



How to Avoid the Top 5 Subscription Marketing Mistakes

Ouch! When we asked copywriting guru Don Hauptman to review typical sites' subscription sales pitches — such as Salon and WSJ.com — he ripped in without mercy.

Seems that most sites are making five very basic mistakes — which could be costing them quite a few sales. Find out if you're making them too, plus pick up some useful copywriting tips.

According to our sources, at least five organizations — Classmates, ConsumerInfo.com, ConsumerReports.org, eDiets, and the AmericanGreetings.com family of sites — sold more than 1,000,000 subscriptions to Web-based content in 2002. And WSJ.com is bucking to join them.

We wondered, could they be doing any better?

Fact is, much of the marketing copy for online subscriptions makes classic direct response professionals wince.

The game for 2003 is not about getting consumers over the shock of being asked to pay online. It's about convincing them to pay for a particular site or newsletter.

While this is getting easier to some degree because consumers are more and more used to paying for online content, it's also getting harder for existing subscription titles because publishers have plucked the low-hanging fruit — your biggest fans who were easiest to convince to subscribe.

Convincing consumers on higher branches to buy will be the most significant marketing challenge of 2003.

It's also something print subscription publishers have spent the last quarter century discovering best practices in.

So, we asked veteran copywriter Don Hauptman, who has helped print publishers such as No-Load Fund Investor, Briefings, and The Parent Institute sell more subscriptions since 1975, to review a variety of typical subscription sites, and to share tips that could help everyone sell more.

The nine sites we asked Hauptman to examine were (links below):

- The Bahamas Report
- Encyclopedia Britannica Online
- The Internet Marketing Center
- Microsoft Watch
- NanoElectronics Planet
- Salon
- South China Morning Post
- The Wave Online
- WSJ.com

Overall, Hauptman spotted several marketing mistakes that many sites shared (does your site share them too?) The top 5 common mistakes were:

Mistake #1 — Where's the pitch? Missing & confusing links

"Often it's almost impossible to find out how to subscribe!" exclaimed Hauptman.

Even though he was deliberately looking for subscription offers on the nine sites, frequently the offer or even a link to an offer just weren't obvious. "If I couldn't find the offer, imagine how hard it would be for these sites offers to catch regular visitors' attention."

Hauptman says putting a link on your navigation bar that simply says "Premium membership" or "subscribe" is not enough to catch the eye or compelling enough to make visitors click on it. You have to draw attention to the link, and you have to test various wording choices until you figure out what gets more visitors to click.

Then make sure that link is clearly visible on every page of your site that a non-subscriber can access. Hauptman noted it's sometimes left off secondary pages.

Also, check that your links are easy to click on. Instead of just making the precise link clickable, try making the area around the link and any related graphics also clickable. Hauptman had to click several times to get some links to work because the clickable area was too finely defined.

Mistake #2 — Lack of strong (or any) "benefits" copy

Hauptman notes that while many sites described the features of subscribing (i.e. what content buyers get access to) practically none trumpeted what benefits subscribers would derive from these features.

And very few of the sites he viewed featured a compelling benefit in their sales copy headline — the copy that has the most profound impact on your sales.

Hauptman recalls the classic copywriting proverbs, "Don't tell me about your grass seed, tell me about my lawn. Don't say the dishwasher is 28 inches high, tell me it will slide easily under my kitchen counter."

Mistake #3 — "Abandon me now" awful order forms

Does your order form look really easy to fill out? Have you limited questions and fields (not just required ones) to the absolute minimum? Does your form feature a quick recap of your sales pitch?

If your site is like most subscription sites, your answers are no, no, and definitely not.

Internet retailers report an average of 10% of online buyers abandon their shopping carts at each stage of the buying process (so if the cart has more than one page, each loses another 10%.)

Hauptman says based on the typical subscription order forms he's seen, he strongly suspects online publishers' abandonment rates are much higher.

One thing to bear in mind is that most subscription sales, even in business-to-business, are impulse buys. Your visitor thinks, "What the heck." Awful order forms stop impulse buyers in their tracks.

Mistake #4 — No premiums

Hauptman was absolutely dumbfounded to see that almost none of the subscription sites offered content premiums such as special reports, which are a traditional mainstay of print subscription marketing.

