# Behind the Scenes: Achieving Significant Results with Data
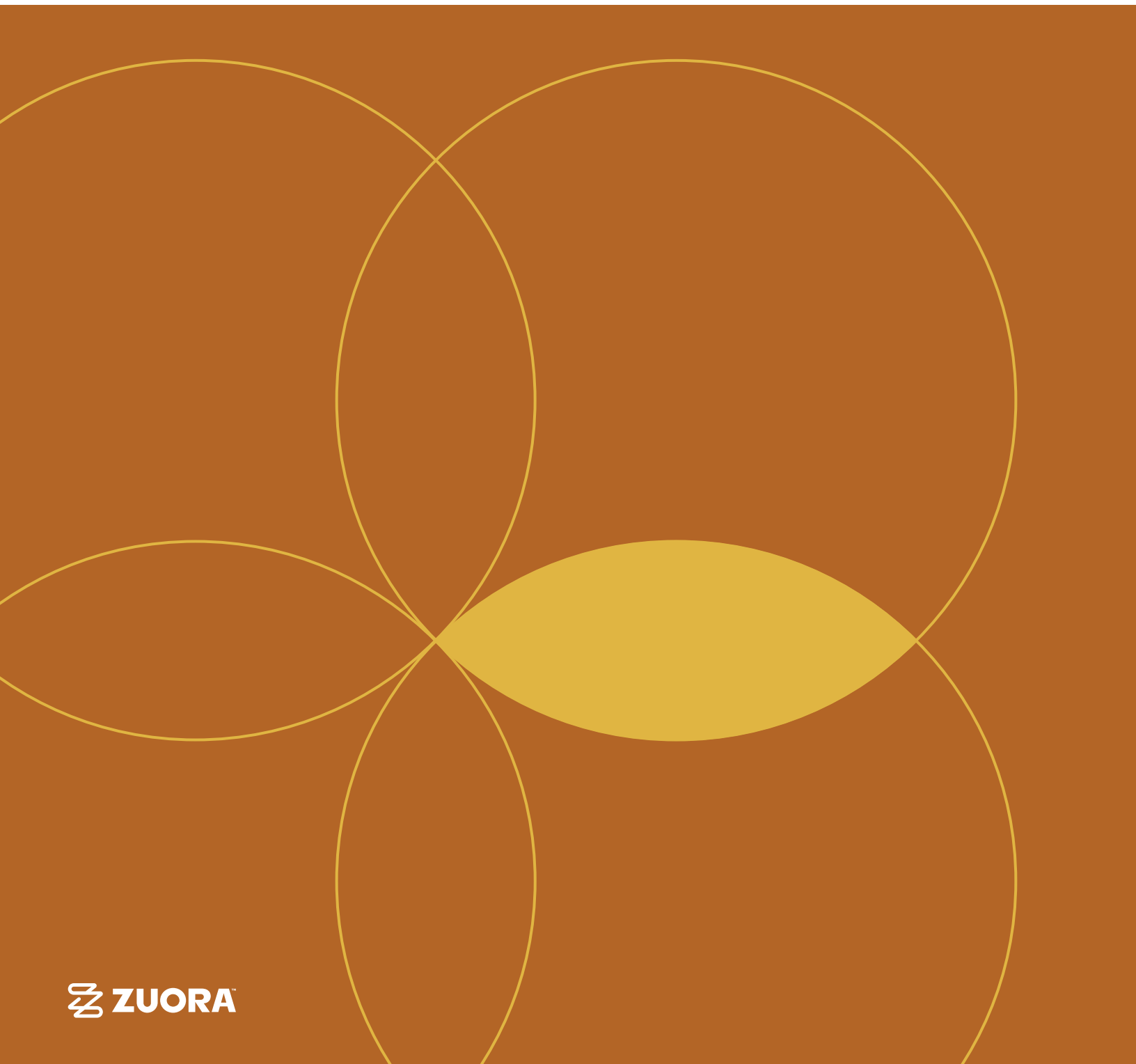
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# Contents

# Introduction

**Over the last decade, the data revolution has influenced how digital publishers interact with customers, the types of messaging and advertising they use, and the strategic business decisions they make.**

Granular audience insights, segmentation, and targeted, real-time triggers are all examples of previously unfeasible practices that have only become possible as a result of a steady supply of data on consumer audiences and their interactions.

According to the Winterberry group whitepaper "**Data as Competitive Advantage**,"[1] about "90 percent of executive-level professionals—including marketers, and publishers—say that audience data has driven at least 'some' value in supporting unique competitive advantage for their organization, with 32 percent adding that it has driven 'substantial' competitive advantage."

Stats like that make it clear that leveraging data in the right way has the power to create breakaway results. So if that's the case, how can businesses ensure their data is driving substantial competitive distinction?

This guide will dive into four success stories from digital publishers who were able to utilize their data for a competitive advantage. We'll cover the types of data to watch out for, tips for effective use of that data, and how publishers can find the right tools to enact their data strategy.

First, let's recap the types of data to be aware of.

