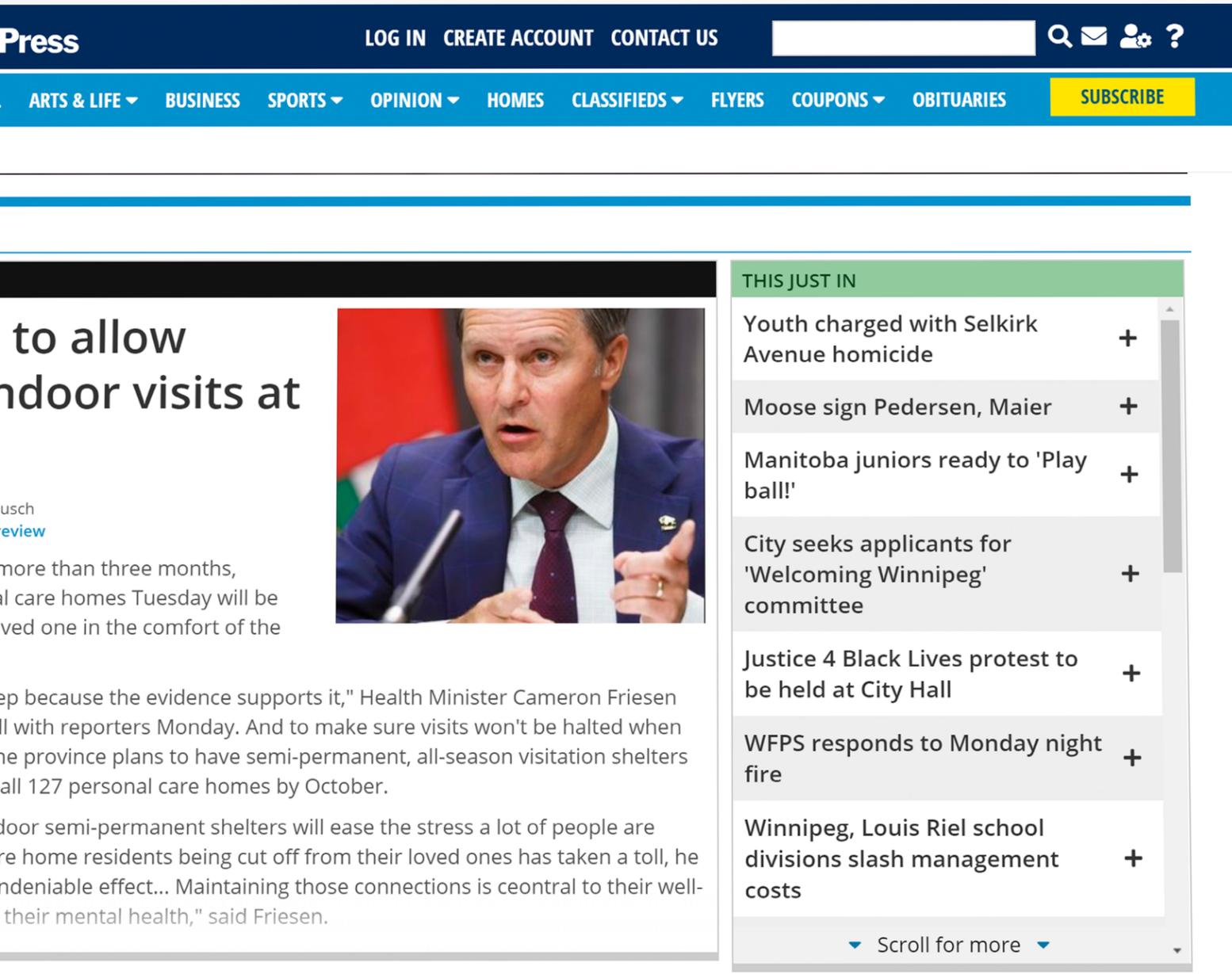




“Data aware” will get you there

How the Winnipeg Free Press’ close eye on user experience drives revenue — and what Piano does to help them achieve it



At the Winnipeg Free Press — the oldest newspaper in Western Canada — delivering the best local reporting in the region is table stakes. “We cover our marketplace better than everybody else, but that’s not enough to get somebody to pay for you,” says Christian Panson, the newspaper’s Vice President of Digital. “The other guys in our marketplace just watch our site and then rewrite our stories.”

Rather than succumbing to the sincerest form of flattery — imitation — the publisher works hard to deliver a personalized digital experience that sometimes upends newsroom tradition, sometimes embraces it, but always puts readers first. The team has aimed to win registrants and subscribers with a frictionless user experience that keeps people reading and nudges them ever closer to sign-up.

