



# How to Build an Audience That **Search** **Can't Take Away**

NYPA Spring Conference 2026

- How to Build An Audience That Search Can't Take Away

# About Cheryl

- Head of Advisory Programs at The Lenfest Institute for Journalism
- Supporting news organizations in building strategies for financial sustainability and audience growth.
- Previously adjunct faculty at the Poynter Institute and led the Black Media Initiative at CUNY's Newmark J-School.
- Outside of work, Cheryl and her husband run a small contracting business



- How to Build an Audience That Search Can't Take Away

# What we'll cover

## What we'll discuss

- The shifting traffic landscape and what it means for the subscription funnel
- Diversifying channels and moving casual readers to ones you own
- Engagement, retention, and save strategies that moves the needle

## What you'll walk away with

- A better understanding of how AI search summaries are impacting traffic
- A clear understanding of the tactics that can fuel growth despite the changing dynamic
- Tactics and examples of growing owned channels, building habit-and-loyalty, and save strategy

- How to Build an Audience That Search Can't Take Away

# The Landscape

- How to Build an Audience That Search Can't Take Away

# How resilient is your audience strategy?

## Your search exposure

### 1. What share of traffic comes from search?

Average is 40%. Higher than that, you're especially vulnerable.

### 2. What share of subscription starts come from search?

For most publishers it's #1. That's revenue risk, not just traffic risk.

### 3. What's your search conversion rate?

Wide variance – a low rate is also your biggest upside.

## Your resilience beyond search

### 4. What share of newsletter readers convert to paying?

Opens and clicks are gamed. Paid conversion is behavioral.

### 5. What share of readers are known vs. anonymous?

Known users are the ones moving down your funnel.

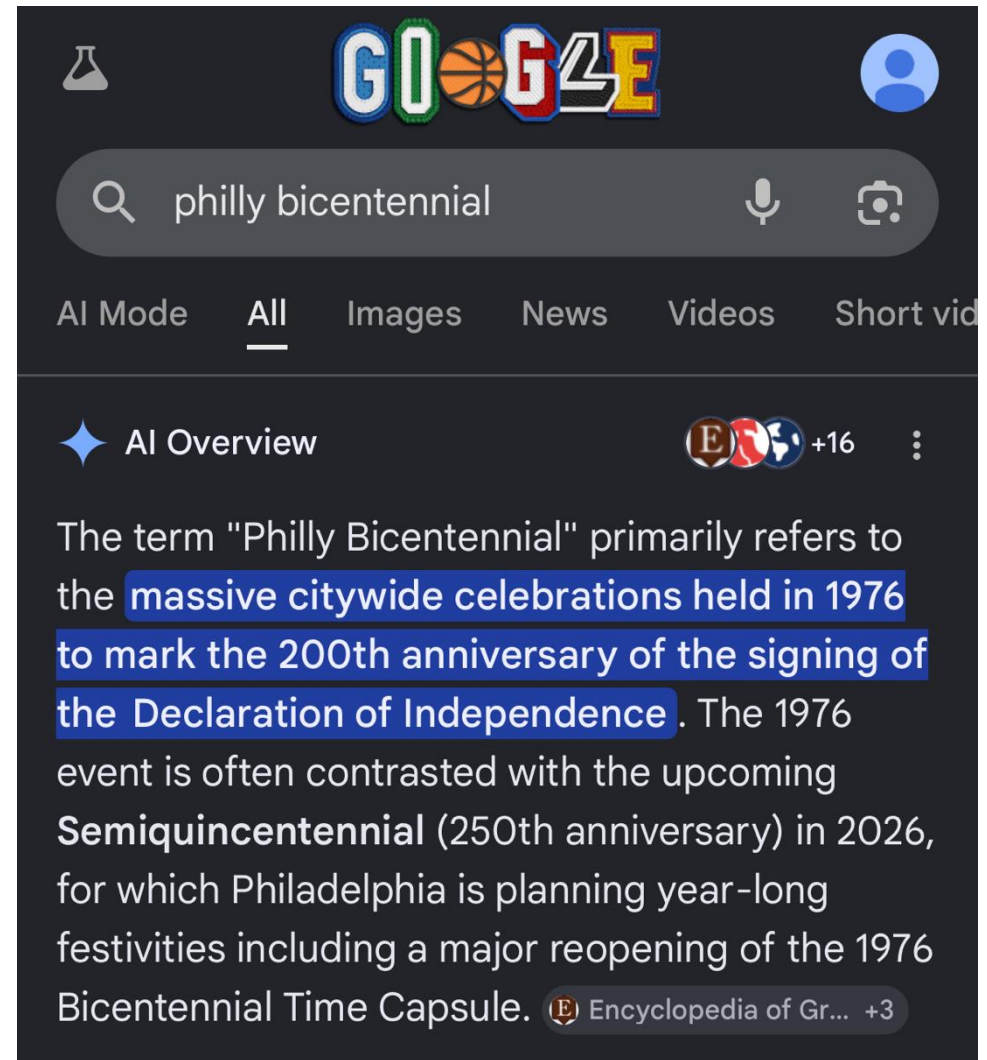
### 6. Which habits bring readers back?