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[1] https://www.iab.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Winterberry-Group-White-Paper-Data-as-Competitive-Advantage-October-2015v2.pdf

# Types of data

## Actionable data

Actionable data is arguably the most crucial and fundamental layer of data that publishers should give attention to. Actionable data empowers publishers to take the right tactical steps toward desired outcomes. Actionable data comes in various forms and represents key insights throughout the life of the subscriber (e.g.,, which audience segment a user belongs to, which paywall is converting best, or how many times a user is logging in). Armed with actionable data like this, publishers can take actions right away that directly impact their bottom line (e.g.,, example, swapping an underperforming paywall with the best conversion).

## Vanity metrics

Whereas actionable data tells a company where it can take proactive action to reach its brand, revenue, and reader relationship goals, vanity metrics do much the opposite. Vanity metrics are a low-value data measurement that may sometimes function to improve brand image, but do little to actually move a company toward its tangible objectives. For example, the average number of article page views. This might be interesting to see, but it doesn't provide an immediate action to help a publisher improve.

Defining these types of data is crucial since many digital publishers lose valuable time trying to garner something useful out of data that doesn't serve them to achieve business objectives. A joint Deloitte-Google News study confirms this, finding that "75% of companies have set a clear goal for audience data, yet less than 50% are able to actually realize the benefits."