In particular he says news-based sites and newsletters should offer premiums, "You're selling promises of future content. You're saying, here's what's typical of our coverage, whereas with a premium you can promise them something specific that offers immediate gratification."

An example, "Subscribe now to the Mutual Fund Report and you'll get a report on 100 mutual funds to avoid. It's a lot easier to sell by giving away a one-shot report with a very clear title."

If access to archives is a big feature of your subscription, Hauptman says a sexier pitch would be to gather segments of your archives together into a PDF, booklet or site segment, and offer that. People like the convenience, and it's easier to promote a narrowly focused single-topic report than "archives" or "back issues access."

The exact wording of the title of your premium can make a huge difference.

Example, John Caples found ads promising a book on 'How to Fix Cars' pulled a ten times better response than ads offering a book on 'How to Repair Cars'.

"There's a tremendous difference in impact between the choice of a strong word and a weak word," says Hauptman. "The title should be specific. People have specific problems in search of specific solutions. The title should communicate a clear and immediate benefit: make money, save time, be a hero, avoid big mistakes that can endanger your career.

He continues, "Adding a number — '47 Great Tips To...' — often works. But don't offer 2,006. Choose powerful, dramatic words: proven, tested, little known, fast, smart, strategies, success, etc. Also, short title with a longer subtitle can work: 'E-Mail Profit Breakthroughs! 37 Great Ideas to Help You...'"

Mistake #5. Generic barrier pages

We defined a "barrier" page as a page that appears when a site visitor attempts to go to subscriber-only content. Most sites have this page appear when home page visitors click on story summary links, or use the search box for a particular term.

In every case that Hauptman examined, that barrier was generic. It didn't matter what story or piece of information the visitor was trying to reach, they all saw the same barrier.

Hauptman says this means you lose the power of the impulse. The visitor was seeking something specific — why not put a line at the very top of the barrier that says, "You will be able to view [insert specific name of item here] instantly when you subscribe now"?

Sounds like common sense to us.

The Specifics: Here are Hauptman's quick critiques of nine sites' subscription marketing tactics (in alpha order.)

#1. The Bahamas Report — a niche B2C site

<http://www.thebahamasreport.com>

While Hauptman admired the site's strong graphic design — you certainly feel as though you are in the world of the Bahamas — he felt the site could improve its subscription sales with three quick changes:

- Renaming the boring sounding "Bahamas Info Pack" premium to something more interesting such as "How to Retire in Paradise".
- Adding a graphic of the premium so it would feel more tangible.
- Adding a guarantee.
- Slightly revamping the order form "I feel pummeled by the many required fields, most people will just run in the other way."

#2. Encyclopedia Britannica Online — a B2C encyclopedia

<http://www.britannica.com>

Hauptman was definitely impressed with the subscription offer (which Britannica has been testing improvements on this fall) but wondered if two specific tactics might help sales:

- Improving their barrier page by noting the specific term the visitor was searching for an entry on. (i.e., "Become a subscriber and you'll see all the info we have on [search term here]")
- Testing changing their "72-hour trial" to "3-day trial". It's the same amount of time, but the wording change might make a difference. "When you test 50% off vs. half off, for no rational reason half off usually does better. My hunch is three days would pull better here."
- Shortening the order form, "They force you to go through so many pages. I'm sure they lose people."

#3. The Internet Marketing Center — a how to site

<http://www.marketingtips.com>

Although this site is owned by famed direct response marketer Corey Rudl, Hauptman felt its layout is a bit confusing, "I don't know where to look first, I'm just baffled," and some links are confusingly worded.

"It says 'For more information click here' and then you're directly on the order form. What happened to the 'more information' I wanted? If it says 'click this button to have an elephant in your living room' there'd better be an elephant in your living room after you click it."

#4. Microsoft Watch — a B2B email newsletter

<https://ziffdavis.omed.com/zm/msw/msw.cgi?intro2&p=5UZXA00014>

This Ziff Davis newsletter featured a marketing page closer to a traditional DM sales letter than any other of the nine sites.

"I would argue they should test it with fewer or more sales bullets, but at least they are telling you how a subscription will benefit you!"