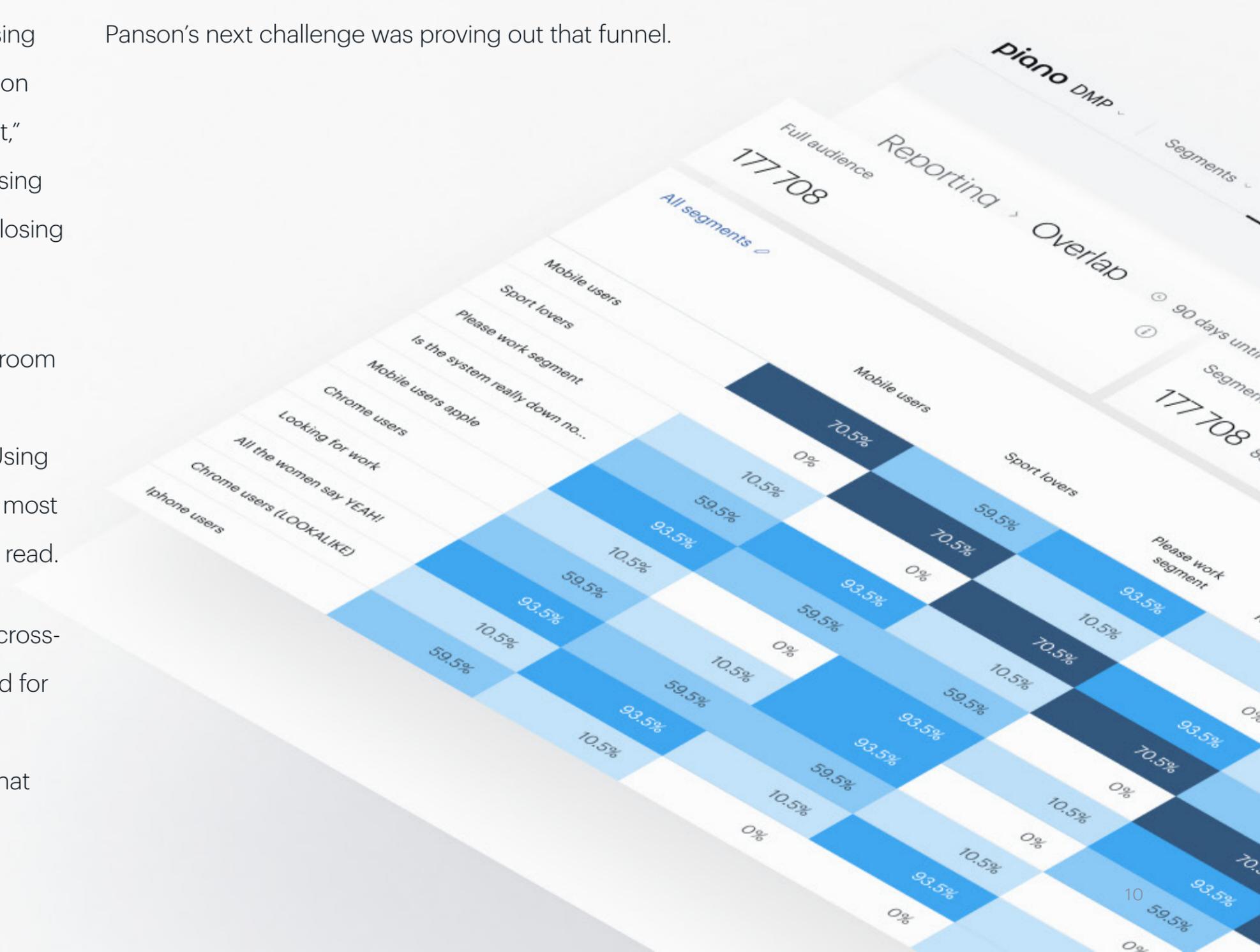
Getting personal to reach readers

When the WFP launched its site in 2015, there were a few stumbles. To start, they didn't organize content by section, causing confusion among readers. For another, they went full bore with algorithm-driven content personalization, causing problems in the newsroom. "I wouldn't say we had a full-on rebellion, but editorial couldn't wrap their heads around it," Panson says. They had to get the message across that using machine learning to recommend content doesn't mean losing creative and operational control.

By 2017, the traditional sections were back and the newsroom had regained control of the front page while allowing automated content recommendations to fill in the rest. Using Piano, the WFP site surfaces content individual users are most likely to read and suppresses content users have already read.

That capability is particularly important given the WFP's cross-device presence. Its app has two newsfeeds, one curated for editors and one that's completely personalized. That personalized feed is deduped against curated news so that readers are always moving onto a new story.

Keeping readers engaged with new, relevant content is key to the WFP's revenue strategy. Personalization nurtures engagement, and engagement triggers subscriptions. Panson's next challenge was proving out that funnel.



A foundation of data awareness

Like most small- to mid-sized publishers, the Winnipeg Free Press does not have a large data science team. Panson calls his organization “data-aware,” acknowledging that WFP is in the early stages of learning how to best apply data. While they instituted a registration wall far ahead of the curve in 2015, shortly before a paywall, they still have a great deal to learn.

To move forward, they crib data strategies from industry titans like the New York Times (“We figure they know what they’re doing,” Panson says) and they use Piano to implement them.

“We’re a small outfit. We’re independent. We don’t have corporate support. We need to do it all ourselves,” Panson says.

“We lean on folks like Piano to be our brains as far as data is concerned and to help us achieve some of our goals.”

