

**Promoting Print Magazine Subscriptions Online  
at Reader's Digest Canada, 2013**

*by*

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## **Abstract**

This report examines methods of maximizing print magazine subscriptions on the rd.ca website. It begins with an overview of the history and current status of the Reader's Digest Canada (RDC). It then takes an in-depth look at the ways in which RDC is currently reviewing and refining its online subscription strategies. It compares the methods used by RDC to methods of online subscription promotion employed by its main competitors. The study concludes with a set of recommendations for promoting online print magazine subscriptions across the industry. The findings of this study have implications not only for the magazine itself, but also for the Canadian magazine industry as a whole.

**Keywords:** online print magazine subscription promotion; subscription banner design and placement; subscription offer strategy; subscription page design; creative performance testing

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## Introduction

Using Reader's Digest Canada (RDC) as a case example, the aim of this report is to analyze and evaluate the role of magazine's websites in promoting magazine subscriptions. The emergence and proliferation of the Internet and other new media over the past twenty years has resulted in a sustained and dramatic increase in digital content readership. Smart print content providers, especially magazine publishers, see the new digital technology as a great opportunity to monetize their print content in more formats and on more platforms. They use their websites to enlarge and engage their audience, to promote their print magazines, to market digital products, and to sell ads. Today, there is no doubt that a magazine's website is an essential component of its operations, either as a digital component, or as a tool to promote print content.

RDC has built readersdigest.ca (rd.ca) as a separate digital content platform, as well as a tool to promote the print magazine. As a content platform, it builds and engages its own audience, and is monetized by selling website ads. As a tool for print magazine promotion, its content reflects but differs from the content of the print magazine. The site has successfully built an audience base of over 36 million unique visitors<sup>1</sup>, with over 1.8 million current monthly visits<sup>2</sup> and over 11 million current monthly page views<sup>3</sup> (see Table 4 in Part I). However, as a tool for print magazine promotion, it has not been very successful in converting traffic from site content to the print magazine; and the low site subscription rates have been falling in recent years (Young 2013).

However, the ever-worsening fall in online print subscriptions has only been part of the overall decline in the status of Reader's Digest (RD) in recent years. Statistics show that the RD brand equity, though still the leading brand in the Canadian English magazine market, has been sliding in both brand strength<sup>4</sup> and brand stature<sup>5</sup> since 2006 (*Reader's Digest 2012 BAV Report*, RDMC Ltd. 2013b). Paralleling the loss of the RD brand equity is RD's declining readership. Figures show that although *Reader's Digest* is still the most read Canadian English magazine (Print Measurement Bureau<sup>6</sup> *2013 Fall Topline Readership Report*, PMB 2013a), its readership has been declining continuously over the past decade (see Table 1 in Part I). What's more alarming is that

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<sup>1</sup> Distinct individuals requesting pages from a website during a given period.

<sup>2</sup> Unique sessions initiated by visitors to the website.

<sup>3</sup> Instances of a page being loaded by a browser.

<sup>4</sup> Refers to the current and future growth potential that a brand holds in it.

<sup>5</sup> Refers to the power of a brand.

<sup>6</sup> Canada's leading syndicated study for single-source data on print readership, non-print media exposure, product usage, and lifestyles.

the latest statistics on subscriptions show that *Reader's Digest* has also lost its leading position in terms of total paid, verified<sup>7</sup>, and analyzed non-paid circulation<sup>8</sup> (see Table 2 in Part I).

RDC is not alone in experiencing a decline in its print magazine circulation and subscription take-up; it is a trend that has been repeated across the Canadian magazine market. According to Alliance of Audited Media<sup>9</sup> (AAM 2013a), the total paid and verified circulation of the 60 Canadian titles that submitted comparable data, decreased by 7% for the first half of 2013 from the year-earlier period, with paid circulation down 7.4% and single-copy sales down 5.4%. And, of the top ten Canadian consumer magazines, eight suffered a loss of total circulation from the same period in 2012.

There are several factors underlying this trend, including competition from other media, proliferation of cheaply available and free digital contents, and the “popularity of digital information consumption” (Brien 2013); and many of these elements are beyond the magazine’s control. However, the focus of this report is on the ways in which RDC can use its own resources, specifically, its website, to help buck this trend.

Since the *Reader's Digest* print magazine has been and is still the main carrier and contributor of the RD brand, its circulation remains important to the overall marketing strategy of RDC. In early 2013, the company laid out a strategy to “aggressively market [the magazine] to new audiences and channel the [RD] resources more efficiently and effectively to grow the company’s core brands.” In October 2013, the company further decided to place rd.ca at the centre of its digital strategy to halt the decline in subscriptions. As Philippe Cloutier, General Manager of RDC, stated, “by moving responsibility for our [RDC] websites under the marketing function, we [RDC] will be able to better leverage this channel as a marketing tool to recruit subscribers.” (RDMC Ltd. 2013a)

The urgent need to increase subscription rates to the print magazine led the RDC Digital Marketing Team to set up a review of RDC’s site subscription strategy in May 2013. Its remit was to review, analyze and revise all aspects of the site’s subscription promotion, and to recommend improvements. The research undertaken combined a comparative study of site subscription

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<sup>7</sup> Refers to subscription copies designated by publishers for readership in public places or intended for individual use by recipients who are likely to have a strong affinity for the content of the magazine.

<sup>8</sup> Refers to copies of a publication that are distributed free of charge to defined recipients, or are available for pickup at designated locations.

<sup>9</sup> A non-profit organization that provides, among other services, verification of print and digital circulation for leading newspapers, magazines, and digital media companies in North America.

methods of RDC's competitors, with an in-house analysis and testing of its own digital subscription techniques, including its use of subscription offers, subscription page contents, and subscription banner placements. Hence, the research and findings of the review are relevant not only to RDC, but also to the Canadian magazine market, generally.

The main focus of this report is to report the research conducted by the RDC Digital Marketing Team. The report falls into two parts. Part I presents the necessity and feasibility of using rd.ca as a tool to promote print subscriptions. This part includes a brief outline of the history of RDC, the main sources of its past success, its current position, and an analysis of the potential of rd.ca as a vehicle to promote print subscriptions.

In Part II, the research and testing conducted by the RDC Digital Marketing Team are presented. This part includes an overview of the RDC Digital Marketing Team and its past efforts in promoting subscriptions, the presentation of a competitive analysis, a description and evaluation of a series of the in-house testing of RDC's own site promotion strategies, a summary of the main findings, and, finally, a set of recommendations.

The report as a whole concludes with a final evaluation of the implications of the study for future RDC's site subscription strategies.

## **Part I: The Promotion of Print Subscriptions Online by Reader's Digest Canada**

### **Reader's Digest Canada: An Overview**

Reader's Digest Canada (RDC) is the Canadian outlet of the Reader's Digest Association (RDA). Since its founding in 1922 by William Roy DeWitt Wallace and Lila Acheson Wallace, RDA has expanded into a global brand with a presence in 75 countries worldwide and an estimated readership of nearly 100 million (rda.com 2013). In addition to being the best selling family magazine in the world, it is also a major vendor of goods and services, selling over 40 million books and music videos annually as well as competitions and other products. RDA entered the Canadian magazine market in 1947 with *Reader's Digest* (Canadian English edition) and the French edition of the magazine, *Sélection du Reader's Digest*. The English version of the magazine soon established itself as market leader and consistently maintained that position up to the present time. RDC currently has six titles in its stable, *Reader's Digest* (Canadian English edition), *Sélection du Reader's Digest*, *Best Health*, *Our Canada* and its companion *More of Our Canada*, and *Taste of Home Canada*. They have a combined readership of 7.6 million (PMB 2013a). RDC currently operates six branded websites — *readersdigest.ca*, *selection.ca*, *ourcanada.ca*, *besthealthmag.ca*, *plaisirsante.ca*, and *tasteofhomecanada.com*.

The Author, Yuchun Xie, worked as a member of the Digital Marketing Team of RDC from May to November 2013, first as a digital marketing intern, then as a Jr. Marketing Analyst, under the leadership of Zahra Young, Director of Digital Marketing. Yuchun helped conduct the competitive analysis, the study of demographics of the *Reader's Digest* print magazine and the rd.ca website, and the implementation and analysis of the in-house tests summarized in this report.

### **The Relative Decline in RD Brand Equity and Circulation Figures**

The phenomenal success of the RDA, both globally and in Canada, rests upon two solid foundations: strong brand identity and the effective use of the direct marketing model. By the time RDC was established in Canada, its flagship magazine had already gained dominance in the US magazine market and in the magazine markets of several other countries. RDC repeated this success story in the Canadian market.

The first pillar of the RDC's market dominance is the strength and appeal of the Reader's Digest brand. The "essence" of the brand is not to be found in a single component of the magazine, but is the result of an interlocking number of factors that, taken together, inform its overall editorial direction. From its first beginnings, the magazine has undertaken an educational function: its mission is to bring a wide variety of learned and informed content in an accessible form and sell it at a reasonable price to the general reading public. It has also positioned itself as a champion of the people and as a source of practical advice on everyday problems. And finally, it has consistently promoted the family and family values and encouraged a spirit of optimism and a belief in individual freedom and progress. In short, the values of the magazine are progressive, humanist, communitarian and populist. The combination of values that constitute the "essence" of the Reader's Digest brand has continuously resonated across a wide audience.