#5. NanoElectronics Planet — a niche B2B directory and news site

<http://www.nanoelectronicsplanet.com>

Ugh. In contrast to Ziff's site, Hauptman's assessment of this INT Media site was, "This is quintessentially a bad business-to-business site in terms of copy."

He explains, "There's nothing on the sales page that's a proven benefit to the reader. No concerns they solve. There should be three bullets giving you the advantages of joining."

Plus nothing on the home page actually promotes subscribing, beyond a small link blandly reading "Membership". There's no offer, no sales pitch. Hauptman suspects many visitors have no idea the site is expecting to sell them something.

Last, but not least, once you poke around and find a page describing subscriptions, it uses small type and thin margins.

"It's painful for me to read. The lines are too long. A lot of studies say you've got an alphabet and a half [39 letters], that's how long a line should be, max."

#6. Salon — a magazine-style site with B2C feature articles

<http://www.salon.com>

Currently Salon's headlined benefit starts, "Join the tens of thousands of Salon subscribers..."

Hauptman suggests Salon go in the opposite direction.

He argues that Salon should try changing their so-what headline into "a kind of elite thing. Create an image where you are a special high-class person when you make this decision. You're a member of the literati. Something that says I'm a quasi- intellectual."

"We are all seduced by that fiction. That when we put on a suede jacket or a perfume we feel superior."

#7. South China Morning Post — a regional newspaper
<http://www.scmp.com>

Although Hauptman likes this site's layout in general, he definitely felt the home page requires more of an obvious sales link beyond Premium View. "Who the heck knows what a Premium View is?"

He says the order form is a step-above most order forms, even for much larger sites, because of its clear, friendly step-by-step layout. However SCMP should add sales copy at the start and reduce the horrifyingly many subscription options (10!) at the end.

#8. The Wave Online — a niche B2B daily news site
<http://www.thewaveonline.com>

Aside from being built with user and search engine-unfriendly frames — "who uses frames anymore?" — this site makes the prototypical mistake that assuming because it's marketing to a niche audience, they already know why they should buy a subscription.

Abandon sales copy at your peril. Never assume people are sold until you get the order.

#9. WSJ.com — a business newspaper
<http://www.wsj.com>

Although WSJ.com was one of the only sites to actually have a banner promoting subscription sales on its home page, Hauptman notes the banner is very difficult to use. "There were four live links next to each other in that tiny box each going to a different place."

Hauptman tried to click on the link to subscribe but ended up at the site tour by mistake. We wonder how many other visitors do that — and if those metrics are

leading WSJ.com marketers to think their tour is more popular than it actually is.

The tour itself was also hampered by worst practices in navigation. All links within the tour — to subscribe, to visit the next section or the tour, etc — are relegated to the far left side of the page. Seems like WSJ.com is assuming most people are either left-handed or Israeli.

WSJ.com's barrier page, which you see when you click on any specific article link on the home page, does not refer to the name of the article you were expecting to see. Nor is there any benefit copy. The entire pitch is a discount offer.

Nor does the tour home page give any specific benefits in its headline. Seems like the marketers are assuming their product is famous enough that the benefits are self-evident. This kind of lazy copywriting can lose you sales.

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About MarketingSherpa's ContentBiz

Founded in February 2000 by Managing Editor Anne Holland (who previously launched MIN's New Media Report in 1994), ContentBiz was the very first business weekly to focus on the practical aspects of selling subscriptions online.

ContentBiz, a division of MarketingSherpa Inc, publishes a free weekly email newsletter on:

- How to sell more subscriptions.
- How to sell more online and newsletter ads.
- How to sell ancillaries such as lists, ebooks, books, single articles, syndicated content, etc.

More than 16,000 executives in the online publishing business read ContentBiz every week.

Every May, ContentBiz holds an annual Summit on Selling Subscriptions to Internet Content. Attendees and speakers over the past five years have included ConsumerReports.org, Hoovers, ChristianityToday, Harvard Business School Publishing, MyFamily Inc, Zagat, WSJ.com, NYTimes Digital, Genealogy.com, ChangeWave, Paperloop, Law.com, Economy.com, Time Inc, Classmates, Ziff Davis, TheDeal.com, CNN.com, Audible, The New England Journal of Medicine, TradingMarkets, AmericanGreetings.com, WeatherBug, The Economist, and VNU Business Media.

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