Games, newsletters, commenting, podcasts?

- How to Build an Audience That Search Can't Take Away

# Google AI Overviews: the new top of the page

- **Launched May 2024.** AI-generated answers now sit above the blue links for all U.S. users.
- **Clicks collapse when an overview shows.**
  - CTR fell from 15% to 8% (Pew)
  - 58% fewer clicks on top-ranking pages (Ahrefs)
  - <1% click links inside the overview. (Ahrefs)
- **Zero-click is the new default.**
  - 56% → 69% of searches (May '24 to May '25).
  - News search referrals dropped from 51% to 27% of traffic.



Example: an AI Overview above the traditional search results.

- How to Build an Audience That Search Can't Take Away

# What's happening to news traffic

Mather Economics benchmarks across 660 U.S. news brands:

- Unique visitors fell 13% year-over-year in Q4 2025
- Pageviews down 17% in the same period
- Every region saw declines; no geography was insulated
- December showed stabilization, not continued freefall



- How to Build an Audience That Search Can't Take Away

# What's happening to news traffic

**But not all newsrooms are suffering equally:**

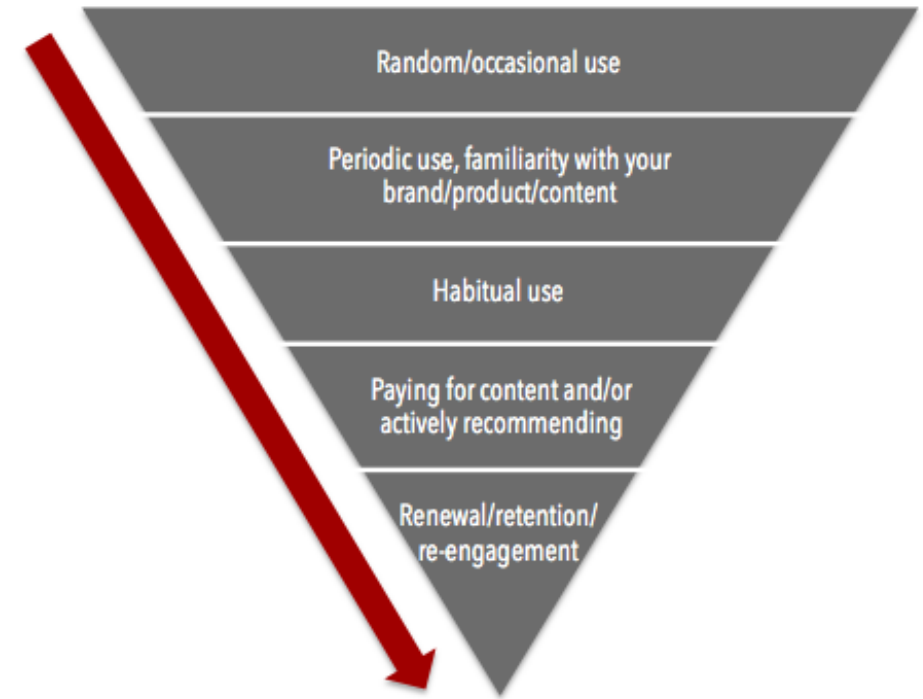
- Smaller regional publishers had the lowest YoY declines
- Newsrooms still investing in SEO fundamentals are outperforming the overall market, even as AI summaries reshape search.

- How to Build an Audience That Search Can't Take Away

# Why shrinking traffic hits hard

Most newsroom subscription models follow a three-stage funnel:

- Broad audience visits your site
- A portion become engaged readers, returning frequently and reading deeply
- A portion of those convert to paying subscribers



Source: Better News

- How to Build an Audience That Search Can't Take Away

# How do we respond?

- **Diversify your channels.** Move casual readers off platforms you don't control (search, social) onto ones you do: newsletters, email, texting, app.
- **Convert more of the traffic you already get.** Known users are ~10× more valuable than anonymous ones. Earn the email before asking for the subscription.
- **Build habit and loyalty.** Newsletters, games, puzzles, commenting, and daily features create routines that measurably increase conversion and reduce churn.
- **Plug the leaks at the bottom.** Easy cancel flows, save offers, win-back campaigns, and card-updater fixes keep more of the subscribers you've earned.

