

The Changing Digital Landscape

Achieving Success in 2023 and Beyond



E-GUIDE



A Zuora Company

With the considerable shift in **third-party cookies** rocking the industry over the past few years, **digital publishing** has faced enormous **hurdles** and undergone **drastic changes**.

And with the additional aftereffects of the global pandemic, economic challenges, and rapidly developing technologies, these changes don't seem to be slowing down anytime soon. But the good news is, as the environment advances, there lies plenty of **opportunity for publishers to stand out, lead in their field, and grow revenue**.

In order to succeed, the key is in knowing what to expect for the future. While predicting that can be difficult, the current evolving trends give a good idea of some of the opportunities that may arise for digital publishers in the next few years.

In this e-guide, we'll discuss these trends, the changes in the subscription market, and the tech opportunities available for digital publishers moving forward. The first section will look at general trends in consumer behaviour, while the second section will dive into the technology shifts and advancements to be aware of.

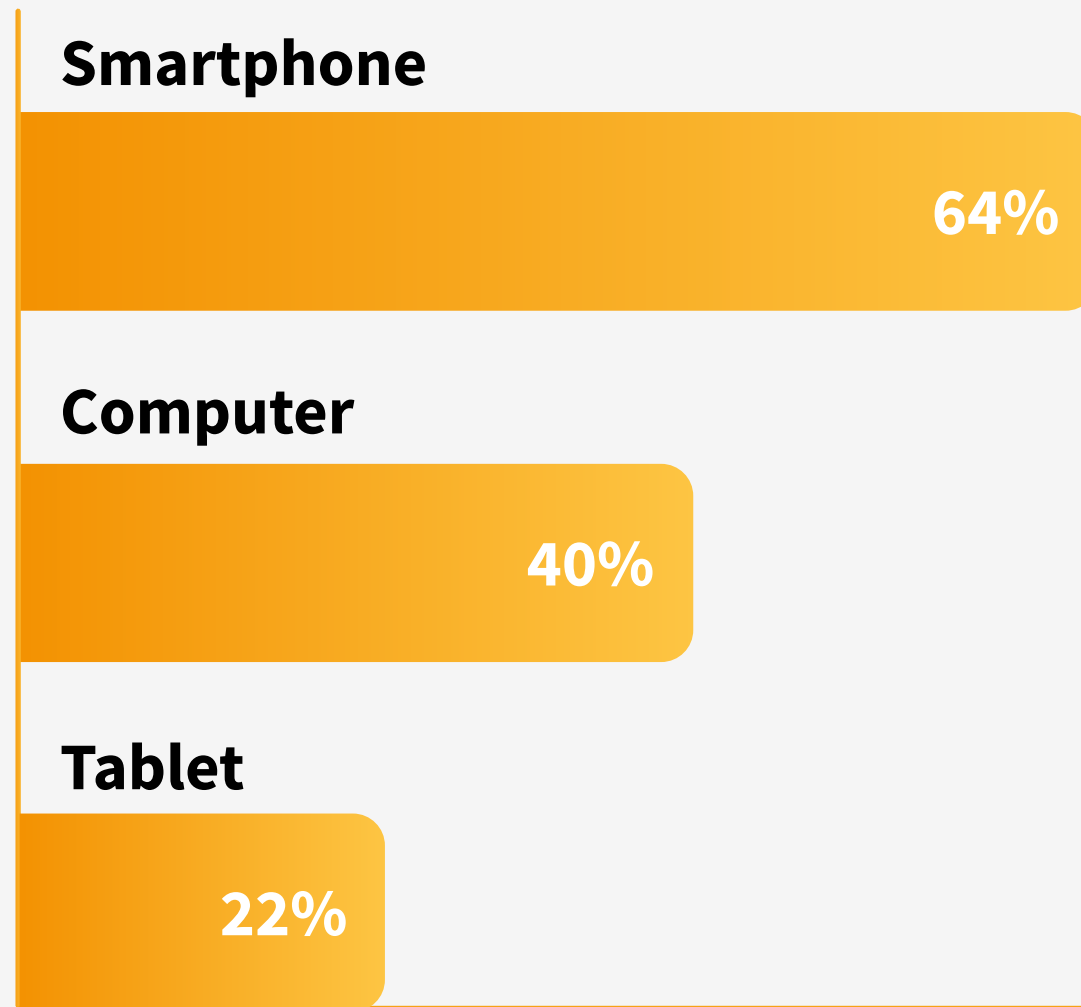
Without further ado, let's dive in...

