

MARKETING JESUS:

Sharing the Good News in a Digital Age

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Marketing is a standard practice in today's business world but is often an afterthought within the Church. Our Church is certainly more than a business, but there are ways in which we operate that require business techniques every day (accounting, fundraising, leadership and more).

Start with Why!

Why does your parish exist? Parishes must define their mission, vision, values and goals, and the core of these is the *why*. In Orthodox Christianity, we have the best *why* that has ever existed: to share the Good News of eternal salvation! That is the big *why*, but there are also small *whys* that put us in the context of our local communities and parishioners' lives. Keep in mind that the mission of your parish fifty years ago may not be the same as it is today. We should return to our parish's *whys* year after year and ensure that all of our programming, marketing and communications contain those *whys*. (Author and speaker Simon Sinek has TED talks, books and a website, startwithwhy.com, on this topic.)

Who Is Your Audience?

Or, perhaps, who do you want your audience to be? When we communicate, are we trying to speak to that audience, or do we spend our efforts preaching to the choir but never seek out those who need to hear our message?

Are you frustrated that there are no young people in your pews on Sunday morning? Invite them to grab a coffee and just listen. We often forget that listening is as important as speaking.

The Explicit and Implicit Message

Parishes communicate so much about how their communities act and operate, whether they are conscious of it or not! Our implicit and explicit messages must be consistent. For example, if the explicit message is, "We want families with kids to come to church," but parents with noisy children are met with dirty looks, the implicit message is, "It's better that you stay in the narthex or the hall so you don't disturb the rest of us." What are the messages your parish is already communicating? And are the things others say about you in line with the *why* of your parish?

Digital Technology Is Not Necessarily the Answer

In the digital age, there are more ways than ever to connect, and it can be overwhelming. With all of the noise, people start to shut down and tune out.

When used properly, digital technology and online marketing can certainly assist your parish in spreading the Good News, but we must never forget our ability to connect one-on-one with an individual. People want connection. We as humans are meant to be in relationship with one another. If we cannot

connect personally with our parishioners, no amount of technology or good marketing efforts will really matter. But it's still a good idea to get your tech and communications in order.

The Parish Website

The website is still the standard in online communications. It should be the backbone of any online strategy so you can point visitors back to it from social media and other sites.

Current research has found that a website's design is a top criterion for someone determining the credibility of an organization. Anecdotally, I can vouch for this. We have parishioners who have made a point to say they began coming to our parish as a result of what they saw and experienced on the website, and we have heard the same from other parishes. The Department of Internet Ministries offers tools and products to assist you with your parish's web presence.

What Makes a Good Website

1. It must be useful

Does it speak to your intended audience about your core message? If you want to reach new parishioners but are saying nothing about how and when to get to church and why you would like people to visit, then you might need to make some adjustments.

Are your visitors able to find the things you want them to find, such as an upcoming calendar of events, resources for spiritual information and appropriate contact information? Have you made online donation forms available? Utilize statistics and analytics to see what content visitors are seeking.

Your website must also be useful to you. Do forms and other information on your website make your job easier and encourage people to attend your parish? If the website is not serving your parish's needs, make a change! It's not essential that your website is all things to all people. Perhaps your website needs to do one thing really well, like welcome new parishioners.

2. It must be inviting

Do you offer a welcome message? Are there engaging (and recent) photos of your community in action? Are you using terms like *cathedral*, *Theotokos*, *archons* and *Philoptochos* that may be foreign to a non-Orthodox audience?

3. It must be current

Content must be updated regularly. If you can't find a way to keep it updated, utilize a strategy that doesn't reveal that to your visitors. A simple, elegant website with minimal information is better than a robust, outdated one.

4. It must be accessible

It is essential that your website be mobile friendly. Your website likely receives 40 to 60 percent of its traffic from people on mobile devices. If you host your site with Internet Ministries, it is already mobile friendly! There are also other forms of accessibility you should consider for ADA compliance (visit ada.gov to learn more). Finally, ensure your website can be found through search engines (see "Online Directories" in this article).

Social Media, Email, Text Messaging, Mobile Apps and More

Taking on the responsibility of digital communications effectively is daunting given how many ways there are to communicate today. Don't feel like you need to be on all of the many platforms out there. The worst thing you can do is spread yourself too thin and end up being completely ineffective in your efforts.

Your parishioners will be on a wide variety of platforms. Find out how they prefer to communicate and try to narrow down your options. Remember, too, that your teens and kids will always be one step ahead of the adults.

An effective digital communications team needs diverse talents. Find people who love to write, proofread, take photos, use social media (regardless of age) and more. Challenge your parishioners to get involved, and trust that they will be able to be a part of this important ministry.

Utilizing a bulk mailing list, you can easily reach your parishioners each week with an attractive, accessible newsletter that parallels or complements your weekly bulletin. Or perhaps sending out a text message with the latest news is the way to go. Your parish might even offer a mobile app parishioners can check for the latest information as an alternative to your website.

No matter what technology you use, it's not going to be the solution in and of itself. It comes down to relationship; talking *with* people is always better than talking *to* them. Be open to feedback and others' involvement and participation.

Online Directories

Online Directories are the yellow pages of the modern age. Can your neighbors find you on Yelp, Foursquare, Citysearch, TripAdvisor, Google Directory, The Knot or GPS navigation systems? Whether you want to be found as a parish community, for your Greek festival, for your wedding and rental facilities or more, directory services are essential.

You're probably already listed on many of these with the default "telephone book" info. Contact our department and we can provide you with a list of several directory websites to check so

you can update and refine your listing. Remember your *why* so that your listings reflect how you want your parish to be known.

Breadth vs. Depth

Digital communications is a two-edged sword: it allows us to easily connect with many people, yet there is no guarantee that the information we share will be received with any depth. With the digital landscape, we have grown accustomed to measuring success quantitatively rather than qualitatively. At a Bible study, would you rather have fifty people but minimal engagement or three people who have a deep, heartfelt discussion?

The same goes with communications. Breadth is important, but we must not forget that in order to bring the Gospel message alive, for parishioners and others to feel invested in our communities and for our community to truly become a spiritual home and family, we must go deep.

I've touched on some best practices that can be applied and then tailored to meet your parish's specific needs. Be willing to try new things, but always listen and welcome feedback. Aim for the personal connection above all. At the Department of Internet Ministries, it is an honor to be able to work for you. We are available to answer questions, guide you to learn more and offer our many tools and services to enhance your digital ministry.

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