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Upgrading to club class

Everyone loves getting the inside curve on something new ahead of the crowd, and while glossy magazines used to do this with features about what was on trend, now magazines are starting to go one step further. They want to offer their readers insider access that, they hope, readers will be prepared to pay more for, and to stay committed to the title for longer.

As magazines see print sales slow (though nowhere near as fast as newspapers), the idea of magazine readers joining a “club” is gaining momentum. This is usually tied to subscription to the print issue, but adds a lot of more treats.

Over at the classic comic the *Beano*, there’s a recently introduced club annual membership at £20, which includes a letter from the Beano editor, a fan pack with fluffy Gnasher badge and even a special edition Christmas card, all delivered from Beano Towers. In 2024 it is offering an “exclusive” online event for members for the first time. The blurb is clearly fashioned to attract parents, and grandparents, who might have once been members of the Dennis the Menace fan club in the 1970s and 80s and proudly worn the famous badge. It’s all a bit pricier than the original membership fee of 75p, but then again it comes with a lot more bells and whistles attached.

At a different end of the age spectrum, *Good Housekeeping* is modelling a new club class for 2024. The 100-year-old magazine emailed prospective members in March and April to hype up the launch of its VIP members’ club. There’s a waiting list to join and an exclusive founding members’ deal. They hint at what is going to be on offer, but suggest the rest is being kept under wraps. What we know so far is that there will be a mix of live events, members-only conversations with editors, free ebooks, and special guests. Other tempting appetisers are access to the GH testing team, who have famously pushed and prodded products for decades, and a free ticket to the annual GH four-day event in London. Hearst, GH’s owner, is keeping the price under its hat, so far.

Another heritage title is bringing a horticultural twist to the club concept. *Gardeners’ World*’s offer includes the opportunity for members to ask its experts questions about gardening headaches such as how to see off those pesky slugs or tackle black rot on your favourite tree. You also get discounts on plants and seeds. Ed Garcia, head of retention at *GW*’s owner Immediate Media, said half the magazine’s print subscribers, 90,000 people, had signed up for this premium-level service. Meanwhile film fans have the chance to get up close and personal with Hollywood legends such as Michael Keaton and James Cameron if they join the VIP club at *Empire* magazine. This along with access to insider podcasts and the chance to meet with members of the Empire editorial team, plus invites to advance film releases, is drawing in the crowds. According to media giant Bauer (which owns Empire) it is testing out the club concept with other magazines too.

This idea of a premium price being tied to exclusivity is not new. Bricks and mortar members’ clubs have been around for centuries, and magazines have experimented with fan clubs but having a magazine “club” for an additional fee which also includes in-person events and special access to experts on a regular basis does feel like a new take on an old theme. Exclusivity is definitely on trend. Music magazine *NME* has just made the move back into print but is deliberately making finding a copy of those new issues a challenge. It promised

only a limited print run, available in just a few shops, leaving fans desperate to get hold of a copy, having to search high and low. All in all, this is the opposite of the pile 'em, sell 'em cheap sales technique, NME clearly believes creating hard to find collectors' items will give them higher value, and a bit of a buzz around actually getting hold of a copy.

It looks like magazines are betting on premium pricing and the allure of exclusivity to give an extended life to print, and their brands. This feels like a gamble that's worth taking, and could produce a way forward for publishing.

Rachael Jolley is a lecturer in magazine journalism at Cardiff University. She is a former editor in chief at Index on Censorship magazine, and has worked in magazines, covering everything from science to travel, for many years. She is currently working on co-authoring a book on the future of magazines.