

5 Things to Consider to Before Building your Church's Online Presence

There is no denying that social media is where a majority of the “Nones” and “Dones” hang out. It can feel like a scary, negative place. Or, we have tried posting on Facebook or boosting a Facebook ad but did not get any traction. It is no wonder that most busy churches give their online presence minimal efforts, if any attention at all.

Think of it as the modern day “field”, where John Wesley stuffed down his extreme distaste for preaching outside of the church walls and persistently met the common man where they could be found after the toil of the day. In other words, by the grace of God, Wesley brought the Good News to the town square, which is now Cyberspace. Even though it is not always comfortable and we think our old, clunky website and static Facebook page (the last post was 2017) is just fine, we must endeavor to bring our best there too.

1. Online Strategy - You need to have a strategy or a plan regarding how new people will engage with your church online. Think of your website as the landing pad that you can always link to for more information about who you are and the good work you do.

How would a new family engage with your online platforms? Perhaps your potential guest sees a Facebook post on a friend's page about a Trunk or Treat event. She and her 2 kids are new to your town, so she is not sure which area is safe. She clicks on the event, which has a link to your website. On the website, a Google Map shows your location, which is not far from her house. She clicks on your ministries tab and sees that you have a Wednesday night program for children and youth and even a book club for single moms. She also notices that you collect food and clothes for families at her daughter's elementary school. It is a definite maybe.

Your members get loads of information from the pulpit, bulletins, newsletter, word of mouth, etc. Providing an easy to navigate online information stream that serves the needs of people who do not attend every Sunday is essential. Ask a few newer people to serve as a focus group as you are in the building phase.

2. Shift to Outside Focus - As you build your online presence, it is important to explain to your congregation the intention to shift to an outside-the-church focus, if they are not already aware of it. Most churches will say that they are friendly but it will serve your congregation well to “walk the talk” that you represent online.

Bishop Bob Farr noted at one of his “friendly” churches that his congregation would greet a new person but then immediately turn back to their tribe. He initiated a rule that during that awkward time between church and Sunday School, you could chat with your friends/family for 5 minutes but then you had to

Speak with people you did not know well and even better, invite them to eat with your tribe after church.

One big change that might be a challenge is that you will need to take more images and videos. Younger people will already have their go-to pose, but some members might feel snapping pics during the service is not appropriate. You need to explain that the purpose is to show people outside the walls that the folks in your pews are happy and welcoming.

I worked for a church for several months as the communications director and during that time, took hundreds of images every Sunday and during events. At first, people were a bit uncomfortable with someone taking pictures and videos of them at church, but when I caught special moments and shared them on Facebook, it created excitement. While my primary intention was to create some organic engagement online, an unexpected result was that current members could see what their church looked like from an outsider's perspective and it made them proud and motivated to reach out in different ways.

3. Create a Communications Team & Build an Image Library - Before you start building your new website, task a team of people to start creating a library of photos. Most churches do not have a specific staff member or volunteer responsible for catching the Holy Spirit moving or those special moments that build community. A DSLR camera is great but some cell phones have the capability of taking better images and videos than some cameras. Professional images taken from free sites like Pixabay are great in a pinch, but most viewers will be suspicious of a church in rural NM where everyone is dressed like a hipster.

There are some important guidelines about professional looking images. Encourage your team to get up front and catch the close shots. Typically, church images are taken from the back of the Sanctuary, so as not to disrupt the service. There is admittedly a balance. You do not want your photographer to be so distracting that they ruin the service. There are angles and zoom lenses that help, but it is best to have a discussion with the pastor and choir director to decide what is acceptable.

4. Online/Social Media Policy - You need to create an Online/ Social Media Policy. A critical consideration is how you ask permission to share images and video. Do not take photos of children unless you have permission. Most children who are regular attendees will have image permission forms on file. If you can post an announcement asking that anyone who does not want their image shared online to contact you, it enables you to build a better safe list. Custody battles, foster care rules, and stalkers are some reasons why you need to be careful about the images you post. For programs where you invite the community, you might ask participants to fill out a contact card where you can ask permission to take photos. One idea is to place a bright sticker on people

who do not want their pictures to be shared. If that is not possible, the best recommendation is to take photos of children from behind. Never tag children or locations.

Your staff and volunteers who have online administrator responsibilities must be aware that they are speaking for/as the church. While a youth director wants to be like her young, edgy charges, she must follow guidelines on what is acceptable to post online. For example, you might mandate that there will be no political posts or that secular music is allowed provided that it does not include explicit lyrics or images. Will you delete potentially offensive comments or ask to engage with the poster privately? Activity on social media happens quickly. It is best to have your response plan in place before anything harmful occurs.

5. Budget – Many churches are on very strict budgets; however, if you consider your online presence as one of the most effective evangelism, discipleship-making efforts, it is worth the money and staff time. It does not cost a lot to build and support a website and buy a few Facebook ads. For example, Squarespace offers just about everything that you might need for a basic website for \$18/month. The platform allows you to add Google maps, online giving and link your social media directly to the site. It is relatively easy to build, maintain and it looks clean and professional. You can set an annual budget to boost your Facebook ads and reach a specific demographic that you could not reach otherwise.

Entering Cyberspace - Cyberspace can be intimidating, but if we are serious about our mission - *To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world*, we must go where the people are and not half-heartedly.

This concept of online evangelism is a Conference initiative. We will continue to build on this shared knowledge and go there together. If you need help or coaching, please contact Alli Newsom, Conference Communications Director at 505-255-8786, ext. 111 or alli@nmconfum.com.