

The Wall Street Journal:

Redesigning for Today's Platforms

For 125 years, the *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) has been a venerated newspaper with a focus on business and a well-educated, discerning readership. It consistently ranks as one of the top publications worldwide in terms of number of subscribers (currently approximately 2.8 million). Despite its pedigree as one of the most recognizable and respected newspapers in the world, WSJ has also made an effort to stay on the cutting edge in an industry that has seen significant disruption in the past decade. It was a pioneer in developing a pay wall for its digital content in 1997, which met with skepticism and even ridicule at first, but is now increasingly common among online newspapers. WSJ was also one of the first news organizations with its own app for the iPad, released in 2010.

From 2010 to 2015, however, WSJ began to lag behind other newspapers and websites as devices became smaller, more streamlined, and more specialized. Although it was a first mover into the mobile space, other papers like the *Financial Times* and *USA Today* made sweeping changes to their websites and mobile offerings during this time period that better suited mobile browsing. WSJ had not redesigned its website since 2008. To make matters worse, in 2015, Google updated its search algorithms to prioritize sites that are optimized for mobile devices, which caused WSJ's search results to suffer. The company wasn't alone in that regard, with nearly half of the websites belonging to Fortune 500 companies failing to achieve "mobile-friendliness," according to Google, including a surprising 29% of retail sites, where mobile search is critical to maintaining revenue growth. However, with many publishing companies already struggling to adjust to the new online world, WSJ decided it had no more time to waste.

In 2015, WSJ undertook a complete redesign of its website and mobile apps across multiple platforms. It released new iPad and Android apps with a variety of new features to improve user experience, and followed those up with the release of apps for the Apple Watch and for the Windows 10 operating system. It also added its first mobile-only product, an app that features a curated digest of 10 stories that is refreshed during the



day, patterned after the What's News column that appears on the front page of the print version. *WSJ* also launched a London-specific app called *WSJ City* that provides frequent updates on the most significant business news in London. In 2016, *WSJ* announced plans to launch more apps with specific functions akin to What's News and *WSJ City*. The paper also launched the *WSJ.D* niche site, which focuses on technology news, analysis, commentary, and product reviews. The overhaul was more than just cosmetic. Organizationally, it also integrated the team that works on new technology products and design elements into the news room, so that the editors themselves can have direct input into shaping the technological future of *WSJ*. This move has helped *WSJ* keep pace with other top newspapers, including the *Washington Post*, which has almost 50 engineers working in its newsroom. In 2016, *WSJ* also announced continued changes to the organizational structure of its newsroom to improve its digital efforts further.

One of the most critical objectives of the overhaul was to ensure that the user experience was consistent across all of the different devices that readers use today and in the future. Being able to save an article on the iPad and open the app on your iPhone or log in to the website and see the same article with your progress saved was a top priority for *WSJ*. The number of options for navigating articles was reduced for simplicity and ease of use, with the number of exposed navigation options dropping by nearly half on many pages. In the past, options were different on different devices and appeared in different places on the screen, confusing readers attempting to move from one device to another. Using an iOS feature called Handoff, *WSJ* allows users to save stories across all of their devices and to carry over the "graying out" of article headlines that have been read across those devices as well. It also allows users to access its Watchlist stock portfolio service across all devices.

In addition to making the user experience more consistent across devices, *WSJ* hoped to improve it. The app versions of *WSJ* are more responsive and more visually appealing. Graphical elements are more prominent and even interactive. The app loads faster, which had been an area where it trailed its competitors in the past. *WSJ* wanted the reading experience to feel natural on any device, which required it to optimize its apps for the screen size of the latest generation of Apple and Android phones. As devices continue to evolve in size, so too will the *WSJ* app experience. On a desktop, users can mouse over and click precise areas, but on a mobile device, users can swipe and tilt the device. In general, *WSJ* seeks to minimize interactions requiring precise taps on mobile as well as to reduce the amount of the screen that is fixed from page to page. Making interactive maps suitable for mobile can be particularly difficult, but *WSJ* is fine-tuning its approach.

Most of the feedback on the design changes has been positive. Elements that many readers had requested were added, including a "Market Data Center" featured prominently on the new website home page with essential information on the status of the stock markets that day. The iOS app also includes a Journal widget that places top stories of the day alongside other daily notifications, such as appointments and weather alerts. Users can swipe directly from their widget menu to move straight to the story within the *WSJ* app. From a user perspective, the new site and apps provide a large number of content choices, while also offering a variety of advertising opportunities, which is beneficial from *WSJ's* perspective.