Top *Consumer Trends* to Look Out For

1 Mobile-Friendly Content

According to [Statista](#), as of February 2022, more people use smartphones to read online news than any other device, and this trend is increasing.

Source: [Statista](#)



Share of correspondents

Extrapolating this data to 2023 and beyond, it's likely that in the future, nearly all online news reading will be done through mobile devices, so publishers are starting to focus their campaigns and content towards mobile readers.

Since first impressions are so important for user experience, how a website looks on a mobile device is a top priority. Publishers ought to consider things like page load time, mobile-friendly registration forms, mobile-friendly call-to-action buttons, and content that's easy to consume on a small screen. The addition of an app can also be a great way to make your content more accessible across a range of devices.

But perhaps more importantly, this shift to mobile-friendly content and the ability to access news from various devices creates an urgent need for **cross-device tracking**. Cross-device tracking allows publishers to follow users as they interact with content across different devices. This will be increasingly important to ensure a consistent experience as the use of multiple devices continues to increase. If a user logs in from multiple devices, cross-device tracking lets publishers see their activity across all of those sources and understand what articles they're looking at to gain a holistic view.

Doing so enables publishers to show relevant and targeted content (or offers) to users across every device, creating truly personalised experiences at every interaction. This is crucial because if a user registers on

mobile, they'll want (and expect) to have their preferences carried over when they log in via tablet or laptop too. If the experience is different or disjointed, it could increase the level of friction in the user experience. This importance of a continuous experience carries over into design elements, brand messaging, and even the location of various segments of a site.

“Consistency across devices is really important. Users experience and get familiar with your brand, so if you're using three different styles of buttons or panels on different devices, your users will have more cognitive load and they'll find the experience difficult and frustrating. This can cause your user to either do something different or do something wrong. That's not only hugely frustrating for them, but also potentially damaging for your conversions too.”

-Jamie Counter

Creative Director for Product Development, Zephr

2 Agreeable Advertising

Even though digital publishers aren't solely relying on advertising revenue anymore, it's by no means a 'dead' revenue stream. The key is to ensure advertising is done in a way that doesn't feel disruptive or intrusive to the reader. While many users show an aversion to obvious and intrusive adverts, some audiences, such as Gen-Z are used to seeing influencers in their news feed who are paid or sponsored to demonstrate products in a subtler way.

Publishers looking to keep their ad revenue stream alive might want to try different advertising strategies, such as sponsored content articles or even in-content purchases. 'Native' adverts like these can be integrated into regular content more smoothly, making them less intrusive and better suited for the audience.

Some publishers have already started to alter their advertising strategies in this way by personalising adverts based on user preferences or the article they're featured on. **A study by Forbes reported that 90% of consumers found messages not relevant to them 'annoying'. And a further 53% of respondents stated how frustrating it was to receive advertising about products they're not interested in, ranking it the highest on their list of annoyances.** It's clear that there's real scope for better aligning user interests to advertising served.

3 SEO Changes

Search engine optimisation (SEO) is the process of improving the quality and quantity of website traffic from search engines (such as Google).

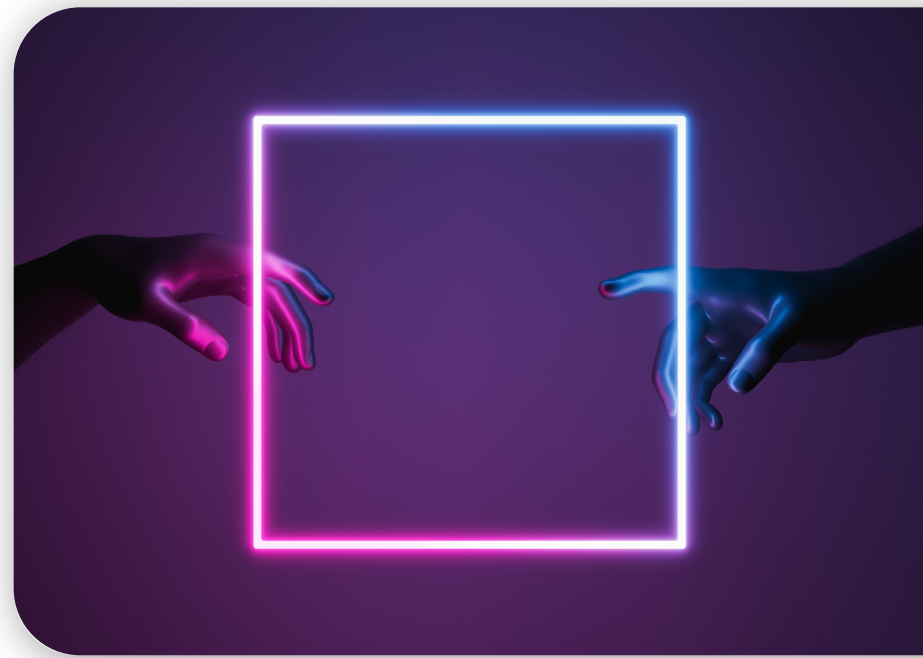
While SEO is common knowledge for digital publishers running a website, recent changes from Google suggest publishers might need to alter their SEO strategy.

