

Social Media for Small Churches

Using social media efficiently and effectively

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Introduction

Church leaders are being called to use and engage with members through social media. There are many platforms available and more being developed every day. How can a busy church leader, especially those over smaller congregations where resources are stretched thin, keep up with the demands of social media? It may seem overwhelming, but it is possible to successfully keep active in social media when time is limited.

This paper will help church leaders and communicators navigate the social media world and learn how to manage their accounts efficiently and effectively. We will begin with a brief overview of why churches should join or become more active on social media. Next, we will explore the basics of two top social media sites, Facebook and Twitter. These two sites are great to get you started and are interconnected, which makes things even easier. Then, we will explore a few strategies and tools to help manage one or multiple social media sites. This will be especially helpful for those who are working in their position as volunteers and do not have a lot of extra time to devote to maintaining social media accounts. Finally, we will look at how to begin your social media journey. This will include a discussion on how to determine what would work best for your congregation and establishing a social media plan.



Everyone Is Doing It

Maybe you have been told you need to get on social media or expand your reach because everyone else is doing it. Well, everyone else is out on social media and churches are no exception. But, that is not the right reason to go out and create a Facebook or Twitter account for your church. Our social media use should be intentional and informed, not impulsive or forced.

Why Should Churches Tweet?

Wise (2014) quotes Mark Hanson, an American Evangelical Lutheran Church archbishop, who wisely said, “No longer is the role of the church to own and distribute information. The role of the church is to gather and distribute and connect” (p. 95). Church leaders are being called to not only preach to the congregation during a Sunday service, but they must now actively engage the congregation while sharing the information they have gathered. Wise himself stated, “We need to rethink the way we interact with the digital culture. Sharing is a new way of life. There are no more one-way streets. Everything is participatory. A new media culture is not content to sit idly by” (p. 97). Members are now looking for ways to interact with the church (ministers and members) and get engaged. Church leaders need to meet this need by finding ways to create dialogue between themselves and the members as well as between members.

Social media sites provide an ideal tool to engage in this desired dialogue with members. As Davis (2014) put it, “Billions, yes billions, of people are conversing and relating on social media. Simply put, people are present and where people are present the church must be as well” (p. 6). Since there are so many people active on social media, it provides a place to go out and meet the people where they are congregating. If you have a desire to reach more of the younger generation, this becomes even more relevant.

Sites such as Facebook or Twitter also provide tools such as posts, messaging, commenting, liking, and sharing that encourage interaction and

conversation. These tools are also easy to access through apps on smartphones, so even busy people, like a minister, can access the conversation 24/7 if they wish.

Tools of the Trade

Since social media is so important and a vital communication tool for churches to use, we will cover some of the basics about two of the most common platforms, Facebook and Twitter. A high percentage of social media users are on one or both of these platforms, across generations, so they are good ones to start with. The two sites are also interconnected, which makes it even easier for church leaders to efficiently utilize both.

Facebook

Facebook is the social media site with the most registered members; if it was a country it would be “the third largest nation in the world” (Davis, 2014, p. 6). If you were to choose only one social media platform to use, Facebook should be your choice. You will find members of all ages on Facebook and it provides multiple tools to connect with members.

Churches can create pages that members can “like” or join. You can then post messages that members will see when they log in to Facebook or visit your page. Posts could include daily verses, inspirational quotes from sermons, or reminders about upcoming events or deadlines. To really engage your audience, you should post open-ended questions (ex. How has God blessed you this week?), opinion polls (ex. What color should we paint the new Sunday School classroom?), or encourage people to share their photos from recent events (or another fun twist would be sharing old photos around an anniversary date).

It is recommended to post a minimum of five times a week, but ideally you would want to post up to ten times including a few photos each week (p. 15). Photos are a great way to visually engage your members and create an identify for your church (ex. We are friendly and like to have fun!).

Twitter

Twitter is another social media site, but provides a whole different medium for conversation. Twitter is a microblogging platform with a 140-character limit for each post. As Hunter (2013) shared, “Our words are limited, but that does not mean our message has to be. But it does mean that every tweet has to be intentional” (p. 183). Twitter holds great potential for connecting with and engaging members or “followers” in the Twitterverse.