In general, when collecting and utilizing data from users, it's vital to keep in mind the business decision you actually aim to make from your data points.
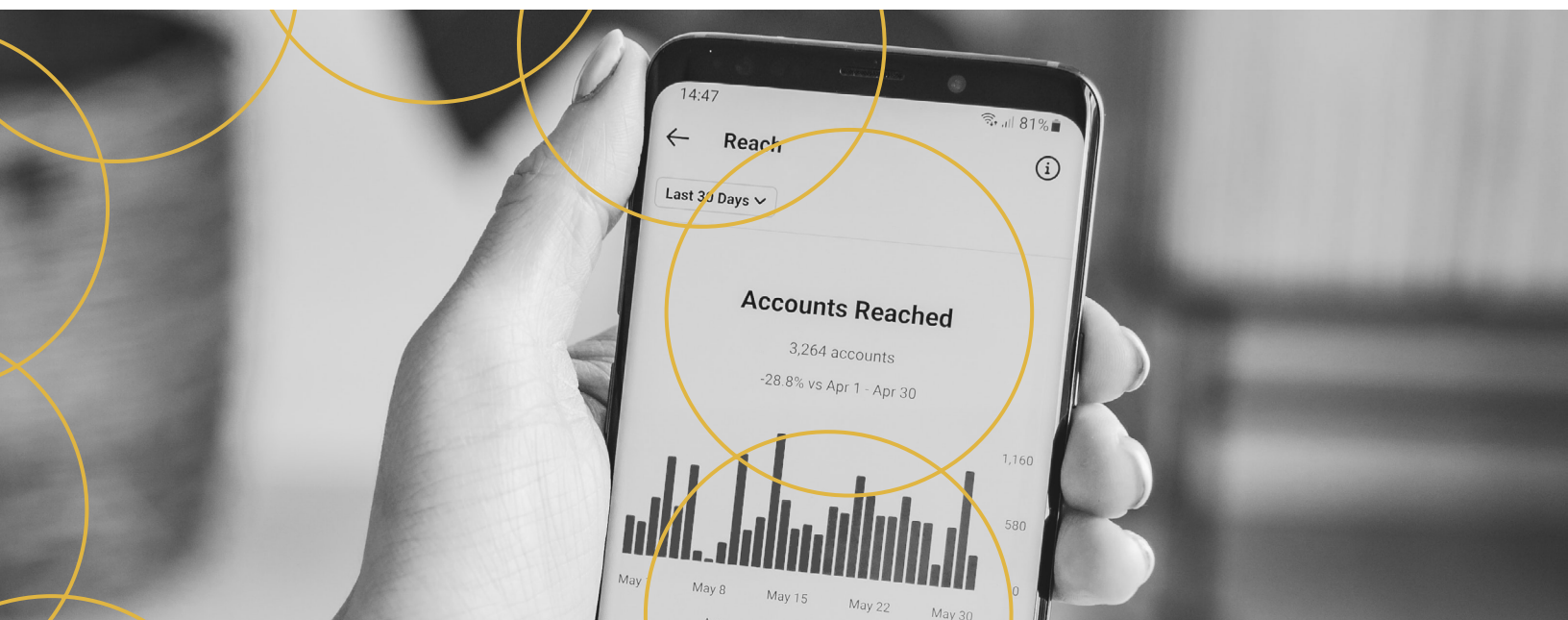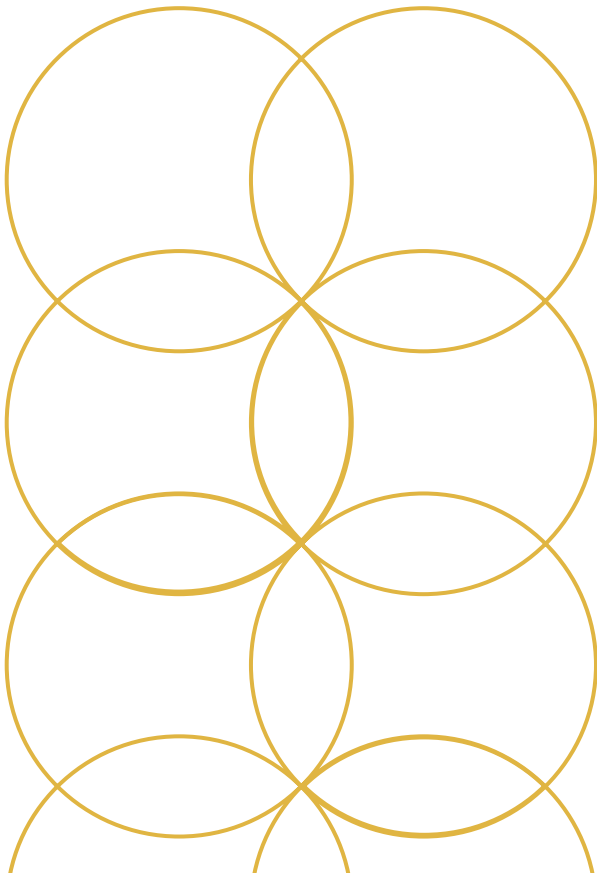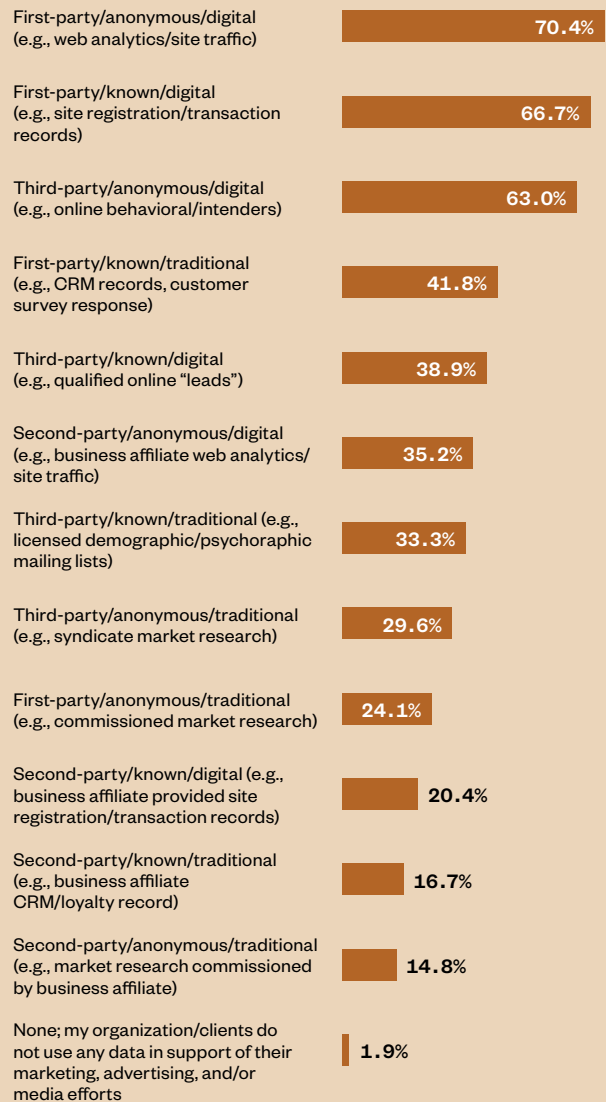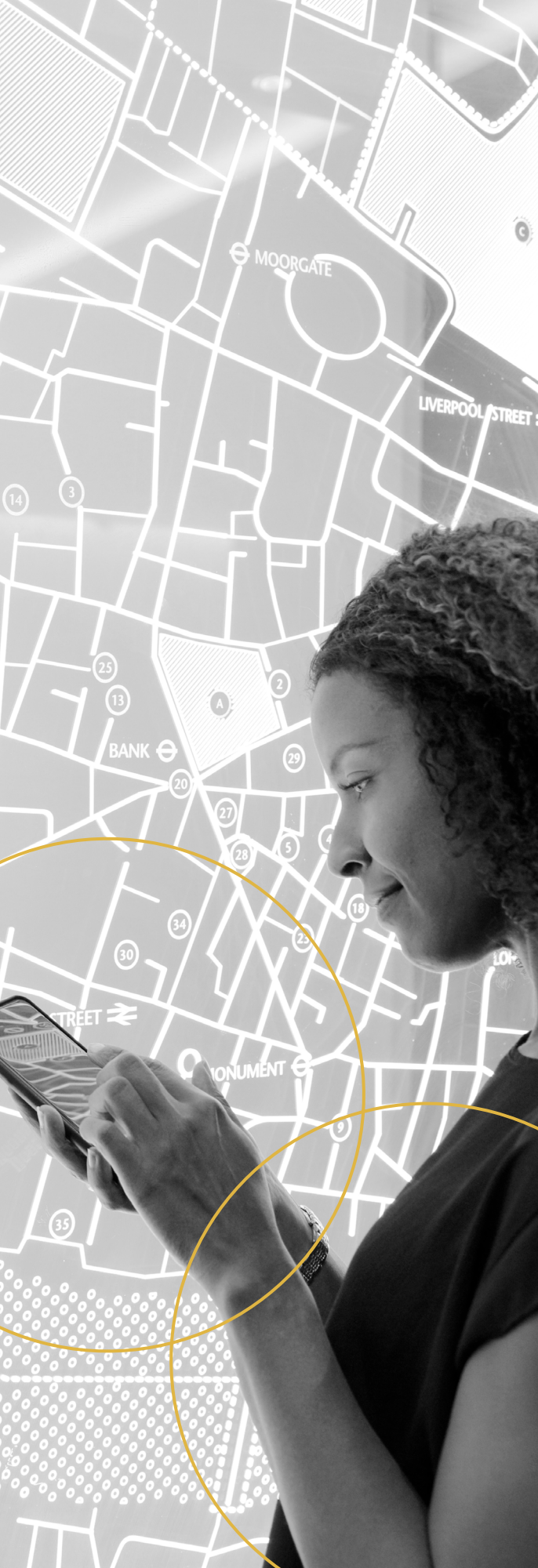
**02** # Which data is the most valuable?