Google announced their "helpful content update", which will basically prioritise value-based content rather than keyword-rich content in search rankings. Saying, "this ranking update will help make sure that unoriginal, low-quality content doesn't rank highly in search, and our testing has found it will especially improve results related to online education, as well as arts and entertainment, shopping and tech-related content."

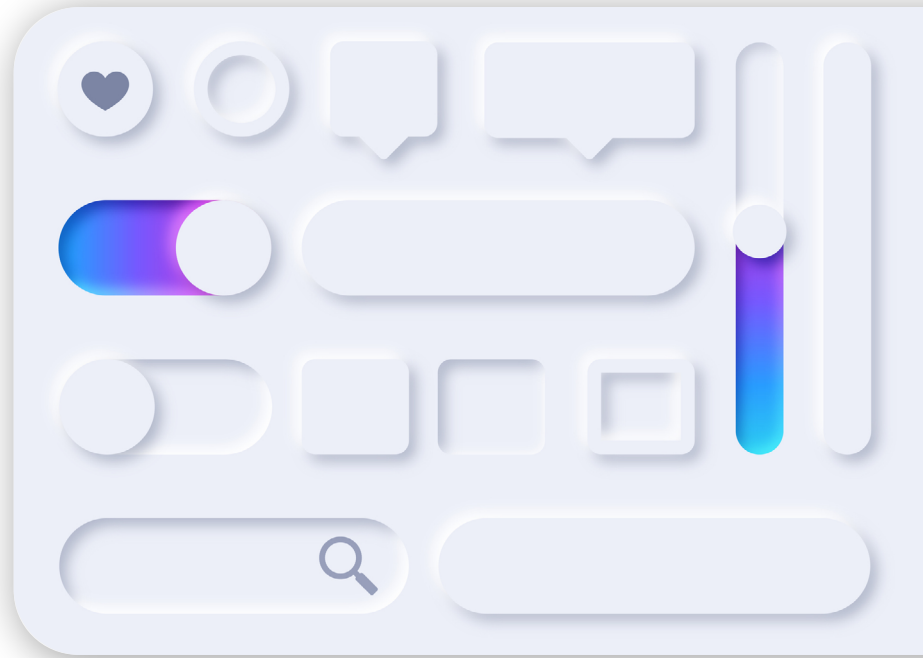
Essentially, this means that **Google has begun to judge the quality of a page based on how useful and informative it is, rather than on how many keywords it contains.**

What does this mean for publishers moving forward? In short, it looks like there will be a shift to a more value and intent-focused SEO content strategy. So, what can publishers do to ensure their content ranks in the new value-based algorithm? Here are a few suggestions:

Top Consumer Trends to Look Out For



First, focus on creating content that's truly informative and valuable to your audience. This means understanding what they want and need to know, and then delivering that information in an engaging and easy-to-understand way. This can be done by collecting first-party data on preferences and topics of interest, or by gaining real feedback from online communities, and then using that data to enrich and enhance content.



Second, make sure the content and accessibility is as user-friendly as possible. This means ensuring it's easy to navigate, fast loading, and mobile-friendly (as discussed in section one).



And third, continue to build links to your website from other high-quality websites. Link building is still an important ranking factor and will likely become even more important as Google continues to refine its algorithm and determine what counts as high-value content.

In summary, investing in high-quality content creation and content strategy is essential to survive in a market that is even more focused on delivering on user needs. As part of that, understanding audience preferences becomes even more crucial than ever.