- How to Build an Audience That Search Can't Take Away

# Owned vs. Other audiences

## Owned

- You control the relationship. Every person chose you and keeps choosing you every time they open it.
- More likely to come back and more likely to pay.
- **Goal with this audience:** move non-subscribers to conversion; retain existing subscribers.

## Other Channels

- High potential reach, zero ownership of relationship or data.
- Algorithm changes lead to disruption, especially if highly dependent.
- **Goal with this audience:** Build brand awareness, provide value and move them to one of your owned channels.

- How to Build an Audience That Search Can't Take Away

# Top of the Funnel



- How to Build an Audience That Search Can't Take Away

## Reducing traffic loss

The Lenfest Institute tracked 18 Philadelphia newsrooms' audience traffic from December 2024 through December 2025.

A useful comparison point in the same market, same conditions, same platform volatility.

# 12%

**year-over-year decline in unique visitors across the entire Philadelphia cohort.**

# 6%

**year-over-year decline in unique visitors among the newsrooms that received Lenfest Expert Network audience consulting.**



- How to Build an Audience That Search Can't Take Away

## An example: Cleaning up your site to improve SEO

What did newsrooms in the consulting cohort actually do? A lot of it was unglamorous.

One Philadelphia newsroom we worked with cleaned up 404 pages and fixed broken backlinks as part of a broader site audit – the kind of SEO hygiene most teams know they should do and rarely get to.

**The result:** recovery in organic search traffic, and a noticeable lift in newsletter signups.

- How to Build an Audience That Search Can't Take Away

# Search still matters—here's how to do it right

Going beyond search doesn't mean abandoning it. It still sends real readers – just fewer of them, and only to sites that earn the click.

## What still works:

- Fix the basics: broken links, 404s, stale metadata, slow pages.
- Write for the questions AI can't answer for you: local, specific, first-hand reporting.
- Add structured data and clear bylines so you show up as a trusted source.

- How to Build an Audience That Search Can't Take Away

# Deepen Engagement & Convert

“

The power of the email address, the power of the known user, is 10 times compared to an anonymous user.

Pete Doucette

- How to Build an Audience That Search Can't Take Away

# What newsletter investment looks like in practice



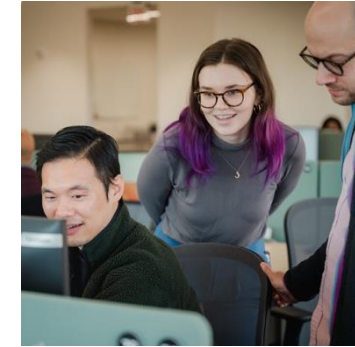
## Non-Local Newsletter

- 2% conversion rate to paid subscribers



## Optimized & Personalized Newsletters

- 30% increase in subscription conversions
- 10% total revenue growth



## Newsletter for younger audiences

- 65% of readers are under 34

- How to Build an Audience That Search Can't Take Away

# Retention & Saves



Habit-forming features

- How to Build an Audience That Search Can't Take Away

# Retention is a system, not a single fix

## Payment & lifecycle triggers

- Proactive outreach at expiring cards, lapsing engagement, and failed payments recovers subscribers who would otherwise quietly disappear.
- What happens when a subscriber tries to cancel is one of the highest-ROI moments you have.