**By far the most valuable data digital publishers can gather from users is first-party data. This is because it offers the deepest understanding of customers. It's accurate because it's collected through direct user interactions like website visits and purchase history, and the insights gained can be used to build a more detailed profile of customer interests.**

Considering a competitive advantage today is usually down to a company's ability to gain better knowledge about their customers than other brands, it's unsurprising that most data-driven triumphs are linked to gathering and segmenting first-party data. These efforts provide a more detailed, actionable view of customer interactions.

What types of data organizations currently leverage to support their marketing, advertising, and/or media efforts:

| Data type | % |
|---|---|
| First-party/anonymous/digital (e.g., web analytics/site traffic) | 70.4% |
| First-party/known/digital (e.g., site registration/transaction records) | 66.7% |
| Third-party/anonymous/digital (e.g., online behavioral/intenders) | 63.0% |
| First-party/known/traditional (e.g., CRM records, customer survey response) | 41.8% |
| Third-party/known/digital (e.g., qualified online "leads") | 38.9% |
| Second-party/anonymous/digital (e.g., business affiliate web analytics/site traffic) | 35.2% |
| Third-party/known/traditional (e.g., licensed demographic/psychoraphic mailing lists) | 33.3% |
| Third-party/anonymous/traditional (e.g., syndicate market research) | 29.6% |
| First-party/anonymous/traditional (e.g., commissioned market research) | 24.1% |
| Second-party/known/digital (e.g., business affiliate provided site registration/transaction records) | 20.4% |
| Second-party/known/traditional (e.g., business affiliate CRM/loyalty record) | 16.7% |
| Second-party/anonymous/traditional (e.g., market research commissioned by business affiliate) | 14.8% |
| None; my organization/clients do not use any data in support of their marketing, advertising, and/or media efforts | 1.9% |

In the "Data as Competitive Advantage" whitepaper, one interviewee said:

> "First-party data is your most valuable asset; I'd estimate it represents about 60 to 80 percent of the total value you can get from data because it tells you how long someone has been a customer, how they interact with your brand, on what type of device, their length of product use, type of service contract and whether they have a family account. Payment history is also very important."

This is a common view reflected by many other experts in the digital publishing industry:

> "First-party data lets you draw a direct line between your readers and your content, and no one, not Facebook, Google or Apple, can come between you. Every interaction — from subscription forms to behavioral data gathered through apps and websites — deepens your ability to understand your audience. With that insight, you can serve them content and advertising that fits their needs."
>
> **Peter Housten**[2]
> Co-host, Media Voices

It's clear that collecting first-party data is a vital aspect to the success of any subscription business. Still, there are a few things publishers need to consider before bombarding customers with surveys and forms.

[2] https://whatsnewinpublishing.com/first-party-data-how-publishers-can-reclaim-their-audience-relationships/

# 03 Housekeeping

**Before taking action, it's critical to first understand how to collect your data and how to use it effectively.**

## 1. Create incentive

As with all data, publishers need to create a fair value exchange for their audiences. This means creating some kind of incentive or reward for imparting their information. Otherwise customers can feel cheated, ignored, or simply unmotivated to provide their information. Be sure to actually inform audiences about why this exchange is worthwhile.

## 2. Simple is always better

Simple is always better. As far as possible, try to minimize the barriers to entry within data capture forms. Also, remember that data capture should be a long-term strategy that progressively profiles audiences over time. You don't want to hit users with a form that has 20 different fields to fill in all at once!

## 3. Clean the raw data

Clean the raw data. Once you've implemented simple collection forms across your website and apps, you might find that you have a variety of data from numerous different sources. It's critical to bring them all together in order to get a comprehensive view of each individual reader. With all of this data in one location, it's considerably simpler to cleanse it of repeated inputs, incorrect particulars, and useless information.