4 Community First

Social media platforms such as **TikTok**, **Instagram**, and **Reddit** have seen a meteoric rise over the past few years. Part of their incredible success comes down to the fact they encourage engagement, participation and discussion to keep users coming back for more.

How can digital publishers follow in the footsteps of these social media giants? Build loyal communities! [Openweb's 2022 research report](#) shows that readers are already interested in joining and participating in publisher-hosted communities. 72% believe publishers and brands should host communities, and 91% reported already reading community comments in articles whenever there's a comments section available.

Most readers who stayed for the community also showed increased time spent on the site, more return visits, and greater registrations. Consequently, it appears that **building an active and engaging community** for 2023 and beyond might be one of the most crucial ways publishers can **reduce churn**.

Not only do communities offer obvious benefits to prevent churn by increasing conversions and keeping audiences engaged, they also, offer a unique source of data. Owning a community allows publishers to gain real-time feedback such as which topics are the most popular or which demographic active community members belong to. Potentially offering even more insight into audience behaviours and interests than first-party data alone.

One way to build a healthy community is through membership subscription models that include group forums and message boards. **Some publishers are also getting creative with hands-on approaches too:**



[The Ferret](#) offers fact-checking nights in Scotland that are open to members as opportunities to learn and contribute to investigative journalism.

[Chicago's City Bureau's Documenters](#) program not only invites its supporters to attend and document civic events and meetings, but it also stimulates their engagement by paying for these contributions.

[Honolulu Civil Beat](#) started inviting members to come to monthly coffee chats with their staff in the newsroom.

All these examples show creative ways publishers are making users feel more valued and creating a more personal and enjoyable experience with their brands. A factor that could be crucial to developing strong communities and brand advocates moving forward.

5 Frictionless Future

Attention spans online are at an all-time low. As a result, it follows that any friction or barriers to accessing content will add resistance and may drastically increase the chances of a user losing interest and leaving a site altogether.

In other words, customers want a smooth process with as few friction points as possible, and that desire will likely increase after recent years.

Google notes: *“The pandemic has reinforced what brands should continue to focus on: enabling people to shop [and consume content] when they want, how they want, and where they want, all the while providing a pleasant and frictionless experience.”*

When there are fewer steps or barriers to the action a user wants to take, conversion rates will improve, and customer frustration will decrease.

Amazon’s revolutionary ‘one-click buy’ is an excellent example of this principle in action. Looking at the whole user experience across the journey, from anonymous users to paying subscribers and brand advocates, is key. This includes things like: how many steps are in the registration process? At which point does a user see a paywall? And what offers do different users see (and at what time)?

As Google explains further, “a frictionless experience encompasses product organisation, pricing, availability, navigation, ease of checkout, and payment.”

So it appears users value a good experience, perhaps even more than ever. The good news is, technology can help streamline these processes and remove the hassle from the experience of the user.

Publishers might consider employing subscription experience platforms to gather first-party data, build an accurate picture of user expectations and needs, and enable fast iteration of regwall and paywall forms. This, in turn, can help publishers create more personalised article recommendations, fewer steps in the registration and conversion journeys, and even dynamic paywalls that adjust based on user behaviours. All significant advances towards a more frictionless interaction.

6 Redefining What It Means To Pay

In recent years, there's been a shift away from a hard paywall subscription model to a more dynamic one. Offering users access to some content before showing them a paywall when they've reached their max number of free views.

On top of this, there's also interest in the possibility of behavioural pricing. Behavioural pricing allows publishers to offer subscription products that are tailored to a user's behaviours and demographics. For example, if it is determined that a user is highly engaged with content and in a high-income job, a publisher might offer more features at a higher price point than they would an unengaged user in a lower-income job. This maximises a user's willingness to become a paying subscriber by offering price points and packages at which they are most likely to convert based on their individual value perception.

But new pricing and payment strategies don't just stop there. Publishers are trying a variety of things to see if they impact a reader's likelihood to pay. For example, [The Chicago Sun-Times](#), [Time](#), and [The Marginalian](#) have experimented with the ability for audiences to purchase content using payment methods such as cryptocurrency. With cryptocurrencies seeing [record growth](#) in 2021, this might be a much-needed step to keep up.

But in addition to new payment types and paywalls, we might also see publishers consider other developments, such as the [emerging practice of buy-now-pay-later \(BNPL\)](#). Buy now pay later is a type of financing that allows customers to make purchases (such as signing up for a subscription) and pay for them at a future date, often interest-free.

As this practice becomes adopted across more and more online businesses, we might expect more publishers to follow suit. The likes of [BuzzFeed](#) and [Bustle Digital Group](#) have already taken up deferred payment tech, so it seems we're not far away from it.

While payment methods, gateways and strategies vary, one thread remains consistent: having the right technology.

All these examples clearly show that using the right technology to integrate new payment providers into your tech stack will be vital to keeping up. Publishers may have to consider more intelligent paywall solutions if they're to future-proof their businesses. Without the ability to adapt to new payment trends, make iterations or alter paywall strategies at speed, they risk being left behind and missing out on vital revenue potential.

Technology Trends to Look Out For

As technology advances, there are several new **trends for digital publishers** to be aware of in order to **future-proof their businesses**.

All of these technologies have the potential to increase revenue for digital publishers. Those who are not yet using these technologies might consider **adapting now** in order to **stay ahead of the curve**.

NFTs Are Not So Distant

While some feel they present a new and lucrative revenue stream, others believe they are just the latest example of a passing trend.

However you look at it, NFTs have seen a lot of traction in digital publishing over recent years.

Time Magazine began auctioning old magazine covers, while CNN has sold moments from its archives as NFTs. But the craze doesn't seem to show signs of slowing down anytime soon.

Time's President Keith Grossman stated that the more intriguing part is what this implies about the future of subscriptions, community, and membership. This is an opportunity we've seen capitalised on first-hand. Zephr clients like Forekast News have already incorporated NFTs as access to events, and **it might be possible in future that NFTs become a way of paying for subscription access too.**

An example of what an NFT might look like- Unique art is the primary driver for NFT buyers, and an opportune market for publishers to tap into.