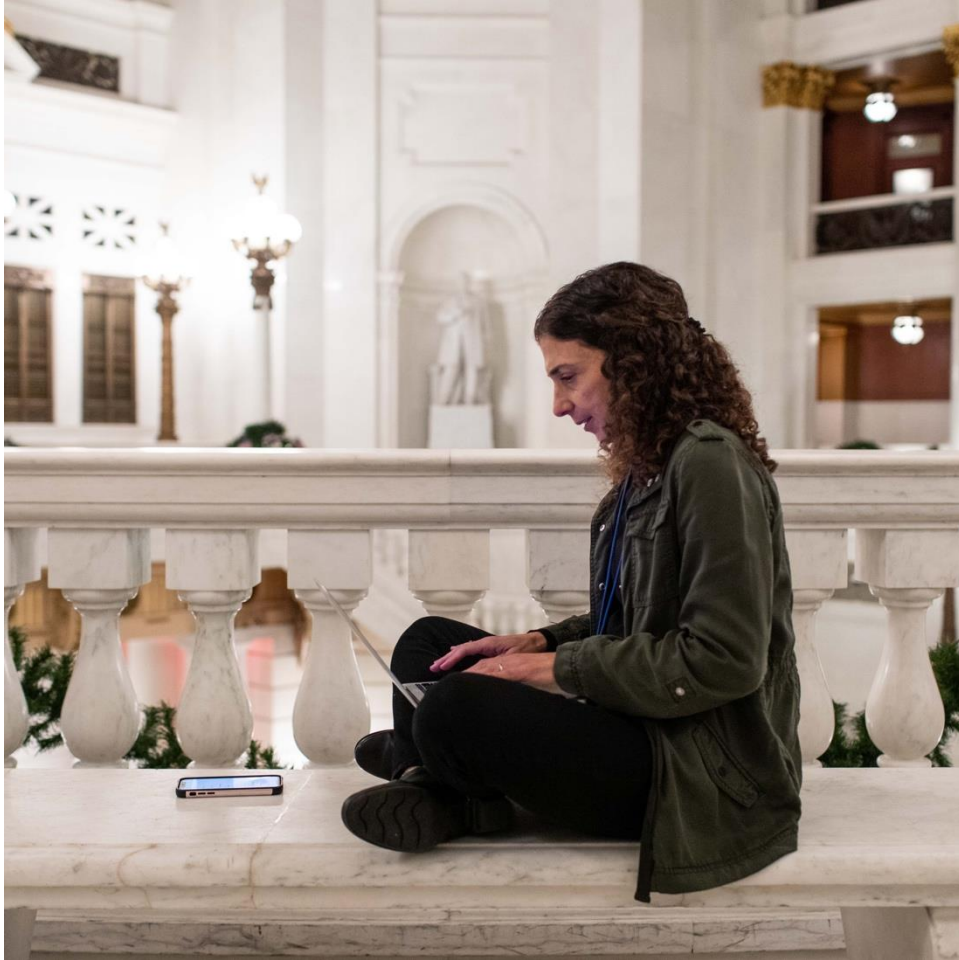
- How to Build an Audience That Search Can't Take Away

# Cancellation & save systems: your most underused tool

Most publishers have no save system at all. When a subscriber clicks cancel, they just cancel.

## **What a save system does:**

- Intercepts the cancellation and presents an alternative: a pause, a discount, or a different plan
- Personalizes the offer based on engagement history
- Tracks save rate as a core business metric



- How to Build an Audience That Search Can't Take Away

## Cancellation & save systems: your most underused tool

- When one major U.S. newspaper allowed online cancellation instead of requiring a phone call, the restart rate among that group increased 45% over six months, with a 2.3% drop in the monthly stop rate. (Mather)
- One regional publisher using dynamic save offers at point of cancellation is achieving a save rate of more than 40%, with an average save price of roughly \$2 per week.

- How to Build an Audience That Search Can't Take Away

# Spokesman Review



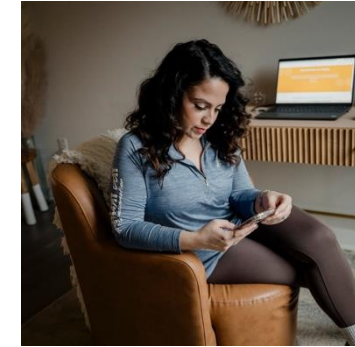
## Grace period texting

- Collected 23% of at-risk payments
- Recovered more than \$100,000 in just 7 months



## Win-back texting

- 14% restarted their subscriptions
- Reactivated more than \$20,000 in recurring weekly revenue



## Credit card expiration

- 39% of contacts updated their payment methods
- Retained an average of \$2,600 in revenue per week

- How to Build an Audience That Search Can't Take Away

# Payment lookback window

One regional publisher made a single technical change to their payment system: they extended the account updater lookback window from 3 months to 1 year.

When an annual subscriber renews, the system now looks back a full year to find their updated card number, rather than only 3 months.

**The result:** a 20% drop in weekly digital churn rate.



- How to Build an Audience That Search Can't Take Away

# Games & Puzzles Reduce Churn

## 1 Wall Street Journal

- Wall Street Journal found that subscribers who play puzzles are significantly less likely to churn.
- After adding games to subscriber onboarding active days rose.

