for news, it's WHEN

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A few months ago I [suggested](#) Waitrose as a solution to the problem of finding a new business model for journalism. I was trying to make a more general point about journalism being delivered in different ways but I am increasingly convinced that I may have hit upon something, partly thanks to some interesting comments from a clever chap at Stanford.

When we consider the technicalities of getting income from the consumer, the secret may not be HOW to get people to pay for news, it's WHEN that counts. Let me explain, although bear in mind that I am economically illiterate. Like most journalists.

The idea of the Waitrose model was that the John Lewis' supermarket shares the same community and values as Guardian readers. North London, liberal, organic, quality, cosmopolitan, over-priced etc. So why shouldn't Waitrose buy up the Guardian and deliver news as part of the groceries and a series of other services for the Guardianistas such as fringe theatre tickets, French film DVDs, Fairtrade banking etc? I already get a Times newspaper

with my Ocado delivery, so why not go the whole (free range) hog?

I suggested this partly because I wanted to make a point about news being part of our identity and lifestyle as much as a separate, distinct product. That is why I am so sceptical of the various schemes to make us pay for news such as pay walls or donation buttons. Those mechanisms simply replicate the old cover price or subscription model. It's the same relationship whereby one of lot of people make something that another lot of people purchase. The Internet's ability to give us free content has made that simple cash-for-product exchange impotent when it comes to journalism. With the Waitrose model what I am suggesting is akin to the old advertising relationship where people sold stuff around news, but this time we do it without the advertising.

I have found some boffin-type support from an [interview](#) with Dr. B.J. Fogg, an expert in "persuasive technology" who heads up Stanford University's Persuasive Technology Lab (no kidding). He is very unenthusiastic about the various 'click read and pay' ideas floating around at the moment. He points out what we knew, that people have learnt to get journalism for free. But if they are to work, he stresses, you have to ask people to pay when they are in a paying mood:

"Getting online users to pay for content online (whether by mandatory payment or voluntary donation) works best when you hit the user at a time when he or she already is in payment mode, which of course is no easy task when the user is reading news for free online.

Amazon.com can succeed in getting people to buy additional related products when they're about to buy something; a consumer ordering a Nikon camera is presented with other photography goodies during the ordering process and increases the amount spent. Google Adwords ads work so well because the user is in search mode; a contextually matched text ad shown with search results can result in more clicks and purchases because the user already is in search-and-acquire mode.

An example of hitting consumers at the right time to pay for news (this would be limited to nonprofit

news providers) would be if a news organization like MinnPost.com, a nonprofit news entity that serves the state of Minnesota, was able to get on a list of optional charities that taxpayers can give to when they're filling out their state tax forms. As Fogg points out, they're already in the mode to write a check (or know that they're getting a refund), so that's an ideal time to hit them up for a small extra donation to MinnPost and support public-interest journalism."

Well, surely getting us to pay for our news alongside our bread (wholemeal stoneground) and butter (Normandy unsalted) is exactly that?

[Thanks to @rcnee for putting me onto Dr Fogg]

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