

UNDERSTANDING CANADIAN MAGAZINE READERS

Introduction

Research+Knowledge=Insight (RKI) conducted a two-wave online research study to over 2,000 Canadians to help publishers understand the Canadian magazine reader and what will be most effective to encourage purchase at retail and subscriptions.

Before conducting the interviews with Canadians, RKI talked to a selection of Canadian publishers to ensure that the content would be the most relevant to those currently experiencing retail and subscription challenges. The insight was designed to be useful from both a strategic business decision-making perspective, as well as to promote the value magazines bring to Canadians. The stated objectives were to:

- Uncover Canadians' magazine reading behaviours and motivators
- Bring statistics and facts to assist publishers to promote the value of magazines to advertisers

If You Create It, They Will Engage

Although we often hear the phrase “No one reads magazines anymore” touted as fact, the results of the two-phase consumer research survey show that this is simply not true. **The majority (54%) of Canadians are reading a print magazine at least once a month.**

Notably, this majority of Canadians who read print magazines is not restricted to an older demographic. Most Millennials (51%) and Gen Xers (51%) are reading magazines in print at least monthly. Baby Boomers are reading them at a marginally higher rate of 58%.

Where age does seem to have an effect is in digital magazine reading. Millennials are reading digital magazines with the same frequency as their print habits (51% at least monthly), whereas 39% of Gen Xers and only 1 in 5 (22%) of Baby Boomers are reading a digital magazine at least monthly.

Overall, and not surprisingly, those who are paying for their magazines, are also more frequent readers. Subscribers are nearly universally reading monthly (86%) and of those who purchase at retail, 70% are reading at least monthly.

Do You Have A Millennial Retail Strategy?

Canadians are paying for magazines.

Now that we know that over half of Canadians read magazines at least monthly, are they paying for them? The statistics show that just under half (46%) of Canadians are reading magazines that they pay for, either by subscription or purchased at retail.

Where it comes to location of purchase, Canadians are more likely to purchase magazines at retail (28%), followed by subscription (23%). A slim 5% of the population is both buying at retail and subscribing.

Looking at the numbers with an age lens we start to see some differences. Overall, more Baby Boomers (50%), and slightly fewer Gen Xers (42%), and Millennials (43%), are paying for their magazines. It is noteworthy that the age-related decline in paying for magazines, while existent, is not a dramatic drop off.

	Millennial	Gen X	Boomer
Net Paid	43%	42%	50%
Purchase at retail	31%	28%	25%
Paid subscription	14%	18%	33%
Digital subscription	5%	6%	5%

Digging a bit deeper into how different age groups are paying for their magazines we start to see some differences. There is a striking preference among younger age demographics to purchase magazines at retail.

Overall, Millennials are twice as likely to purchase at retail (31%) than to have a subscription (14%). Gen Xers also prefer retail purchase (28%) versus subscription (18%). Whereas, Baby Boomers are more likely to have a subscription (33%) than purchase at retail (25%).

Paid Content Needs a Better Cheerleader

Key Benefits of Paying for Content

Examining the numbers more deeply, we uncover important trends. The existence and prevalence of free magazines is evident. Only 13% of Canadians are reading paid magazines exclusively, that is they are not reading any free magazines. 87% of Canadians, nearly all, are accessing some form of free magazine content, this is a key fact that cannot be underestimated.



It is important to note that the key place Canadians are accessing magazines that they do not pay for, is “in public places,” meaning doctor’s offices, waiting rooms, etc., followed by online content that they do not subscribe to. Note that these top two locations to access magazines without paying are likely dominated by titles that are mainstream paid magazines.

	Millennial	Gen X	Boomer
Net Free	87%	87%	85%
Available in public places	58%	52%	55%
Magazine content online but do not subscribe	35%	35%	29%
Free magazines at retail	29%	30%	24%
Magazines from family or friends	16%	20%	20%
Free magazines in the mail	16%	18%	21%
Magazines available at my workplace	20%	20%	7%

With nearly all (87%) of Canadians having access to free content, there is an erosion of value in paying for content. When asked if they expected to find “Excellence in Journalism” in free or paid magazines, a scant majority (52%) overall said that they expected to find excellence in journalism in paid magazines, with no difference by age group.

