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How NOLA.com & The Advocate Use BlueConic to Drive Engagement & Subscriptions

About

NOLA.com (New Orleans) and TheAdvocate.com (Baton Rouge) are the websites for Capital City Press, the largest news organization in Louisiana.

Challenges

Publishers that drive revenue from subscriptions are constantly straddled with balancing acquisition and retention. They have to rely on finding the "right time" and "right way" to make an ask.

NOLA.com (New Orleans) and TheAdvocate.com (Baton Rouge) are no different. With publishing roots dating back to the 1800s, Capital City Press – the brands' parent company, part of Georges Media Group – relies heavily on paid digital subscriptions to drive revenue and accelerate growth.

But effectively improving subscriber acquisition and retention means having access to unified, actionable first-party data and the ability to orchestrate cross-channel touchpoints to engage with subscribers and non-subscribers in meaningful ways.

The company's Vice President of Consumer Revenue, Kyle Whitfield, weighs in on how the company is using first-party data, including interest data, behavioral data, and subscription

status, to offer relevant and timely browser notifications that fuel engagement, subscriptions, loyalty, and revenue.
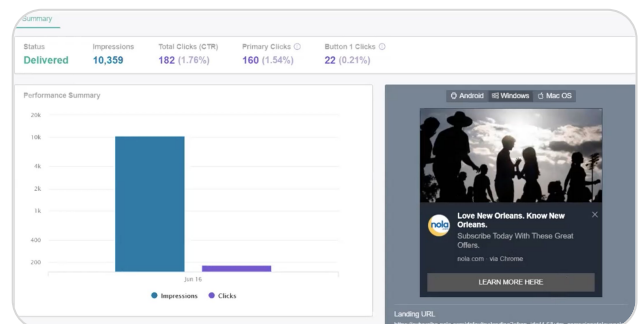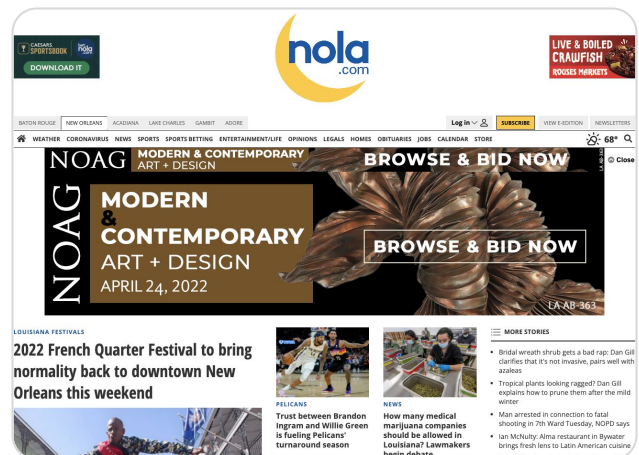
Solutions
Notifications that keep customers tuned in, not turned off

"In our pursuit of growing digital subscriptions, we're always trying to find new ways to reach our most loyal audiences," says Whitfield. "When we analyzed our digital subscribers, we found an impressive percentage of users were email newsletter subscribers, which wasn't a huge surprise. But we also found that a sizable group also subscribes to our desktop push notifications."

Push notifications are alert-style messages delivered on desktop and mobile devices that website visitors opt-in to. "With several thousand loyal readers actively using desktop push notifications, we thought, why not use it to market digital subscriptions?" Whitfield continued. So, he approached his customer data platform (CDP) vendor, BlueConic, and push notification vendor, Pushly, to figure out a way to make it happen.

Unifying first-party data to personalize at scale

Whitfield and his team leverage BlueConic to collect and consolidate consented first-party data into individual-level profiles. With access to unified, actionable profiles, NOLA.com and The Advocate can use up-to-date data to understand where a particular subscriber or prospective subscriber is in their lifecycle, create dynamic segments based on their recent behaviors, interactions, subscription status, consent status, and more, and activate those segments across channels to drive smarter engagement.

In order to use desktop push notifications to drive subscriptions, the company had to clear a few key hurdles. First, they needed to have an accurate record of profiles that were opted into desktop push notifications. To identify these users, the team used a data collection feature in BlueConic known as Listeners. The listener picks up the information from Pushly and automatically adds it to their individual profiles in BlueConic, creating an accurate and up-to-date record of which profiles are opted into desktop push.

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Next, the team needed to ensure they weren't sending subscription-related marketing messages to desktop push notification users who were already subscribers. Using BlueConic Connections to pass profile data to Pushly about who is a subscriber and who is not, the team ensured subscription-related messages weren't sent to the wrong people.

Finally, the team had to account for users who may not visit the site frequently but had a change in subscription status. This was done using an Amazon S3 bucket to push updated subscription data to Pushly.

Experiment, test, and learn
With the data integrations in place, NOLA.com

and The Advocate kicked off a number of small campaigns to test this new cross-channel tactic, starting with their "Love New Orleans, Know New Orleans" campaign.

Using the segmentation capabilities in BlueConic, the team created a small segment of users who had visited the site at least once during a one-week period and whose last engagement came from a desktop computer. These segments were then sent to Pushly for activation. Within 24 hours, the campaign generated a 1.76% click-through rate and six direct conversions. But perhaps equally important to the outcomes it produced was the operational efficiencies it created. "Six new paid subscribers isn't a huge number, but it only took us five minutes to build this campaign. If I can get six subscriptions via a campaign that only took us five minutes to create, that's a major win for us," said Whitfield.

Whitfield also noted how the new tactic is accelerating the pace at which they can reach new people and get them into their checkout flow. "Let's say someone clicks on a Pushly digital subscription offer and enters their email address, but doesn't place their order to become a paid subscriber. At least we've earned the opportunity to email that individual and retarget them with an abandonment offer. So even if someone doesn't convert directly from desktop push, just getting them into our checkout funnel is really important."

A CDP use case roadmap for success
Since their initial tests, NOLA.com and The Advocate have started to explore additional

CDP use cases to increase both revenue and operational efficiency. For instance, the team plans to test drip campaigns using BlueConic and Pushly as a way to boost subscriptions. "When someone interacts with a desktop push notification about a subscription offer but doesn't convert, they can be automatically flowed into a segment that receives a drip offer a couple days later. So, you can get pretty sophisticated with it."

Whitfield also stressed the benefits of using BlueConic's segmentation capabilities to uncover new insights and find ways to connect with customers with more relevant messages. "By experimenting with segments, we can look at things like who's reading what, who's coming from which referral source, who visits us a lot but doesn't subscribe to our newsletter, and more. For example, using the Interest Ranker listener, we were able to discover a number of individuals who read articles about LSU and the Saints, but don't subscribe to the LSU or Saints email newsletter. We were then able to use that insight to target that segment with messaging to sign up for the newsletter."

> " **You can do a lot with the segmentation and the lifecycle orchestration capabilities in BlueConic to see what moves the needle the most.."**
>
> Kyle Whitfield
> VP Consumer Revenue, The Advocate

Results

By combining ad revenue from desktop push notifications referrals and subscription revenue from push marketing, NOLA.com and The Advocate is averaging about $3,500/month in incremental revenue.

When asked for advice for others who want to unlock the power of first-party data and desktop push notifications to power subscription marketing efforts, Whitfield stressed the importance of testing and learning around everything. "People are inviting you to directly message them. Have a plan. Be thoughtful and engaging," he concluded.

To learn more about BlueConic, email info@blueconic.com