The Rise of Intelligent Data

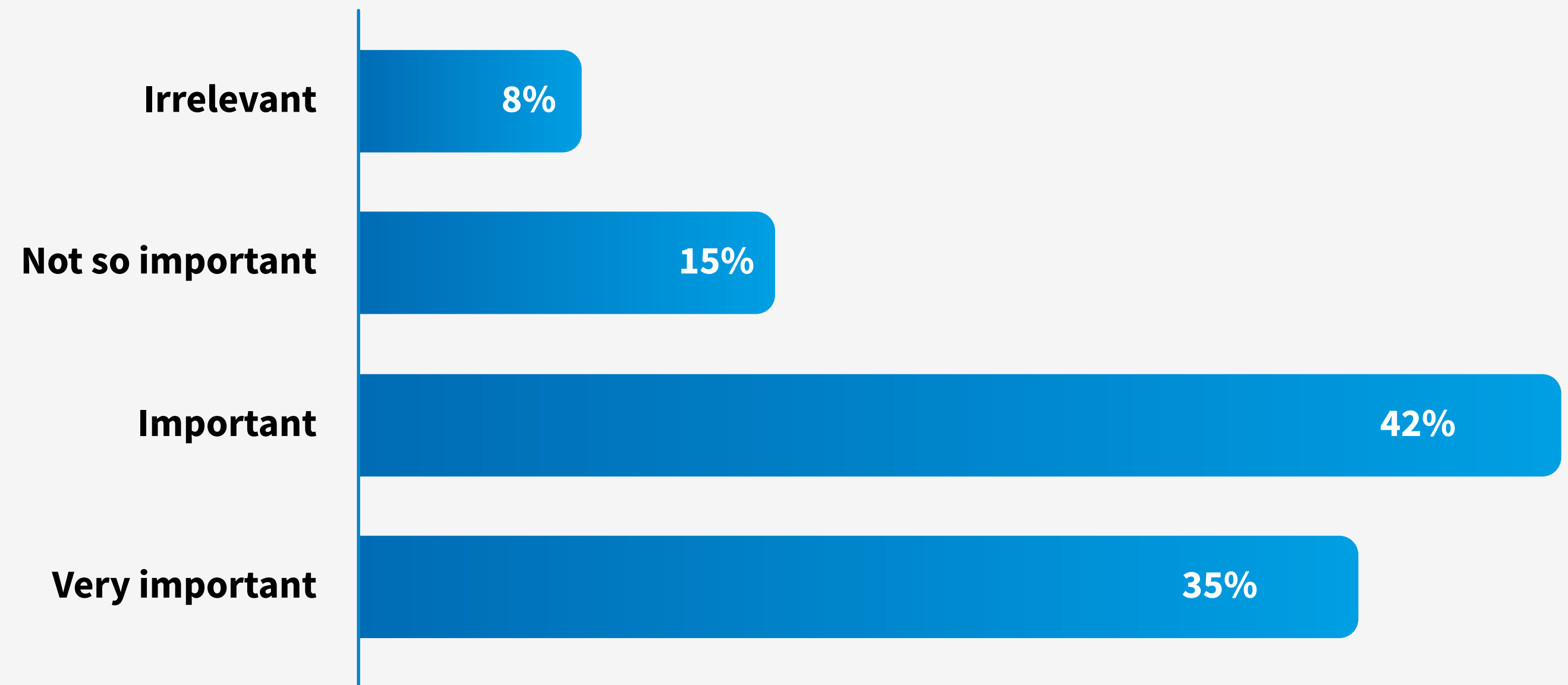
75%

In a recent Wan-Infra report, over 75% of publishers stated that AI and intelligent analytics will be integral to their companies' successes within the next three years. Not only is this common in large newsrooms, but also in small regional ones too.

Intelligent data collection, analytics and utilisation will likely manifest in the form of intelligent paywall tools, integrating with a wider tech stack. The ability to collect and analyse this data relies heavily on how easy it is to integrate technology together and gain valuable insight. All the more reason to invest in best-of-breed solutions!

The primary obstacle to implementing intelligent data analytics is a talent and skills shortage. Consequently, digital publishers who hope to move quickly with their data strategies should consider adopting a more collaborative approach. Primarily, this means seeking tech that's intuitive, easy to adopt, and can be operated by commercial and technical teams alike.

How important will AI be for the success of your business in 2024?



