

// Jeremy Smith



By the
NUMBERS

A Longitudinal Study on the Digital Ministry
of America's Largest Churches

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America's Largest Churches

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Introduction

I have always wanted to help build up the church. It is why I got into ministry in the first place, why I did consulting for so many years, and why I blog for ChurchMag. I have always found myself somewhere between knowing a lot of technology and wanting to be relational with others. This sometimes manifested in translating "tech speak" about soundboards or wanting to get a website up and running to pastors and elders who simply wanted to do ministry without knowing the whole tech aspect. At the same time, I have always seen how these devices and programs could be the antithesis or complementary tool of bring the love and truth of God to the whole world, depending on how it was used.

All I want to do is help make the kingdom of God known and God praised for His holiness.

This translates into numerous situations.

- To those that feel like they have no hope and are browsing their Twitter stream for something to help them not feel terrible for a brief moment.
- For those that are struggling with a theological crisis and want to find an answer online.
- To the parent who is looking for something to grasp when they feel helpless.
- For the college student who needs some purpose in life and has never heard the full story of how Jesus could bring them life-giving peace.
- To the pastor who gives their all and is not sure if it is even making a difference.

In the end, I hope this furthers the kingdom of God and helps churches find community online as well as creates community for those who are looking.

This research study is based on the 100 largest churches in America. This sample group in some capacity is assumed to be attempting cutting edge digital ministry instead of mimicking everyone else. They are seen as the thought leaders, whether they have earned it or not.

I don't want this to be a "they are huge churches and we have no way of getting to that point" or even "my church needs to be doing what they are if we are to be successful." I simply want for you to know what has been happening online and to feel empowered to do something with your ministry in this unexplored area.

And that's what it is, unexplored. There are a couple of short social media or website research reports out there specifically for churches, but nothing determinative. Most of what has been done are either guesses or has been adapted from the business world which may or may not translate as we are looking for more eternal outcomes than what impacts a quarterly sales report.

We want to approach this as all encompassing. That means this is the first in many reports to come to not only give you a snippet of what happened in December of 2014, but what has happened all year and how you can help make changes for your future.

Seeing as this is the first in a series of reports, we are going to be foundational in this eBook. Nothing crazy, just some really good basic statistics for you to deconstruct for yourself.

So go on, take a look, see what we have to offer and start making your digital ministry great!

Chapter 1: Setting A Standard

Every church consultation I worked on to create a digital ministry strategy started the same basic way.

Generally, I would meet with the senior pastor and the person who would run the account. Sometimes it was a communication pastor but most of the time it was a youth pastor taking on another job or a volunteer who has a couple of extra hours a week to devote to the task. On a few occasions, the pastor was the only one present and would be the one managing the website and social media accounts. Before meeting with the team, I would compile an assessment of what they had, what they wanted to gain, what they wanted to avoid, and the resources they were going to devote to it.

The discussion would then cover concerns I might find if expectations were too simple or outside their possibilities. I'd field examples of possible actions they could take in the short term, and plan following action steps that would lead to a schedule.

In the coming weeks, undoubtedly they would then have questions about best practice tips, why they could not do more tweets or blog articles, and address difficulties they did not foresee as the project would come about. But the one problem that would constantly come up which I found myself annoyed with is hearing others giving unsolicited and unfounded social media advice.

Without fail, two to three months into the setup process, questions would arise about why I don't encourage them to post more frequently, use more than one social media account, or incorporate a daily blog, podcast, or newsletter. I'd explain the effort, creativity, time, and skill that would need to go into it. Further, that we needed to know what worked specifically for them, not for another church. No standard had been set and "social media gurus" could only duplicate the idea of what they had done with the one or two churches they worked at.

This has inspired me to help identify what trends truly are happening in America with websites and social media. In the eBook that follows, you will look at what churches are and are not doing, how frequently they are actually posting, and some other foundational standards to begin implementing.

I encourage you to take this as a guideline for your church, but understand that these are the largest churches in America and direct comparison is ill-advised. Look at possible growth areas for your church, and approach it in small steps. And as always, if you have questions on data or want some assistance, do not hesitate to [leave a comment](#) and I'd love to help!

Go With The Data

Let's be clear, be wary of advice from people who give their opinion on what you should do with social media or technology when it is not based on data or facts. Want to see it happen for yourself? Tweet out if you should go Apple or Android and people will give you SO MANY silly reasons to switch to one or the other. Ask if you should put your church on Twitter or Facebook, or what hosting platform you should use for your church website. Most of what you will get is based on opinion rather than a large audience of churches and, therefore, a proper dataset.

People constantly give social media or website advice to churches that is not based on relevant data. Instead, it is based on what they did at their one church for their specific congregation with their budget in their socioeconomic culture and the expectations and limitations of their denomination. Or "social media gurus" will give you best advice that has been written over and over by blogs for businesses looking to earn a profit, yet the motivations are different and the audiences are not even close to similar, making the "tips and tricks" best guesses.

Research Project Details

By the Numbers utilizes the America's Fastest-Growing and Largest Outreach 100 Churches, 2014 report¹ to find out what these churches are doing on their website and social media platforms. You can actually see the whole list with breakdown numbers if you want to see the original data.

This project looks at several factors including what basic components could be on their church website, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram accounts. Below is a quick breakdown of the components we looked at to construct this research project.

Website

The website is, as Michael Hyatt would say, the "platform" of your organization online. This is a home base where everything else should be launched from. Below are the criteria we looked at for each church website. We assume very basic information that could be listed on each site.

Social Media Links on the Homepage?

If your website is the home base for everything you do online, you would think that you would have all of your social media platforms on the website. We go a step further and ask if it is specifically on the homepage of the website. It should be noted that many of the churches we looked at have a homepage as well as individual satellite church homepages. Either one of these could count as a homepage for this research project. We did limit the research parameters as too many options would have made this project too bloated, thus we focused solely on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

Are The Social Media Icons Out-Of-Date?

Facebook and Twitter particularly have evolved over time and with that the logo branding. As a blogger and former social media manager, out-of-date icons drive me crazy. Dustin Stout goes further by calling it an "icontastrophe". At the very least, keep your site up-to-date.

Contact Us, About Us, and Ministry Pages?

A recent study suggested that the three most important pages for a church website are these three. So what I have done is simply looked to see if they exist. It does not matter if the About Us is buried in the ministry page navigation, the Contact Us link is at the bottom of the page in small font, or the ministry pages are individualized. I simply want to know they exist.

Physical Address and Phone Number?

During the majority of website consultations I always ask this question, "Why don't you have your church's phone number and address on your page?" For people that are new to your community or wanting to start attending a church in the area, this is the most important information. Without it, they will not know where to go or how to get ahold of you. It is best practice to have it in the footer or header of every page so that someone can find it quickly as well as on the Contact Us page.

Social Media

As stated before, we are limiting the social media accounts considered to Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. We know that there are several of the top 100 largest churches on other social networks which were publicly displayed including Google+, YouTube, Vimeo, LinkedIn, Snapchat, Pinterest, and Flickr. But these were the minority compared to the first three. Here are the specific data points we collected.

Followers

I find this metric relevant as it indicates how large social media presence is online in relation to many different attributes, including how this compares to the size of a physical congregation membership.

Following

While this statistical value may be less important, there is some interesting ideas regarding if churches should follow others. What do you think is the case?

Number of posts in a single month

Constantly I hear that churches should post 7 times a day on Twitter or at least once a day. Based on what? We'll cover what is really going on.

Website links

If your website is supposed to be the home base, does your church's social media accounts link back to your website?

Custom hashtags

Specifically Instagram, does your church utilize custom hashtags? And lets be honest, I don't count #Christmas2014 as custom. Branding or identify need to be present.

Branding

Whether with your Twitter header image or branding in your Instagram images, are you branding content?

Let's get started...

1. "America's Fastest-Growing and Largest Outreach 100 Churches,

2014" <http://www.outreachmagazine.com/2014-outreach-100/outreach-100-largest-churches-america.html>.

Chapter 2: Data Outcomes

A love for data started when I was very young. This was no doubt encouraged by my parents who gave me a professional grade, independent video-editing machine that I used on every project from fourth grade on to the pursuit of a Bachelor's in Science with Computer Engineering.

For those who do not care about the details that led to the conclusions and simply want the tips and tricks, you are probably going to skip much of this chapter. However, it's important to include the justification behind the analysis. Fair warning, the content will get quite nerdy.

This chapter looks at what the data covers, how far you actually can take it, and what your church, big or small, digitally engaged or not, can do with it.

Defining Terms

Let's define some terms before we go too much further, especially for those that want to fully grasp the data but have not taken a statistics class in several years, if ever.

- *Scientific Experiment* - A scientific experiment will have a hypothesis and results which either support it or not. A confirmed hypothesis is as good as one proven false. But an action has to result from the experiment. This project does not have a hypothesis nor action outcome and therefore is not a scientific experiment. But we can utilize several of the statistical critiques to gather precious data and help you define a starting point and work towards a standard.
- *Reliability* - Any significant results must be more than a one-off finding and be inherently repeatable. Reliability can be defined as an overall project as well as specific data points. This is just the

first research point, so no reliability is given.

- Validity - Encompasses the entire experimental concept and establishes whether the results obtained meet all of the requirements of the scientific research method.¹¹ If I were to say your church can immediately apply all of this data without evaluation, the validity would be almost zero. But the validity we have here is actually better than any other data I have found, and I have been looking for years.
- Normalize - In a simplistic understanding, we are taking several different kinds of data with different data ranges, medians, etc., and converting each dataset to a set of values allowing us to compare them together.
- Outliers - All data is relevant when it is part of a reliable and valid research project, but some of the data is noticeably out of the norm from the rest. A researcher wants to try to normalize and generalize the data as much as possible. A great dataset and hypothesis will have anywhere from 90% to 99% of the data under a bell curve with only a few outliers. Our research has been able to do that.

Collection of Data

The step of gathering the data is actually very dull and unglamorous as I spent countless hours simply going to church websites and social media platforms, identifying the different statistics, and putting them into a structured Excel sheet. For a designer, this creative void might kill them to attempt, but I found it fun if not potentially overwhelming considering all the data we could gather in the future. That being said, what resulted from this labor of love was itself beautiful.

The data collection was executed in two stages. To maintain the integrity of data, all follower counts and website data were collected on January 1 and 2, 2015. This allowed for metrics to be assessed over a full day of the year to improve reliability instead of collected at random times.

The validity of this research project is not intended to tell First Baptist Church of Midwest City, USA with a congregation of 100 people how to do social media. We recognize that these are the largest churches in America, not a random sample population, and this is not a true scientific experiment. Therefore, all outcomes simply serve as a beacon for other churches to view as relevant data to guide decisions, yet not a standard which all churches must adhere to. Yet, because of the research approach, this data has a stronger validity than blog articles telling everyone how frequently to post online, how many followers and fans would be good to reach, and where to be at online.

The second data set addressing frequency and type of posts in December 2014 were not time-sensitive and collected one week later. The Instagram and Facebook posts, hashtags, branding, and account URLs were recorded manually while the Twitter posts needed to be calculated using TweetStats.com.²

Possible Inconsistency

When collecting the data, several contrasting points arose that I will address to clarify the decision-making process. It should be noted that the results of the data speak for themselves.

Media Posts

When posting to Facebook, we wanted to calculate two types of posts, total posts and media posts. The purpose behind this is that Facebook actually penalizes low quality posts which can include external links and non-visual posts or short posts.³ Thus, I counted two separate metrics, the total posts a church published for the whole month of December as well as the number of media posts.

About Us Pages

If a churches 'About Us' page is cleverly disguised as the I'm New page or What We Have To Offer, I did not count it. It had to explicitly use the word 'About' for it to qualify. This is not to discredit anyone else, in fact, I think the "I'm New" page is being used fairly regularly. This might be a future focus for the research project. But can you truly say that every "I'm New" page is used to describe the ministry? Of course, the reverse could be said as well for pages titled 'About Us.' But that is for a blog post for another day.

Branding

The idea of branding images is as complex as a promotional image posted on Instagram inviting people to come to their Christmas service or a simple overlay for all of the photos you upload of people. Further, we did not discriminate the frequency of posting, just that if any image was branded, it was counted for the month. More data could be recovered to see how many pictures are branded, though more details need to be hashed out.

Custom Personal Hashtag

Much like branding, we did not discriminate. If you posted a custom, personal hashtag one time on one Instagram image or description, we counted it as true. That being said, we were very specific on what a custom, personal hashtag could be. We did not count the following as they were too generic:

- #Christmas2014
- #Reason4TheSeason
- #NewYearsEve
- #CandleLightService

Instead, we looked for #SaddlebackChristmas, #ChristmasatNorthpoint, or any others that referenced your church. It did not have to be holiday specific, but it could not be used by just anyone.

Professional Social Media Accounts

Creating a personal account and making that your church's social media presence feels... wrong. I could go into using words like narcissistic, slimy, self-serving, and lazy, but those are judgmental and I honestly don't know the backstory of any church and how they got to where they are now with social media. What I do know is that people treat ministries differently than they do personal accounts, both as a user and viewer. That being said, for the sake of validity and promoting a sense of professionalism, I did not include any data on social media accounts that were personal. This includes personal Twitter or Instagram pages as well as Facebook accounts instead of Facebook pages.

Big Data

The numbers are in and I am excited to see what happens with the data both as a statistician analyzing them as well as seeing how these can positively influence your ministry. Here are some of the general findings:

- 98 websites reviewed. Of the two churches not represented, one had no servers available at the time of writing this article, the other had an old domain and no website platform could be found.
- For the rest of the websites, assuming I found their About Us, Contact Us, and Ministries page in a total of 5 clicks (several required many levels of clicks), I loaded almost 500 church web pages.
- 176 social media accounts were visited. Two minutes was spent on each church to find a Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter account and several social media accounts could not be found because there simply was no links or digital presence.
- 12,253 social media posts were sifted through, 3,652 of them by hand. 1,105 were from Facebook, 8,601 were from Twitter, and 2,547 were from Instagram.
- Not including the writing of this book, 47 hours have been

dedicated to this project of which 6 hours were given to analysis and blog writing, 6 towards concept and construction of the project, which leaves 35 hours of simply gathering the data. If I were to charge my normal church consultation fee, not including my other fees, the cost of this project would come to \$1,665 before I even setup a meeting to compile or present the data to presenter. The price goes up to \$3,525 if this were for a non-ministry non-profit or business.

Foundations Firstly

There are about a hundred questions that I would love this project to answer but ultimately we need to start at the beginning and that is the whole purpose. What are churches actually doing online? I love that they are doing something, and I hope that they are doing it for a purpose and fully for the Kingdom of God. But from the wise words of Mary Poppins, "Let's start at the very beginning. A very good place to start."

What You Can Do With This?

This is not specific social media advice for your church. I don't know your church's story and I don't know the specifics of the strategies for the churches we data mined. You may have heard the phrase "association does not imply causation" in your theology class, the same intention applies here.

What we can glean from this data is that these larger churches could be seen as role models who are attempting to set standards. They have dedicated resources of time, money, and manpower to make an impact on the digital frontier for the sake of the Gospel. Look at what has worked for these churches, gather a clear understanding of what goes towards your intentional mission of your ministry, and try out some of these ideas.

Jonathan Malm said it best:

"...the cutting edge churches everyone mimics didn't get to where they were by copying. They got there by trying new things and seeing what was right for their church." 4⁴

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1. "Validity and Reliability." <https://explorable.com/validity-and-reliability>. October 20, 2008.
 2. TweetStats. <http://www.tweetstats.com/>
 3. "News Feed FYI: Showing More High Quality Content." <https://www.facebook.com/business/news/News-Feed-FYI-Showing-More-High-Quality-Content>. August 23, 2013.
 4. "Rethink Your Church Website Strategy in 2015." <http://churchm.ag/rethink-your-church-website-strategy-in-2015/>. January 15, 2015.

Chapter 3: Website Platforms

Remember, your church website is the home base to everything you have online.

We know that digital platforms out there, like Facebook, YouTube, and Tumblr, you have the ability to customize across social media, but if they decide to remove a component, change an algorithm, limit ranges of content, or charge you to use their platform in the future, you are out of luck. A website is your domain and you should have complete control over everything available. Even if you use a tool like Squarespace, Clover, or WordPress, you have a very minimal need to worry about change or being left high and dry.

Because you have this flexibility and control over your website, the question becomes, "What do we put onto our platform?" For Steve Gliebe, the answer to the question is practical for everyone that might engage in your church:

*"Use it to identify and fill gaps in your church website content. You can help regular attenders and, more importantly, encourage newcomers to step through your doors for the very first time."*¹

Caitlin Gustafson talks about how the specific information that resources like Google Local provide can impact your digital presence and actually help you get better Google results and more In Real Life (IRL) interactions if done right.² Both find that having your phone number, address, service times, and other amenities are important to post online.

The question then becomes, what is most important to have on your website and what are other churches actually posting on their websites?

For the sake of time, we limited the data to these ten specific points

that build towards the larger research project, though it is expected more data will come in the future regarding blogs, online giving, "I'm new" pages, podcast links, does the phone number even work, and more.

1. Does the website exist/load?
2. Does this website have a Contact Us page?
3. Does this website have an About page?
4. Does this website have a section or page that discusses the different ministries they offer?
5. Do they display their physical address?
6. Do they display their phone number?
7. Is there a Twitter link from the homepage?
8. Is there a Facebook link from the homepage?
9. Is there an Instagram link from the homepage?
10. Are the icons used for linking to the social media accounts current?

We will take a look at the first six points in the rest of this chapter and combine the last four points in the next chapter on Connecting Different Platforms.

Initial Research to Build On

One of the first research projects we found was an infographic by Bryan Young that looked at what webpages are most visited on a church website.³³ I'd love to see an updated version of this data because it is three years old as well as a full report instead of just an infographic, but here are some of the statistics.

- The most viewed web page on a church website is the ministries page. (26.7%)
- I would have thought that the about and contact us pages would have been higher, but they only account for 2.7% and 2.1% respectively.
- The About Us section traffic was taken away because it was

broken down to "New Here," "Statement," "Mission," "What We Believe," and "History," along with the "About" page. It would appear we are making it overly complex without the benefit of people actually clicking on those web pages.

Again, the data is only from an infographic and should be taken with a grain of salt, but it notes how important it is for readers that your church have specific types of pages. I encourage you to have analytics for your church website so you know what pages are being visited most often.⁴

The rest of the research into churches with a digital ministry presence lies in how frequently people go to a church's website, most of which focuses on new visitor impact.

- Barna Group reports "About one-third of Millennials are using online search to scope out a church, temple or synagogue online. This increases to over half (56%) of practicing Christian Millennials who do the same. It may be that for Millennials, checking out a faith community online, from a safe distance, is a prerequisite for the commitment of showing up in person."⁵
- Grey Matter Research reports "15% have visited the website of a local place of worship in the last thirty days, and 28% have done so within the past six months. A total of 36% have done so within the last year... 28% have visited their own congregation's website in the last thirty days, 44% have done so in the past six months, 57% have done so in the past year, and a total of 68% have done so at some point while attending that place of worship. Thirty-two percent of churchgoers who use the Internet have never visited their own congregation's website (or their church does not have a website)... Among online Americans who attend worship services regularly, 13% in the past thirty days have visited the website of a congregation other than the one they attend. A total of 27% have done this in the past six months, and 37% in the past year."⁶
- iMinistries.org shares that 40.1% of website visitors are new (new to the website, not new to that specific church), while 50.9% are returning visitors.⁷

From here, we build towards what churches are now doing on their websites and then will make the transition to how they will connect to social media.

Churches Are Tied To IRL, Not Necessarily Digitally

The data from our research identifies some very key points with regards to church websites. Here is the specific data points and a short infographic below that.

- 98% of the churches had a website that was able to load.
- 100% of churches with a website posted their physical address on their website, while 99% of them include their phone number.
- 69% of churches have a page on their website titled "About Us" or "About."
- 76% of churches have a page on their website titled "Contact Us" or "Contact."
- 97% of churches have a ministry page or section on their website.

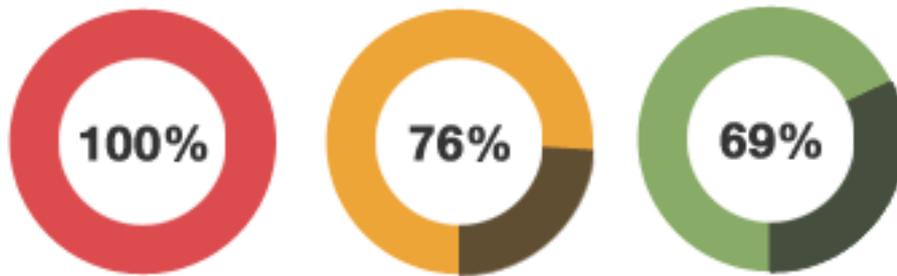
It would seem that the largest churches in America fall in line with the idea of having a digital platform to share information with the world. All of the church websites had a single point of entry, regardless if they were one large church or a collection of satellite churches. It should be noted as was previously clarified in Data Outcomes chapter that several churches may have a version of an About Us page titled "I'm New," "What We Believe" or similar pages which can hint to the lower than expected percentage. Even after extending the timeframe to 5 minutes per church, several times I found myself clicking through numerous pages to never find what I wanted.

The question that deserves asking is: *"How many times are you going to make your viewers click and wait before they find some information about your church and how long do you think they are willing to tolerate?"*

There are some differences on how churches with satellite campuses manage their website. Several of them will give distinct website platforms as a category of the main website. To get to the About Us, Ministries, and Contact Us page for any church location or phone number, you will need to click the region or campus name first and then find the page you wanted to locate. Other churches will have an About Us and Contact Us section on the parent site and different Ministry pages on each of the satellite sub sites. What is most effective for satellite churches is worth exploring in the future.

Connecting Online and Offline

Below is a percentage of churches that have their physical address shared online as well as churches that have a dedicated page titled About Us or Contact Us.



100% of churches post their physical address on their website. **69%** of churches have a page on their website titled "About Us" and **76%** with a page titled "Contact Us".

ChurchMag Research: By The Numbers, February 2015.

ChurchMag

Conclusion

Frankly, I thought an About Us and Contact Us page would be no-brainers. Since created my first website in 1996 while in 6th grade, there has always been a way of the reader being able to go to a page that tells the purpose of the website and how to get ahold of me if they need to. In a college web design class, they actually spent classroom time to discuss why this was important for businesses, including

churches, to have this information. While the physical address and phone number are present on nearly all websites, staff are not always included, as it is more convenient to have that information available on a page or to send via email instead.

As a parent of an infant, I need to know two different things before I am even willing to entertain the idea of going to your church, let alone if I plan to join you as a member. First of all, do you have events and activities for my children that are age appropriate? Secondly, how are you going to keep them safe and me in on the loop? While I did not get into the nitty gritty of what type of content was being displayed (more data to gather in the future), it was very encouraging to see that at least some content was being delivered about youth, children, and adult ministries. Some of the best had very detailed high level navigation that made searching very simple to do. Yet more could have been and needs to be supplied for new visitors to your site and your church.

Now this may feel like really specific information to have on a website, but if it is Saturday and I have to know this information and no one is in the office to talk to, I will not be spending 1-2 hours getting my children ready, only to realize there is no cry room or check-in service at your childcare room and we get back in the car to go home. Details such as this are vital to new visitors and are so easy to supply, if you can simply get it posted on your church website. Less critical details such as youth group announcements, sign up forms for camping events, or volunteer openings could also be supplied here, but are certainly not mission-critical.

A quick interpretation of this information without a formal qualitative analysis would indicate a strong expectation of connecting people from the digital to real life communication, but not necessarily to keep the conversation digital. Further statistics in the next chapter Connecting Different Platforms will demonstrate a further separation of perceived priorities for churches with digital communications.

1. "Content your church website must have." <http://churchthemes.com/2014/07/08/church-website-content/> July 8, 2014.
2. "The Ultimate Church SEO Guide: External Marketing." <http://www.churchmarketingsucks.com/2015/01/ultimate-church-seo-guide-external-marketing/> January 19, 2015.
3. "What Is Being Viewed On Your Church Website?" <http://churchm.ag/church-website-pageviews/> August 20, 2012.
- [4.](#) If you do not have analytics setup for your website, I highly recommend Google Analytics. If you do not know how to set this up or do but do not know how to read your data, I'd love to help. Contact me at jeremy@churchm.ag
- [5.](#) "How Technology is Changing Millennial Faith." <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/millennials/640-how-technology-is-changing-millennial-faith#.VN6ZzrDF-5L> October 15, 2013.
- [6.](#) "What Makes a Healthy Online Presence for Churches? [INFOGRAPHIC]" http://www.iministries.org/10267/blogentry/entry_id/285616/What-Makes-a-Healthy-Online-Presence-for-Churches-INFOGRAPHIC February 13, 2012.
- [7.](#) "Use of Church Websites" http://www.greymatterresearch.com/index_files/Online_Church.htm May 30, 2012.

Chapter 4: Connecting Different Platforms

The Internet is a vast place and, just like a busy city, you need to give proper directions online. You need to make sure you give great instructions as well when you are connecting your social media accounts online. You cannot assume that every church has a Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter account. Further, you are probably not the only church with your name on the world wide web, no matter how unique it is.

Pointing people to your social media accounts from your website and vice versa is the best way to go. This ability to point people to your different platforms allows no one to get lost along the way. Thus new visitors to your digital presence will be able to see the conversation on your social media website as well as those who are regularly posting about your church can visit your website about updated blog articles or event details.

In this chapter, we look at what platforms are being used online with social media as well as how churches are connecting their online platforms. We leave opinions at the door because we do not know the digital strategies for these churches, but you can discover the implications for your own church to improve your website.

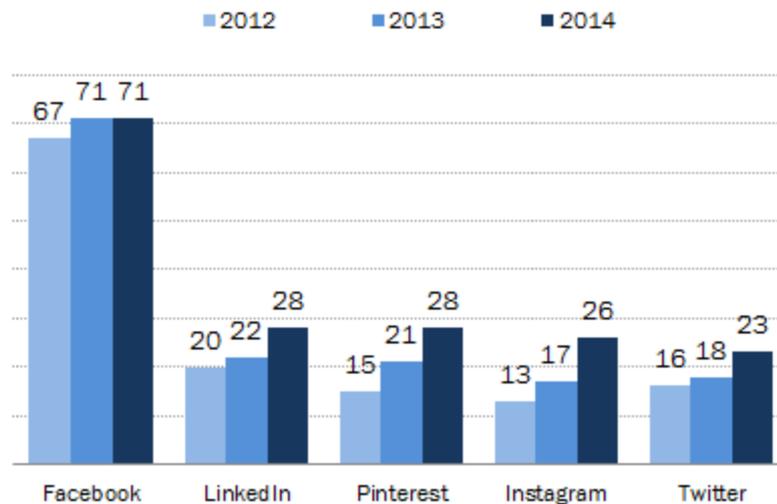
What Are People Using

I have worked with a variety of clients in an assortment of situations, whether they are a large church wanting to simply improve their social media process, a small church that is wanting to begin online and start well, or a large organization with thousands of staff and hundreds of sites all over the world. The first question I inevitably get is "what are people using?" To this point, I have been skirting the answer and instead telling them where many people are at, noting the active user statistics that come out nearly every quarter.

The statistics online are very specific. Below is a chart of the percentage of adults in a three year survey on what social media site they use.¹

Social media sites, 2012-2014

% of online adults who use the following social media websites, by year



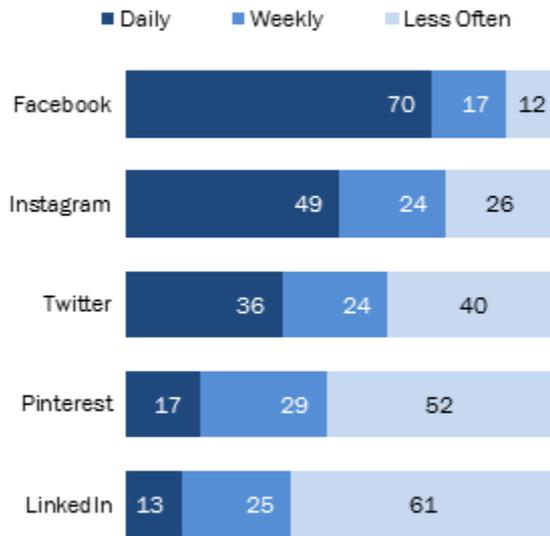
Pew Research Center's Internet Project Surveys, 2012-2014. 2014 data collected September 11-14 & September 18-21, 2014. N=1,597 internet users ages 18+.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Further, the research breaks down how frequently individual adults use social media as well as percentage of users who use more than one social network.

Frequency of social media site use

% of social media site users who use a particular site with the following frequencies (% is reported among each specific site's user groups, e.g., 70% of Facebook users use the site on a daily basis)



Pew Research Center's Internet Project September Combined Omnibus Survey, September 11-14 & September 18-21, 2014. N=1,597 internet users ages 18+.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Social media matrix

% of users of each particular site who use another particular site (e.g., 34% of Pinterest users also use Twitter)

	Use Twitter	Use Instagram	Use Pinterest	Use LinkedIn	Use Facebook
% of Twitter users who ...	-	58%	42%	47%	91%
% of Instagram users who ...	52%	-	47%	38%	94%
% of Pinterest users who ...	34%	43%	-	40%	88%
% of LinkedIn users who ...	39%	35%	40%	-	86%
% of Facebook users who ...	29%	34%	34%	33%	-

Pew Research Center's Internet Project September Combined Omnibus Survey, September 11-14 & September 18-21, 2014.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

This gives a clear understanding for churches to decide what social networks to make their first priority. Yet, this is an educated guess at

best and not based on data specifically researched for ministry use. I don't disagree with Justin Wise when he says, "*When I want to step up my social media game, I don't read a blog post. I read a business book.*"²² But I also don't run my church media account like a business.

The data sets we have collected focus on what social networks people are using. It is not enough to note that Facebook is huge. We get that. But are churches actually online there, posting a certain frequency, and making progress with promotion or engagement? Further, is the audience large enough to make an impact online? Do other churches even use social media accounts like Instagram or Twitter?

Social Media for Churches

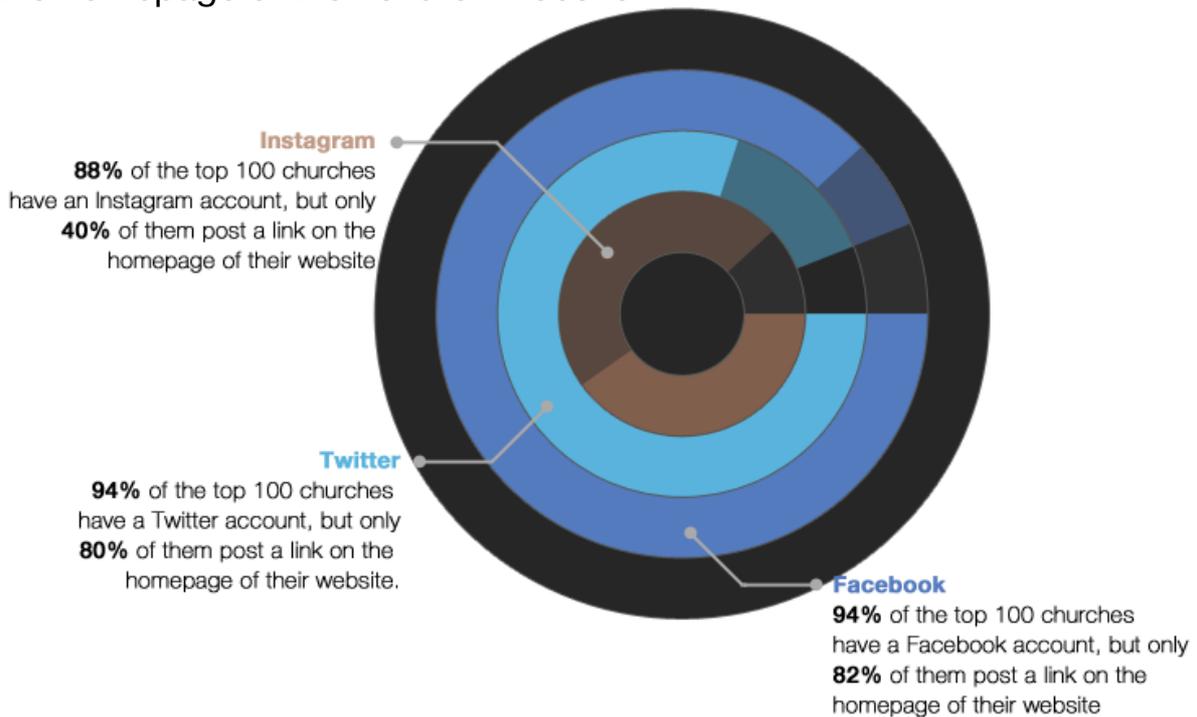
The details for churches on social media are very encouraging. If it is the mission of the Church to bring the Gospel to every corner of the Earth, and that includes a digital mission field, these 100 churches are doing some amazing work by engaging online. Here are the statistics for the churches who leverage different social media accounts, how they are being linked from the church's website, and an infographic with this data.

- 94% of the churches have a Facebook account, but only 88% of them have a link from the church's website homepage.
- 94% of the churches have a Twitter account, but only 80% of them have a link from the church's website homepage.
- 88% of the churches have an Instagram account, but only 40% of them have a link from the church's website homepage.
- 33% of churches use at least one outdated social media logo for their links to their social media platforms.

Social Media Accounts Linked

Below is a comparison of the percentage of the top 100 churches in America that have an account on any of the social media platforms in relationship to the number of churches that link to those accounts from

the homepage of their church website.



ChurchMag Research: By The Numbers, February 2015.

ChurchMag

Social Media Presences

Perhaps the top question I get from churches, is what social media platforms to invest in first. A generalized answer is never appropriate, even with the data from this research, as the specific ministry's investment and audience focus are the main factors for platform choosing. But a good starting point can be identified from this research. This section should be taken in conjunction with the next two chapters *Social Media Size* and *Posting Frequency*.

As an initial point of reference, the three platforms we chose to review for these 100 churches are well represented with an actual account. I have heard it said Facebook is important and Twitter is nice to have, but this research would express that both are very important for churches to consider using. A surprising 80% of churches using Instagram showed that churches are branching out into other platforms outside of the traditional "status update" social networks. This could have some significant impact on how churches could do social media,

focusing first on Facebook, but offering supplicant content from secondary social networks with a different take for digital ministries that capitalize on mediums available.

While having an account is good, this does not answer the question on if they are being effective or if other churches should mimic their social media strategy. Having an account with only 10 followers and posting once every two months is meaningless. Or posting content that is not effective can radically reduce the impact of posting for these platforms. No comprehensive answers are available yet, but we already have the first step towards our foundation settled. Churches are on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

Where to Link Online

Now that we know where churches are at online, are they connecting their website viewers to their social media platforms? You'd think it should be an easy yes to say that people are linking social media accounts from their church website and reverse. You'd be wrong. And maybe for good reason.

The concern here is that your church may have hundreds, up to tens of thousands, of connections online but if you are not connecting them to your website and your website to your social media, you are running independent accounts that are not working together towards a common goal. What if you ran things cohesively instead of independently?

The analogy I hear often for this question is that of a horse pulling a cart. One horse has the power of just one horse. But it has been proven that if you were to harness the power of two different horses to pull your wagon or cart, you would actually end up with nearly three horsepower. This is not simple addition here. And in the world of communication, reiterating of the purpose of a ministry, the ability to serve the widowed and orphaned multiple times, or the reoccurring message of the hope and grace of our Lord and Savior can also have this logarithmic effect.

Icontastrophe

Only 67% of churches are using up-to-date social media logos to link from their church website to their social media platforms.

This may feel like we're getting nit-picky about how your church is presented online, and I'm okay if you take that view. I will not die at the altar of pixel perfect designs for church website because so much can and needs to be done elsewhere. That being said, Dustin Stout has some very entertaining and insightful words towards this issue of using outdated graphics:

"What kind of impression do you think it makes when you are using social icons that have been retired? Let me give you a few impressions:

You're outdated

You're not paying attention

You're irrelevant

You're not really active on the platform

*While this may or may not be true, the impression that it gives of your brand isn't positive. No matter how awesome you are on those platforms, a savvy user (you know, the influencers you want on your side) will recognize an outdated icon right away."*³

I advocate for excellence in everything, including the logos I use, and encourage churches to do the same.

1. "Social Media Update 2014." <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/01/09/social-media-update-2014/> January 9, 2015.

2. "Want To Get Better At Social Media? Do This One Thing..." <http://justinwise.net/want-get-better-social-media-one-thing>

3. "What Is An Icontastrophe?" <http://dustn.tv/icontastrophe/> November 27, 2013.

Chapter 5: Social Media Size

Let's be clear up front, the size of your social media followers does not matter as much as having active and passionate followers.

Which would you think is better: a group of people that is small but regularly engages and shares your content with their own following and thus becomes strong advocates for your brand? or to have thousands of unknown, unconnected and unengaged followers for your account? Thus the user that has 10,000 Twitter followers could actually be less effective in spreading their message to others than one with 100 followers. It is a distortion to think a high follow rate is important.

Of course, there can be some benefit to having higher numbers, though it may be much less of a priority than having strong advocates for your brand. There is a psychological theory out there where because you have more followers, new people who see your tweets will give you a perceived authority, whether deserved or not. But this impact could be minimal in the grand scheme of things while authenticity and passionate followers are more important. It only takes a one stupid Facebook post to recognize something fishy is going on and then your brand is burned.

Kevin Lee of Buffer shares some solid insight:

*"You may have noticed that there is no single, simple hack to get more followers. I'm afraid there's no switch to flip to get the followers flowing."*¹

The general social media consensus for businesses and bloggers overall is quality should be first and quantity second. If you want to go for high follow rates, and this can be an acceptable route, you must genuinely connect with them as opposed to buying followers and fans or mass follow/unfollow other accounts. In the past, gaining high volumes of followers that were not engaged actually hurt Facebook statistics for page owners as the engagement rate would dramatically

drop and your content would then not be put in front of your active fans who do care about your message.

All of this said, let's take a look at what social media size looks like across our sample, with a variety of viewpoints.

Social Media In Comparison To Congregation Size

One of the first things I thought about when starting this research project was the idea of the congregation size in comparison to the presence a church may have online. What if a church was marketing ineffectively? Could they be putting all of this time and energy into marketing ministries and events to their captive audience of congregation members who have already committed to the church and just giving their online audience the leftovers? (Kind of sounds like a hypothesis. More questions to answer later!)

I wanted to see how a church's online presence, at least with social media, compared to their congregation size. This can quickly lead to "how many followers on Twitter or Facebook is enough?" I do give some answers to that, but let me challenge you with this, does it matter if you have already decided to not make them a priority if they only get leftovers?

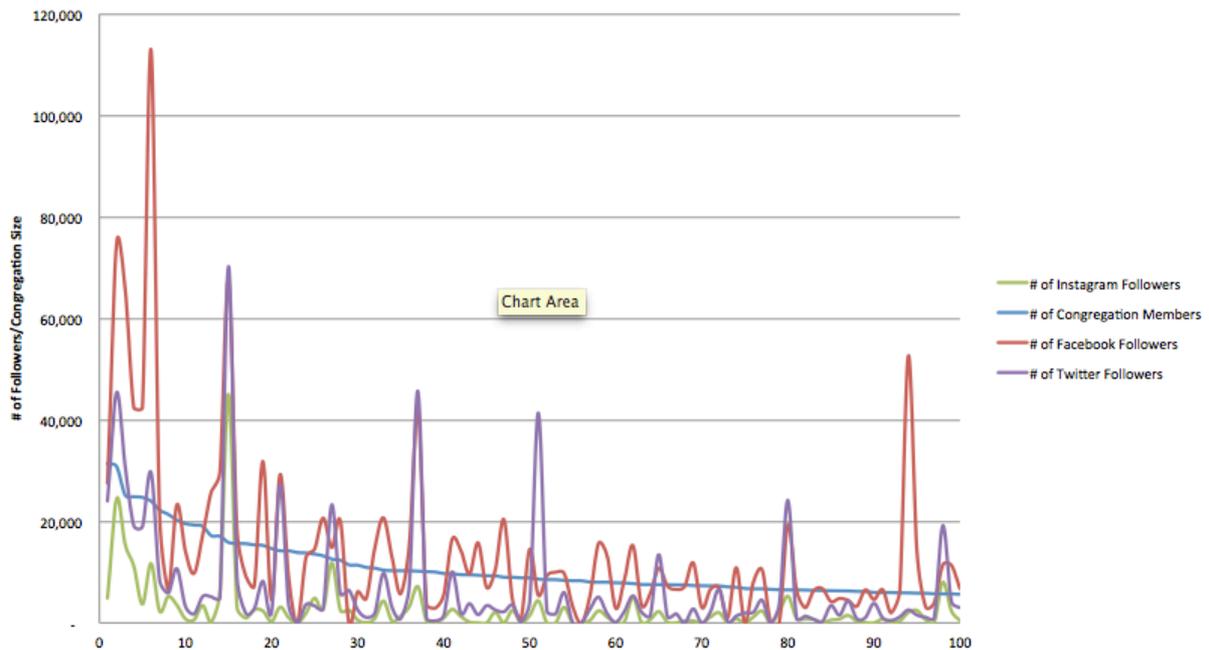
To help identify this, let's look at the raw data as well as the visual graph:

- 52% of the churches have a larger Facebook audience than number of registered congregation members.
- 12% of the churches have a larger Twitter audience and 2% have a larger Instagram audience than number of registered congregation members.

Total Audience A Church May Have

A comparison of a church's audience with their congregation versus the follower base on social media. The graph looks at every church and

each of their social media accounts.



ChurchMag Research: By The Numbers, February 2015.

ChurchMag

Simply looking at raw data like this is fairly unhelpful, but some general outcomes can be deciphered. Note the blue line of congregation members making a smooth almost logarithmic decline? Even with the couple of jumps, it is nowhere near the huge contrasts that result from spikes and valleys of social media. These spikes are the outliers of the process, but do lead to the overall value.

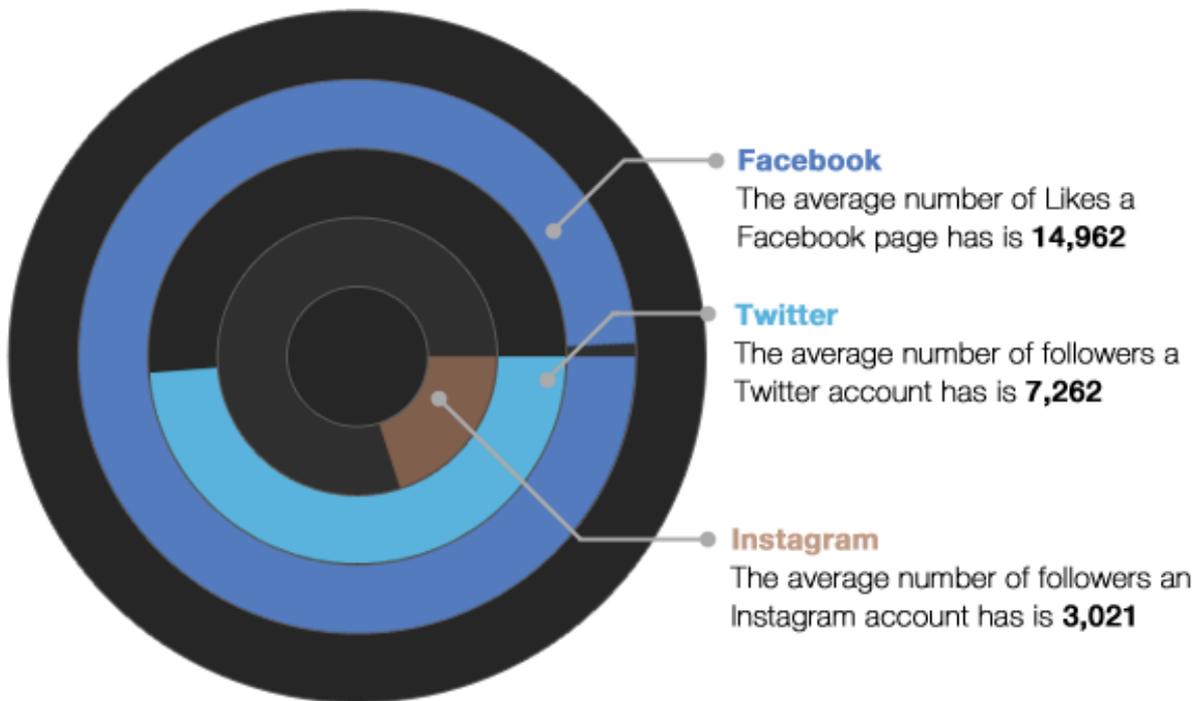
Now that we have a macro view of the data, lets dig in a little.

What Is The Average Follow Count?

After some calculations of the audience of the 100 largest churches in America in relationship to their social media platform audiences, we get the following data.

Average Following Per Platform

The average number of social media accounts each church is following online depending upon the platform they are using.

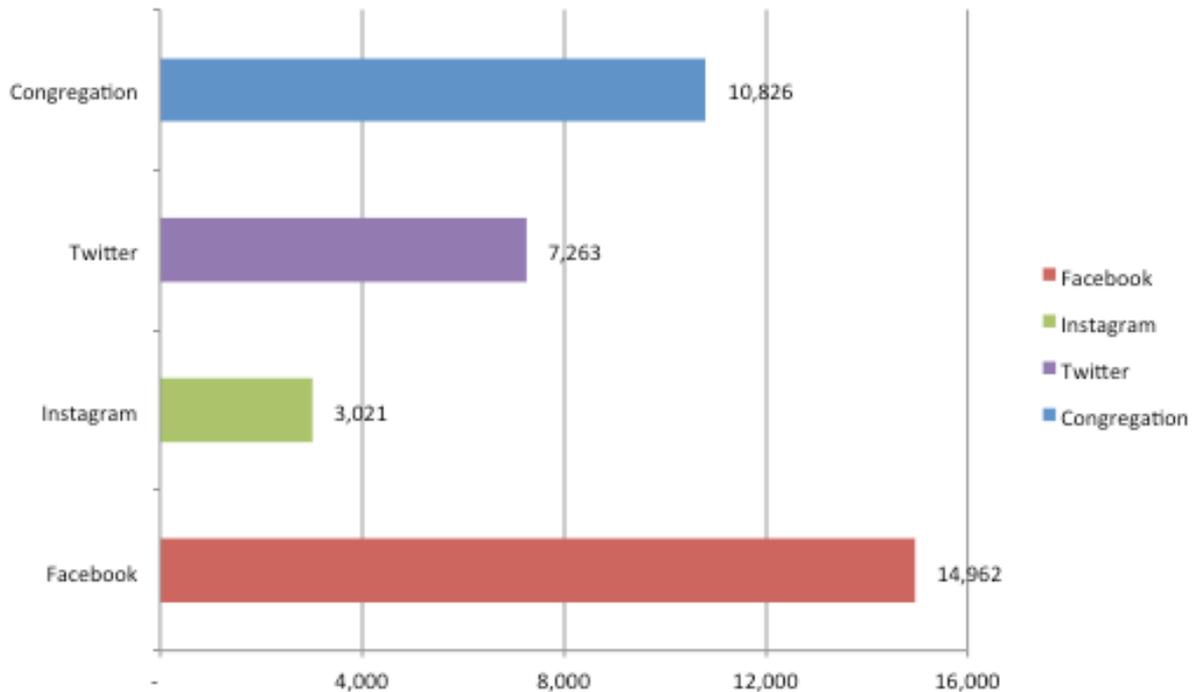


ChurchMag Research: By The Numbers, February 2015.

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Average Audience Per Platform In Relationship To A Congregation Size

The average size of each audience for a church depending upon the platform they are using. The basis of the online social media accounts is in direct comparison towards the average number of congregation members.



ChurchMag Research: By The Numbers, February 2015.

ChurchMag

How Does Your Social Media Size Correlate To Your Congregation Size?

Let's do a quick bit of computation noting how big a church's potential audience is with each marketing that is given and we will build off of it further in the next chapter. Let's take the average congregation count we stated above for churches (10,826). Of course, this is assuming several things, including every church member comes to church on time every week to see the announcements you are sharing as well as this number does not include infants and youth under 11 which probably would not respond to the promotions in service.

Now let's take the number of social media followers for Facebook (14,962), Twitter (7,263), and Instagram (3,021). For the benefit of the doubt, let's assume only 15% of the church's Twitter and Instagram followers are unique people from Facebook. The total social media platform is 16,505 people.

In the end, you have an online audience that is 152% larger than the weekly in real life audience, and that's giving significant favor toward their congregation size. If anyone shares any of your content, likes or favorites any of the content, or leaves a comment, more people will begin to see your social media content outside of your established social networking audience.

Let's see if we can improve this idea even more in the next chapter.

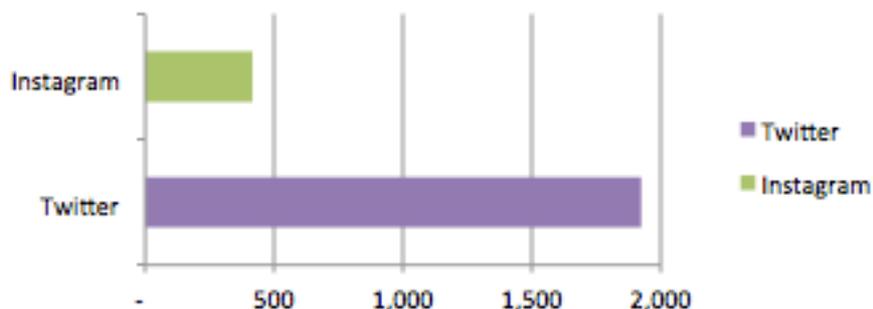
How Many People Should You Be Following?

Before we jump into posting frequency, I do want to address the number of accounts churches are following. Facebook at the time of this eBook is a one-way communication platform for pages and no calculations were gathered. Here is the average number of accounts each church is following with their social media accounts:

- Instagram: 418
- Twitter: 1,923

Average Following Per Platform

The average number of social media accounts each church is following online depending upon the platform they are using.



ChurchMag Research: By The Numbers, February 2015.

ChurchMag

Here are some of the analyzed data we can draw from this:

- The way this calculates is that for every one person a church in our sample is following someone, a church is being followed by 4 people on Twitter and 8 people on Instagram.

- Only 12% of the churches have a follow ratio smaller than three accounts for every five people that are following that church on Twitter and only 2% of churches actually follow more accounts than are being followed.
- Only 11% of the churches have a follow ratio smaller than three accounts they are following for every five people that are following that church on Instagram and only 4% of churches actually follow more accounts than are being followed.

We will make some interpretations of this data in Evaluation of Data, but for now please understand there is a definite value to understanding of how many people churches are following.

1. "6 Research-Backed Ways To Get More Followers on Twitter, Facebook, G+, and More." <https://blog.bufferapp.com/get-more-followers-twitter-facebook-research> May 21, 2014.

Chapter 6: Posting Frequency

*"It is every marketer's concern: Am I over-communicating? Are people sick of seeing my updates? Getting frequency right is an important achievement in marketing, whether you're talking email strategy or social updates."*¹

One question that gets lost in translation for online presence and digital ministries is "how frequently should I post?" There are generalized ideals for online brands overall, but I have never seen what actually is happening with churches online. This analysis hits that point immediately. The quote above communicates it well.

Also, I wonder if more or less frequency is even on the radar or are people struggling with even coming up with content to post in general? This question goes beyond the analysis of the data set, but worth revisiting in the future.

Just as with any church that wants to be intentional with their message on any medium, walking the thin line of "are we spamming people?" or not doing enough marketing is something to be aware of. You want to make sure that people know about your events but you also want to avoid wearing out your digital welcome in one's Facebook or Twitter stream. At the same time, you want to give priority to some events more than others while pushing your information to as many eyes as possible. Further, should the first thing people see when they visit your website be the message, contact information, or faces of people serving and being served? How does your church walk that fine line?

First, let's define what posting frequency is and is not. "Posting frequency" is the number of times you post on your social media accounts. Justin Wise defines what it is not:

*"consistency is different than frequency. You can deliver consistently once a week/month/quarter/year and still be wildly effective."*²

Therefore, every post is considered equal with frequency, where as consistency looks at the quality and trustworthiness of your post from day to day which we will discuss more in Posting Content. While we will be discussing the idea of posting frequency, more now than any other chapter in this ebook, what you see here is not what you must do. We are not setting a standard but a foundation for you to find what your standard could be. You need to do the work to find what fits best for your strategy and audience.

Posting frequency is different for each social media platform. It is generally understood that because of the natural short nature of the content posted in 140 characters on Twitter that you can post very frequently whereas Instagram users may not want a flood of content because a user wants variety in their feed. Intentionality and a social media strategy is important to effectiveness.

How Frequently Should I Post?

*"We want to connect with followers without driving them away. We aim for the perfect balance of sharing and listening. I end up guessing a lot, trying and testing new variations on how often I should post. If guessing is required for finding the optimal frequency, then at least we can be making educated guesses."*³

The above quote comes from a company called Buffer who has a premiere product for any company or individual that wants to use social media to gain the biggest impact their digital platforms can give them. It would therefore make sense that if a company seen as professionals in the field finds themselves guessing at this at times, you could approach it in a similar fashion.

Take the stats below, look through our conclusions on the discussion and then go play with it and see what works for you. Note what gets more reach on Facebook, retweets on Twitter, and comments on

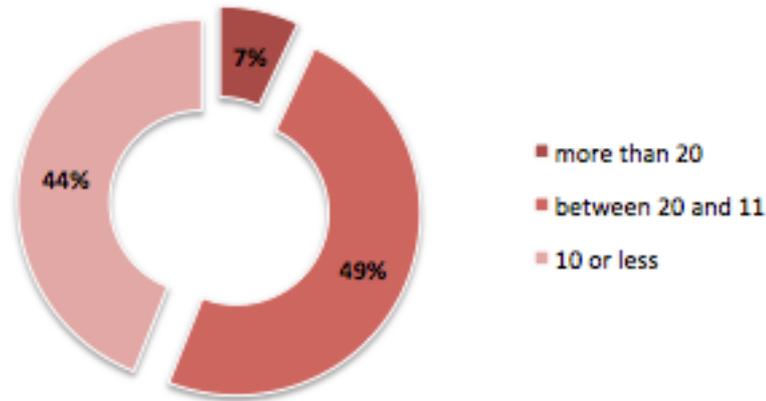
Instagram. Then try a couple of other frequencies and see if you get more or less impact with each post.

Here are the stats we pulled for posting frequency and graphs afterwards:

- The average number of Facebook posts is 12 posts per month, with only 7% of churches posting more than 20 posts a month and 49% of churches posting 10 or less. **Not a single church posted every day of the month and the average church posted about 3 times a week.**
- The average number of Instagram posts is 29 posts per month, with 37% of churches posting more than 20 posts a month and 32% of churches posting 10 or less. **27 churches posted a frequency of at least once a day, 6 of them at least three times a day, and 1 church reached more than five times a day. The average was once a day.**
- The average number of Twitter posts is 91 posts per month, with nearly 41% of churches posting more than 75 tweets a month and only 20% of churches posting 25 or less. **Only 20 churches tweeted a frequency of less than once a day whereas 18 churches tweeted five times a day and 2 churches as high as 12 and 16 times a day. The average church posted three times a day.**

Number of Posts for Facebook In One Month

The frequency range of of social media posts each church had in the month of December on Facebook.

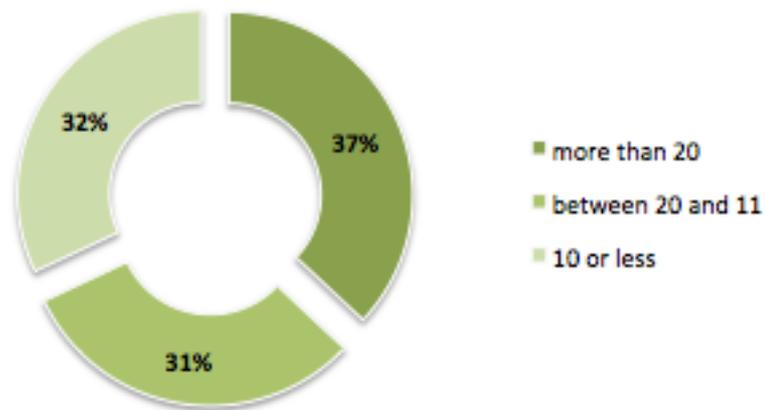


ChurchMag Research: By The Numbers, February 2015.

ChurchMag

Number of Posts for Instagram In One Month

The frequency range of of social media posts each church had in the month of December on Instagram.

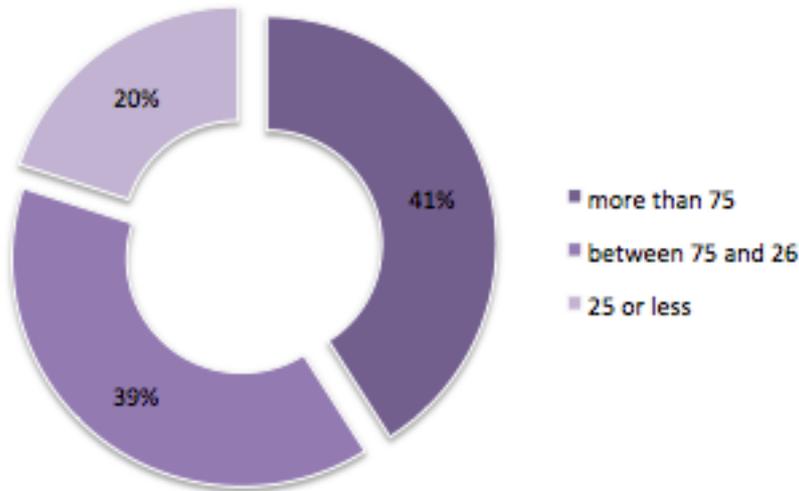


ChurchMag Research: By The Numbers, February 2015.

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Number of Posts for Twitter In One Month

The frequency range of of social media posts each church had in the month of December on Twitter.



ChurchMag Research: By The Numbers, February 2015.

ChurchMag

Conclusion

I hate to draw too many conclusions here, except to note that Facebook saw significantly less posts than Twitter and Instagram frequently had more than once a day. This is a lot of content that needs to be produced and if you hope to reach these levels of posting, understand that you do not simply come up with a post or tweet instantly, but that time and energy is going into this content. This means hours of work to be able to get to these levels and you need to know what bandwidth you have to not only post this content, but then to follow up with engagement afterwards.

Another conclusion I feel safe drawing builds off our conclusion in the previous chapter, Social Media Size. We found the average church in our sample had a congregation size of 10,826 and an adjusted social media audience size of 16,505. Let's take this idea of marketing and engagement a little further and compare in real life with the digital platform.

Let's first assume a church is announcing 6 events every week to their congregation through bulletins, projected slides, and from the pulpit. We also assume that every congregation member has come on time to

every service that week so they have definitely seen the announcements, plus an additional Christmas Eve service as it is Christmas. Using Facebook's terminology, the average church has a reach of 324,780.

For the digital platforms, we take our audience with our with our different posting frequency and again assume very conservative numbers, well below the typical average. Let's assume 15% of Facebook users have seen something from your church's page, 25% of Instagram users have seen your photos, and 12% of Twitter users have seen your tweets in that month. This would assume a digital reach of 329,604 and therefore even with a HEAVILY weighted set of assumptions for in real life marketing and an extra sermon day to advertise as well as ZERO social media sharing for your audience, the average church's digital reach out performs.

We will draw further conclusions about this in Evaluation of Data, but it is clear that an effective digital strategy and platform is not a supplemental marketing platform to what you do on Sundays, but in and of itself a priority.

-
1. "A Marketer's Guide to Nailing the Timing & Frequency of Social Media Updates" <http://blog.hubspot.com/blog/tabid/6307/bid/33601/A-Marketer-s-Guide-to-Nailing-the-Timing-Frequency-of-Social-Media-Updates.aspx> September 24, 2012.
 2. "Why You Need A Content Creation System." <http://justinwise.net/content-creation-system>
 3. "The Social Media Frequency Guide: How Often to Post to Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn And More." <https://blog.bufferapp.com/social-media-frequency-guide> April 7, 2014.

Chapter 7: Posting Content

Of all of the chapters we discuss, content is by far what I view as the most important. I love to talk about this as you will find over at ChurchMag and have devoted numerous eBooks to the types of content you can put on your blog and social media accounts to get the most diverse and effective strategies possible. I value quality of content so highly, I'm willing to sacrifice quantity if need be. Yet, this is my own value of a social media and web strategy and you need to define your own reasons for posting great content.

Whatever you do with social media and website content, weather for engagement or marketing, do it with a purpose.¹¹

The sections below are going to be brief, but full of great statistics from the research but also some excellent examples of content you can make. This is only the beginning as I plan to continue sharing some of the great content published on these different platforms throughout the coming months following the release of this eBook. You can check ChurchMag for our series on *By the Numbers* at <http://churchm.ag/by-the-numbers> for a list of all of the resources we have posted and more great ideas to spur you on.

What Should I Post?

You have your online platforms, you have connected them all effectively. You even know how much you want to post and how large an audience you need. Great. But how are you using your platform to post? Is your content effective with proper branding and hashtags? Are you capitalizing on the ability to share Facebook posts with media that gives you more bang for your buck?

By no means am I analyzing individual tweets as this would be an insanely large task nor do I have the time and energy to devote to such

a cause. That being said, a simple analysis can suggest if churches are making the most of what they post. Or is it simply about throwing some content out for people to see and moving forward with the online presence in that manner? A follow up qualitative research project with individual churches could give more insight into this process, but for now we will stick with our quantitative approach. This includes using hashtags, branded photos, edited photos, and unedited, non-media posts.

One side note, this was not reviewed at across all platforms. Twitter is intentionally ignored as the posting frequency is too high and impossible to evaluate within the scope of this research project. Because of the integration of Instagram and Facebook, all branded, hashtag, and edited photos were assessed on Instagram only. And all non-media posts were only considered on Facebook. The results are still quite relevant, but very specific.

Hashtags

55% of the top 100 churches in America use hashtags on their Instagram accounts.

Hashtags are a great way for churches to be able to look into the dialogues that are happening at your church. Whether you go for one big church hashtag or one for each ministry,²² I highly encourage you come up with at least one to use for your church.

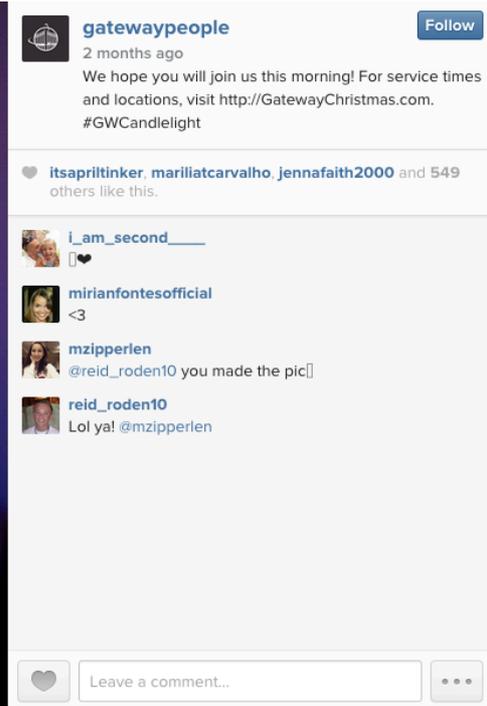


Image via <http://gatewaypeople.com>

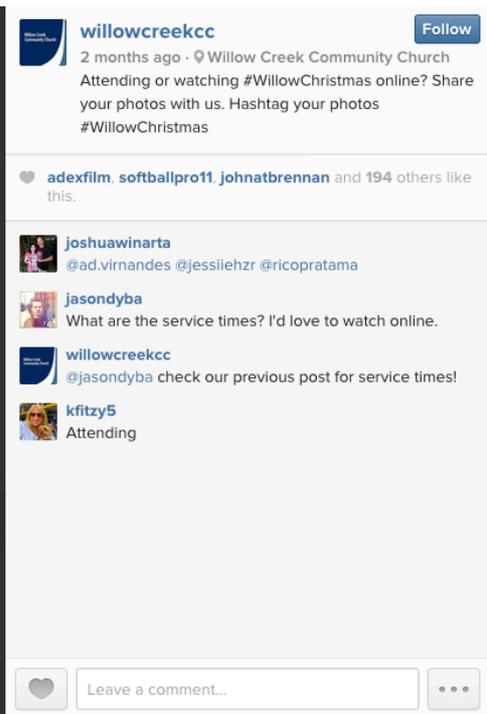


Image via <http://www.willowcreek.org>

Branding

45% of the top 100 churches in America use branding on their Instagram images.

Branding is this simple idea that potentially hundreds, thousands, or millions of eyes are going to see your pictures over the next year. The focus of the image is on the content with smiling faces, church times, and creating a culture or environment of serving, worshipping, and growing deeper into our faith. Yet, it is possible to subsequently improve the brand visibility of your church and engrain that your church is doing some great things. This has the passive effect of connecting faith and action into the minds of your viewers.



Image via <https://www.southeastchristian.org>



Image via <http://www.wc.org>

Edited

65% of the top 100 churches in America have edited images on their Instagram accounts.

Edited photos take some time, creativity, and energy to produce, but as you will see below, it can make something special. This is therefore something that cannot be done easily on the fly, especially when only operating a mobile device to upload to social media. But the presentation value when done well is absolutely wonderful.



Image via <http://northpoint.org>

northpointcommunitychurch Follow
2 months ago
3 Days to Go: Our Senior Pastor, @Andy_Stanley, is putting the final touches on his Christmas message. You don't want to miss our services this weekend! <http://sharechristmas.com> #BTSNPCC #ShareChristmas

amberbrown14, bethsegreen, pj_478 and 173 others like this.

Leave a comment...



Image via <https://newspring.cc>

newspring_church Follow
2 months ago
Christmas At NewSpring begins today! Tag the friend you're bringing then visit ChristmasAtNewSpring.com for locations and times (link in bio) #ThrillOfHope #ChristmasAtNewSpring

taragracin, brooklynthomason5603, jessica_nicole and 976 others like this.

leni_frances
I've got my tissues ready!

emmies0116
@heat143 @jagerette83

cadencerayne
@cpowell_07 tomorrow at 10am!!

_flowers_rn
@_btwitsjennifer @madelinegracee1 Tuesday 12/23 @6pm!! Ya'll are invited.

ashlynnkoon
@manningasnip Will you come with me?!?!?

kristiscarborough
Got saved at this very service 2 yrs ago today!! After making the decision to putting God number 1 in my life I just celebrated 2 yrs of sobriety...now I watch

Leave a comment...

Unedited

Unedited photos on Instagram are very simple, yet possibly difficult to produce, photos that let the image be the hero. This allows your content

to be the center stage as you capture moments and upload them quickly from your photography devices.



Image via <http://www.crossroads.net>



crdschurch 2 months ago · Crossroads
Double tap (or raise your hand) if it's your first time to see #AwaitedShow.

shewhothrowsglitter, darlie4mkh, krismaurice and 349 others like this.

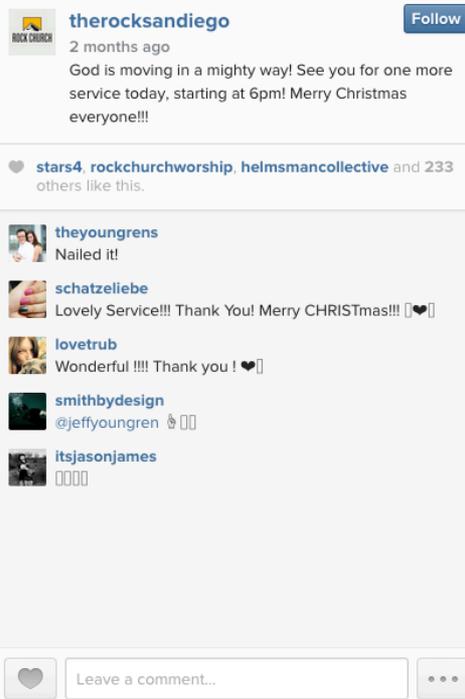
adlee01
I went last year and yesterday with my family. However, I sent 6 of my non crossroads Co workers to tonight's show and they loved it! I'm hoping they come back!

hannah_patton13
My sister Nicole Chance was in the show so we brought the entire family down there to see it we also saw it last year and it was awesome once again!

Leave a comment...



Image via <http://www.sdrock.com>



therocksandiego 2 months ago
God is moving in a mighty way! See you for one more service today, starting at 6pm! Merry Christmas everyone!!!

stars4, rockchurchworship, helmsmancollective and 233 others like this.

theyoungrens
Nailed it!

schatzliebe
Lovely Service!!! Thank You! Merry CHRISTmas!!! [❤️]

lovetrub
Wonderful !!!! Thank you ! ❤️

smithbydesign
@jeffyoungren [👍]

itsjasonjames
[👍]

Leave a comment...

Non-Media

The average number of media posts on a church's Facebook page every month is 7. The average number of non-media posts is 5.

Non-media posts include sharing links to outside of Facebook (including non-embedded YouTube links and to the church website) as well as text-only posts have been shown by Facebook to have less reach and impact for your page's user. Yet, when you want to maintain certain frequencies or "in-between" posts that highlight a blog article on your church site or a prayer, these posts can be simple to do. Here are a couple of examples.



Church of the Highlands
December 18, 2014 · ✱

Many have asked about the local missions we are supporting with a portion of the Legacy Offering, and we wanted to let you know that a comprehensive list can be found at <http://www.churchofthehighlands.com/give/legacy>. Because of your generosity, these incredible ministries are being strengthened and encouraged to continue to make a great difference in our communities.

Legacy Offering | Giving | Church of the Highlands
Church of the Highlands is a life-giving church meeting in multiple locations throughout Central Alabama.
[HTTP://WWW.CHURCHOFTHEHIGHLANDS.COM/GIVE/LEGACY](http://www.churchofthehighlands.com/give/legacy) | BY HUMANS.TXT

Like · Comment · Share · Buffer ·  252  4  29

Image via <https://www.churchofthehighlands.com/>



Image via <http://www.second.org>

Conclusion

The simple conclusion is that there is no one-way of posting and if you give your digital ministry a couple of hours at a time to be creative, your online presence will thrive. For staff, make it part of your routine to create great stuff. For volunteers, find a great process to gather as much content as possible.

Kenny Jhang put the idea of creating this content well:

*"Don't use technology to replace human interaction and personal relationships, but use it to scale them."*³

There are so many articles on the Interwebs about how to create content for all of your digital platforms. So go out and do something amazing for the Kingdom of God.

^{1.} "Social Media Engagement Matrix: Introduction." <http://churchm.ag/social-media-engagement-matrix-introduction/> June 9, 2014.

^{2.} "One Church Hashtag To Rule Them All?" <http://churchm.ag/one-church-hashtag-rule/> October 23, 2013.

3. "Church Website Content — Foundry #1." <http://churchm.ag/foundry-church-website-content/> September 25, 2014.

Chapter 8: Evaluation Of Data

The data has been gathered, compiled, and extrapolated. Within the findings, we have found some good nuggets, but there is more that can be evaluated. These are initial thoughts from the data set, but truly only great results can come from conversations with the digital media managers as well as other observations as you the reader apply this to your own situation.

Further, I ask that you set aside your preconceived notions of what you expect is required to be effective online and instead go through all of this with an open heart and mind. Too many times I have done a consultation with pastors who have made many assumptions thinking it was impossible for their church to be effective online or goals that are just unattainable. Instead, allow yourself to dream and hope for something great for your church.

The Numbers Don't Lie, Digital Can Be Effective

Looking at our calculations in Social Media Size and Posting Frequency, it is already an effective communication medium for churches if they just tap into it. Imagine if you start to regularly get shares, likes, and comments that double, triple, or more the reach of your content to the point that if you only had a volunteer team on it before, you start to consider a part- or full-time position as its outreach potential goes beyond any other program you had running. Truly, this is a three to six month project that could have immediate as well as long-lasting benefits for years to come.

A Digital Ministry Is A Priority

Taking this idea of a full-time staff person is not a "could be if we were them" mentality. I have heard of 5-7 churches in a single community putting forward funding to a social media or blogging manager that can

be split several ways. At that point, pastors are creating content, secretaries are being trained to respond to comments, and a single social media or blogging manager can help with the process, dedicated 5-10 hours of their time to any one church but being considered full-time and the individual churches gaining benefits beyond traditional means.

Many Churches Are Wanting To Be Followed, Not Follow Others

In the world of marketing or engagement, some churches did an amazing job of wanting to hear what others had to say. They would retweet people, capitalize on the use of hashtags, and promote people instead of events. But these examples are few and far between. Instead, it was "come see us" or "look at what we did" type of posts. There is no judgment if that is the expectation of your church, but it also is only one dimensional, missing out on great conversations, outside perspectives, and finding digital advocates for your brand that can go beyond city limits and denominational viewpoints to a broader, more global mission. It takes intentional effort that at times is humbling, but can be eternally rewarding as well.

Be Consistent With Posting, Stay The Course

Don't start posting then go silent. Keep to a sustainable pace of posting so that your audience can know when to expect to hear from you, because they actually do love hearing from you. There is nothing worse than starting quickly out of the block to fade to nothing. Several Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts showed signs of "we tried it but it didn't work so we'll leave it alone." I wonder how much effort they intended to put into it, because I personally have found it can take 12-18 months for full results and building an audience can take much longer than that. This is a guess, but I bet without instant success, a majority of churches simply gave up. Completely contrary to how digital platforms work.

Instagram Is A Real Winner That No One Is Talking About

At the time of this writing, very few people are giving credit to Instagram in the role of ministry. It is assumed that Facebook is always supposed to be the primary and Twitter a good alternative, especially if you want to engage with other pastors and thought leaders. But the simplicity of Instagram, combined with the high view rates, and ability to not only market but engage with people. At the same time, simply looking at the lack of connected Instagram accounts to websites is frustrating. Most of the time, I had to make educated guesses to find these accounts or pull from Twitter when they wanted to share an image on a tweet. In many ways, they are their own worst enemy and I have a feeling this is more common beyond these 100 churches.

Connect With In Real Life People

Digital conversations are good, but it would appear that churches want to be reached in person, whether that is a person in the pew on Sunday morning or a phone call to talk with a pastor personally. It's hard for me to make much of a distinction with the boundary between IRL and digital, but the effort to come to church or make a phone call certainly is a barrier for many people, for better or for worse. Keep posting phone numbers and addresses, but making contact us pages more prominent is vital to successful digital strategies.

Chapter 9: Ancillary Observations

This research project had a lot of specific goals which needed measured within very detailed and strict guidelines. I believe that has been achieved. But while completing this project on a short timeline from scratch, I began to notice a couple of details that are not necessarily scientific, but definitely worth being noted.

Below are some of these observed side notes I jotted down while plodding through the data. Some may become more fodder for future research goals while others are just good things to share without any basis other than an honest opinion.

Some Churches Know What They Want

I have been under the false assumption that churches are working towards a goal based on business practices. What I observed instead is churches being intentional about what they post, and being creative and professional with set standards. They are not operating as a for profit company or blogger trying to be read, but celebrating the Church and our Creator. It truly is amazing what is out there.

Not Every Ministry Is Great

Beyond the amazing examples of great digital ministry, I saw many churches that simply let things slip away without a social media post for months or years, old blog articles from 2013, and being very sporadic in their published content. Let me say that it pains me to see churches with a digital ministry presence but not be intentional and effective with it. Further, I saw churches who went the shotgun route and left their digital platform confused at best. Imagine being in that community and seeing the church's online presence. It's hard to think someone would think, "I want to go to that church."

So Much Creativity

I see two-thirds of the year as "normal" marketing and relationship building, but I unintentionally (and thankfully) picked the month of December to do this research project. What I saw was churches having engaging conversations with their audience and producing inspiring content. Beyond the "post something every day" mentality, I saw so many smiles, hugs, and worshipping hands that I felt the presence of God impacting our digital lives. If you don't think the Holy Spirit can be communicated digitally, let me show you a thing or two that will make your heart jump for joy.

It Would Seem Many Churches Don't Have A Strategy

Many of the churches I reviewed didn't have a strategy, they did have one but missed the target, or I simply did not understand it. Certainly, some of the best websites and accounts are rocking it with the intent to get people into their church or others want to engage viewers where they are at and it's clear as day. Others are posting 5 times a day or 5 times a week and not necessarily on Sundays. Still others will have a clear strategy for most of the month, but then in 3-4 days, break from the strategy. The question is, what is holding them to what they intend to do and do they truly know what their goals actually are?

Narrow In On The Target

Ultimately, I think my biggest critique of the experience for churches is to narrow your intentions. If you have an Instagram account but don't link to your website and visa versa, what are you doing? If you tweet but don't show images or videos, are you fully communicating the heart of your ministry? Smiles mean a lot! And websites are meant for an online platform to connect people to people, so forget redesigning your site if you cannot even tell your story well.

Great Things Are Happening

At the very foundation of all of this, nearly all churches are doing something and I bet if they track it well, each church could find that their digital ministry has had some positive effect. Other churches may find they are having significant effect. What I know is that many people are sharing content, leaving comments, and liking it. That means not only is the Gospel getting to the people who already have a connection point, but it is getting to friends and family of those who are engaging with their content. Thus, the reach is compounding upon itself and maybe even going a little viral.

Websites Need Updating

I'm not even talking about the social media icons. If you use outdated ones, that's fine. But some of those sites are horrible. I'd wonder how many of them even could be used on mobile devices. If I load your site intently looking for something and cannot find it, how is this going to work for a person who is casually looking and nothing engaging hits them? This is your platform, do something great and make it easy for others to get where they want to go.

Appendix: What's Next?

By the Numbers doesn't stop there. ChurchMag will share some of the amazing content that these churches have created to generate more creativity and hopefully empower other churches to do something amazing as well. See what your church has the bandwidth for and reproduce them.

Meanwhile, I'll try to work some magic and get some Photoshop files, interviews, and other resources out of the whole experience from some of these churches to share with you. Maybe even score an interview or two to discuss their digital platform strategy on the ChurchMag podcast.

This is not the end of the research process. There is more data to comb through and this is just the beginning. I want to turn this into a longitudinal study that sees not only a snapshot in December 2014, but a year long process of how churches are working online. I hope to find ebbs and flows, holiday focuses, and ultimately at least one foundational strategy to underline them all. This will be a big task, but I look forward to the challenge.

Here just some of the things that I want to cover:

- 20 examples of church websites with satellite campuses
- How many church have a blogs?
- What churches offer online giving via their blog?
- What makes up an "I'm new" page?
- Gather data on podcasts links, YouTube accounts, and other mediums.
- Do churches have posted service times, staff pages, staff photos, and events?
- Does the phone number and contact us listed even work?
- What blog categories are used, how frequently do they post, and how many authors post in a given month?
- Do churches continue to post on social media as frequently in the

coming months to come over a 6 month period?

Let's Start A Dialogue Here

This is research on the top 100 churches, but I would love to know what is happening at your church. How does your data compare to this? Are your goals relevant and realistic? What does "success" mean to your church?

I'd love to begin this discussion with you. If you are willing to answer any of these questions and interested in valuable dialogue please leave a comment or shoot me an email at jeremy@churchm.ag.

Who is Jeremy Smith?



Jeremy Smith is a Christian first, husband and father next, and then a blogger, writer, and social media realist. Besides helping churches Level Up their digital marketing platforms and church tech ministries through writing and direct consultations, he loves to spend time with his family and serving in the church with infant daycare and marital and pre-marital counseling.

Jeremy is currently an outpatient clinician at a Colorado Community Behavioral Health Center and previously worked at Youth for Christ/USA as the Social Media Specialist as well as a Youth Ministry Director over the span of more than ten years. He has received his Masters of Arts in Mental Health Counseling from Denver Seminary, Masters of Arts in Family Ministry from Winebrenner Theological Seminary, and Bachelors of Science in Computer Engineering from Ohio Northern University. He has been involved in Youth for Christ for ten years and absolutely loves sharing the life of Jesus with teens.

Who is ChurchMag Press?

We are the digital publishing arm of ChurchMag, a [highly ranked ministry website](#) dedicated to equipping church leaders and technology professionals with content that makes their job more effective and brings a smile to their day.

ChurchMag Press is uniquely positioned to provide an established platform for writers, artists, and creatives of all types to leverage as they add value to their tribe.

It is our mission to bridge the gap between content creators and publishing houses. To provide a system that delivers valuable content to readers.

Want to self-publish, but lack the audience?

Looking for a publisher, but none will give you the time of day?

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We are excited about the road ahead and the opportunity it will afford our writers, their tribes and the Church.

Thank you for purchasing [By the Numbers](#).

Godspeed!
Eric Dye & KC Procter

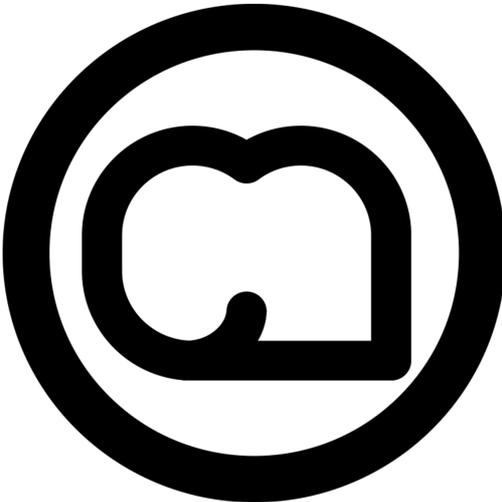
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