As traffic continues to shift to the mobile platform, providing these advertising opportunities will become increasingly important to *WSJ's* continued success. In 2008, 10% of *WSJ's* traffic came via mobile devices. That figure sits at 55% in 2016 and continues to grow quickly. *WSJ* has about 900,000 digital-only subscribers, trailing the *New York Times* (1 million) and coming in ahead of the *Financial Times* (over 520,000), but most of its 1.5 million print edition subscribers also have all-access subscriptions. Although measuring subscription numbers has become more complicated as the number of digital devices and reading platforms has grown, the trend away from print and towards digital has long been clear throughout the industry. But despite the proliferation of the mobile platform, two-thirds of *WSJ's* subscribers visit the website home page each month. Realizing this, *WSJ* included the website as a key component of its redesign. As it turns out, readers use whatever device is convenient at the time—desktop in the office and mobile devices when moving about.

Another effect of the wider array of options for *WSJ* subscribers is that different trends and reading patterns emerge on each platform. To capture this new data, *WSJ* is upgrading its analytics capabilities, with the goal of using them in the newsroom and in its larger business strategy. One example of this approach already delivering results is the breakdown of device usage by *WSJ* readers. Tablet usage of the *WSJ* app is growing at approximately 10% per year, but smartphone usage is growing by 30% to 40%, suggesting that the smartphone app experience should be *WSJ's* major focus going forward. Additionally, *WSJ* has found that app users are more active and engaged than web browser users, spending more time in the app and reading more articles than other types of users. App users are also likelier to maintain their subscriptions than any other type of user. *WSJ* also dropped its LinkedIn share button in 2016 because its analytics indicated that it siphoned off more traffic than it returned.

Many of the features that *WSJ* engineers are working on are tailored specifically for the app experience. One goal is to provide live video coverage via mobile devices. Another is to improve push alerts to make them more relevant to users. By analyzing reader data to understand what types of stories are most appealing to individual users or different demographics of users, *WSJ* can provide custom push alerts that are likeliest to motivate readers to swipe and move to the app. Another feature in development is a “Read-it-later” button that allows users to tag stories on any platform and view them later within their app. *WSJ* will also continue to optimize its Apple Watch app, which allows users to tilt the watch while looking at a headline to make that story available on the iPhone app.

Going forward, *WSJ* hopes to begin work on other features that will help in the future as early as possible. This means the paper will be continuously redesigning itself on a rolling basis. By integrating its engineering and product teams into the newsroom, it is much better positioned to achieve this level of development. For example, *WSJ* is one of the first organizations experimenting with virtual reality technology to improve its reporting. To that end, it updated its apps with built-in 360-degree video and virtual reality capability. With its sweeping redesign across all platforms, *WSJ* has once again solidified its status as an industry leader, even in this brave new world of news media.

SOURCES: “Small Screens, Full Art, Can’t Lose: Despite Their Size, Phones Open Up New Opportunities for Interactives,” by Shan Wang, *Niemanlab.org*, March 10, 2016; “WSJ Drops Publishing Frenemy LinkedIn’s Share Button,” by Lucia Moses, *Digiday.com*, February 5, 2016; “The Wall Street Journal Plans Three More Vertical Apps,” by Lucinda Southern, *Digiday.com*, January 22, 2016; “General Advertising Rate Card 2016,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 4, 2016; “News Outlets Left and Right (and Up, Down, and Center) Are Embracing Virtual Reality Technology,” by Shan Wang, *Niemanlab.org*, November 9, 2015; “Wall Street Journal Launches In-App 360° Video and Virtual Reality,” *Globalnewswire.com*, November 4, 2015; “Wall Street Journal Launches ‘WSJ City’ Mobile App for London Readers,” *Dowjones.com*, November 3, 2015; “How The Wall Street Journal Creates Mobile-Friendly Interactives,” by Madalina Ciobanu, *Journalism.co.uk*, October 14, 2015; “Newsonomics: 10 Numbers on The New York Times’ 1 Million Digital-Subscriber Milestone,” by Ken Doctor, *Niemanlab.org*, August 6, 2015; “Wall Street Journal Debuts Its ‘What’s News’ App,” by Joe Pompeo, *Capitalnewyork.com*, August 26, 2015; “Push It: How the Wall Street Journal Plans to Make Its Push Alerts More Personal,” by Joseph Lichterman, *Niemanlab.org*, August 13, 2015; “The Wall Street Journal Is Targeting Its Loyal Subscribers with Its New News Digest Mobile App,” by Shan Wang, *Niemanlab.org*, August 5, 2015; “New Google Algorithm Changes Prompts Wall Street Journal Website Redesign,” by Steve Odart, *Ixxus.com*, April 28, 2015; “After the Launch of its Long-Awaited Web Redesign, The Wall Street Journal Hopes to Spur Innovation,” by Joseph Lichterman, *Niemanlab.org*, April 21, 2015; “Newsonomics: The Wall Street Journal Is Playing a Game of Digital Catchup,” *Niemanlab.org*, by Ken Doctor, April 21, 2015.