The second pillar of RDC's success resides in its highly efficient use of name-gathering strategies and direct marketing. RDC employs a variety of strategies to gather names of potential customers. For instance, from time to time, a variety of giveaways or interesting contests are presented to the audience. The audience are given the option to be included in future communications containing special product offers, discounts, free gifts, exclusive prize-winning opportunities, or other news from RD, in return for a chance to win a certain prize, normally attractive enough that people are happy to enter. From time to time, RD also provides free digital premiums in exchange for personal information. The customer's personal data are then collected on the company's database, analyzed, segmented, and subsequently used as the target audience of direct marketing campaigns. Names are also gathered by presenting contests and giveaways with direct marketing campaigns. This combination of name-gathering tactics and direct marketing strategy has helped build a large subscriber database. According to Zahra Young (2013), Director of Digital Marketing at RDC, the RDC database now holds the personal information of over three million people.

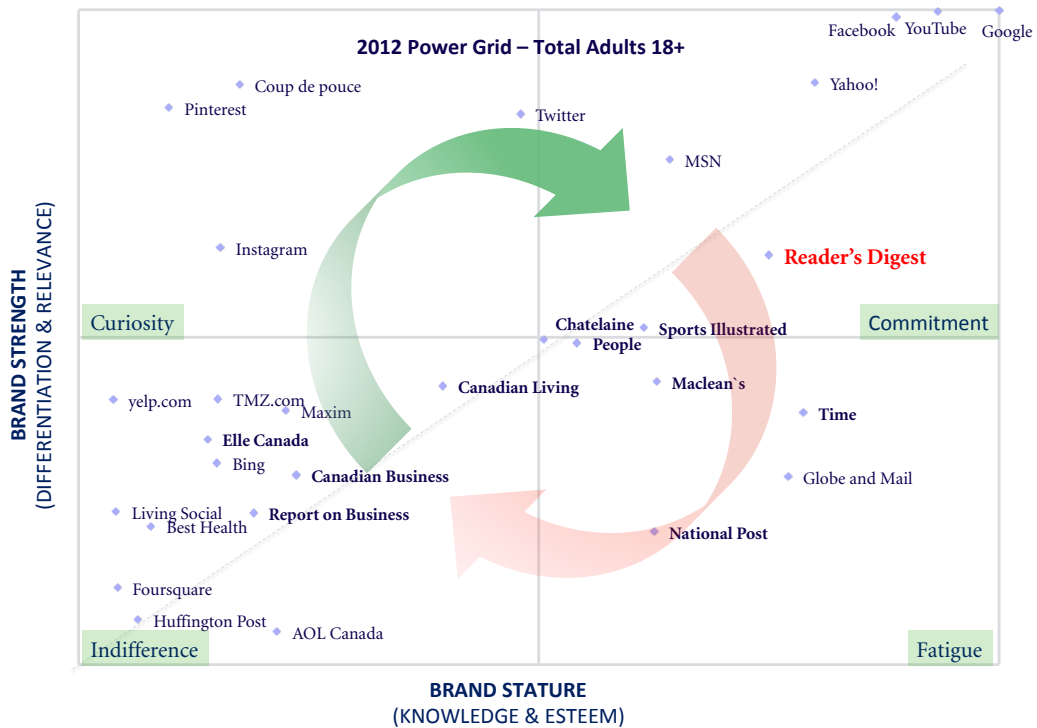
The RD brand remains strong today. The most recent Brand Asset Valuator<sup>10</sup> (BAV) survey shows that Reader's Digest remains in the commitment quadrant<sup>11</sup> of the BAV brand power grid, and it is still the leader brand in the Canadian English magazine market (see Figure 1 below).

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<sup>10</sup> The proprietary brand diagnostic tool developed by Y&R Group that provides insight into the development of brands.

<sup>11</sup> BAV uses four quadrants to describe consumer attraction cycle of a brand, namely, the indifference quadrant, the curiosity quadrant, the commitment quadrant, and the fatigue quadrant. The commitment quadrant is the highest stage of consumer attraction.

Figure 1: RD remains in the commitment quadrant of BAV power grid.



Base: BAV Canada 2012; All Adults

Young&RubicamAdvertising

Adapted from *Reader's Digest 2012 BAV Report* (RDMC Ltd. 2013b, PowerPoint, Slides 8, 11, 17).

The RD brand remains strong when compared with its competitors, but nonetheless it has been losing momentum in recent years. A comparison of RD's historical position in the BAV power grid shows that although it is still a prominent force in the commitment quadrant, its position has been slipping since 2006 (*Reader's Digest 2012 BAV Report*, RDMC Ltd. 2013b).

Parallel with the situation of the RD brand equity, RD's readership retains its lead in the Canada English magazine market, according to the latest Print Measurement Bureau topline readership report (PMB 2013a). However, RD's readership has been declining continuously during the past decade, along with its circulation. (See Table 1 below.)

Table 1: *Reader's Digest's* circulation and readership change.

Year	Circulation (000)	% Change	Readership (000)	% Change	Male (000)	% Change	Female (000)	% Change
2004	1,103		7,709		3,572		4,137	
2005	1,025	-7.1%	7,432	-3.6%	3,419	-4.3%	4,013	-3.0%
2006	995	-2.9%	7,206	-3.0%	3,176	-7.1%	4,030	0.4%
2007	986	-0.9%	7,085	-1.7%	3,137	-1.2%	3,948	-2.0%
2008	982	-0.4%	6,882	-2.9%	3,091	-1.5%	3,791	-4.0%
2009	936	-4.7%	6,423	-6.7%	2,913	-5.8%	3,509	-7.4%
2010	883	-5.7%	5,969	-7.1%	2,727	-6.4%	3,242	-7.6%
2011	776	-12.1%	5,610	-6.0%	2,543	-6.7%	3,066	-5.4%
2012	658	-15.2%	5,350	-4.6%	2,357	-7.3%	2,993	-2.4%
2013	586	-10.9%	5,025	-6.1%	2,221	-5.8%	2,804	-6.3%
10-year change	-517	-46.9%	-2,684	-34.8%	-1,351	-37.8%	-1,333	-32.2%

Adapted from PMB topline readership reports, 2004-2013 (PMB 2013a).

Reports from Alliance for Audited Media (AAM) also show the declining trend of RD's circulation. For instance, the latest AAM publisher statement shows that *Reader's Digest's* total paid, verified and analyzed non-paid circulation dropped by 100,000 from the corresponding period the year previously; and the magazine has tumbled into the third place in the Canadian English magazine market in terms of total circulation (see Table 2 below).

Table 2: Historical paid, verified & analyzed non-paid circulation of RD and its competitors.

Title	Jun-13	Dec-2012	Jun-2012
<i>Reader's Digest</i>	487,342	492,142	587,294
<i>Chatelaine</i>	539,913	536,478	550,613
<i>Canadian Living</i>	521,200	513,027	511,817
<i>Maclean's</i>	313,007	311,974	321,095
<i>Canadian Gardening</i>	92,624	89,179	97,996
<i>Today's Parent</i>	154,974	158,650	160,035
<i>Style at Home</i>	233,900	233,048	230,041
<i>Canadian House &amp; Home</i>	232,893	246,066	248,158
<i>Good Times</i>	131,487	132,275	133,211

Adapted from AAM (ABC): *Competitor Trending* (RDMC Ltd. 2013c).

In addition, according to AAM, *Reader's Digest's* paid subscriptions have also been declining over the past six years, even though the price has been made lower year on year (see Table 3 below).

Table 3: *Reader's Digest's* historical paid subscriptions.

Year	Paid Subscriptions	% Change	Avg. Annualized Subscription Price (\$)	% Change
2008	772,023		35.19	
2009	717,272	-7.1%	32.89	-6.5%
2010	575,906	-19.7%	34.02	3.4%
2011	484,686	-15.8%	31.34	-7.9%
2012	432,898	-10.7%	27.07	-13.6%
2013	350,226	-19.1%	26.89	-0.7%

From (*Reader's Digest*) Magazine Publisher's Statement (AAM 2013b, p. 2).

In line with the decreasing overall subscriptions are the declining site subscriptions. Though the exact subscription numbers are not released, Young (2013) admitted that site subscriptions have been very low and have been falling in recent years.

### **The Rich Potential of the Rd.ca as a Vehicle to Promote Print Subscriptions**

Given RDC's declining subscription numbers, measures to increase sales of subscriptions seem advisable to generate more revenue for the company, to increase circulation, and to maintain its lead in the Canadian English magazine market. There are three main reasons why the rd.ca is well placed to promote subscriptions to the print magazine: it has a large audience; its audience consumes extensive content similar to the *Reader's Digest*; and it shares a common demographic with the print magazine.

