



ZEEN101

The publishers' quick start guide to accelerating digital subscriptions

A highly flexible metered paywall is the foundation of your digital revenues.

In this short guide we're going to show you how to successfully implement these three critical activities:

1. Build your email subscriber lists
2. Grow paying subscriptions
3. Set yourself up to sell new digital products

We will cover:

- Your metered paywall
- Building your email lists with a free registration
- Paid subscriptions
- Future revenues

Let's get going.

Two things to keep in mind as we begin:

First, your metered paywall is generally going to be your starting point. Once you get traction with paid subscriptions, you're ready to flex your paywall to offer new products.

Second, the ultimate mechanism for building paid subscriptions is an effective subscription funnel. A good subscription funnel uses your valuable content (articles, video, audio, etc.) to capture the interest of your visitors and usher them from casual readers to paying subscribers to premium members. The *best* funnels will do most of this automatically.

Your subscription funnel

What is it?

Your subscription funnel is the journey that a visitor to your website will take with you. A new visitor may know little about your publication. Over time the visitor engages with your publication and you build a stronger and stronger relationship with them. This approach will both build up your email lists and motivate these new readers to pay for your access to your content.

Here's an example of what your initial subscription funnel might look like:

1. Someone searches for an article with Google or follows a link to an article from Facebook. This produces a new website visitor
2. The visitor reads the article and clicks to a second article
3. The second article is restricted and triggers a *free subscription message* that promises immediate access to the current article and offers 3 premium articles each month
4. This visitor decides to register (for free) to gain these benefits and are added to your email list
5. They start receiving your email newsletter which drives them back to your site to explore new content each week
6. Reading more articles engages them and after reading 3 free articles it triggers the *paid subscription message*.
7. This happens each month and two months later they decide to upgrade to a paid subscription for full access

Focus on building your email list and sending your content to your subscribers. This starts and builds your relationship with them over time. The above subscription funnel can be fully automated, including your email newsletter.

Your foundational metered paywall

Let's get the basics out of the way. What is a metered paywall and what is the best way to set it up?

A metered paywall allows the casual visitor to choose a few free articles to read before the subscription message pops up. (As opposed to viewing only article previews or the specific articles designated by the publisher as 'free'.) So, for example, you could set your meter to: "Allow readers two free articles of their choosing every 30 days."

Why is the metered approach so important?

It satisfies the three critical requirements that the modern reader demands:

1. **Google discovery:** Each and every article you produce needs to be fully indexed (scanned and ranked) by Google in order for it to show up when readers search for the information you write about. Google will drive a large chunk of new visitor traffic to your site. The meter (even if it is only set to one free article) is ignored by the Google bots and thus Google can 'read' all the text in all your published articles.
2. **Social sharing:** The metered paywall allows every article you produce to be shared on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc.. Even if your meter is set to only one free article per month, which is a fairly tight restriction, one article can be read in full by thousands of different readers. It's only when the individual browser starts to read more articles on your website that the meter starts counting down, eventually displaying the message to subscribe.
3. **Reader choice:** Your paywall meter allows the visitor to choose the articles that are important to them. This relieves you of the burden of deciding what articles are premium and what are free (though you can still create a member level of fully restricted content). If a visitor clicks on a link to one of your articles in Google search or on Facebook, the visitor has decided that specific article is important to them. It might even be a quickie article that you published and felt had low value. What is key here is that you don't have to guess what might be important to the visitor. The metered paywall supports that certainty by allowing you to simply set a free number of articles over a given time period. Bottom line: set the meter and let the incoming visitors decide what is important to them.

What about a hard paywall?

The formerly-popular hard paywall was the first iteration of the digital subscription approach for news and magazine publishers. Well-known publishers like *The Wall Street Journal* initially found success with the hard paywall (though even they are now loosening their access). Publishers with such strong brands have large marketing resources and recognition. They can drive traffic to their publications without the help of Google search and social sharing. Most publishers, however, suffered when they turned on their hard paywalls. Their Google traffic would drop dramatically (upwards of 90%) and social sharing would practically stop altogether.

The main issue with the hard paywall is that it blocks more than readers. Google cannot fully index (and properly rank) the text in your articles. Articles with only short excerpts do not get many shares on Facebook and on other social media sites.

The hard paywall has now morphed into more of a metered-hybrid approach. This means that publishers are having more success with a metered paywall that has some additional functionality in order to granularly restrict certain types of content. This works quite well for publishers with multiple subscription products.

Enough paywall history. Let's start learning how to build your email lists and grow paid subscriptions.

Your first step: Offer a free subscription level to build your email list & start your new relationship

Readers who join your email list are 10x more likely to become paid subscribers.

Capturing the email address of a website visitor is priority number one. Building your email list builds your most important direct marketing tool. Email marketing is the primary way to reach your audience on a regular basis.

Each email subscriber you add gives you permission to send your newsletter with your content to them every day, week, or month. This is key to driving these potential paid subscribers back to your website content, and triggering prompts to subscribe. This boosts your chances for them to pay for a subscription by 10x or more.

The Free Subscription Level (or free registration) is the start of your subscription funnel.

How would you like to add 1000 new email addresses to your list in a week? Or 7000 in just a few months? This is exactly what happened when *The Business Journal* launched their Free Registration Level, and new readers signed up for their free subscription offer.

What does the free subscription level accomplish?

1. **More paid subscribers:** As mentioned above, once someone registers on your website they gain access to a few additional premium articles each month and are added to your email list. Over time you will be able to send your email newsletter to these new subscribers which drives them back to your website to read more content. After they read their free level allotment of articles they hit your *paid subscription message* which encourages them to subscribe for full access. This is a natural, organic pestering that happens over time and gently reminds this free-level subscriber that your content is premium and requires payment for full access. Experience with your content over time brings them around to the idea that they should pay you to get access to everything you are publishing.
2. **Increased email advertising revenue:** You will attract more advertisers to sponsor your email newsletter. As your list grows it becomes more valuable to them. The free registration approach builds your email list faster and with more engaged readers than any other method.
3. **Reduced payment friction:** One of the hidden benefits of having a free registration available is that once a free level subscriber is ready to pay, they are already logged into your website and their personal information is pre-filled on the checkout page. All they have to do to subscribe is enter their credit card information. Since they already filled out their info previously during the free registration, this boosts the chances of a paid transaction.

What we know here is that the larger your email list is, the greater the volume of subscribers who will pay for full access (assuming you are regularly emailing them your teaser content to drive them back to your site).

How many articles should you meter (give away) before requiring a free registration?

This is a question we get all the time. The answer is: 1

If you have a free registration level to offer readers a few more premium articles each month, your meter setting should be tight. Allowing one free article before requiring a registration to read a few more articles works very well. (*The New York Times* even uses this strategy; one free article before requiring a free registration to view more.)

So how many articles should I provide to a free-level subscriber?

This depends on your audience and content. For a niche, low-volume publisher such as *Tea Journey*, the meter is set to one free article for the casual visitor and three free articles per month once they have registered for their [free subscription level](#). If you are a higher volume news publisher you may need to provide five to ten free-level articles each month. Start with a best guess and adjust the meter setting every 30 days to test free and paid subscription conversions.

Another approach for the low volume or startup publisher is to set the free registration level to offer an additional two or three premium articles...*period*. Once someone is registered and has read your small batch of free articles, they have no further access until they pay for a subscription. You need the free level subscriber to run out of articles, so that they trigger your paid subscription message.

Here's an example of a free level subscription message that works well:

Destination Songyang China

October 10, 2020 | Sia Yu | [f](#) [t](#)

Modern Songyang integrates the essence of mountain and river, the taste of the countryside, and the beauty of folk art and local customs.

Read this article NOW for [Free...](#)

...and get **3 Free premium articles each month.**

How? Simply [sign up here](#) (no credit card required) to get access now.



The above subscription message shows up after one free article has been viewed and the visitor clicks to read a second article. The message shows up in-content, which hides most of the article itself.

This approach is compelling as it promises:

1. Instant access to the article being read, and
2. Future access to three premium articles each month

Here is the free registration page that that appears after the visitor clicks the “Free...” link in the above screenshot:



ORDER SUMMARY

YOUR ORDER: Three Articles per Month for Free

SUBSCRIPTION LENGTH: Forever

RECURRING: No

CONTENT ACCESS: 3 Premium Articles per month

TOTAL: Free

YOUR DETAILS

First Name *

Last Name *

Email Address *

Password *

Confirm Password *

PLEASE SELECT YOUR EMAIL PREFERENCES

What are your favorite topics?