That way, publishers are left with a reliable and informative pool of data from which to make business decisions.

## 4. Connect the data sets

Connect the data sets. For many publishers, their data management solution, CRM, marketing software, billings provider, and analytics tool are all different systems. A single tool from which to operate allows digital publishers to manage their customers in a far more rapid and accurate manner by allowing access to all aspects of the customer journey from a central location. Subscription experience platforms are an excellent solution for this, allowing publishers to understand and action all their data points by integrating with other best-in-breed tools.

## 5. Enrich the data base

If publishers want to go deeper with their data, machine learning employs all of the data at hand to continuously update and reveal new predictions and insights. The nice thing about machine learning is that the more information becomes available, the better it works. It's continuously updating with the most recent customer behaviors.

With those stats in mind, let's now explore how some successful digital publishers effectively put systems in place to gather valuable first-party data insights directly from their audiences and used that data to gain a competitive edge.

Keep an eye out for common data points these businesses are collecting, such as:

- Session length
- Interests
- Time of session
- Device type (mobile, laptop, etc.)
- Conversion activity
- Content preferences (video, podcast, article)
- Channel from which they access content (Google search, social media, email click-through, etc.)

## 04 How Raconteur used data capture to skyrocket engagement

**Founded in 2008, [Raconteur](https://www.zuora.com/our-customers/case-studies/raconteur)[3] has grown considerably throughout the years, with media owners and content creators from all around the world becoming part of the business.**

In recent efforts, their strategy focused on increasing their digital presence and building a loyal online audience who were regularly engaged. Ultimately, Raconteur wanted to make sure they were putting out content their readers found informative and valuable and wanted to ensure non-returning users continued to come back.

Without audience insights, this was a difficult task, so Raconteur decided to collect first-party data on their own site and use that data to create content and experiences that naturally foster more engagement online. That involved implementing customizable, first-party data capture forms that could easily be applied to their site. With these in place, Raconteur were able to gain actionable insights into user interests and could then use that information to test different content and messaging in their registration forms.

Since Raconteur implemented these capture forms, they've been able to understand their users in a meaningful way and connect the enriched data to their CRM. Allowing them to easily utilize insights and information from readers such as email address, company, seniority, industry, and job function.

Armed with this data, Raconteur tailored their content to better match their audiences, and as a result, saw a direct impact on traffic and other key metrics. That included a consistent bounce rate of 40–60% for targeted traffic, site sessions that are over 3 minutes on average, and the realization of 100 user identities each day.

This boost in engagement also had a knock-on effect. As a result of being able to tailor their content more specifically to user needs, Raconteur saw a rapid increase in their overall newsletter subscribers from 6,000 to 34,000 members.

### Key takeaway

This is an excellent example of how the right actionable data can directly impact the bottom line. By tailoring content to audiences' needs, publishers are more likely to provide readers with a satisfactory experience and keep them coming back for more.

[3] https://www.zuora.com/our-customers/case-studies/raconteur

## 05 How Highland News & Media found the best offer for their audiences

**Highland News & Media**[4] **is proud to share 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.

With no in-house tech team and limited digital capabilities to implement a paywall, it was challenging to reach a goal where online content made up the vast majority of revenue, and they knew they would need to optimize offers if they were to ensure maximum conversions. Implementing paywalls across both their websites and app and using a subscription experience platform to track activity enabled them to collect data from multiple devices and build a more complete picture of conversion rates, ready for pricing optimization and testing.

Using the data they collected about conversion rates, they were able to test their pricing strategy and alter their paywalls depending on changes they saw in user behavior. This strategy meant they could drastically increase the chances of a website visitor becoming a subscriber.

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

**"**

One of the challenges in our business was understanding data, where to get it, and how to analyze it. [Thanks to implementing paywalls], 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,
Highland News & Media

### Key takeaway

Providing customers with a product they deem "good value" is somewhat guesswork without the use of data. Tracking conversion rates is key to determining the most effective offer and price structure.

[4] https://www.zuora.com/our-customers/case-studies/highland-news-media

## 06 How LeadDev leveraged event data to boost digital subscribers

**Specialist content and events provider
LeadDev**[5] **wanted to implement a new
revenue channel into their business
in the form of digital events. With
in-person events canceled due to the
changing circumstances of recent years,
they had to act fast to host thousands of
paying customers online.**

Similar to a lot of B2B publishers, LeadDev realized
that registration for services like online events
presented a new opportunity to gather additional
customer information, which could then be used to
help understand audiences, drive readership, and
ultimately improve new content and event offerings
in the future.

**"**

We had to very rapidly
transform our business
into a digital business
from being a full face
to face one.

**Dave Fletcher**
Co-founder, LeadDev

By setting up registration access procedures for their digital events on-site, they were able to manage the data collected at registration from the thousands of ticket purchases for their "LeadDev Together 2020" virtual event.

This on-site digital registration meant the customer experience was seamless, and it also gave LeadDev the opportunity to gather valuable insights into registered user interests.

The LeadDev team successfully hosted over a thousand paid visitors to their LeadDev Together 2020 series. Since then, they have run a series of webinars and another large virtual event using registration forms, each one gradually helping to grow their audience insights and subscriber list.

Once their site was established, LeadDev then deployed a metered datawall on their previously ungated content. Like many leading businesses have done in the publishing industry, LeadDev experimented with allowing readers a set number of free articles each month before asking them to sign up with an email address, with the goal of converting loyal readers into registered users.

As a result of the data capture forms at event sign-ups and their confidence in metered paywalls, LeadDev increased their subscription base by 50% in just eight months.

"

Events are a great opportunity to gather valuable insights from attendees. Not only can you collect basic information at the sign-up stage on your registration forms, but you can also capture insights around content. For example, which panel sessions have the highest registration rates. This information is particularly valuable to publishers, as it can give first-hand knowledge of the topics customers are most interested in.

**Andrina Dhillon**
Field Marketing Manager, Zephr

## Key takeaway

On-site registration is a powerful tool for optimization in future. Sign-up forms for events, free trials, or competitions provide a great incentive for customers to share personal information, and they give publishers ideas for future content based on trends in audience interests.

## 07 How SCI were able to match customers with the right packages

**Specialist financial news provider <u>SCI</u>[6] looked to expand their subscription packages to cover the unique needs of each subscriber.**

When starting out, SCI had a complex and inflexible paywall, and they realized that some subscribers wanted more flexibility in the content they could read.

Without much information about the types of packages their audience wanted specifically, it was difficult to choose and implement the many possible product combinations.

To solve this issue, SCI replaced their inflexible content combinations with dynamic paywalls, allowing them to present many more specialized packages to their customers while simultaneously being able to control identity and gather additional user insights with ease.

Testing these new flexible packages allowed SCI to collect data and gain better insight into customer interests in order to align customers with the valuable content they created.

Within just two years of implementing dynamic paywalls with these flexible packages, SCI saw a significant increase in their top-level revenue and noted a 100%+ subscriber renewal rate on subscription income.



[6] https://www.zuora.com/our-customers/case-studies/sci
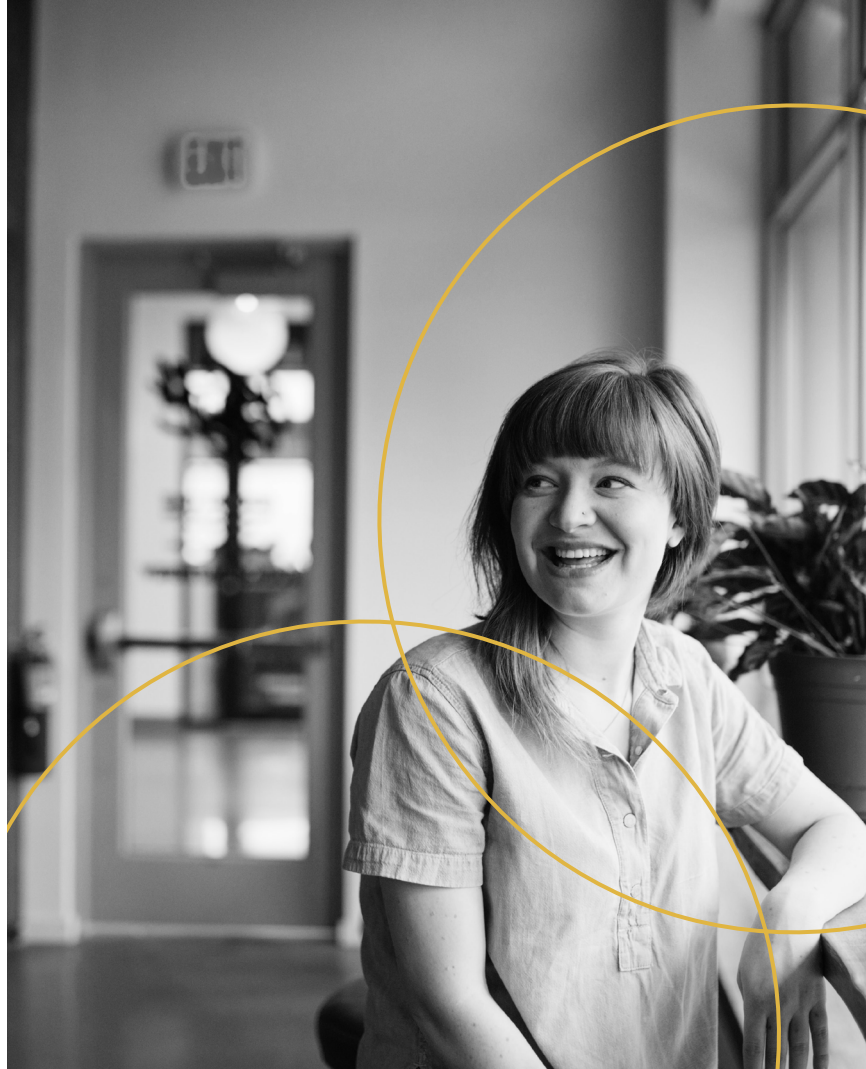
As with the above use cases, we see many other experts in the industry using data for similar outcomes:

## Which use cases organizations are currently leveraging user data for.

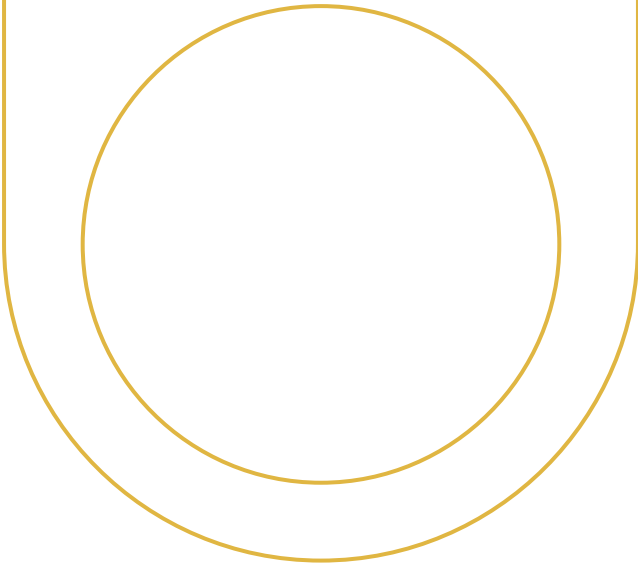| Use case | |
|---|---|
| Open-market programmatic media buying/selling ("RTB") | **70.4%** |
| Audience segmentation and rules-driven targeting (e.g., for retargeting, suppression, frequency capping, etc.) | **59.3%** |
| Audience analytics — so as to inform product development, offer, and/or marketing operations | **59.3%** |
| Private-market (or "reserved") programmatic media buying/selling | **59.3%** |
| Optimization/personalization of paid digital advertising content | **55.6%** |
| Optimization/personalization of owned media content (e.g., website, emails, etc.) | **50.0%** |
| Audience analytics — so as to better understand customers generally | **44.4%** |
| Cross-channel marketing messaging/audience engagement ("omnichannel" execution) | **40.7%** |
| Audience extension | **37.0%** |
| Cross-channel marketing measurement, reporting, and/or attribution | **29.6%** |

The examples above came directly from customer success stories at Zephr. To see more case studies in full and to understand how Zephr helped these businesses achieve their results, visit the Zephr **case studies page here**.[7]

## Key takeaway

A one-size-fits-all approach no longer cuts it with subscriptions. Each subscriber is different, and there are clear benefits to being able to tailor to these individual needs. With the use of dynamic paywalls, digital publishers can test different subscription packages and track them to see which converts best. They can also use form fields on paywalls to gain valuable insight into the interests of subscribers.
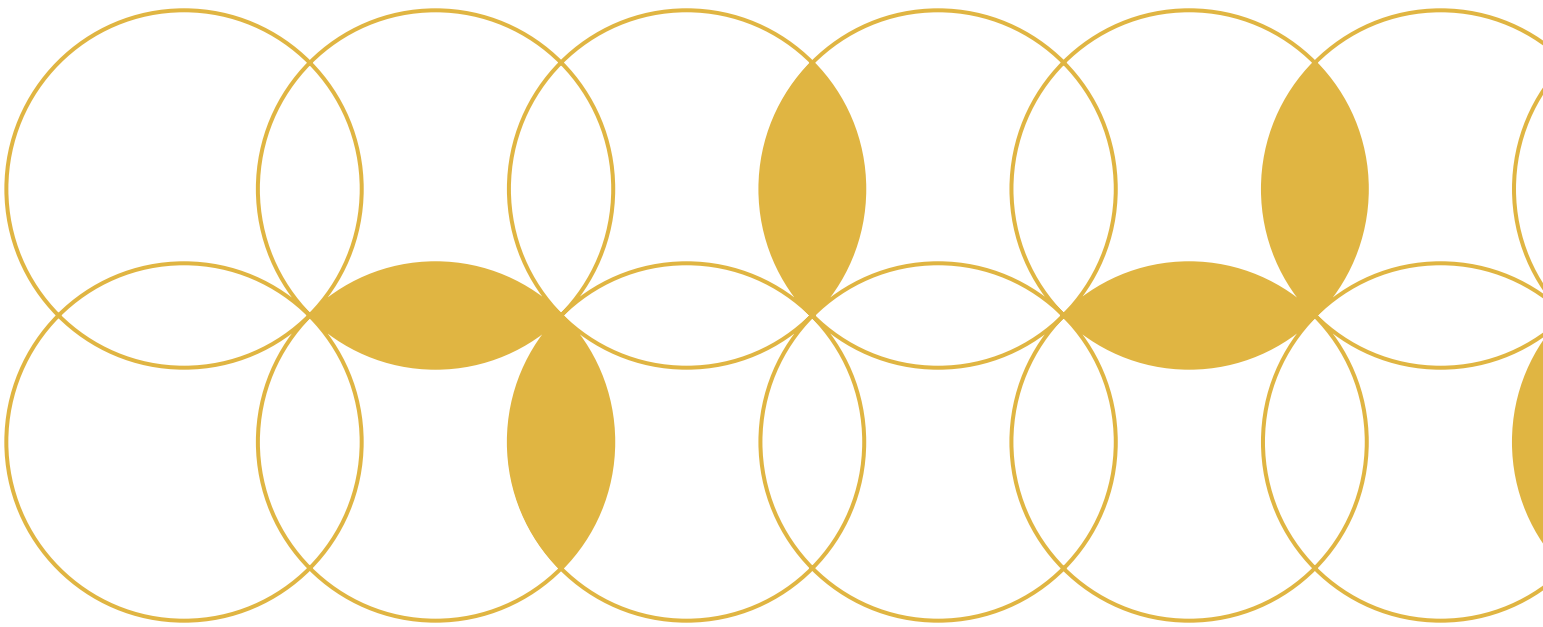
# 08 The benefits of first-party data collection