First, rd.ca has accumulated over 36 million unique visitors, with over 1 million unique visitors currently (August 2013) active on the site (See Table 4 below). With such a large audience base, the market potential is considerable. In addition, these active visitors currently (August 2013) make over 1.8 million visits to the site and read an average of 6 site pages, indicating a high level of interest in the site contents. Besides the above figures, there is an average (July 2006 to August 2013) of 29% new visits<sup>12</sup> per month to the site, indicating a great growth potential of the site audience and site content affinity.

<sup>12</sup> Visits by people who had never visited the site before.



Table 4: Rd.ca site audience overview (July 2006 to August 2013).

	Visits	Unique Visitors	Page Views	Pages / Visit	% New Visits
Monthly Average	1,380,619	508,151	6,506,062	4.69	29%
Current (Aug 2013)	1,824,646	1,027,499	11,105,155	6.09	49%
Site Total	118,733,199	36,556,767	559,521,302	4.71	31%

From Google Analytics (2013a).

Second, popular rd.ca site contents are similar to the feature contents of the print magazine. Data from Google Analytics show that, apart from the Win section (a monthly Sweeps which people can enter everyday to win \$5,000), site content sections “Travel,” “Health,” “Home & Garden,” “Food,” and “Pets” have had large numbers of page views since Google Analytics tracking was implemented in July 2006 (see Table 5 below). The contents of these site sections reflect those of the *Reader’s Digest* print magazine sections. Hence their popularity with the site audience indicates that the site audience is very interested in contents similar to the print magazine. Theoretically, they should like reading the print magazine, as well. Furthermore, the relatively high percentage of new visits (compared with those to the Win section and the Contest section<sup>13</sup>) also indicate the attractiveness of content in these sections and the potential for gaining even more interest.

Table 5: Traffic details of top rd.ca site sections (July 2006 to August 2013).

Rd.ca Top Sections	Page Views	Unique Visitors	Pages / Visit	% New Visits
Win	376,508,819	9,861,551	4.78	11.49%
Travel	30,510,863	2,994,826	9.75	73.79%
Health	25,737,322	4,602,549	5.43	75.68%
Home & Garden	17,115,467	1,995,404	8.98	74.70%
Food	15,936,208	3,186,947	5.01	73.25%
Pets	9,001,184	1,675,039	5.37	74.05%
Contest	8,239,088	731,632	6.40	23.22%

From Google Analytics (2013b).

<sup>13</sup> The Win section offers regular monthly sweeps with a \$5,000 monthly pay out, while the Contest section hosts seasonal contests. The low percentage of new visits to these sections indicates that it is largely the same group of people who constantly check the contests on the site. However, the major purpose of these contests is to gather names of potential subscribers.

Data from Google Analytics also show very high growth rate in page views of these five site sections over the past three years (see Table 6 below), indicating potential popularity growth of these contents for rd.ca site audience.

Table 6: Change in page views of rd.ca major content sections.

Rd.ca Major Content Sections	Page Views in Time Periods			3-year Change
	09/2010-08/2011	09/2011-08/2012	09/2012-08/2013	
Travel	1,253,055	2,892,851	21,962,253	1653%
Health	2,184,887	2,551,253	15,612,124	615%
Home & Garden	1,075,538	4,250,472	11,148,793	937%
Food	1,438,623	3,072,666	7,909,683	450%
Pets	1,041,278	1,644,377	4,880,211	369%

From Google Analytics (2013c).

The third reason why the rd.ca site is well placed to generate magazine subscriptions is that the site audience demographics are close to print audience demographics. Data from PMB and ComScore<sup>14</sup> (see Table 7 below) show that, very much like the print magazine, the majority of rd.ca site audience are females, and that females are much more likely (with a much higher readership index<sup>15</sup>) to visit the site than males. In addition, the age profile of the site audience is also very close to that of the print magazine, with the majority of visitors (54.2%) being over 45 years old and with relatively higher readership index (154). The similarity of audience location is also clear, most being from the Ontario region and the Prairies, and with the highest readership index being from the Atlantic region. Although some of the details regarding the audience household income are not comparable, because PMB and ComScore uses different scales<sup>16</sup>, the comparable data available shows that both the site audience and the print magazine readers tend to have medium to high household income. Finally, the audience household size and language profiles, to a large extent, also overlap one another.

<sup>14</sup> An American Internet analytics company that provides digital measurement to enterprises and publishers.

<sup>15</sup> The likelihood of reading the magazine or the site. See Note \*2 in Table 7.

<sup>16</sup> PMB uses \$25K-\$34.9K, \$35K-\$49.9K, and \$50K-\$74.9K; while ComScore uses \$25K-\$39.9K, \$40K-\$59.9K, and \$60K-\$74.9K.

Table 7: Rd.ca and *Reader's Digest* demographics.

	% Composition <sup>*1</sup>		Readership Index <sup>*2</sup>	
	<i>Reader's Digest</i>	Rd.ca	<i>Reader's Digest</i>	Rd.ca
<b>Gender:</b>				
Male	43.9	41.7	89	83
Female	56.1	58.3	111	117
<b>Age:</b>				
12-17 years	7.6	12.3	94	72
18-24 years	9.4	7.8	85	69
25-34 years	12.8	14.1	80	89
35-44 years	14.6	11.0	93	71
45-54 years	18.6	20.6	107	128
55-64 years	17.3	21.7	113	184
65+	19.8	11.9	119	149
25-44	27.4	25.1	87	80
45-64	35.9	42.3	110	156
45+	55.7	54.2	113	154
<b>Region:</b>				
Atlantic	10.7	8.5	155	125
Quebec	4.0	14.4	17	65
Ontario	44.1	46.3	114	118
Prairies	25.6	18.5	150	104
British Columbia	15.6	12.3	116	88
<b>Household Income:</b>				
Under \$25,000	11.8	7.2	106	82
\$25,000-\$74,999	43.8	45.8	104	120
\$75,000-\$99,999	15.5	14.6	99	84
\$100,000+	28.9	32.4	94	94
<b>HH Size:</b>				
1	11.9	6.3	97	82
2	32.7	28.3	108	115
3+	55.4	65.4	97	97
<b>Language:</b>				
French	2.1	15.4	10	65
Other	97.9	84.6	123	111

Adapted from *Demographics of Reader's Digest* (PMB 2013b) and *Demographic Profile for Readersdigest.ca* (ComScore 2013).

<sup>\*1</sup> Represents the percentage of total readers/visitors to the magazine/website that a specific demographic group comprises.

<sup>\*2</sup> Represents the extent to which each stated demographic group to the magazine/site is over or under represented versus each group's corresponding percentage of the total audience. Indices above 100 show overrepresentation, while indices below 100 show underrepresentation. An index of 100 shows parity.

In short, the rd.ca site's large, demographically similar audience to the print audience and their preference for similar content, suggests that there is great potential for turning more of the site audience into print subscribers. By using the latest web technology and practices, the magazine can better communicate with its readers and get instant, first-hand information about them (demographics, psychographics, preferences, etc.). If a successful online subscription conversion strategy is in place, this could also create a cost-effective, sustainable distribution model. Without any middlemen involved, wholesale and retail distribution costs could be saved, which in turn could sustain the publisher in curating better contents for the readers.

## Part II: Towards an Effective Online Print Subscription Strategy

### Introduction

How can the rd.ca site best be utilized to promote print subscriptions? To answer this question the Digital Marketing Team of the RDC decided to undertake some formal research into RDC's current in-house site promotion methods and compare its methods with those of its competitors. The goal was to determine how its online subscription promotion strategies could be improved.

Since its formation in 2004, the Digital Marketing Team of RDC has used a wide variety of means to promote print subscriptions by digital means. They include adopting Search Engine Optimization (SEO)<sup>17</sup> and Search Engine Marketing (SEM)<sup>18</sup> tactics to build site traffic; conducting a variety of contests to create site buzz and to gather names of potential subscribers; placing display ads on other sites; employing Email Direct Marketing (EDM) tactics and the sending of emails carrying subscription banners to segmented inside lists<sup>19</sup> and outside lists<sup>20</sup>; and placing subscription banners in newsletters of different interest groups. Subscription forms were also built and banners were placed on the site to promote print subscriptions. In addition, in 2009, the Team conducted a pricing test and found out that while a lower price did generate more conversions, it was not sufficiently profitable to sustain the development of the magazine. In 2010, the Team conducted a multivariate test, offering 1-year and 2-year subscriptions. However, according to Young (2013), the test did not generate significant differences in subscription uptake, partly due to the fact that there was not enough difference between the higher and lower prices, and partly due to the unstable test environment caused by the company's decision to move the site to a new content management system soon after the test was implemented.

The Digital Marketing Team's recent review of its online marketing strategy developed in three stages. First, a competitive analysis was conducted to compare the site subscription promotion strategies of the RDC with those of its rivals, with respect to subscription offer, subscription page content and on-site marketing placements. The aim of this competitive analysis

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<sup>17</sup> A methodology of strategies, techniques and tactics used to increase the amount of visitors to a website by obtaining a high-ranking placement in the search results page of a search engine.