Looking at those who are paying for magazines, we see a jump to 66% who believe excellence in journalism is found in paid content versus free. While this number is higher than overall, it is important to understand that a full third of those paying for magazines, find excellence in journalism in free magazines. And those who do not pay for magazines are overwhelmingly finding excellence in journalism in free magazines.

Conclusion: Those who access free content only, think very highly of what they are reading for free and they believe they are finding excellence in journalism in free content.

In trying to retain subscribers or retail purchasers who are currently paying for content, the top rated metrics—“Excellence in journalism,” “To learn something that is important/useful to me,” “Stories that inspire me,” and “Unbiased stories”—will resonate as the reason that they have paid in the past and will continue to pay in the future. However, for those who are not currently paying, these are not statements that differentiate paid content from what is available for free.

The subtle change of phrasing that drives us to pay for magazines.



Of course, content is the key driver for encouraging and maintaining purchase and subscriptions, but a marginally changed emphasis on descriptions may make a huge difference.

When we focused on what keeps readers paying for their magazine, the top mention was their desire to “Support my area of interest.” This is especially notable among Baby Boomers. It is important to note the phrasing: they are voicing their support for a topic, or subject matter, or focus area of interest. It is key to reinforce this concept with current readers, who perceive their payment to the magazine as a method to contribute to promoting the subject matter. Magazines that can demonstrate this support will reap rewards across all age demographics.

In second place for why readers pay for content was, “It is a ‘little luxury,’ an indulgence,” at 44%, which resonated most strongly among Gen Xers; while the third place answer, “The articles are designed to inform me, not manipulate me (‘Fake News’),” at 32%, resonated the most with Baby Boomers.

Attracting Millennials specifically can also be done through outlining and detailing “The sense of exclusive information,” “Connects me with ‘my tribe’—people with the same likes and dislikes as me,” and “Makes me feel good about myself.” These three are less likely to appeal to Baby Boomers.

	Millennial	Gen X	Boomer
Support to my area of interest	51%	57%	63%
It is a “little luxury”, an indulgence	43%	51%	38%
The articles are designed to inform me, not manipulate me (“Fake News”)	28%	28%	36%
Provides me with the sense of exclusive information	24%	19%	12%
Connects me with “my tribe” people with the same likes and dislikes as me	23%	12%	11%
Makes me feel good about myself	18%	6%	5%

Effective Reader Engagement is Based on Your Infotainment Approach

Entertainment and Information Drive Reading

Two key themes emerge regarding what is keeping Canadians reading magazines: Entertainment, (highest with Millennials and Gen Xers), and Information (highest with Baby Boomers).



Despite the age-related preferences, it is important to note that there is a close entwining of Entertainment and Information as top mentions. None of the other tested mentions were close to their dominance.

For all titles, both Information, and Entertainment, need to be a part of every issue, with the individual focus of each title dictating (obviously) the emphasis on one, or the other.

This seems obvious, but it is worth repeating, no matter the exact subject matter of your magazine, ranging from the super serious and earnest, all the way to the pure slapstick humour—if you can ensure that you have at least something that will amuse and something that will educate in every issue, or even in every article, if you can manage it, you will keep readers coming back.

The key reasons that I read magazines are...	Millennial	Gen X	Boomer
Entertainment	73%	71%	60%
Keep me informed	50%	55%	62%
Indulgence	38%	31%	25%
Professional growth	26%	22%	17%
An affordable escape	24%	24%	25%
Stress reduction	24%	20%	11%

When RKI probed on specific magazines related to a niche area or hobby, the results were very similar, with “content focused on what I am interested in,” and “Something new to teach me,” coming first and second for reasons Canadians read them.

In terms of making a case for reasons to continue purchasing, focusing on the topic of the magazine in a manner that both entertains and informs, is more likely to resonate with current subscribers than a focus on any of the other attributes measured.

It is key to note that a focus on the quality of journalism, or other tenets, will not necessarily resonate or encourage continued purchase. Canadians do not feel manipulated, with nearly universal agreement (84%): “I am not Influenced by Fake News.” Thus, they do not consider it a motivating factor or reason to pay for their content versus getting it for free. Correspondingly, RKI saw comparatively low ranking and low scoring (32%) attributed to “The articles are designed to inform me, not manipulate me” as a motivating factor for purchase.