Twitter had a different beginning than Facebook, which began with college students. Twitter on the other hand, “began with older generations and then Generations Y and Z started to embrace Twitter” (Qualman, 2013, p. 72). Currently, “the fastest growing demographic on Twitter is the 55 to 64 year age bracket” (Davis, 2014, p. 5). But, close to half of the users are in the 18-34 range, closely followed by the 35-44 age group (faithHighway, p. 6). So, overall, Twitter is another good platform to reach many generations.

With the word limit, sometimes you have to get creative about getting your message out. But, there are many great uses for Twitter. You can use tweets, similar to Facebook, to share Bible verses, snippets from sermons, or event announcements. For engaging your followers, you should again include questions and other opportunities for members to respond and comment. Photos are also highly encouraged to increase the likelihood your tweet will be noticed and retweeted (shared). Twitter also relies heavily on the infamous hashtag (#). Facebook has also started incorporating hashtags, so we will explore that topic and its potential a little further.

Hashtags

Hashtags, as indicated by the “#” symbol, are “used to mark a phrase that will allow for marketing or searching” (Hunter, 2013, 25). By tagging something with a hashtag, it is categorized with other tweets of the same type. This offers an opportunity for churches to connect their members and their tweets. It is highly recommended that churches establish a general hashtag for members to use when tweeting about or to the church. An

example of one could be “#YourChurch”. Keep it short (they count towards the 140-characters) and easy, but recognizable as your church name. If you hold a large, special event, you can also create a special tweet for the church and members to use, like “#YChurchBlockParty,” when talking about the event. The hashtag can also be used to create excitement building up to the event. As mentioned above, Facebook now allows hashtags, so the church hashtags can be used across platforms.

Connecting Facebook and Twitter

Hashtags are just one way Facebook and Twitter are interconnected. Searching for a hashtag does not connect the two sites, but the use of hashtags allows for multiple uses for the special tags you may create. Also, if you find an article you would like share with members, most blog sites allow you to share with both your Facebook and Twitter sites. This is especially helpful if you, yourself are creating the blog post. You can also post the same message on both sites. There are tools that allow you to create one post and then post it on both sites at the same time. This can be a great time saver especially when you are recommended to post so often each day/week. In the next section, we will explore these helpful, time-saving tools.

Time-Saving Tools and Strategies

In the last section, we discussed the recommended number of posts for both Facebook and Twitter. Both numbers many seem unrealistic for those who have a life outside of social media. Thankfully there are tools available that make those numbers a reality. These tools allow you to set up scheduled posts and tweets, so you can take an hour at the beginning of the week to prepare for the week. Of course, unexpected things will happen and you may have to post an unexpected tweet, but that is simple enough. It is also important to not just set up the posts and forget about the accounts. You must still check throughout the day to see if there are comments or tweets to reply to. Social media users expect timely replies and replying to followers is

the best way to create that open dialogue mentioned earlier. But, the following tools allow for more efficient and effective use of your time (less time posting, more time replying and interacting).

- Buffer—A nice managing site for Facebook and Twitter, it “sends posts per your schedule. Simply compose a post and it fills the next open slot. You're able to buffer days and weeks in advance” (Davis, 2014, p. 17).
- HootSuite—A site that allows you to access both your Twitter and Facebook account in one place. You can schedule posts to both sites ahead of time and monitor activity.
- Tweetdeck—Similar to HootSuite, but allows a team to access the dashboard with the Twitter and Facebook account.
- GroupTweet— Do you have other people on your team that could help monitor the Twitter account? “Create a more dynamic Twitter account with multiple authors” (Qualman, 2013, p. 227).

These tools are only a small sampling of hundreds of sites that offer assistance in managing social media. You can start with these, but feel free to explore other options to find what works best for you and your needs.

Another time-saving strategy is taking advantage of the ability to “Share” posts on Facebook or “Retweet” in Twitter. These two options allow you to share with your followers what others have posted. You are able to post relevant, engaging information on your site, without having to take the time to develop or create the content yourself. One example of this on Facebook could be sharing a particularly inspiring blog post about loving your neighbor. On Twitter, perhaps someone you follow shared a moving quote from a Christian author; retweet the post and share it with your own followers. The important thing to remember is keeping the shared content relevant. Perhaps you have a theme of “faith” for the month. Try to keep the content you share in line with the theme. Do not let this limit what you share, but let it help guide you to make a deeper impact on followers.

