

## How the Seattle Times is empowering reporters to drive subscriber growth

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The Seattle Times has extended its efforts to add subscribers down to the ground level.

Over the past year, the news publisher, which grew its digital subscriber base 38 percent to 40,000 in 2018, has been trying to get small teams of reporters to think more entrepreneurially about driving subscriptions. It wants them to not just monitor which kinds of content visitors read on their way to paying but also to experiment with new content and packaging formats designed to keep readers engaged.

In 2017, the Times gave its newsroom staff access to a dashboard that showed reporters which stories they published were driving subscriptions. Next, the Times' executive editor, Don Shelton, formed several teams, called mini-publishers, which paired editorial staffers with members of the paper's digital audience, product and business intelligence teams to figure out what kinds of content the audience likes, how to make more of it, and so on. The first two teams, which focused on local politics and the University of Washington's football team, launched in 2017. But in 2018, it expanded that effort to more topics the Times knows are big subscription drivers, including the Seattle Seahawks and Mariners, opinion, real estate, outdoor and travel, and local food and drink.

At launch, each group got about two months of regular visits with dedicated members of the Times' digital audience and business intelligence units, both of which sit outside the editorial organization. (The first two mini publisher groups got dedicated product resources, though the Times determined that those weren't necessary in early stages; they are brought into the fold as needed for ideas that each publisher has.) Rather than expand to more categories, the hope is to speed up the number of experiments each group runs.

Many product tweaks the Times has rolled out this past year came from reporter suggestions. For example, its sports reporters, sensing an opportunity to make the Times more of a habit among football fans, decided to launch a second newsletter about the Seattle Seahawks that runs only during the regular football season.

"They realized they were producing so much content after games that they could support two newsletters, rather than one," said Danny Gawlowski, the director of digital imagery and innovation at the Seattle Times. "We were worried we'd hurt open rates, but working with our business intelligence team, pretty quickly figured out, that as long as we can increase click-throughs to stories, we should do it."

In other cases, the data helped teams adapt their coverage strategies. A team of reporters working on a large series about orca whales in the Puget Sound started publishing more quick-hit, breaking news pieces because they noticed immense audience interest in the topic, Gawlowski said.

The Times does not have a hard number of subscriptions it can attribute to these efforts. But Gawlowski sees the change in culture and thinking as a key element in subscriber growth, though one that's hard to separate from the efforts of the publisher's business teams. "The performance of our stories is increasing, but it's a group effort between the newsroom and the business side," he said.

The Seattle Times has been on an 18-month quest to transform its newsroom. The publishers is getting close to replacing lost advertising revenue with consumer revenue; it needs to amass close to 50,000 [close to 50,000](https://digiday.com/media/seattle-times-attracted-36000-digital-subscribers/) digital subscribers to make up for the declines in digital display advertising that are testing publishers across the board, according to media analyst Ken Doctor.

The Seattle Times is part of a broader movement among news publishers pivoting away from content that does not build habits or direct connections with their audiences. By getting reporters directly involved in driving subscriptions, the publisher can create a stronger link between the content its newsroom is making and conversions.

“You need to think about things where the readers have given you a clear signal that they like it,” said Gren Manuel, a London-based media and publishing consultant. “I still just see so many stories where I ask, ‘Who was this written for?’”

