How Italy’s most read newspaper has continued its digital subscriber growth throughout the pandemic by applying machine learning, data analysis, survey research, and constant testing.
RCS at a glance

€924 million in revenue (Dec 2019)
Total audience: 51 million monthly users
Leading newspapers in Italy and Spain
More than 3,500 employees
Corriere della Sera’s audience

Italian leaders in circulation and digital subscription

- 269,000 daily copies*
- 384,000 digital subscribers

Digital audience

- 3,951,883 (daily unique users 2021)
- 29,340,000 (monthly unique users 2021)
- 340,000,000 (monthly pageviews 2021)

* Dec 2020
125% increase in active digital subscriptions over two years.

The growth has been exceptional — with more than 100K subscriptions in March of 2020 as the first wave of COVID crested in Italy. But the more important story here is not about the massive organic growth in 2020 fueled by COVID but the 24% growth in 2021 driven by smarter strategies.
First, what didn’t work:
Simply lowering meter height

One of the early tests in the Corriere-Piano partnership was dynamically lowering meter height — giving variable numbers of free articles to different propensity cohorts.

Despite such targeting often generating good results other publishers, it didn’t work for Corriere della Sera. The increase in paywall hits resulted in lower conversion rates, leading to lower absolute conversions.

13% Increase in paywall hits

-8% Conversions drop
Maybe hitting the paywall wasn’t the main barrier to conversion

In the wake of the meter height test failure, a fundamental reality to wrestle with was the fact that Corriere della Sera’s digital audience was hyper-engaged. While variable meter heights may work for a lot of publishers, it may be less relevant for sites with extreme loyalty.
Engagement was off the charts

For many news websites, getting enough visits to exhaust their meters is a major challenge, but the incredible levels of engagement meant that Corriere della Sera had cohorts of users who were hitting the paywall constantly.

Percentile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentile</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>95%</td>
<td>20.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.3%</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Corriere della Sera

5+ Pageviews
Piano Benchmarks, Q1 2021
Prospects were open to longer term subscriptions

While a significant majority of Corriere della Sera’s subscribers were on monthly subscriptions, pricing research had shown that there was a general preference for annual subscriptions, which meant there was opportunity to improve retention and increase lifetime value with the right offer.
What did work: targeted offers

Since many prospects were repeatedly hitting the paywall, we realized that barrier to conversion was the offer rather than the paywall hit.

By varying and time-limiting the offer based upon paywall hits and propensity, we were able to grow conversions and dynamically discount to the individuals who had repeatedly rejected the standard offer.
What did work: targeted offers

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3X to 4X

Conversion Rate Increase
Test philosophy is more important than individual test

While incremental messaging was one very successful tactic, it was one of many tests and strategies. The ability to validate when a “best practice” applies and when it does not is what allows you to make incremental gains.
Three Takeaways

Start from data insights

Always A/B test your hypothesis

Have a clear goal in mind when setting the KPI
piano

THE DIGITAL EXPERIENCE CLOUD

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