For example, the company began tracking and segmenting readers by frequency, paying special attention to the Times’ benchmark of four or more visit days a month. Panson and his team are using Piano to bucket those customers, who will serve as a baseline for future campaigns that aim to lift engagement, registration and subscription rates.

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CHRISTIAN PANSON

VP DIGITAL & TECHNOLOGY,

WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

Every story is a payday

The WFP is also monitoring stories to see which content drives subscriptions. One early analysis showed travel news was working well — but that content was supplied by a wire service. “It was the most head-scratching finding, so we had a quick look at what the system considers travel news,” says Panson, who found the stories inspiring sign-ups were in fact around transportation and infrastructure. “People really care about stories that affect them.”

A story about an Oakland Raiders exhibition game in Winnipeg and a bombshell undercover piece about a white supremacist group recruiting nearby also drove 1,200 and 2,000 registrations respectively. Those registrations eventually translate into subscriptions, says Panson, who wants his newsroom to consider those stats.

There is also an argument to be made that journalism that drives registrations is easier to fund. A story that generates 10,000 pageviews may drive 2,000 trials and 40 subscriptions. That story has just added about \$8,000 in subscription revenue, not to mention the associated ad revenue.

“Then I can prove that out by saying this journalist created this many trial starts and those trial starts are going to deliver this many subscribers, which will generate this many dollars in the next three years based on a customer lifetime value. The data points are there,” Panson says. But the newsroom isn’t. At least not yet. “We’ve got journalists who have been working for us for 25 years and digital’s still new. They care about getting their story on B1. We need to get them data-aware.”

Experiencing results

Since installing their paywall in 2015, the WFP digital team has used a combination of site design, personalization technology and news judgment to facilitate steady progress. Digital subscriptions have increased 40 percent year over year and now account for 35 percent of the publication's total readership. And by cribbing data strategy from global publishers and relying on Piano technology to identify opportunities, the publication is making measured strides toward achieving its goals.

Today, personalized content recommendations not only improve the reader experience on site, but allow the newsroom to focus on curating top stories rather than populating back pages. What's more, by suppressing read content, Piano helps move readers from story to story, boosting engagement and moving them closer to registration.

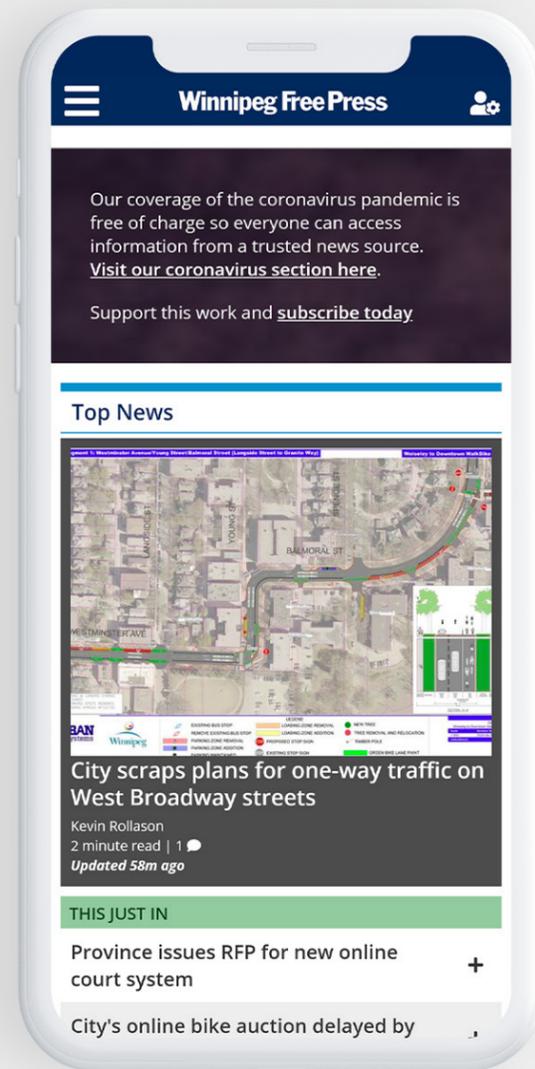
Readers click on personalized recommendations 1.6 times as often as randomly placed stories and, since activating the technology in 2015, active time on site has doubled to an average eight minutes on desktop and four minutes on mobile.

5x

AS MANY NEW REGISTRATIONS
AND TRIAL SIGN-UPS PER MONTH

40%

YEAR OVER YEAR INCREASE
IN DIGITAL SUBSCRIPTIONS



200%

INCREASE IN ACTIVE TIME ON SITE

Once they've reached a three-story limit, readers at the WFP are asked to register. But when the team saw the traditional trial flow wasn't working, they used Piano to identify drop-offs and have since instituted a new flow that has boosted sign-ups by 500 percent. And the team continues to use the platform to A/B test content recommendations, making marginal gains that result in real revenue.

Now, they are focused on which stories drive subscriptions, identifying which section or reporter is driving pageviews and analyzing how those pageviews translate into paid conversion. The team hopes they can make a good argument for funding newsrooms and, in doing so, boost data-awareness among the editorial team.