What Motivates Subscribers?

When considering the best message to encourage purchase, both retail and subscriptions, the focus should be on:



1. The specificity of your niche area of interest

Being more specific regarding your area of interest is key to motivating subscriptions and retail purchase. Directly relatable information concerning politics, environment, etc., is key to generating sales at retail and subscriptions.

Attempting to appeal to a very wide audience may hurt subscription and retail sales, as the broadening of the focus may erode the interest level. It is the narrow and specific focus that is inspiring the purchase. Note that this implies a level of dedication and actual authority on the subject matter by the magazine.

Specificity is the top rated motivator across subscribers and retail purchasers, meaning those who are already purchasing magazines are justifying their purchases to themselves (and perhaps others) that the information is directly relatable and of value to them, as it reports on their topic, where they are curious, have expertise, or is meaningful to them.

Millennials are especially motivated by specificity, scoring higher than Gen Xers, or Baby Boomers on this metric (although it is the primary motivator across all age demographics). Millennials are far less likely to subscribe in general to magazines, stating that they are interested in more variety, when subscriptions can feel like getting the same magazine over and over. Marrying these two concepts, variety and specificity, may be the key to unlocking the elusive Millennial subscriber.

2. Learning and discovering something new, “Discovering something that I didn’t know”

Information and news are key tenets for all age demographics. It is pronounced here with the highest scores measured among Millennials, who cite information as a motivating factor to purchase.

As magazine publishers, you will be very familiar with this concept. A key takeaway is that, while as a concept, delivering something new and noteworthy to readers should be automatic, ensuring that this is communicated to readers is a must. For example, a “tips and tricks” article or one-pager, should be described in terms that push the “learning something new” button.

3. Canadian-focused content

Canadian-focused content is a top-rated marker for what would interest Canadians in paying for content. We can assume that Canadian-focused content is linked to the top motivator (specificity/ niche of interest). Canadian-specific content may present an option for publishers who do not have a niche area of interest focus. With a dearth of

information available, having Canadian writers and a Canadian lens on your subject matter, should be made evident, and stated plainly, and repeated as a key differentiator to other sources of similar information.

Both subscribers and non-subscribers identify Canadian-focused content as content that they would pay for. It is, not surprisingly, higher among those (76% of Canadians) who support government subsidies of Canadian culture.

How interested are you in paying for the following content? Definitely/consider Summary	TOTAL	Millennial	Gen X	Boomer
Magazines that are specialized on topics of my interests, with directly relatable, reliable information pertaining to your interests/concerns, politics, environment, (for example outdoor/adventure in Alberta)	65%	71%	66%	62%
Discovering something that I didn't know	62%	68%	63%	57%
Canadian focused content	55%	63%	51%	55%
Unique editorial pieces – what is not available elsewhere, or reviews that are not online, better information or topics	50%	61%	53%	40%
Variety, for example Women's Lifestyle magazines that contain more intellectual articles on politics, arts, literature, deeper articles	41%	56%	43%	30%
Special collector's editions of magazines (for example 65 years of Queen Elizabeth)	32%	37%	38%	24%

For those who already subscribe, motivating retention tactics or benefits fall into two categories:

1. Discounts

The two key subscriber benefits that are most attractive are from the discount side: “Deep cut discounts \$1 an issue” and “Value deals for subscribing—free products.” This is not a surprising finding. However, it does confirm the price sensitive nature of Canadian magazine readers.

“Special offers (e.g., value deals for subscribing, free products included with a subscription)” score notably high with Millennials—nearly three quarters of Millennials would definitely subscribe or consider subscribing. This is noteworthy when considering that Millennials are far less likely to subscribe in general. It is possible that this type of offer could be the key to initiating Millennials into being magazine subscribers. Consider the free product with subscriptions could be advertiser product, and, with some creativity, could be exchanged for contra, or even sold as part of a sampling initiative. Note that the subscriber should feel like the benefit is significant.



2. Premium – charge more to give more

Although the premium subscriber benefits were rated lower than the discounting ones, the findings are important to keep in mind, as they show an acceptance, especially among Millennials, to new ideas, premium rates and an openness to subscribing.

