



## NEWS SUBSCRIPTIONS: WHAT WORKS AND WHAT DOESN'T

**Austin, TX – September 4, 2018** – A new two-part study funded by the American Press Institute and conducted by the Center for Media Engagement (CME) sought to understand what tactics newsrooms should implement and which they should forgo when looking to obtain new subscribers.

To complete the study, CME researchers interviewed staff members from six news organizations with strong reputations for securing donations and subscriptions to understand their experiences, strategies, and best practices for reaching out to potential donors and subscribers. The interviews led to two key insights: the importance of visuals (pictures of journalists working, major news events) and the significance of a “ladder of engagement” whereby people are introduced to the brand and then gradually shown the significance of the journalism before being asked to subscribe or donate.

After completing this work, CME collaborated with three U.S. newsrooms to determine the influence of several factors in getting people to click to learn more about subscribing to news:

- the image accompanying a subscription offer,
- the messages describing the offer,
- whether the offer was for a free newsletter or paid print/digital access, and
- whether the subscription appeal appeared on Facebook or in an email.

A total of 23 tests reaching 492,965 Facebook or email accounts took place between April 16<sup>th</sup> and May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2018. CME analyzed the percentage of people who clicked on a subscription link depending on the subscription appeal.

Study results show:

- On Facebook, logos reduce click-through on subscription appeals relative to other images, such as journalists doing their work.
- When soliciting subscriptions via email, messages emphasizing what people would lose without news (e.g., “Don’t lose touch with news from our city and the world”) frequently result in lower click-through rates compared to other strategies, such as telling people what they would gain from a subscription (e.g., “Stay in touch with news from our city and the world”) or just giving them details about the subscription (e.g. “Start a digital subscription for 99 cents.”).
- Ads for free newsletter subscriptions garner more clicks than ads for paid print/digital access.
- For these tests, there is little evidence that paying for ads yields an acceptable return on investment.

“In the competitive media environment, advertising for subscriptions sounds promising because it helps to reach the target audience, but one should take into consideration the returns compared to the costs,” said Yujin Kim, CME Research Associate.

“People aren’t persuaded by logos or messages conveying what’s at stake, and they want to sign up for free newsletters more than they want to pay for a subscription,” said Jessica Collier, Research Associate at CME. “The differences are sometimes small, but nonetheless important. Newsrooms need to consider these issues when they look to gain new subscribers.”

*The Center for Media Engagement, part of the Moody College of Communication at The University of Texas at Austin, provides research-based techniques for engaging digital audiences in commercially viable and democratically beneficial ways. Learn more at [mediaengagement.org](http://mediaengagement.org)*