

10

**ESSENTIAL
QUESTIONS
TO ASK BEFORE
USING A NEW
COMMUNICATIONS TOOL**

churchjuice
energizing church
communications

GETTING STARTED

So you're thinking about harnessing that brand new technology to spread the word about your church? That's awesome! You're trying to appeal to people where they are and that's important. But every technology comes with its positives and negatives. The key is making sure you are aware of both.

We have to remember this: *technology alone will not save you*. It's just not realistic. Technology is a tool to help you communicate better and reach people in a more effective way. The true change only comes through sharing God's unchanging message.

We need to be aware of what we are communicating. Everything you do communicates something to those you are trying to reach. Because of this, we need to be careful both in what message we give and in what mediums we use to distribute our messages.

This resource comes out of an independent study I did during January of 2010 for the Congregational and Ministry Studies department at Calvin College. As the culmination of the research for that project, involving interviews and readings from various authors, I've come up with 10 questions I think are crucial for any ministry to consider before choosing to use a new piece of technology to use as a communication tool.

After asking each of the questions, I'll take a look at why this question is worth pondering. Some of these questions might seem to have an easy answer - don't settle for that. Make sure you spend enough time on each question that you get at the underlying issue. We are communicating the most powerful message ever – let's make sure we are doing it the best we can.

- Brian Speelman, Calvin College Class of 2011

QUESTION #1

WHO IS MY AUDIENCE?

Who am I trying to reach with this medium? Is it a specific group of people in my congregation, the entire congregation, or even a wider community?

Remember as a kid being told, “Well if _____(insert a name) jumped off a bridge would you?” Guess what? It still holds. Do what’s best for your church, not necessarily what’s hip and new.

Some churches create a sample John and Jane Doe and give them a full biography. Then, when launching any new content, they imagine how these people might react. Be sure to judge things based on how well you think it would be received by this person. Maybe your community is so diverse that you need a couple of John and Jane’s - do what is right for you.

In a similar way, if you’re using a new tool to reach a specific group of people, like a women’s ministry, who is the target person in that group you’re trying to reach? What style (writing, graphical, etc.) are you using to communicate with them?

WHY USE THIS MEDIUM?

QUESTION #2

Why are you using this medium? Is it just because everyone else is or do you believe it’s the best way to reach a certain group of people?

Always be conscious of why you are considering putting your time and money here. Before you take on a new responsibility, make sure you are committed to the medium - both in the short and long term. Are you willing to spend enough time getting to know the new tool? Will you stick with it through the early ups and downs? Is your John or Jane Doe (see #1) going to use this medium or will your message be ignored as if it were just another corporate advertisement that doesn’t pertain to them? Is that person even using this technology?

QUESTION
#3

WHAT RESOURCES ARE BEING USED HERE
THAT COULD/SHOULD BE USED ELSEWHERE?

As part of the research I did, I chatted with Bill Wiarda the Communications Director for Madison Square Church in Grand Rapids, MI. When his church decides to use something new, they look at where it would fit on a hierarchy in terms of importance and what would be sacrificed on the bottom of the hierarchy.

Spend the time thinking about what other ministry or communication tools will lose some resources because they are being allocated here.

IS THERE SOMETHING WE CAN USE INSTEAD?

QUESTION
#4

It's not my goal to say you shouldn't try new technologies. However, why not make the things you are using now better? If you can send the exact same message through something people are already using, why not do it? Kem Meyer, the Director of Communications at Granger Community Church, talks a lot about trying to say more with less. If you are overloading people with messages you begin to lose your credibility.

QUESTION
#5

HOW WILL YOU USE YOUR CHURCH'S
LANGUAGE IN THIS NEW MEDIUM?

Many churches have their own names for specific ministries. However, a newcomer will have no idea "Foundations" is the name of your profession of faith class. Members and regular attendees may know those names better. Where will you put yourself on the continuum between exclusively using your church specific language and being friendly to visitors? Try to always be careful that you are aware of who the audience is for a given piece and then use your church-specific language accordingly.

For example, an email to your church members is different than a mailer used to invite guests to your Easter service - so write accordingly.

It's good to remember there will always be some people in your church who don't know a particular ministry by name. Even regular attendees. So if your high school ministry is called Ignite, it's probably best to write it as Ignite High School.

WHERE ARE YOU TRYING TO DIRECT PEOPLE?

QUESTION #6

Where is it you want people to go in order to find information?

During my research, I talked to one person who said their website was the primary spot. Someone else mentioned they try to drive people to read the bulletin. Don't only think about where you are directing people, but also why you are pushing them there. Make the right choice based on where your congregation is already at. If you force them to use a medium they are not comfortable with, they won't use it and your message will suffer.

QUESTION #7

HOW ARE YOU BUILDING COMMUNITY?

Building community is the goal of almost any communication, right?. Quentin Schultze, an author and Calvin College professor, talks about the idea of "Shalom" and how our communication can help bring some measure of well-being to earth. Is this form of communication going to build community or is it just going to fade in with everything else that is out there? You need to be conscious of not just adding to the media overload, but instead building authentic community.

HOW ARE YOU CONNECTING WITH YOUR AUDIENCE?

QUESTION #8

Whenever you are communicating, you are hoping to identify and connect with your audience. How are you doing it through this medium? Be careful not to use the medium as just another way to distribute your message. Try to use the medium to connect with your congregation.

The big thing about social media, and other communications tools, is that they are a conversation -- not just a one way street. Engage your congregation. Value their feedback and you will get their buy in. Also be involved. If people are commenting on something you wrote, leave a comment as well. Guide the conversation. One of the biggest failures of starting to use a new technology is falling into the "set it and forget it" mentality. It takes effort and a time commitment to use a new technology to its full extent.

QUESTION #9

WHAT IS THE COMMUNITY YOU'RE ENTERING LIKE?

People have expectations about what they're going to find in a given place. What they expect when they get a brochure and what they expect when they visit your website are two different things. Make sure you take the time to research and observe the medium before you try to use it. That way once you decide to jump in you will know the best practices of what to do.

Also, make sure when you are writing you do so with that community in mind. Use the style and tone they would expect, while also staying true to the voice of your organization. The message you write for one medium, like Facebook, sometimes translates well into other areas and sometimes it doesn't. Make sure you are tailoring your content to the context you're writing it in and the people you're writing to.

This was one of the big questions that emerged during my research. How are you planning on dealing with it when people come to you and say that they have a problem or were convicted to take action based on what you wrote? Who is going to respond to these posts and how will they do it? How do you think that person would respond to someone calling or emailing them back as a follow-up to that post? Our goal is to bring the saving message of Christ to them, so we need to be ready to help them take the next step. This might be the only place they would be willing to be vulnerable - don't lose this chance to help.

CREDITS AND REUSE POLICY



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