**Ultimately, these case studies demonstrate that effective collection and utilization of user data is key to subscription success. With direct impact on engagement and conversions and valuable insights into pricing strategy, event offerings, and subscription packages, first-party data[8] has become one of the most valuable commodities for digital publishers today.**

Not only does collecting first-party data benefit publishers, it also benefits their customers too! With many consumers becoming more aware of the uses of their data, it's not uncommon for individuals to actually prefer publishers who use data for personalization. According to Accenture, **83% of consumers**[9] are willing to share their data if it means they experience a more personalized experience.

To summarize some of the effective data uses we've seen, here's a recap of the benefits:

- A deeper understanding of customer interests, allowing for a better content strategy that's more aligned with audience needs and drives engagement
- More detailed view of conversions, meaning optimizing becomes easier, and changes can bring rapid results
- Essential insights and feedback about events and other content, driving more subscriptions by producing offers or events that audiences actually want
- Increased subscription sales from designing packages to fit audience needs

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[8] https://www.zuora.com/products/first-party-data-strategies
[9] https://whatsnewinpublishing.com/first-party-data-how-publishers-can-reclaim-their-audience-relationships/

## ( 09 ) Taking it a step further

**In addition to the cases we've discussed above, there are many other avenues[10] in which first-party data can be used to achieve breakthrough success.**

### 1. Try customer recommendations

Experiment with what you recommend to customers (e.g., which articles or content they're published to next). This is a way to increase engagement if you know customer interests well.

### 2. Use past behavior to predict future behavior

Segmentation is the most obvious example of this (where user characteristics determine future behavior based on similar individuals). Digital publishers can also use this with churn predictions (e.g., predict who's most likely to churn based on historic indicators).

### 3. Consider up lift modeling

While predicting content someone will engage with or predicting their likelihood to churn might be more obvious, publishers also want to know "what can I do about it?" If a publisher has richer-engagement data, they can plug it into AI to determine which tools to use to re-engage those most likely to churn. (E.g., If a user in the past re-subscribed after receiving a discount offer, AI can use that information to determine who else is likely to respond to discount offers in the future.)

For more help and ideas for effectively using data, take a look at this guide on the **7 best ways to leverage first-party data capture strategies for a competitive advantage**.[11]

> "
> In today's fast-paced world, most companies must experiment, iterate, and A/B test in real time, without the assistance of a team of engineers. All readers who interact with your content should be monitored in a comprehensive and useful way by a platform that allows commercial decision-makers to test and learn from numerous conversion strategies.
>
> **Chris Scott**
> CPO, Zephr

[10] https://www.zuora.com/products/zephr
[11] https://www.zuora.com/resource/7-best-ways-to-leverage-first-party-data-capture-strategies-for-a-competitive-advantage

# Conclusion

**Many publishers currently hold data in diverse places and struggle to unify reader information in ways that offer holistic insights about their readers over time.**

Publishers who want to be "data-driven" must concentrate on developing a strategy that governs how data is obtained and utilized. That includes a robust way to collect actionable insights from multiple sources, a team of employees who understand the demands and goals of working with that information, and most importantly, access to technology that future-proofs and supports "real-time" data activation. Those still reliant on "one-size-fits-all" customer journeys will lose market share to publishers that combine strong technological solutions with deep audience knowledge.

See how Zuora can help you achieve more with your data.

**Speak to our team**

**ZUORA**

Zuora provides the leading cloud-based subscription management platform that functions as a system of record for subscription businesses across all industries. Powering the Subscription Economy®, the Zuora® platform was architected specifically for dynamic, recurring subscription business models and acts as an intelligent subscription management hub that automates and orchestrates the entire subscription order-to-cash process, including billing and revenue recognition. Zuora serves more than 1,000 companies around the world, including Box, Komatsu, Rogers, Schneider Electric, Xplornet and Zendesk.

**More at www.zuora.com**