“Premium subscription that come with a monthly/quarterly set of products aligned to the magazine’s subject matter interests” and “Exclusive bonus content (behind the scenes video, etc.)” score very high for Millennials, who preferred these twice as much as Baby Boomers did.

The same as above is true in terms of finding products that align with the magazine; however, it would be important to ensure that the value of the products far exceeds, in an obvious manner, the added premium paid on top of the subscription. If this can be achieved and Millennials are a part of your target market, this could be a winning strategy, as 70% of Millennials say they would definitely subscribe or consider paying for this as a subscriber benefit. Notably, Gen Xers are less keen (49%) on this idea, and Baby Boomers even less so (30%). This is important to consider if you must “sell this idea” through channels in your organization that may have older demographics in decision making roles and who will need to be specifically educated on this Millennial preference. Stated plainly, if you need to persuade your boss to try this idea and she is a Baby Boomer, be prepared that her “gut feel” could be negative based on her age demographic.

Exclusive, or bonus content, is something that some (38%) will choose to pay more to receive. This will be highly subjective to individual magazines and their subject matters and populations. At this point, it bears noting that, again, Millennials (52%) are twice as likely than Baby Boomers (25%) to be interested. And, as a tactic to attract Millennials, who are less likely overall to want to subscribe, and if this fits your brand, it should be explored as a possibility.

The benefits of premium are evident in terms of their dollar value. However, it should be underscored that this type of tactic, when executed correctly, has an added benefit of increasing the loyalty and engagement of the subscriber.

How interested are you in the following magazine subscriber benefits? Definitely/Consider paying for	Total	Millennial	Gen X	Boomer
Deep cut discounts for subscribing (\$1 an issue)	68%	74%	68%	65%
Special offers (e.g., value deals for subscribing, free products included with a subscription)	62%	74%	66%	52%
Contests and prizes related to the magazine’s subject matter (for example a trip to Canada’s North)	46%	65%	48%	35%
Premium subscription that come with a monthly/quarterly set of products aligned to the magazine’s subject matter interests (similar to the dollar shave club box)	45%	70%	49%	30%
Exclusive bonus content (behind the scenes video, etc.)	38%	52%	42%	25%

Magazines Help Canadians Savour the Moment

Magazines Support Mental Health

Nearly all Canadians (96%) say that it is important to make time for themselves and that they have hobbies and niche areas of interest (92%). 86% say that reading a magazine helps them to relax. Over two thirds of Canadians agree that sitting down with a magazine is a way of setting aside uninterrupted time for themselves. Making sure that you can tap into this type of message in your brand marketing, will resonate with Canadians who are looking for an escape and magazines are a natural fit.

As key to creating what is seen as a relaxing magazine, the top-rated answers are: “shorter digestible articles”, especially enjoyed by Baby Boomers, and “attractive photos, illustrations and eye candy” preferred by Millennials.

Methodology

Online survey

Dates: Wave 1: November 2018; Wave 2: February 2019

Average completion time: Wave 1: 8 mins; Wave 2: 8 mins

Number of completes: Wave 1: n=1001; Wave 2: n=1026

Screeners: Canadians 18+, who read magazines (digital or print) at least yearly (not:never)—
Note this was an 89% qualification

About Elizabeth Hall, Managing Director, Research+Knowledge=Insight

A research geek working with media companies since 2005, Elizabeth spent 12 years working for Rogers Media, and currently she has her own boutique market research firm specializing in Content Research. Elizabeth was a key part of developing this research exploring Canadian magazine readers for Magazines Canada.

Elizabeth speaks at a range of industry specific conferences, ranging from financial to pharmaceutical to Market Research. Recently she was awarded a Research Excellence Award by the Market Research and Intelligence Association.

About Magazines Canada

Magazines Canada is the national association representing Canadian-owned, Canadian-content consumer, cultural, specialty, professional and business magazines. French, English, Indigenous and ethnic member titles cover a wide range of interests, trades and communities across the country and across multiple platforms. Topics include arts and culture, business and professional, lifestyle and food, news and politics, sports and leisure, women and youth. The association serves Canadian magazines through the core services of government affairs, retail distribution, professional development and research.

CONTACT US

Magazines Canada
555 Richmond St. W., Suite 604
Toronto, Ontario M5V 3B1
info@magazinescanada.ca
magazinescanada.ca

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