News websites should target 'reward seekers,' researcher finds

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As newspaper sales continue to decline, many news organizations are searching for ways to improve readership and revenues from their online presences. Now, University of Missouri researchers have found that news organizations should target readers with certain personality traits in order to optimize their online viewership. Paul Bolls, an associate professor of strategic communication at the MU School of Journalism and a 2011-2012 MU Reynolds Journalism Institute Fellow, has found that news consumers who have "reward-seeking" personalities are more likely to read their news online and on mobile devices, and to engage with websites, by leaving comments on stories and uploading user-generated content.

In a study accepted for presentation at the 2013 International Communication Association conference in June, Bolls surveyed more than 1000 respondents and placed them into two personality groups: reward seekers and threat avoiders. He found that reward seekers tend to use the Internet liberally, searching out entertainment and [gratification](#), while threat avoiders tend to be more conservative, looking only for information that directly affects them. Bolls found that [respondents](#) identified as reward seekers were much more likely to engage with news websites as well as more likely to use [mobile devices](#) such as smartphones and tablets to consume news. He says this knowledge should direct news organizations to target these reward seekers.

"While threat avoiders may passively view news online from time to time, reward seekers are much more likely to visit news websites and,

once they are there, stay there for longer periods of time," Bolls said. "In order to maximize the amount of revenue they can earn online, news organizations should find ways to specifically target reward seekers and engage them with their websites. If news organizations can keep reward seekers on their sites and [mobile apps](), we have shown that they will willingly view many different pages, which will boost [advertising revenue]()."

Bolls also recommends that news organizations use "brain friendly" designs when building their websites. He says that the brain is engaged through motivation, so the most effective way to get readers to visit and stay on a website is to give them proper motivation, such as invoking emotion with stories and pictures. He also says that the simpler the design, the better.

"The brain can only process so much information at a time," Bolls said. "Too much information can overload it and cancel out understanding and retention. Consuming news and advertising involves receiving information, adding previously held knowledge for context, and then storage of the new information. These steps need to be in balance. If a reader has to work too hard to find the stories they are looking for on a news site, it can defeat their brain's ability to add context and store the new information for the future. Keeping it simple is key."

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia