

## **Connecting the Local Church: Social Media Best Practices**

**Advice compiled by Lindsey Solomon of United Methodist Communications**

If your church has not yet embraced social media as a communications tool, now may be the time. Church members should see their place of worship as a place of both spiritual and social connection. Through social media, your organization can provide a small mirror of that environment online for members and seekers alike.

Social media is a flexible tool with the power to constantly evolve in reach and capabilities. Thus, this best practices guide does not claim to be all-inclusive. What it can do is supply ideas that may decrease anxiety and help the local church become intentional about developing a social media communications strategy. As you read this tip sheet, remember that sometimes the best way to learn is through the experience of trial, error and response to the tactics that work best for you and your congregation.

### **Facebook**

Facebook might once have been considered a passing fad, or at least a frivolous tool designed for the college set alone. Today, Facebook boasts more than 500 million active users, and people spend over 700 billion minutes per month on Facebook.<sup>1</sup> Group/fan pages allow organizations a way to share easily accessible information about themselves to fans who “Like” them. Facebook itself provides a space for users of all ages to interact digitally with their real-world social connections.

- Ask for comments and “Likes” from your constituents. The more social traffic, the more likely posts will show on fan News Feeds.
- Customize your page to reach more people. Configure your page for maximum participation.<sup>2</sup>
  - o Facebook allows you to set default page views, landing pages and fan permissions.
  - o You may choose to auto-expand fan comments – the more comments that can be seen on an initial glance, the more chances for conversations to expand.
  - o Make sure fans are allowed to write on your page’s wall and give them permission to post photos, videos and links. Let them tell their own stories about your organization.
- Limit status updates – one or two a day should suffice, released at different times of the day.
  - o Facebook is not Twitter. Content rotation in Twitter is fast and frequent. Facebook posts are more static. Sending too many updates may result in the loss of fans, or people may hide you from their News Feed.

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<sup>1</sup> “Facebook Press Room: Statistics.” Facebook. Last accessed April 29, 2011.  
<http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>.

<sup>2</sup> “Facebook Best Practices.” DIOSA Communications. Last accessed May 4, 2011.  
<http://www.diosacommunications.com/facebookbestpractices.htm>

- Ask those in your congregations and on your board to start conversations by posting, liking and commenting on what others say. It is not cheating to move social currency from your home base outward. Good content is good content.
- Keep your tabs and pages updated.
  - Facebook's multi-level pages allow many places for outdated information to slip through the cracks. Did you create an event page? Add results of the day after the fact. Did you change service times or add a new blog address? Reflect these in all appropriate places.

## Twitter

While Facebook has the capability to map real-world social connections in a digital space, Twitter leads the social media pack when it comes to real-time, global information sharing. By using Twitter, you have access to information beyond your group of friends. Search features let you view streams of information about any topics you care about, updated constantly. Hashtags (placing the # sign before any word or space-less phrase) allow Twitter users to categorize their data on their own terms, making searching easier. Ask all followers to use the same hashtag to come together for a common theme. Twitter's capabilities are current, widespread and instant.

- Start by planning three tweets a day, and try to limit to no more than 5-6 tweets per day.
  - It is important not to overwhelm your followers with constant content, but Twitter's format allows for more flexibility with this than Facebook's does.
  - If you do not know where to begin and need help getting started, try tweeting in three categories daily<sup>3</sup>.
    - One personal tweet: about you/your organization/what you're doing for an event.
    - One partner tweet: about a partner church/sponsoring organization/about someone else in your organization.
    - One industry tweet: about something going on in your industry/a link to an industry blog or news article/something showing that you are aware and involved with the world around you.
- Niceness goes a long way in the Twitter world.
  - Follow those that follow you. Provide a two-way street for conversation.
  - When people start following you, direct message them with a simple "Thank you for the follow!"
  - Retweet things you find interesting, thoughtful or applicable.
  - Reply to as many follower questions as possible.
- Do not worry if you lose followers. Those with real interest in your cause will stick with you.
- Try asking for retweets through direct messaging to increase traffic. It does not hurt to ask, though too much pestering will not get you far.
- Make sure your tweets are short enough that they can be retweeted easily (less than 125 characters).
- Use hashtags.
  - Using hashtags everyone uses provides more exposure in searches.

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<sup>3</sup> Kyle Lacy, "Evolve or Die!" (presentation, social media workshop at United Methodist Communications, Nashville, TN, April 15, 2011).

- Use multiples – employ common ones and develop a specific hashtag for your event as well, if applicable.
- Communicating the hashtags you plan to use to your congregation and/or community partners helps provide more grouping opportunities. Encourage them to do so, as hashtagging alongside you or replying to you gives them a way to tell their story, providing a multi-faceted experience.