Starting the Journey

Once you decide to start or increase your social media use, it is important to start with a social media plan.

Making a Plan

There are many templates and examples available online, but here are a few basic questions you can answer to get started.

- What are the needs of your congregation?
- What social media site would reach the most members?
- What are your resources (people, time, money)
- What is your goal with social media?
- What are some realistic, measurable short-term objectives?
- What are some realistic, measurable long-term objectives?

After you establish a basic plan, the next step would be to determine a schedule for your social media posts. It is better to start small, get established, and then expand the weekly posts. As Hunter (2013) shared, “whatever standard you set today is what you will be doing in three or nine months” (p. 12). Setting a standard of six tweets a day can be a lofty goal when you first begin, so it is better to start with two or three and perhaps work towards six tweets a day. Starting too quickly can also lead you to burn out quicker. Hunter went on to say, “It is better to not have a social media presence than to have one that shows you do not care” (p. 71). A Twitter page that consistently posts three inspiring, engaging tweets a day, with a lot of activity from followers will make a bigger impact than a page that had a lot of activity three months ago, but appears almost abandoned now. Followers will only see the *now*, not the *then*.

One way to get ideas of what to post would be to explore the sites of similar churches. Look what other churches in your area are posting on their social media. Pay attention to the number of followers they have compared to have many people are actively engaging with the site, as in commenting, liking, sharing photos, or tagging the church in their own posts. These engagement

indicators will help you see what works and what does not. Keep in mind that what works for one congregation, may not work for another, but this exploration of other similar sites will help you get started.

Intentional Communication

Challies (2011) said, “The Bible reveals that we are created and called to fulfill God’s mandate: that we go into all the world, faithfully stewarding the world God has created and the message he has given us” (loc. 98). We are called to share God’s word with everyone and social media provides a great medium through which to reach many. Technology is a gift from God, but in sinful, human hands, it can do evil. This is why it is important to ensure our use of these God-given gifts is intentional.

Challies went on to share, “The things we create to assist us in overcoming the consequences of the curse [sin] also seek to dominate us, drawing our hearts away from God rather than drawing us toward him in dependence and faith” (loc. 261). This holds true for social media. Perhaps you have heard about the “addicting” nature of social media. That could be one reason you have avoided getting active or involved with social media. This is a reasonable concern. There is an inherently addictive nature of monitoring how many people are following you and sharing or retweeting posts. This drive for connection is human nature; “At the root of human existence is our great need for connection [...] Connection is the very core of what makes us human and the very means by which we express our humanity” (Rice, 2009, p. 28).

It is important to ensure the connection we seek is Godly. The connection should be in the fellowship of fellow believers or with those who are seeking God. The connection or needs we seek to fulfill should not be for personal gain, to boost our ego, or “make the church look good.” Instead it should be used to help us better serve the congregation and spread God’s word. As Challies (2013) also said, “It can and must be used in ways that honor and glorify God,” not ourselves (loc. 163).

As Cheong (2011) shared, “In recent years, social media have similarly been promoted to extend fellowship between believers, deepen intimacy between pastors and their congregational members, and sustain a ‘church without walls’ or church life beyond Sunday” (p. 23). Facebook and Twitter (and the many other social media sites) can be great tools for extending that sense of fellowship members experience every Sunday throughout the week and into the online world if done with Godly intentions.

Conclusion

We are called to spread God’s word and do His work here on Earth. Social media is a wonderful tool to reach not only members of one congregation, but hundreds, thousands, or millions of others with one click of the mouse. To reach so many, it does require work, dedication, and prayer. As mentioned in the previous section, it is important to always enter this work with Godly intentions and a prayerful heart.

This paper provided a brief overview of why churches need to get started or become more active on social media. One of the main reasons is we live in a digital age where people desire a two-way conversation rather than just receiving information. Next, we explored the basics of Facebook and Twitter and how they are connected. Then we explored a few time-saving tools and strategies, like scheduling posts ahead of time, to get even the busiest church leaders more active on social media. Finally, we discussed the importance of intentional, Godly use of social media. No matter how many “best practices” you follow, your social media journey will only be truly successful with prayer and looking to God and The Bible for guidance.

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