<sup>18</sup> Refers to acts associated with researching, submitting and positioning a web site within search engines to achieve maximum exposure of a web site. It includes search engine optimization, paid listings and other search-engine related services and functions that will increase exposure and traffic to a web site.

<sup>19</sup> Lists of names gathered (e.g. through name-gathering contests) and owned by RDC.

<sup>20</sup> Lists of names owned by other companies, who charge RDC for deploying emails to the lists.

was to identify areas where RDC could use the best practice of its competitors to improve its own online subscription page.

Second, the findings of the competitive analysis were used to create a new subscription page (called a new *creative*, referring to everything that is created on the page, including texts, images, the design, the layout, etc.). The new creative (the test page) was then tested for its effectiveness in comparison with the current page (the control page). This testing took place as a “package test” (a test of two creatives differing in more than one element to see which package of elements works best). The effectiveness of each creative in producing subscription conversions was measured.

Finally, the results of the competitive analysis and the package test were used to create a second test page and a second control page. These were then tested in two phases. Phase 1 was another package test, for which the previous test page was updated in content and made into a new control page; and a new test page was created, and its performance in producing subscription conversions was measured in comparison to the new control page. Phase 2 was to be a series of element tests (an element test is a test of two creatives differing only in one element to see which element makes a key difference). The performance of each element of the successful creative of Phase 1 was to be further tested over and against a new creative. However, this part of the test has not been carried out at the time of writing.

While the tests on the subscription page creative were in progress, an entry-point test was also conducted to figure out what subscription marketing placement works best and what type of placements attract more clicks. Each subscription marketing-placement (the entry points to the subscription page) on rd.ca was marked with a separate label and the number of page views resulted from clicks on the placement was recorded.

**\*A note on methodology:** The report on the marketing testing below is not a full reporting from start to finish, rather, it represents the major techniques — the combination of “package tests” with “element tests” — employed by the Digital Marketing Team from May to November 2013. The aim of the package tests was to quickly identify the elements of a new subscription creative that would work better than the previously used subscription page. The findings from the competitive study were used to identify the innovative elements to be included in the new creative. Then, the capacity of the new creative to generate more conversions than the old subscription page was tested; and, the results were sufficiently encouraging as to justify its adoption as a new subscription page. Finally, element tests were to follow in order to precisely pinpoint the element(s) on the successful creative (from the package tests) that make the key difference in generating subscription uptakes.

## **The Competitive Analysis**

The purpose of the competitive analysis was to determine the best practices of the RDC's competitors in terms of subscription offers, subscription page content and banner placement. RDC's practice in these three respects was compared with that of seven of its main competitors: *Canadian Living*, *Chatelaine*, *Maclean's*, *Canadian House & Home*, *Style at Home*, *Today's Parent*, and *Canadian Gardening*.

### *Subscription Offer*

The comparison of RDC's subscription offer with those of its rivals (see Tables 8 and 9 below) showed that RDC's offer was potentially uncompetitive in four main ways. First, the price per issue offered by RD was relatively high, resulting in a relatively low discount rate (51% of cover price), whereas most of its competitors offered higher discount rates (as high as 86% off cover price). Moreover, unlike the offers of the majority of its competitors, the price quoted did not include mailing or tax. Second, RD did not offer more than one subscription choice, while most of its competitors provided a 2-year option with a higher discount, as well as a 1-year option. Third, RD's offer did not include a digital component, while some of its competitors offered a combined print and digital subscription package. Fourth, RD offered no tangible bonus gift, only a chance to enter a contest to win a BMW or \$40,000 in cash; whereas its competitors all offered tangible gifts, and one, *Chatelaine*, offered a choice of bonus gifts.

Table 8: Main subscription offer of RD and its competitors.

Title	Major Offer Elements of Subscription Page										
	Issues / year	Cover price (\$)	1-year sub (\$)	\$ / issue	% Off cover price	2-year sub (\$)	\$ / issue	% Off cover price	3-year sub (\$)	\$ / issue	% off cover price
<i>Reader's Digest</i>	12* <sup>1</sup>	51* <sup>2</sup> (4.25)	24.97	2.08	Over 50% (51%)						
<i>Canadian Living</i>	12	3.99	23.95	2.00	48% (50%)	47.96	2.00	50%			
<i>Chatelaine</i>	12	4.50	14.95	1.25	72%						
<i>Maclean's</i>	22	6.95	26.00	1.18	83%						
	22	6.95	24.00	1.09	84%						
	20	6.95	20.00	1.00	86%						
<i>Canadian House &amp; Home</i>	12	5.99	26.95	2.25	79% (63%)	46.95	1.96	67%			
<i>Style at Home</i>	12	5.99	24.95	2.08	67% (65%)	42.95	1.79	70%			
<i>Today's Parent</i>	12	3.99	16.95	1.41	65%	29.95	1.25	69%	42.95	1.19	70%
<i>Canadian Gardening</i>	6	5.50	22.95	3.83	34% (30%)	39.95	3.33	39%			

\*<sup>1</sup> Unmarked numbers were from each title's official subscription page. Grey numbers were provided for ease of comparison. Issues per year marked grey were from websites; cover prices marked grey were from newsstands; dollars per issue marked grey were subscription price divided by number of issues; percentage off cover price marked grey was calculated based on the cover price and subscription price.

\*<sup>2</sup> Total cover price for one year; the grey price was the single-copy cover price.



Table 9: Subscription offer supplements of RD and its competitors.

Title	Supplementary Offer Elements of Subscription Page			
	Digital components	PPH*	Tax	Bonus gift
<i>Reader's Digest</i>		7.99	Not included	A chance to win a car or \$40,000 cash
<i>Canadian Living</i>			Not included	15 Classic Cooking Lessons
<i>Chatelaine</i>	Immediate access to digital edition; unlimited access to articles on chatelaine.com	Included for ON, NB, NL, MB		A tote bag, or a watch, or <i>Dinner in 30</i> cookbook
<i>Maclean's</i>	Instant access to digital editions	Included for ON, NB, NL, MB		Different gift for different offer
<i>Canadian House &amp; Home</i>	Additional \$6/year for digital access	\$40 if outside North America		
<i>Style at Home</i>			Included	<i>Best Outdoor Entertaining</i>
<i>Today's Parent</i>	Immediate access to the digital edition; unlimited access to the articles on todaysparent.com	Included for ON, NB, NL, MB		A mommy bag
<i>Canadian Gardening</i>			Included	<i>50 Favourite Perennials</i>

Source: readersdigest.ca homepage, styleathome.com homepage, todaysparent.com homepage, macleans.ca homepage, houseandhome.com homepage, chatelaine.com homepage, canadianliving.com homepage. Accessed July to October 2013.

\* Postage, processing, and handling.

The results of the study of competitors formed the basis of further research and testing. The RDC Digital Marketing Team recommended that tests be conducted to determine whether the following changes would help increase subscriptions: (a) a lower discount rate and the inclusion of shipping charges and tax in the price; (b) a wider choice of subscription offers; (c) the inclusion of a digital component in the subscription package; and (d) the replacement of a contest entry for a slim chance to win a big prize by a choice of small tangible gifts made available to each subscriber.

### *Subscription Page Content Strategy*

A comparison of content elements on the subscription page of rd.ca with the subscription pages of its competitors also showed that there was room for improvement in the content strategy for the subscription page. Apart from the basic content elements common to all subscription pages, such

as cover image, offer elements, subscription form, and payment method, each magazine provided different supplementary elements on the subscription page, as outlined in Table 10 below.

Table 10: Supplementary contents on the subscription page of RD and its competitors.

Title	Supplementary Content Elements on Subscription Page					
	Mag info	Security	Customer care info	Satisfaction guarantee info	Issue # info	List of items & payment
<i>Reader's Digest</i>	yes	yes	no	no	no	no
<i>Canadian Living</i>	yes	yes	in frame	yes	no	no
<i>Chatelaine</i>	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
<i>Maclean's</i>	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
<i>Canadian House &amp; Home</i>	no	no	yes	no	yes	yes
<i>Style at Home</i>	yes	yes	in frame	yes	no	no
<i>Today's Parent</i>	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
<i>Canadian Gardening</i>	yes	yes	in frame	yes	no	no

Source: readersdigest.ca homepage, styleathome.com homepage, todaysparent.com homepage, macleans.ca homepage, houseandhome.com homepage, chatelaine.com homepage, canadianliving.com homepage. Accessed July to October 2013.

The results of the survey showed that the rd.ca subscription page was potentially deficient in four major respects compared with the online subscription pages of its rivals. First, rd.ca did not offer customer-care information on the subscription page; while all its competitors either provided customer-care information on the subscription page or within the site frame<sup>21</sup> on the subscription page. Second, the rd.ca did not mention a satisfaction guarantee<sup>22</sup>, whereas most of its competitors offered this promise. Third, the rd.ca did not clarify the number of issues included in the 1-year subscription, while some of its competitors made this information clear. Fourth, the rd.ca did not list the total payment for a subscription, whereas some competitors listed total payment for a list of subscription items.