### **General Tips**

- Employing the use of an aggregator can streamline your social media efforts. An aggregator can collect information from different websites (including Twitter, Facebook and Bit.ly accounts), allowing the user to access them all in one place. One can schedule tweets or posts in the morning to appear throughout the day. Investigate aggregator options like Hootsuite or Posterous to help collect social media efforts in one place.
- If you employ an aggregator, use it to its best advantage by creating columns of information.
  - Separate by people creating content you want to find, by people that influence your content, by competitors or partners.
- Asking questions via post or tweet can help drive retweets and shares. Inspirational quotations may do the same, though too much scripture may polarize seekers interested in your feeds.
- Link to outside content in both social media channels. Use YouTube or Flickr streams to give followers and friends a more visual media component.
- Use social media before, during and after an event.
  - If your church plans a big event, you will most likely include social media in your promotion strategy. Post on Facebook. Plan for and utilize hashtags on Twitter. Give followers and friends updates about event specifics and personal information about the planning journey.
  - The day of the event, get participants tweeting and posting live from the event and encourage them to group themselves (using appropriate hashtags on Twitter). Ask them to post pictures and video (with appropriate permissions granted) as well.
  - Social media communication should not stop after the event is over. Share results. Link to a blog post. Post more event photos on your page and, if applicable, on a parent organization's page (like the United Methodist Church's Facebook page).
- Keep your brand/logo consistent.
  - Make sure your church or organizational logo is visible within social media profile pictures/avatars. Even if you rotate the main image, include the logo on or in it.
  - Keep profile pictures/avatars the same on all social media sites – consistency can help build brand and recognition.
- Connect your social media pages to your church's main website.
  - List your social media web addresses on the same page as your contact information.
  - Add buttons on your website for viewers to easily share your content via Facebook or tweet new information to followers.
- Promote your social media pages in newsletters, etc.
  - In addition to listing your social media websites on your main webpage, think about promoting social media sites through other communication channels, such as weekly newsletters or emails.
  - Promoting hashtags through other channels might also be a good strategy if a large special event is approaching.
- Have realistic expectations.

- Unless you belong to a “megachurch,” or large organization, your number of fans and followers will not grow into the hundreds overnight.
- Social media is another tool in your church’s communication bucket. For a younger generation – many in the 18-34 age range – mobile connectivity is important. These sites might give you an avenue to connect with them through a medium they prefer.
- You will not reach everyone this way, but reaching even a few more people could make a difference.
- Think before you tweet or post. The delete button comes in handy, but remembering the very public nature of the social media world before posting something polarizing can aide against digital unrest.
- Social media is not a science.
  - If you still feel unsure, create a personal profile and practice! Hands on learning can be a wonderful way to get to know Facebook and Twitter.

## FAQs

- How do tweets and posts actually get to the people you want to reach?
  - Reaching those you want to is not guaranteed. However, since you cannot push information via Facebook or Twitter, pulling people in is the key.
  - For Facebook:
    - Ask congregational constituents to become fans and contribute to your page.
    - Create compelling content that provokes those encountering your page by chance to contribute as well.
    - Ask fans to suggest your page to potentially interested parties.
  - For Twitter:
    - Use hashtags to group information. Using general/widely circulated hashtags will allow you to appear in varying streams of information, allowing those people searching for you to find you more easily.
    - Cross-promote on Facebook by sharing your Twitter name and asking friends to become followers.
    - Ask for retweets.
    - Again, create interesting content. It stands to reason that good content will be retweeted and replied to more often by more people creating more exposure.
- What is a hashtag? Are they only used in Twitter?
  - Hashtags are only used in Twitter at the present time. However, you may see Facebook friends with hashtags in their posts if they link their Twitter updates to their Facebook page. Hashtags in Facebook look the same, but they do not self-aggregate or take you to another page.
- How many people from your organization should be using these technologies?
  - Personal voices and stories matter tremendously, so one answer is that the more people in your congregation or on your board using these technologies the better!

- The answer in regards to the management of the primary Facebook and Twitter accounts for your organization is the topic of some debate. It is really an organizational choice, but there are some issues to consider.
  - Even if one person manages tweets and posts on a daily basis, it is advisable that multiple people have administrator access, the knowledge of these media and the strategies employed within. If the church's one social media expert leaves, who will be able to continue along the path they have created for your church?
  - Having fewer data managers (or one person through which all tweets come) can create more consistency of voice for your organization.
- What is someone makes a negative comment on your page or in your feed?
  - Do not remove a post from someone just because he or she disagrees with or comments negatively about your organization.
    - Simply removing negative feedback could be seen as closed-mindedness and open the door for further attacks. Debate can be a great learning opportunity.
    - Take the time to respond to the comment in a thoughtful, non-defensive manner.
    - You may be surprised that your fans or followers also come to your rescue, clarifying a situation for the debater.
    - Set internal standards for what does warrant removal, like virus links, spam or unnecessarily lewd or derogatory posts.

### **More Options to Explore**

Aggregators: Hootsuite.com  
Posterous.com

Free Blog Sites: Wordpress.com  
Tumblr.com  
Blogger.com

Photo Sharing: Flickr.com  
Picasa.com

Shorten URLs: Goo.gl , Ow.ly, etc.

### **Further Reading/Resources on the Web**

- [umcom.org/site/c.mrLZJ9PFKmG/b.6381787/k.79BC/Social\\_Media\\_for\\_Churches.htm](http://umcom.org/site/c.mrLZJ9PFKmG/b.6381787/k.79BC/Social_Media_for_Churches.htm)
- [facebook.com/help/faq/](https://www.facebook.com/help/faq/) , [facebook.com/nonprofitorgs](https://www.facebook.com/nonprofitorgs)
- [diosacommunications.com/facebookbestpractices.htm](http://diosacommunications.com/facebookbestpractices.htm)
- [diosacommunications.com/twitterbestpractices.htm](http://diosacommunications.com/twitterbestpractices.htm)
- [support.twitter.com/entries/13920-frequently-asked-questions](https://support.twitter.com/entries/13920-frequently-asked-questions)
- [hope140.org/](http://hope140.org/)
- [kylelacy.com/](http://kylelacy.com/)
- [pewinternet.org/](http://pewinternet.org/)