FT exec urges publishers to charge for web content

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Rob Grimshaw, who has headed the newspaper's online operations since June 2008, said the FT circulates around 400,000 print copies a day and has 207,000 subscribers for FT.com.

"As a publication we're halfway to replicating our paying print audience in digital and that's a really big deal for our business overall," Grimshaw said at a panel discussion at the paidContent 2011 conference in New

York.

FT.com also has three million registered users -- readers who can see up to 10 articles a month before being asked to subscribe, he said.

Grimshaw addressed the fears of many publishers that erecting a paywall would result in a significant drop in traffic and online advertising revenue.

"Our digital revenues from subscriptions increased by over 50 percent year over year," he said.

"We've found with this model that there really isn't a trade-off between advertising and subscription because our advertising revenues online also grew by double digits," he said.

The key to charging for content online is "quality and differentiation," Grimshaw said.

"If you've got quality in your content, if you've got uniqueness, if it can't be found anywhere else, then you have an opportunity to charge for that content," he said.

"Go for it... Use the ability of the channel to test and experiment and find the thing that works for you as a publisher."

In the United States, Rupert Murdoch's Wall Street Journal currently charges for full access to WSJ.com and The New York Times said this week that it would begin charging at NYTimes.com "shortly."

Atlantic Media Co. President Justin Smith told the same panel that charging for online content is better suited to financial news outlets like FT and the Wall Street Journal.

"These are very distinct, niche markets with expensive content that's hard to produce," he said.

"Sure, paywalls work well there," but people are unlikely to pay for other content, including his own company's respected magazine The Atlantic, he said.

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