To sum up, the findings of the survey identified two main supplementary content elements that needed to be tested: (a) the inclusion of customer-care information and a satisfaction guarantee; (b) the clarification of the subscription package, including the addition of such

<sup>21</sup> The frame that normally appears on all pages of a website, including site header, footer, and sidebar.

<sup>22</sup> Normally it refers to cancellation at any time and full refund for un-mailed issues.

information as a calculation of the discount rate, the calculation of the tax rate, the list of total payment, and a list of items (numbers of issues, bonus gifts, and digital components, if any).

### *Subscription Marketing Placements on Site*

A comparison of subscription banner placements on rd.ca and its competitors' sites showed that the most popular spots for placing subscription banners are the top menu, the masthead<sup>23</sup>, the main menu (or *navigation bar*), below the main menu, the loop<sup>24</sup>, the right rail (or *right sidebar*), and the footer (see Table 11 below). RD had placements in all these popular spots, with two placements on the masthead, and two in the loop.

In terms of the type of marketing placements, most competitors put a text ("Subscribe") link on the main menu and in the footer, a static image & text block<sup>25</sup> on the masthead and in the loop, and a static image & text block or a static image & text banner<sup>26</sup> on the right rail. As can be seen from Table 11, all of RD's banners were static; while those of two of its competitors, *Maclean's* and *Chatelaine*, presented animated banners (leaderboard<sup>27</sup> and rollup<sup>28</sup>) with information about the magazine and the offer.

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<sup>23</sup> The site area at the top of a web page, usually below the top menu (if any) and above the main menu.

<sup>24</sup> The main editorial (content) area of a web page.

<sup>25</sup> Usually contains cover image and separately clickable texts such as "Subscribe," "Give a Gift," "Digital Editions," etc.

<sup>26</sup> Usually contains cover image and text copy, clickable as a whole.

<sup>27</sup> A type of banner ad usually sized to the width of the web page that typically lies between the masthead and the content.

<sup>28</sup> A kind of banner that rolls up when the site is open and rolls back to the fold after a set time.

Table 11: Online subscription marketing placements of RD and its competitors.

Title	Subscription Marketing Placements on Site							
	Top menu	Masthead	Main menu	Below main-menu	Loop	Right rail	Footer	Rollup
<i>Reader's Digest</i>	Text	Static image & text banner; Text (above search box)	Text	Static long text	Sub form (homepage); Static image & text block (non-homepage)	Static image & text banner	Text	
<i>Canadian Living</i>			Text		Static image & text block	Static image & text banner		
<i>Chatelaine</i>			Text	Animated leaderboard with slides containing magazine and offer information	Static image & text block		Text	Animated banner with offer message and image
<i>Maclean's</i>		Static text & image block	Text		Static text & image teaser	Static image & text block	Text	Animated banner with offer message and image
<i>Canadian House &amp; Home</i>	Text	Static image & text block					Text	
<i>Style at Home</i>		Static text block			Static text & image block			
<i>Today's Parent</i>			Text		Text & image	Static text & image block	Text	
<i>Canadian Gardening</i>		2 static text blocks						

Source: readersdigest.ca homepage, styleathome.com homepage, todayparent.com homepage, macleans.ca homepage, houseandhome.com homepage, chatelaine.com homepage, canadianliving.com homepage. Accessed July to October 2013.

Besides, a close comparison of RD's marketing placements and those of its two main competitors, *Chatelaine* and *Maclean's*, also revealed that RD's marketing placements, though more numerous, are less salient and less informative. For instance, the static subscription text links and the texts on the subscription banners were all of small font size and did not prominently

stand out from the background (see numbered placements in Figure 2 below). Furthermore, the copy in the masthead banner — “Start your Summer Reading with *Reader’s Digest*” did not give a reason to subscribe; the only information about the magazine — “Canada’s Most-Read Magazine” — was provided on the right rail banner; and the only offer information included was “save over 50%.” In contrast, *Maclean’s* had a prominent rollup banner with a list of items included in a subscription (see Figure 3 below), and *Chatelaine* placed an animated leaderboard with both magazine information and offer information below the masthead (see Figure 4 below), as well as a prominent rollup banner with a list of items and price (see Figure 5 below).

Figure 2: Subscription marketing placements of rd.ca.



Screen shot from readersdigest.ca homepage, accessed July 26, 2013. Courtesy of Reader’s Digest Magazines Canada Limited.

Figure 3: Offer information on Maclean's rollup.



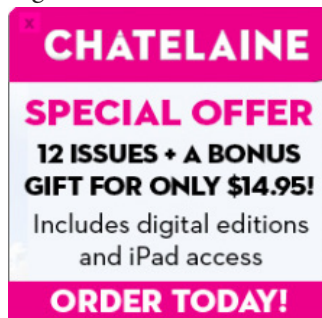
Screen shot from *Maclean's* magazine website homepage (macleans.ca) of Rogers Media Inc., accessed July 26, 2013.

Figure 4: Magazine and offer information on Chatelaine's leaderboard.



Screen shot from *Chatelaine* magazine website homepage (chatelaine.com) of Rogers Media Inc., accessed July 26, 2013.

Figure 5: Offer information on Chatelaine's rollup.



Screen shot from *Chatelaine* magazine website homepage (chatelaine.com) of Rogers Media Inc., accessed July 26, 2013.

To sum up, the findings of the survey of subscription marketing placements were essentially two-fold. First, the banners on the rd.ca site are too static and not sufficiently animated in comparison to those of its main competitors. And second, although there were numerous spots on the rd.ca site calling for customers to subscribe to the RD magazine, they did not contain sufficient copy giving reasons why customers should do so. It was concluded, therefore, that more research and testing needed to be done to find out the best content, design and placement of the banners.

## **The Testing**

### *The Package Test*

In order to quickly find out what package of elements on a subscription page work best, the Digital Marketing Team decided to conduct a package test. The current subscription page was used as the control page and a new subscription page was created and used as the test page (See Figures 6 and 7 below).

The basic information conveyed was the same on both pages: subscribe today and you will save over 50% off the newsstand price, plus the chance to win either \$40,000 cash or a BMW 128i Coupe. However, the test page and the control page were significantly different in four major respects. First, the test page presented “reasons to subscribe” only once, emphasizing the content of the magazine; whereas the control page presented the “reasons to subscribe” several times, but with the stress being exclusively on the offer. Second, the test page included a short table showing the calculation of the subscription discount on the paid copy price; whereas on the control page the discount was explained in small print. Third, on the test page, the subscription application form was more condensed as compared to the control page; and the application procedure was broken down into three easy and simple steps: form-filling, subscription confirmation, and choice of payment method. Finally, the overall design and layout of the test page was more tidy and compact than that of the control page, and it contained far less text.

Figure 6: The control page of the package test.

**Reader's Digest** .ca

**SAVE OVER 50%!** [LEARN MORE](#)

Bring home a year of Canada's most-read magazine at incredible savings!  
**Plus, you could walk away with a \$40,000.00 BMW!**

**THIS \$40,000.00 CAR could become yours!**

**GIVE A SUBSCRIPTION AS A GIFT**

\* Model may vary

**YES!** Sign me up for a FULL YEAR of *Reader's Digest* for only \$24.97 – an incredible **SAVINGS OF OVER 50%** off the yearly cover price of \$51.00 – plus \$7.99 postage, processing and handling, and applicable taxes. Also confirm my opportunity to enter to win a brand-new BMW 128i Coupe worth \$40,000.00 (cash option available) in the skill-testing, upgraded Special Prize Contest for new subscribers.

**COMPLETE THIS FORM AND CLAIM ALL YOUR PRIVILEGES!**

Exclusive offer for Canadian's only.  
 Fields in bold are required.

Salutation

First Name

Last Name

Street Address

Apt. Number

City

Province

Postal Code

Email Address

Confirmation Email Address

Payment Option



**PLUS,**  
 claim your opportunity to win a brand-new **BMW 128i Coupe** worth **\$40,000.00!**



- YES, I'm interested in your special product offers, free gifts and exclusive discounts.
- YES, I would like to receive occasional communications and special offers from trusted Third Party partners of Reader's Digest.

**SUBMIT**

[Click here](#) to give Reader's Digest as a Special Gift  
 Offer only valid in Canada. All orders subject to approval by Reader's Digest.  
 For shipment outside Canada, please [contact us](#).



Figure 7: The test page of the package test.



## GET SWEET SAVINGS ON READER'S DIGEST TODAY!

▶ Click here if you want to give *Reader's Digest* as a special gift 



SAVE  
OVER  
50%!

### SUBSCRIBE TODAY!

Discover what makes *Reader's Digest*  
the most read magazine in the country!

LEARN MORE

Term	Newsstand Price	Your Price	You Save
1 year	\$51.00	\$24.97	51%

PLUS,

you could win a brand-new **BMW 128i COUPE** worth **\$40,000.00** in our skill-testing, upgraded Special Prize Contest for new subscribers!



COMPLETE THIS FORM AND CLAIM ALL YOUR PRIVILEGES

This is where we'll send your magazine and where we'll contact you in the event of a win.  
Exclusive offer for Canadian's only. Fields in **bold** are required.

**Salutation:**

**First Name:**

**Last Name:**

**Address:**

Address Line 2 (Apt.):

**City:**

**Province:**

**Postal Code:**

**Email:**

**Confirm Email:**

SUBSCRIPTION TERM

Term	Newsstand price	Your price	You save
<input checked="" type="radio"/> 1 year	<b>\$51.00</b>	<b>\$24.97</b>	<b>51%</b>

YES! PLEASE SIGN ME UP FOR A FULL YEAR SUBSCRIPTION TO *READER'S DIGEST* for only \$24.97 plus \$7.99 postage, processing and handling, and applicable taxes – an incredible **SAVING OF OVER 50%** off the yearly cover price of \$51.00! Also confirm my opportunity to enter to win a brand-new BMW 128i Coupe worth \$40,000.00 (cash option available) in the skill-testing, upgraded Special Prize Contest for new subscribers.

SELECT YOUR PAYMENT PREFERENCE

Payment Preference:



YES, I would like to receive communications containing special product offers, discounts, free gifts, exclusive prize-winning opportunities and other news from Reader's Digest.

YES, I would like to receive occasional communications and special offers from trusted third party partners of Reader's Digest.

SUBSCRIBE NOW!

[Click here](#) to give Reader's Digest as a Special Gift  
 All orders subject to approval by Reader's Digest.  
 For shipment outside Canada, please [contact us](#).




Privacy Policy | Special Prize Contest Rules

Screen shot from readersdigest.ca, accessed May to August 2013. Courtesy of Reader's Digest Magazines Canada Limited.

The entry points from rd.ca were linked randomly to the two creatives (the control page and the test page). The “SUBMIT” on the control page and the “SUBSCRIBE NOW” button on the test page were linked to two separate thank-you pages, and there was no other entry to the thank-you pages, so the number of unique visitors on each thank-you page represented the number of conversions from the corresponding subscription page. In Table 12 below, data (from Google Analytics) of the number of unique visitors to both the control creative and the test creative, and the number of unique visitors to the corresponding thank-you pages, were presented month by month.

Table 12: The package test results.

Creative	Month	Unique Visitors (UV)	Thank-you page UVs	Conversion Rate
Control	06/2013	2,054	12	0.48%
	07/2013	4,775	42	0.88%
	08/2013	4,082	43	1.05%
	09/2013	1,139	8	0.70%
	10/2013	292	2	0.68%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>12,792</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>0.84%</b>
Test	06/2013	2,614	13	0.50%
	07/2013	4,480	46	1.03%
	08/2013	3,768	53	1.41%
	09/2013	2,306	68	2.95%
	10/2013	1,151	41	3.56%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>14,319</b>	<b>221</b>	<b>1.54%</b>

Source: Google Analytics 2013d.

The overall conversion rate of the test page (1.54%) was higher than that of the control page (0.84%). So, it would appear that the emphasis on magazine content, the illustration of discount rate, and the well-organized, step-be-step subscription procedure combined together on the test page were responsible for the higher rate of conversions it produced over and against the control page. However, the results of the test could not be taken to be entirely conclusive at this stage because a customer may have come to the control page and thought about it for some time and then ended up coming back to the test page to make the subscription. Nevertheless, the findings were sufficiently clear cut to justify the incorporation of the elements that were recorded as

performing best in the first package test into a new creative, that would then form the basis of the second phase of the package test.

### *The Package–Element Test*


Based on the findings of the competitive analysis and the package test, it was decided to proceed to an enhanced version of the package test to further determine which creative generates the most subscriptions, and to identify the creative elements that account for the key differences. The test was to be conducted in two phases. Phase 1 was an enhanced, cookie-based package test; while Phase 2 was to be a series of element tests (however, at the time of writing, this phase has not yet been conducted).

A new control page (see Figure 8 below) was created based on the layout of the test page used in the previous package test (see Figure 7 above), but with some updates in content. First, a customer-care link was added. Second, the “reason for subscription” was more prominently placed on the magazine content, and hence more copy about the magazine was included. Third, the chance of winning a big prize was replaced by the offer of a free digital download available to all subscribers. Fourth, a 2-year subscription option with a higher discount rate (65%) was inserted, and the number of issues for each subscription was also added. Finally, a note on the detailed tax calculation was added.


A new test page was then created, using much the same content as the new control page, but with two main differences in its overall design (see Figure 9 below). First, in contrast to the vertical and linear design of the control page, the test page layout was divided into two columns arranged, as it were, horizontally. The left column displayed the magazine information and reasons to subscribe; and the right column contained the subscription procedure. And, whereas a “Preview Issue” link was provided on the control page, on the test page, the sample magazine spreads were shown right on the test page, and the audience could enlarge the images to read the content in detail.

Figure 8: The control page of the package–element test.

[Back to readersdigest.ca](#)   [Customer Care](#)   [Give a Gift](#)



## GET TODAY'S **BEST DEAL** & **SAVE 65%**!



### SUBSCRIBE TODAY!

Connect to topics that matter to you. Delve into expertly researched features, inspiring interviews, lively humour and much more. Live smart with *Reader's Digest*!

PREVIEW ISSUE

**Find out why over 5 million Canadians look to *Reader's Digest* for the Best In:**

**PLUS!** Subscribe today and you'll also get this **FREE** download! Make your summer sizzle with 48 delicious BBQ recipes!

**COMPLETE THIS FORM TO SUBSCRIBE**

This is where we'll send your magazine. Exclusive offer for Canadian residents of legal age. Fields in **bold** are required.

<b>Full Name</b>	<input type="text" value="Full Name"/>
<b>Address:</b>	<input type="text" value="Address 1"/>
Address Line 2 (Apt.):	<input type="text" value="Apt. Number"/>
<b>City:</b>	<input type="text" value="City"/>
<b>Province:</b>	<input type="text" value="Select"/>
<b>Postal Code:</b>	<input type="text" value="Postal Code"/>
<b>E-mail:</b>	<input type="text" value="test@test.com"/>
<b>Confirmation E-mail:</b>	<input type="text" value="test@test.com"/>


**SUBSCRIPTION TERM**

Term	Newsstand price	Your price	You save
<input checked="" type="radio"/> <b>24 issues (2 years) *</b>	\$102.00	\$34.97 <sup>+</sup>	65% <span style="background-color: red; color: white; border-radius: 50%; padding: 2px 5px; font-size: small;">BEST DEAL!</span>
<input type="radio"/> <b>12 issues (1 year) *</b>	\$51.00	\$24.97 <sup>+</sup>	51%

\* Special double issues may count as two issues. <sup>+</sup> Plus \$7.99 postage, processing and handling and applicable taxes. Tax rates for QC: 14.98%, NB/NL/ON: 13%, PEI: 14%, NS: 15%, All Others: 5%

**SELECT YOUR PAYMENT PREFERENCE**

Payment Preference:





ABOUT SSL CERTIFICATES

YES, I would like to receive communications containing special product offers, discounts, free gifts, exclusive prize-winning opportunities and other news from Reader's Digest.

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Screen shot from readersdigest.ca, accessed October 30, 2013. Courtesy of Reader's Digest Magazines Canada Limited.

Figure 9: The test page of the package–element test.

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To avoid the possibility of a customer being presented with different creatives at different times, the entry points from rd.ca to the subscription pages were served by Crowd Control<sup>29</sup>, a data management platform that would ensure each customer was presented with only one creative<sup>30</sup>. The test started in October 2013, so only one month's data was available for analysis (the subscription fulfillment<sup>31</sup> was outsourced to Engage platform<sup>32</sup>, so the test data was provided by Engage). In Table 13 below, the data about the number of visits to the pages, the number of subscriptions, and the average subscription terms were provided. The conversion rate was the total number of subscriptions from each page divided by the total number of visits to that page.

Table 13: The Package-element test results.

Creative	Visits	Total Subs	Avg. term (months)	Conversion rate
Control	2169	36	21.80	1.66%
Test	1375	15	22.67	1.09%

Source: *Engage Test Result*, November 4, 2013 (RDMC Ltd. 2013d).

As can be seen, the 1.66% order conversion rate of the control page was much higher than the 1.09% of the test page. Since the new control page shared the same layout of the previous test page (in the previous package test), the result further suggested that clear, well-organized information and the step-by-step procedure produced the higher conversion rates. Also, the average terms for both pages indicated that most subscribers chose the 2-year option. This would suggest that the offer of a longer subscription with a higher discount rate tend to be more popular than the offer of a shorter subscription with a lower discount.