## 2 CherryRoad Media

- Credits games and puzzles with driving annualized churn below 5%.
- Started asking for email and phone number.
- 4,500 people submitted their email this way, 75% of those were new

## 3 Newsday

- Newsday conducted a study and found two major opportunities: food and games
- Upon opt-in, before subscribers even received the first issue, their churn probability dropped 12ppt on average.

- How to Build an Audience That Search Can't Take Away

# Commenting

- One regional publisher found that subscribers who participate in their commenting community have a churn rate nearly 10% lower than non-commenters, and has made building that community a core retention strategy.
- The same publisher's games investment showed over 40% lower churn among players.

**The lesson:** daily habits, whether commenting or games, keep subscribers.



- How to Build an Audience That Search Can't Take Away

# A resilience framework: impact vs. effort

HIGH  
IMPACT

## Do this first – high impact, low effort

- Fix 404s, broken backlinks, slow pages
- Add one save offer at cancel
- Start or grow one newsletter
- Card-updater for failed payments

## Invest here – long-term bets

- Full registration/paywall redesign
- Games, puzzles, or daily habit product
- App or texting channel
- Commenting community at scale

LOW  
IMPACT

## Quick wins & maintenance

- Clean up bylines and metadata
- Add structured data
- Social handles in the footer
- Newsletter sign-up above the fold

## Skip or defer

- Chasing every social platform
- Rebuilding the CMS from scratch
- Heavy SEO-only content plays

LOW EFFORT

HIGH EFFORT

- How to Build An Audience That Search Can't Take Away

# Not sure where to start?

## Lenfest Expert Network

- If the work we just walked through is where you know you need to go and you're not sure where to start, the Lenfest Expert Network is built for exactly this.
- Short engagements (1–6 months) tailored to your challenges.
- Covers audience & revenue, product, editorial, finance, org design, and tech.
- Free for U.S. local newsrooms. Backed by Klingenstein, Knight, and Lenfest.



# Questions?

**Want to go deeper on any of today's topics?**

The Lenfest Expert Network is where you go to figure out which of these moves makes sense for your newsroom. **Scan to book a free office hours session.**



# Appendix

- How to Build an Audience That Search Can't Take Away

# A brief history of how readers find us

- **Web 1.0: the destination era.** Readers had to know your URL to find you. Traffic depended on brand recognition and bookmarks.
- **The search era.** Google indexed the open web and sent interested readers straight to the article that answered their question, a direct pipeline from intent to your site.
- **The social era.** Facebook, Twitter, and others pushed content into feeds, but their business is time-on-platform, not sending readers out. Referral traffic became volatile and algorithm-dependent.
- **The AI era.** Since Google rolled out AI Overviews in May 2024, search increasingly answers questions in place. The ten blue links are disappearing, and with them, a steady stream of visitors.

- How to Build an Audience That Search Can't Take Away

# Reducing traffic loss

Two newsrooms in the consulting group achieved year-over-year audience growth.

These are small, independent news organizations, not regional publishers with large teams.

**Same market. Same conditions. Half the decline. Two grew.**



- How to Build an Audience That Search Can't Take Away

# Why shrinking traffic hits hard

## The industry reality:

- Median publisher converts about 0.6% of visitors to subscribers (top performers reach ~1.4%)
- The median monthly digital subscription churn rate is 4.6%.
  - That means if you start January with 1,000 subscribers and do nothing to retain them, you'll end December with roughly 570.



- How to Build an Audience That Search Can't Take Away

# Diverse Audience Streams

## 1 Owned Channels

Owned channels you control:

- Website
- Newsletters
- Texting
- App

## 2 Search

- Google
- Bing
- For some (Google Discover)

## 3 Social & Others

- Facebook
- TikTok
- X
- YouTube
- Apple News/Google Discover

# 25 times more likely

loyal readers are 25x more likely to subscribe than casual visitors from Facebook, according to the Seattle Times.

# 7%

Better retention of paying subscribers who are also subscribed to the newsletter, compared to those who are not.

- How to Build an Audience That Search Can't Take Away

# Takeaways

## 1 Grow your owned channels

- Stick to the fundamentals of audience growth: SEO, social strategy, and the basics.
- Be aggressive in moving casual readers to owned channels.

## 2 Build habit & loyalty

Newsletters, games, and comment communities are great ways to keep people coming back.

## 3 Build a Save Strategy

- Easy to cancel
- Provides a save offer
- Has win-back campaigns
- Updates cards to reduce involuntary cancellations