☐ Health & Wellness occasional newsletter

☐ Tea Biz newsletter & Podcast

☐ European Specialty Tea Association

Country*

Do you drink specialty tea?*

Excludes herbal teas

SUBSCRIBE

This messaging and registration builds *Tea Journey's* email list every day. The key is to offer something of value in exchange for an email address.

Don't sweat the initial setup too much. We recommend you adjust your meter and free registration settings to test what works best for your publication.

Hopefully, you're beginning to realize how important the free registration process is. Capturing new email addresses lets you proactively reach those new readers. This starts them on the journey toward becoming a paid subscriber.

The free level ends: Upgrade to paid

Your free level subscribers are using up their free level access. How do you get them to pay?


Once you have a registered subscriber that has used up their free-level access you will want to display a subscription message to prompt them to pay for full access. Something like this:

Sorry you are out of articles. Can we ask for your support?

Tea Journey is a digital caravan, arriving from origin, laden with tea and stories to tell. Join us.

We work hard to bring you tea knowledge from all corners of the globe. With our focus on origin, health & wellness, harvest reviews, and of course tea, we aim to help you understand where your tea comes from, how it was made, and it's impact on your health. Make sure you download our iOS or Android app for convenient reading. We would love your support!

[Subscribe](#) or [log in](#) to gain access to a world of tea knowledge.

A scenic landscape photograph of a tea plantation in a valley, with terraced tea fields and mountains in the background. Overlaid on the image is the text 'SUBSCRIBE NOW' in yellow capital letters at the top, and 'TEA JOURNEY' in large white capital letters at the bottom, with the Chinese characters '茶之旅' (Tea Journey) in green between them.

As with the free-registration-message, this paid-subscription-message shows up in-text for their selected article, hinting at what they're missing out on.

It also gives them a peak at *Tea Journey's* mission, giving readers another reason to commit to a paid subscription.

Again as you email your articles to this new free subscriber, your paid message will show up multiple times. We call this 'organic pestering'. Over time the chances increase that they will comb through more of your content and trigger multiple paid subscription messages over time. Touching your free subscribers with your paid messaging is exactly what you want as it increases the chances that they will decide to pay for access down the road.

Before we go, a quick word on your future offerings: Sell subscriptions, memberships, *and* take donations

Most publishers we work with start by setting up one paid subscription type to access their content, with the option for monthly or annual payments.

Some publishers want to develop a membership-style program to offer additional benefits. (Sometimes publishers simply *call* their subscription program a membership program in order to hone in on the community aspect of their audience.)

Other publishers are more donation-focused, appealing to the generosity of their readership.

Implement all three

We are starting to see publishers sell paid subscriptions to their content, offer a member-level upgrade at a higher price, *and* ask for donations. We find this multi-tiered approach works incredibly well.

Think of your paid subscriptions as your baseline income, the revenue you need to survive.

Member-level access appeals to those super-fans that want *everything* you produce. A member level could access special content, provide status to your members, hide ads, offer direct access to authors, invitations to events, or even just a t-shirt they can wear proudly. Bottom line: you can charge more for the extra level of access and connection you provide.

At the same time you should extend the offer to donate. You are likely a mission-based publication, whether you're for-profit or not. A percentage of your audience members will contribute to your cause if you ask them.

To see this setup in effective action, check out [The Western Standard](#) in Canada. They offer a free registration that includes four extra, premium articles per month. Free subscribers have the option of upgrading to a full-access paid subscription, jumping to a higher membership level,

giving a donation, or all three. Simply asking the audience to self-select a level of contribution works.

With Leaky Paywall, you can offer access to content with any level of commitment, any contribution type: free, paid, member, donation, and much more.

So what's next?

1. If you want to jump in and get started:

- *How to:* [Set up Leaky Paywall for WordPress](#)
- *How to:* [Set up a free registration wall to build your email list](#)
- *How to:* [Customize your subscription messages](#) (includes the two templates from Tea Journey)

2. If you want to learn even more about revenue generation? Download our 77 page [Digital Subscriptions: The Ultimate Guidebook for News & Magazine Publishers](#)

3. If you would like a demo or have a question about our Leaky Paywall platform simply [get in touch](#). We would love to hear from you!



Pete and the ZEEN101 team

