



Case Study

2019 EFFIE AWARDS UNITED STATES BRONZE WINNER

"THE BLANK PAGE"

The Chicago Sun-Times was struggling to stay afloat due to steep declines in print journalism and structural changes. To survive, the paper needed to launch a new digital subscription, asking readers to pay for what was once free. To send a wake-up call to readers, they left their most valuable piece of real-estate - the front page - blank, asking Chicago to subscribe before it was too late. This bold appeal worked, not only making headlines across the country, but increasing digital subscriptions by 161% in just the first week.

Competition:
Effie United States

Ran in:
USA

Category:
Carpe Diem- Products

Brand/Client:
Chicago Sun-Times

Lead Agency:
Ogilvy

Product/Service:
Media and Publishing

Classification:
National

Dates Effort Ran:
April 23, 2018 - April 30, 2018

Category Situation:
In Decline

Credits:
Kendra Arenkill
Edwin Eisendrath
Carol Fowler
Michael Franklin
Chris Fusco
Isaac Pagan
Joe Sciarrotta
Gabe Usadel
Matt Watson
Kelsy Zemanski



Executive Summary

The Challenge

To halt declines, The Chicago Sun-Times needed to introduce digital subscriptions, asking readers to pay for what was once free.

The Insight

To intercept the slow decline of print journalism, The Sun-Times needed an un-ignorable wake-up call for their loyal audience.

The Idea

Imagine Chicago without the Sun-Times.

Bringing the Idea to Life

We made a loud statement quietly by leaving our prime real estate — the front page — blank.

The Results

We made headlines across the country, all because we didn't print one, subsequently doubling digital subscriptions in the first week.

Effie Awards Category Context

To halt declines, The Chicago Sun-Times needed to launch a digital subscription, asking readers to pay for what was once free. Journalism's slow decline has made it hard for people to notice newspapers' fate. We needed a sharp intervention at the speed of social — a wake-up call to activate our loyal audience. We asked them to imagine Chicago without the Sun-Times, by leaving our prime real estate—the front page—blank. We made headlines across the country, all because we didn't print one. Chicagoans embraced the paper: we increased digital subscriptions by 161% in just one week, without spending a dime.

State of the Marketplace & Brand's Business

News publications face a grim fork in the road: sink or swim.

In today's digitally focused world, it's no surprise that print journalism is in decline. In 2016 alone, total weekday circulation (print and digital) for U.S. daily newspapers had fallen 8% — the lowest levels since 1945. Even worse, this decline coincided with double-digit declines in advertising revenue for the industry as a whole, so papers struggle to make up for subscription declines with ad sales, or vice versa¹. The Chicago Sun-Times was not immune. Over the past five years, the paper has been through a string of sales, new owners, and layoffs to become leaner and, frankly, to survive².

It's no surprise that digital news is taking over

In 2017, 93% of Americans read news online³, and 67% read news from social media⁴. Compounding this trend is a 24-hour news cycle that favors clickbait and sensational content versus long-form investigative journalism (what the Chicago Sun-Times is known for).

"Free" now has a cost

The Sun-Times once offered their digital content for free, but the decline in print circulation was so dramatic — falling from 350,000 to 120,000 in ten years — that the paper needed to introduce a paid digital subscription at \$74.49/year². However, readers dislike digital paywalls, and will often exit a restricted article for another one that's free⁵. Many people feel they should not have to pay for their online news content because they're already paying high costs for their broadband, phone plan, streaming and other digital devices⁶. From a marketing standpoint, asking people to pay for something that was once free is no easy task.

Audience

Rebuilding an audience...

In 2017, the Sun-Times' average subscriber was 55+ and preferred print news sources. We needed to recruit a digital-first audience, who increasingly consume news online, and remind Chicago of the importance of the Sun-Times.

...that had stopped listening...

While 84% of Americans believe that the news media is important to our democracy⁷, this doesn't exactly carry over into action. People know they should pay attention to news but are tuning it out; 68% feel worn out by the amount of news these days⁸. The audience of newspapers, cable TV, network TV, and even digital news decreased in 2017⁹.

...and was likely to balk at a new paywall

An MIT study of digital news sites found that, on average, overall visits decline 51% after the introduction of a paywall.¹⁰ Clearly this launch was going to erode our digital readership, at least initially, at a time when we most needed to grow it. Rather than simply brace ourselves for disaster, we would have to find a way to appeal to their "news conscience" and activate latent loyalty to the paper to mitigate this projected decline.

Objectives & KPI's

Business Objective: Generate a shot in the arm for digital subscriptions

- KPI: Double our digital subscriber base in just the first week.

Audience Objective: Conserve online readership

- KPI: Mitigate projected 50%+ decline in overall site visits by half. This would be a crucial intervention at time of launch, to minimize the "paywall cliff" and put us in position to grow.

Site Engagement Objectives: Create an activation spike

- KPI: Boost direct visits to the Chicago Sun-Times home page, surpassing our average by 10%.

This would be a more immediate gauge of our impact, as it measures the number of people who deliberately type Chicago.suntimes.com into their browser on the day of our activation.

- KPI: Boost site visits and page-views above monthly average.

Social engagement objective: Increase engagement with and sharing of our social posts

- KPI: Outperform previous bests.

Sourcing:

¹Pew Research, "Despite subscription surges for largest U.S. newspapers, circulation and revenue fall for industry overall", June 1, 2017.

²The New York Times, "At Chicago Sun-Times, New Owners Vow Return to Paper's Working-Class Roots", July 23, 2017.

³Pew Research Center, "Digital News Fact Sheet", June 6, 2018.

⁴Pew Research Center, "Key trends in social and digital news media", October 4, 2017.

⁵Quartz, "Three reasons why journalism paywalls still don't work", January 5, 2018.

⁶WGBH News, "Print Is Dying, Digital Is No Savior: The Long, Ugly Decline of The Newspaper Business Continues Apace", January 26, 2016.

⁷Gallup, "Media Seen to Key to Democracy But Not Supporting it Well", January 16, 2018.

⁸Pew Research Center, "Almost seven-in-ten Americans have news fatigue, more among Republicans", June 5, 2018.

⁹Pew Research Center, "5 facts about the state of news media in 2017", August 21, 2018.

¹⁰Chiou, Lesley and Tucker, Catherine. "Paywalls and the Demand for News." *Information Economics and Policy* 25, 2 (June 2013): 61-69

Insight

There's comfort in believing the things we take for granted will always be there

At 174 years old, the Chicago Sun-Times is the city's oldest continuous newspaper. Like the Bears or deep-dish pizza, The Sun-Times has become a fixture of the underdog "second city." But change can be upsetting; when Chicago's iconic department store, Marshall Fields, closed¹¹, or the Sears Tower was sold and renamed "Willis Tower"¹², city residents were shocked by the sudden loss of such beloved landmarks.

Print Journalism is dying — slowly

News circulation has been declining for 28 consecutive years¹³. Since 2007, a dozen historic newspapers have shut down. Because this decline has unfolded slowly, it's been hard for people to absorb its full impact, or to mobilize against it. Imagine the outcry if 12 major papers folded within 6 months. This outcry didn't happen, of course, because these closures took years, not months. As The Guardian observed, "There is, strangely, this humble nature of the best people who work in newspapers to not want to make themselves the story. So, ironically, it is a story that has largely gone untold."¹⁴

We needed a sharp intervention that moved at the speed of social—an un-ignorable wake-up call.

Sourcing:

¹¹The Chicago Tribune, "Field's no more", September 21, 2005.

¹²NBC News, "Willis who? The Sears Tower gets a new name", July 16, 2009.

¹³Pew Research, "Despite subscription surges for largest U.S. newspapers, circulation and revenue fall for industry overall", June 1, 2017.

¹⁴The Guardian, "The slow death of the great American newsroom", March 21, 2015.

The Big Idea

Imagine Chicago without the Sun-Times.

Bringing the Idea to Life

A quiet message packed a big punch

To launch their new paid digital subscription, the Chicago Sun-Times did something no newspaper had done before: they left their most valuable piece of real-estate – the front page – blank. The front page of a newspaper usually features the most significant, breaking news. But instead, readers were greeted with an ominously bare page. This beckoned Chicagoans to look closer and learn more. Our bold statement was designed to catch readers off-guard and ensure that our powerful message would be heard.