Source: *Wan-Infra, 2022*

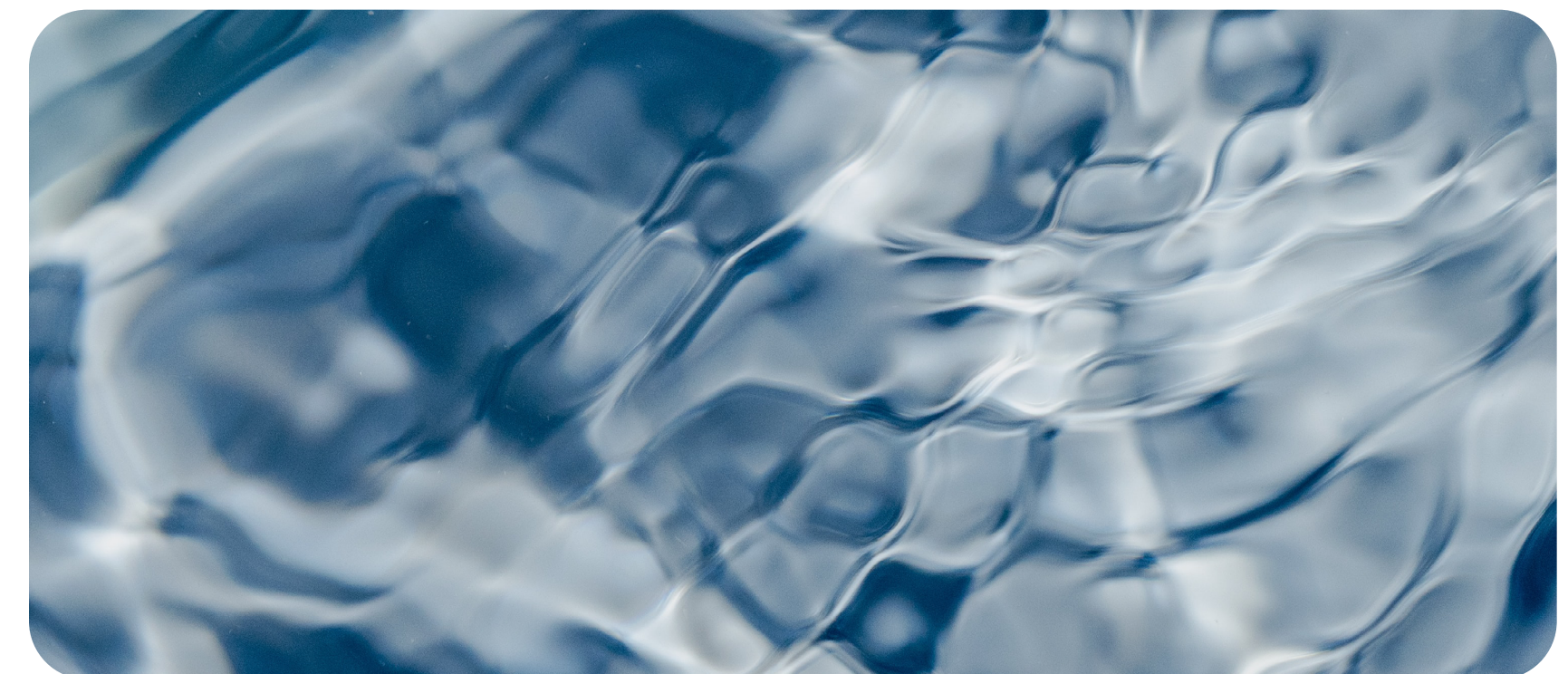
First-Party and Data Collaboration

Third-party cookies are becoming less and less reliable. This could be troublesome for the **82 percent** of web ads that rely on cookies and over **77 percent** of websites that have at least one or more tracking cookies.

While some publishers may have already established solid relationships with their target readers and gathered first-party data, others may find it more difficult to weather the “**Cookiepocalypse**”.

Registration and paywall technologies that make it easy and valuable for users to share their data will likely offer a considerable helping hand to publishers who have, up until now, relied heavily on third parties. **The ability to gather user information gradually over time and progressively profile users will mean this data collection doesn't feel intrusive or create friction in the user experience.**

And in a turn of events, we may see publishers increasingly collaborate to build data banks using their own first-party data, in order to provide better experiences for their users. For example, The Swiss Digital Alliance was launched in 2018 and acts as a single sign-on solution that consolidates a variety of digital publishing companies together. This sees publishers share a range of resources, including data and insights.



These collaborations between digital publishers could become more common in future. With the end of third-party cookies in sight, first-party data will be a significant strategy for years to come.



Audio Set To Be A Winner

Many publishers and podcast hosts in the industry might have found themselves worrying during the pandemic that without commutes, people wouldn't listen to podcasts as much. But although global commuting time decreased, it didn't significantly impact podcast consumption according to the [Reuters 2021 Digital News Report](#). In fact, the popularity of podcasts continued to grow, resulting in a boom in advertising revenue.

Although advertising will likely continue to be the primary revenue driver for podcasts, some publishers are starting to explore podcast subscriptions as an option. After Apple and Spotify launched their own [paid podcast services](#), publishers have begun putting their own podcasts behind paywalls.

Die Zeit, for example, created a paywall for its podcasts which are only available with a 5.99 € monthly subscription. But Die Zeit isn't the only publisher implementing audio paywalls; others like The Economist are discussing doing the same after their podcast hit 3 million monthly listens!

And it seems the trend doesn't just stop at podcasts. Audio articles are on the rise too. In July 2020, The Washington Post made all its [articles available in audio form](#) on Android and Apple mobile devices- A widely popular move with their audiences.

By many accounts then, investing in audio is a no-brainer for publishers. It's cost-effective, simple technology, and the content is easy for users to digest and listen to on the go across multiple devices.

Blazing the Way Forward

Digital publishers have had to quickly adapt their business models in order to maintain revenue in the age of ad-blocking and the **cookiepocalypse**.

Those looking to keep up and future-proof their business ought to consider the tech they need to keep up with changing user needs and demands.

As the market pushes more and more for personalised user experiences, those with the tools to build strong communities, adapt to changes quickly, and create frictionless experiences with their content will stand out and likely lead.

As Nadav Shoval, OpenWeb's co-founder and CEO, put it in an interview: **“Publishers can seize this opportunity and fill the gap by transforming their amazing repositories of content into true community destinations.**

That will be a major step toward what users want, and what we need as a society: better, healthier community experiences that bring people together.”

With so many new opportunities on the horizon, it'll be interesting to see how publishers adopt new technologies (and even make their own) to compete in the market.



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For more help predicting future trends and preparing for years to come, take a look at our popular webinar session [“Staying ahead of the curve - Top trends influencing the digital publishing industry”](#).

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