Compared with the previous package test results (see Table 12 above), the first-month conversion rates of both the control page and the test page (1.66% and 1.09%, respectively) were higher than those of the previous package test (0.48% and 0.50%, respectively). It was also noticeable that the first-month conversion rate of the new control page (1.66%), which used the same layout as the previous test page, was much higher than that of the previous test page (0.50%). These would indicate that the updated contents on the new control page (the customer-

<sup>29</sup> The unifying data management platform of Lotame Solutions Inc, which provides data management solutions for publishers, marketers and networks.

<sup>30</sup> Crowd Control would set a unique browser cookie for each customer and would always show the same subscription page to the same customer, as long as the cookie was not removed.

<sup>31</sup> The specialized service of taking subscription orders and fulfilling them, including maintaining subscriber list, generating invoices and renewals, recording payments, reporting, and customer-care services.

<sup>32</sup> A platform of CDS Global, which provides subscription fulfillment services for publishers.

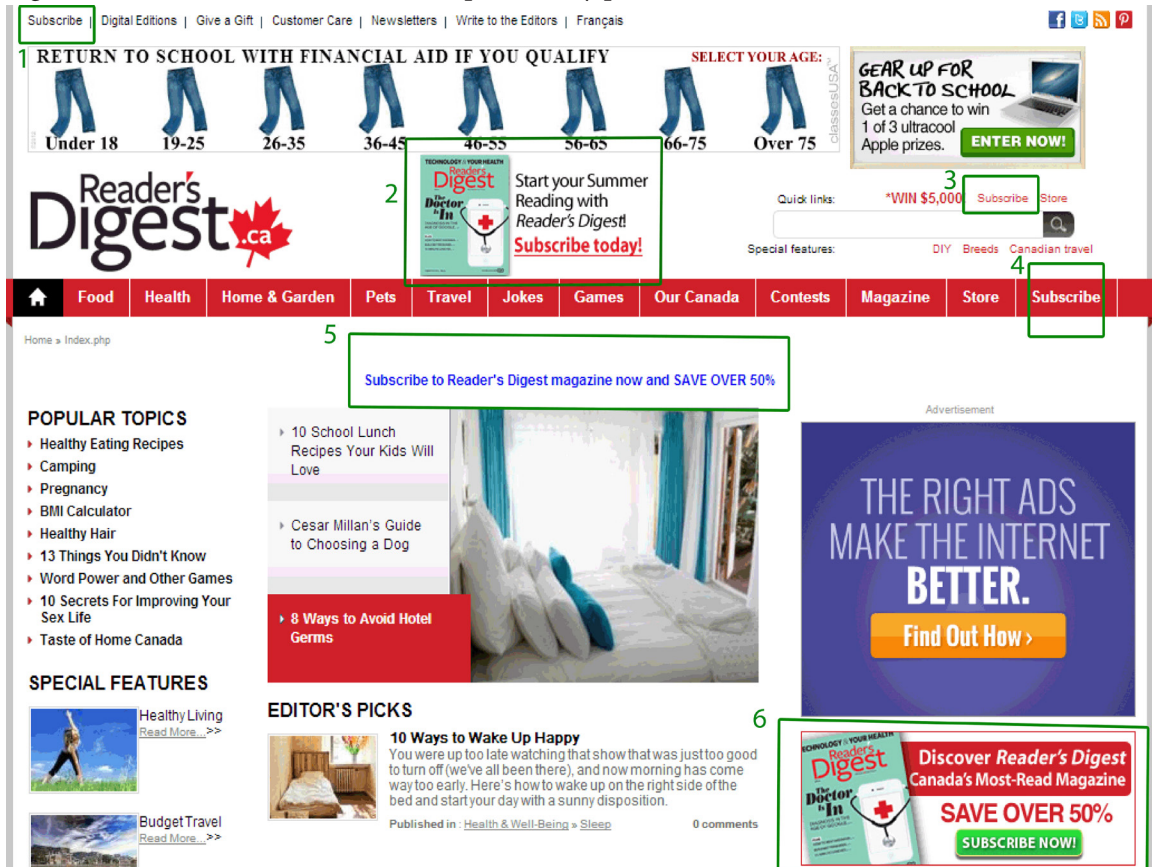
care link, more information on the magazine, the tangible bonus, the 2-year offer option, the number of issues, and tax information) had played a role in producing the higher rate of conversions.

To sum up, all the indicators suggested that the improved customer-care information, issue information, payment information, and magazine content information accounted for the improvement in the conversion rate. However, the results of the test cannot be taken to be entirely conclusive because Phase 2 (element tests) of the package–element test has not yet been carried out. Therefore, it has not been possible to pin point the differences on each creative that generated the increase in the conversion rates. Accordingly, it is to be hoped that the Phase 2 series of element tests will be conducted in the future in order to determine the key elements that makes a difference in the subscription conversion. This would facilitate the design of an optimally effective subscription page, which could also form the basis of further element tests and when they are needed in response to digital innovation and changes in the publishing industry, generally.

#### *The Subscription Entry-Point Test*

In August 2013, the Digital Marketing team conducted a subscription entry-point test, in order to find out which subscription banner or text link on rd.ca generated the most clicks. There were altogether nine subscription entry points on the page. Six entry points were placed above the fold (see 1-6 in Figure 10 below), and three were presented below the fold (see 7-8 in Figure 11, and 9 in Figure 12 below). All of these entry points were marked (with an entry label) and linked randomly to either the control page or the test page (the entry-point test was conducted while the first package test was in progress). The traffic paths from the entry points to the subscription pages were tracked and recorded by Google Analytics.

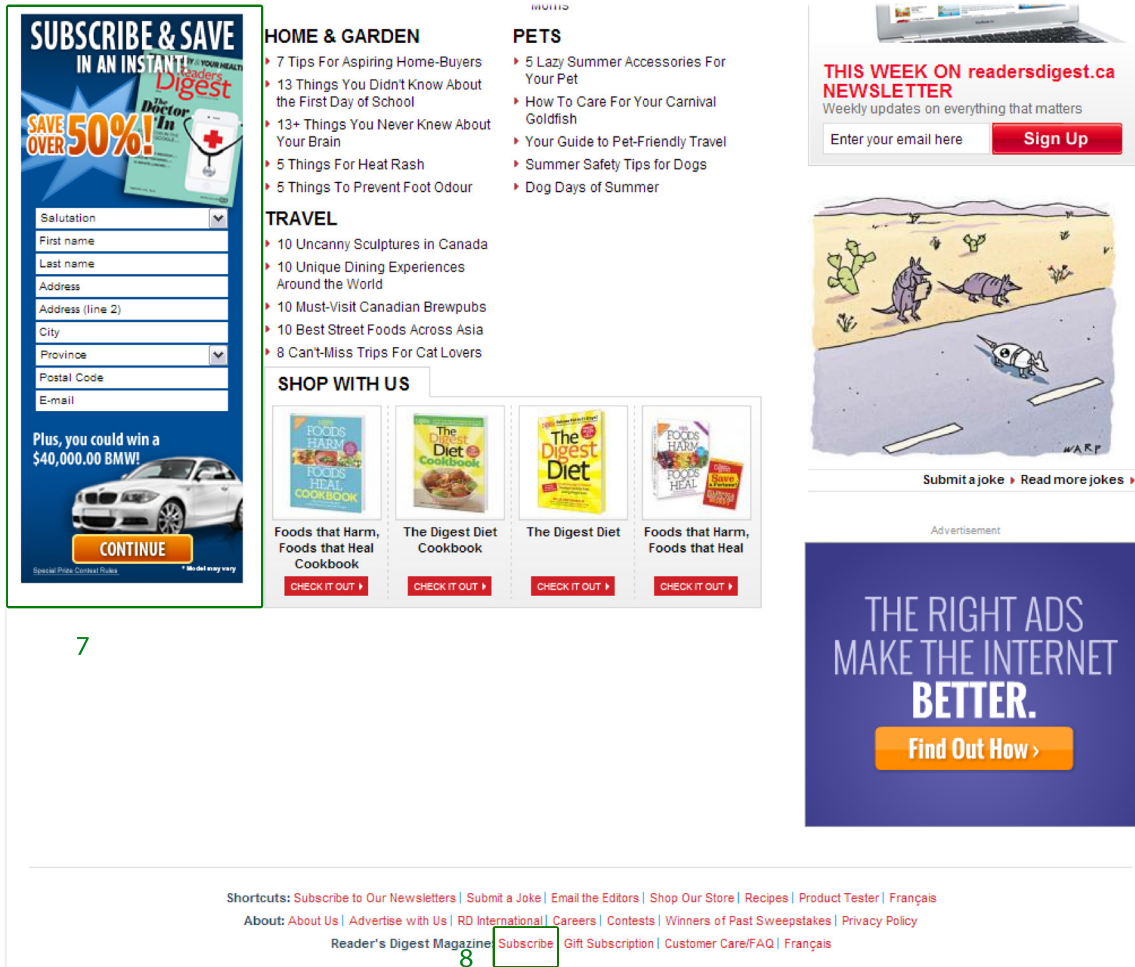
Figure 10: Rd.ca above-the-fold subscription entry points.



Screen shot from readersdigest.ca homepage, accessed August 31, 2013. Courtesy of Reader's Digest Magazines Canada Limited.

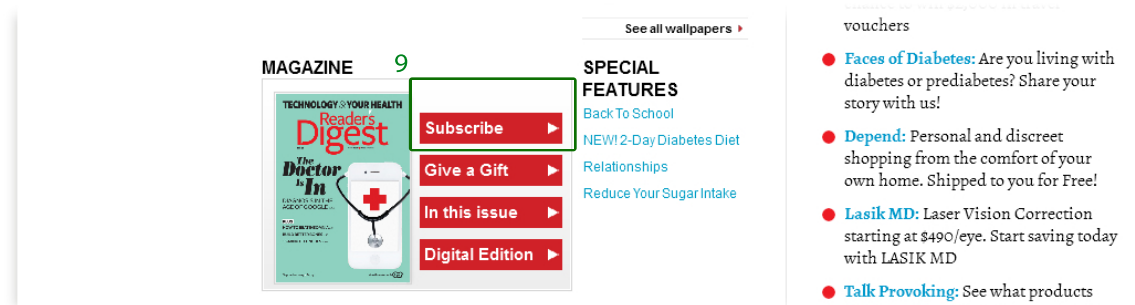


Figure 11: Rd.ca below-the-fold subscription entry points.



Screen shot from readersdigest.ca homepage, accessed August 31, 2013. Courtesy of Reader's Digest Magazines Canada Limited.

Figure 12: Rd.ca loop-bottom-middle subscription entry point.



Screen shot from readersdigest.ca, accessed August 31, 2013. Courtesy of Reader's Digest Magazines Canada Limited.

The total numbers of page views on each subscription page from each entry point were pulled from Google Analytics. The results are presented in Table 14 below.

Table 14: The entry-point test results.

Test page	Page Views
(6) Right-rail banner	1488
(5) Below-main-menu long text	1224
(2) Masthead banner	514
(4) Main-menu “Subscribe”	413
(1) Top-menu “Subscribe”	255
(8) Footer “Subscribe”	67
(7) Homepage-loop-bottom-left subscription form	65
(3) Above-searchbox “Subscribe”	50
(9) Loop-bottom-middle subscription block	40
Control page	Page Views
(6) Right-rail banner	3037
(5) Below-main-menu long text	2861
(2) Masthead banner	988
(4) Main-menu “Subscribe”	860
(1) Top-menu “Subscribe”	500
(8) Footer “Subscribe”	142
(3) Above-searchbox “Subscribe”	96
(7) Homepage-loop-bottom-left subscription form	86
(9) Loop-bottom-middle subscription block	58

Source: Google Analytics 2013e.

The results showed that, in general, above-the-fold entry points (6, 5, 2, 4, 1) were chosen more often (received more clicks) than below-the-fold entry points (7, 8, 9). The results also showed that among above-the-fold placements, the more prominently displayed placements (6, 2, 5) received more clicks than the less prominently featured entry points (1, 3, 4).

It is also noticeable that among the most prominently displayed banners, the one containing both magazine information and the offer information (6) received the most clicks; and placements with offer information (6 and 5) worked better than those without. Below-the-fold entry points (7, 8, 9), taken together, received fewer clicks than any single one of the above-the-fold entry points, except in the case of the above-searchbox “Subscribe” (3).

To sum up, the entry-point test showed that above-the-fold entry-points containing clear offer information, prominently and visibly displayed, generated more interest than below-the-fold entry-points, lacking these features. Therefore, the findings suggested that prominent, animated, rich-media banners with sufficient and precise magazine information and offer information should be integrated into the future design of the subscription page and be made subject to further testing.

## **A Summary of the Main Findings**

a. *Subscription offer*: Both the competitive analysis and the package testing clearly indicate that the dollar savings value of the subscription offer is the most significant factor driving conversions. Customers are more likely to respond favourably to the option of longer term, lower cost subscription rates.

b. *Subscription page content and design*: The package testing into RDC's subscription page layout indicates that clear, prominently displayed and highlighted offer information (total payment, number of issues, information on applicable tax, calculation of discount rate, etc.) aids conversion. In addition, the presentation of precise, well-organized and uncluttered information including a one-column page layout, and step-by-step, easy-to-follow subscription procedures reduce reader confusion, and therefore facilitate subscription take up.

c. *Customer care*: The findings from the competitive analysis and package testing indicate that provision of customer-care information on the subscription page is essential, as it may help reduce customer hesitation and contribute positively to the conversion rate. The absence of such information very likely gives rise to questions in the minds of potential subscribers that may discourage them from making a decision to subscribe. In addition, such elements as a free cancellation facility and the promise of a full refund would make customers feel "cared for," and so reassure them that it is safe to subscribe to the magazine. Furthermore, clarification of what customers get for what they pay helps reduce customer hesitation. In concrete terms, this includes such details as a calculation of discount rate, the calculation of tax rate, the list of total payment, and a list of items included in a subscription (numbers of issues, bonus gift, whether digital components are included, etc.).

d. *Site subscription marketing placements*: The findings from both the competitive analysis and the entry-point test suggest that giving reasons to subscribe is more effective than a plain call-to-action summons; hence banners with precise and attractive magazine and offer information

appear more effective than plain “subscribe” calls. Also essential is the discoverability of marketing placements. Eye-catching, large-sized, animated placements above the fold tend to attract more attention than below-the-fold placements.

### **Recommendations**

In line with the findings set out above, the following actions are recommended:

- a. The offer of subscription options, with longer subscriptions at higher discounts, and with clear issue information and payment information including tax and shipping calculation.
- b. A redesigned subscription page to present clear offer information and a simple-to-follow, step-by-step subscription procedure.
- c. A simplified layout with emphasis on less clutter and greater coherence leading to improved readability.
- d. The inclusion of customer-care information and satisfaction guarantee on the subscription page.
- e. A redesign of RDC’s subscription marketing banners to improve discoverability and effectiveness. Animated, rich-media banners with precise and attractive magazine information and offer information should be integrated into RDC’s future marketing placements.
- f. The employment of Search Engine Optimization (SEO) tactics to increase searchability and discoverability of RDC’s magazine information and subscription offers on its website and to increase the number of unique visitors to the site and the subscription page.

## Conclusion

The overall results of this study show that an effective magazine site subscription strategy requires a flexible package of subscription offers, a subscription page designed to optimize the visitor-to-subscriber conversion rate, and effective marketing placements on the site. A range of smartly priced subscription offers and gift choices personalized to meet audience preferences, and supported by a comprehensive customer-care service, should be made available to attract actual and potential subscribers. As for the site subscription page, it must be user-friendly, readable and attractive in its layout. The focus of the page should be directed towards encouraging visitors to engage with the print magazine content and to take out subscriptions. Also essential is effective marketing placements to increase discoverability of the print magazine information and the subscription offer. Eye-catching, rich-media banners with attractive magazine and offer information should be created and placed prominently on the site. To enhance the searchability and visibility of banners and subscription pages, SEO tactics should also be intelligently employed to maximize the number of unique visitors to the subscription page and hence optimize subscriptions.

In the specific case of RDC, one of the main goals of its site subscription strategy is to use the rd.ca to increase subscriptions to the print magazine. Would the full implementation of a subscription conversion strategy be sufficient to reverse the decline in the print magazine subscription rate? That question cannot be answered with any certainty, since, as noted in the introduction, there are several other factors apart from the effectiveness of the RDC site subscription marketing contributing to the long-term decline of its readership. Furthermore, although the results of the tests conducted by the Digital Marketing Team are significant, given that they were not completed, at this stage they may be best viewed as preliminary findings that can be used to guide future research in this area. Nonetheless, despite these qualifications, evidence from the industry gathered elsewhere suggests that a well researched, adequately tested and

effectively implemented site subscription strategy can indeed significantly increase subscriptions sales and thus drive magazine readership and circulation.<sup>33</sup>

The fact that the findings of the Digital marketing Team are based on a survey of the best practice of site subscription promotion strategies across the industry, and the in-house testing and revision of already proven site subscription techniques, provides limited grounds for optimism that they would at least slow down, if not reverse, the rate of decline in RDC's subscription take-up. In any case, it may be hoped that the insights gained through the research conducted by the Team may be of use to all in the industry who are also concerned with developing digital strategies to re-energize print magazine subscription.

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<sup>33</sup> In his article entitled "Crafting the Offer: Navigating the Vagaries of Language and Sketchy Technology," Roy Beagley (2012) states that offers like "two years for the price of one" worked very well, since they were beneficial to both the publisher and the subscriber. Barbara Besser, publisher of *Yoga Journal*, and *Vegetarian Times*, found that SEO tactics and analytics combined with placement and offer testing boosted online subscription sales for these magazines (Mickey 2010a). Steven Kotok, President of *The Week*, increased subscription revenue by using the magazine's existing subscribers to market gift subscriptions to like-minded friends and family (Mickey 2010b).

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