We asked readers to Imagine Chicago without the Sun Times

Inside the cover, we urged them to subscribe online to keep the publication afloat with a simple message: "We've been a part of Chicago for a very long time. Help us make sure it stays that way". Readers were then pointed online where they could sign up for a monthly or annual subscription. We appealed to the pride readers feel for their city and put the fate of the newspaper in their hands.

The media is the message

125,000 Blank Page papers were dropped around the city, from front porches to airports to newsstands¹⁵. By choosing a singular yet bold media strategy, we aimed to break through the day-to-day headline noise that competes for our audience's attention, creating a frank, more compelling message than if the Sun-Times had run a breaking news headline.

But to launch digital, we also needed to be digital

After our Blank Page was circulated, we took to social media to spread more awareness of our new subscription model and our message, driving readers to our digital subscription page. On Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, we asked Chicagoans to imagine the city without their hardest-working newspaper, and thanked readers for their continued support.

Sourcing:

¹⁵The Chicago Sun-Times, Circulation Report, April 2018

Budget

👉 About the same as competitors in this category.

2018 was the first year we worked with the Chicago Sun-Times. Because the Chicago Sun-Times is a media company, they do not pay for media distribution outside of their day-to-day operations. The Blank Page paper was consistent with the media they put in market on a day-to-day basis.

Owned Media

Because the Chicago Sun-Times is a media company, all media used was owned media.

Chicago Sun-Times Printed Newspaper: We used the front page to draw in readers and convey the paper's importance to Chicago. Inside the front cover, we wrote our appeal to readers, urging them to sign up for our new digital subscription.

Chicago Sun-Times Digital Newspaper (Website): We created a page on the paper's website that brought awareness around the challenges of the paper and urged readers to subscribe to the new digital subscription.

Social Channels: We thanked readers for their loyal support over the years and drove them to our website to sign up for a digital subscription.

Communication Touch Points

INTERACTIVE/ONLINE

👉 Brand Website/Microsite

PRINT

👉 Newspaper- Digital

👉 Newspaper- Print

SOCIAL MEDIA



Results

Business Result:

Within a week of launch, we more than doubled digital subscriptions, increasing our base by 161%. As print subscribers receive complimentary access to digital content, these subscribers were entirely new to the Sun-Times¹⁶.

Matt Watson, Chief Digital Strategist for the paper, said of the results, "We didn't know what to expect for the launch. Considering we'd been giving the online product away for years, I wasn't sure how people would react to charging for it. All in all, we were quite happy, especially since these were people that likely hadn't even hit the pay meter yet, but simply wanted to support our work."

Audience Result:

We mitigated an expected 50%+ decline in overall site visits, seeing only a 17.6% decline in visits after introducing our paywall vs. previous month, beating our goal by a significant margin¹⁷.

Site Engagement Results: We created a sizable activation spike

- Direct visits to the Chicago Sun-Times home page surpassed our average by 16.6% on the day the Blank Page ran, vs. the average number of Monday visits. In fact, the number of direct home-page visits was higher than the average of direct visits on any other day of the week¹⁷.
- In fact, we saw the highest number of site users and page-views on the day Blank Page ran vs. the entire month¹⁷. Compared to April averages, our specific numbers for April 23 were:
 - ↑ 58% in site users
 - ↑ 48% in page views

Social Engagement Result:

The campaign spread on social media with many of our posts topping previous bests for the paper.

"Blank Page" posts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram saw engagement and sharing rates 66% higher than week prior, with the top tweet reaching 1.6 million people with no paid support¹⁸.

Other Contributing Factors

It couldn't have been price:

As noted above, our digital subscription introduced a price (\$74.49 annually) for content that used to be free.

It couldn't have been distribution:

No changes were made to the distribution of the paper.

It couldn't have been other marketing:

The Blank Page activation was the only marketing promoting digital subscriptions.

Sourcing:

¹⁶The Chicago Sun-Times, Subscription Data, April 2018

¹⁷The Chicago Sun-Times, Website Analytic Data, March - April 2018

¹⁸Sprout Group Report, April 16-17 and April 23-24, 2018



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