

Poll: More Than Half of Readers Say They Won't Pay for Online Content

By Lucia Moses/Mediaweek

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NEW YORK Sorry, Rupert. Despite the News Corp. chairman's hopes (along with all publishers) to charge for online content, consumers are loathe to pay, new research from Ipsos Mendelsohn and PHD reveals. Simply put, they've been trained to equate online with free.

The Ipsos/PHD collaboration confirms as much: 55.5 percent of survey respondents indicated they would be very or extremely unlikely to pay for online newspaper or magazine content. Only 16.5 percent agreed they are extremely, very or even somewhat likely. At the same time, 81.5 percent of online users of The Wall Street Journal's and Consumer Reports' sites—both pay sites—considered them to be a good, very good or excellent value. “The message that came out is that you can charge, but you better have incredibly compelling and unique data,” said Bob Shullman, president of Ipsos.

Other Ipsos findings didn't bode well for the future of paid online content. There was little crossover between a publication's online and print content, with 40.7 percent saying they looked into a print pub exclusively and only 3.1 percent saying they read the print and online version of the same publication. Respondents spent almost half the time (8.9 minutes) reading a publication's Web site as they do reading print, and they visited magazines' sites about half as often as they read the issues. (The frequency was a bit higher for newspapers' sites.)

Not all the news was discouraging. The survey found online and print readers are younger and better educated than print-only readers. Their satisfaction level with print publications' sites was 71.4 percent, almost as high as that of the pubs themselves. And readers' overall likelihood of taking action was higher with the site than the print edition.

Also of relevance at a time when many print pubs are folding: Nearly 38 percent said that if a title stopped publishing but remained available online only, they would seek out its Web-only form. The rest were roughly split in between saying they would substitute another print publication or do something else.

The survey was conducted in July of 2,404 U.S. adults who were asked about 40 newspapers and magazines, including Newsweek, Cosmopolitan and Cooking Light.

Survey Says ...

1. 55.5 percent are very or extremely unlikely to pay for online print content. Only 16.5 percent are likely.

2. Only 3 percent read a publication's print edition and its site.

3. In good news, more than a third say they would follow an online version of a shut-down print publication.

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