THE**CHURCH**PLANTER'S guide to
social media

a three story studio resource
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intro

Church Planters Guide to Social Media - Intro

You're a church planter, pastor, volunteer - or all three - and you're in a mad scramble to get teams, core-values and building codes moving forward. Not to mention marketing, fundraising and theological distinctives. On top of all that, you read on Twitter about how you need to put time into social media.

Between the overwhelming flood of other things, you know you should probably set up a blog and a Facebook page, but you're just not sure how to make it effective. You want it to be great, but you don't really have the time to invest or the experience to do it well.

This guide might be for you.

The Purpose of This Guide

This Guide is for church planters like you who feel overworked, over-stressed and under-resourced. It's not to add another task on your ever-increasing to-do list, but to instead give you a clear step-by-step guide and strategy for building a social media platform that will help launch your organization and begin to build community.

These steps are designed to:

- *Guide you through the process of building social media platforms.*
- *Help you and your volunteers be more efficient and effective.*

For your extreme efficiency, the guide is divided up into sections for you to pick and choose which platforms you want to implement based on which are most important for your church.

Of course, we'd say it's all important - and wonderfully fun to read ;)

Why Social Media?

Social media is an unparalleled opportunity to create community online that affects life off-line. For church planters, it dramatically increases opportunities to form relation-ships, reach out to those in need and help create awareness of your community.

Social media has an incredibly powerful ability to help you meet people where they are. It's a fantastic first-touch connection point: it's non-intrusive, yet offers increasing levels of connection, information and natural word-of-mouth opportunities.

Communication is a two-way street,
and social media is designed to help you both listen AND talk.

Bottom line: social media creates conversations, not just information.

getting started

What Social Media to Use?

Obviously there are exactly 1 bajillion social networks out there, all offering a different niche and focus and reason for being there. From Twitter to Yammer, YouTube to God-Tube and Facebook to Foursquare, how do you choose? You don't really have time to wade through all of them to see which ones are most effective for you.

With that, in mind we'll try cut through the clutter a little.

We're going to assume a few things:

> *a. You're busy*
> *b. You don't have the resources (financial, volunteer, time) to do a really broad scope of many social networks.*
> *c. It's better to focus small and do a few things well instead of doing a million things mediocre-ly (is that even a word?).*

Based on that, we're going to go ultra-simple.
Our social media diet for this guide consists of:

> • *Facebook*
> • *Twitter*
> • *YouTube*
> • *Blogs*

Those media, which are the most commonly consumed by the average person you want to reach, in our opinion are the best choices to be lean, mean and effective for church planters.

Person, Group or Page?

There are three approaches you can take to create a presence for your church on Facebook.

Person
You could set up a new person just like your personal account, but as a church. All the features you use for your personal facebook account would be available there. It's generally odd and a little awkward when an organization has a personal account since these accounts are geared towards people. It also limits you by not including some of the features and functionality that a group or page offer. So we don't recommend this approach.

Groups
Groups offer a level of connection through e-mail, chat, sharing and collaboration, and they work well for a small group of people. On a large scale (more than 15 people) groups can seem over-bearing and spammy.

Page
Pages are an ideal setup for a church - we totally heart them. Posts on a dedicated page show up in the feeds of those who "like" that page. They provide for interaction and allow people that like your page to post content themselves (which can be a good thing). In most cases, pages are probably the best option for you as a church.

Facebook Page

Like we said, you'll want one of these.

Pages allow a new level of communication and interaction with your church. Building a community takes time, but you can start now, knowing that a huge percentage of people will consume information and begin interacting about your church through its Facebook page.

Setting It Up

At http://facebook.com/pages, click on "Create Page" to get started. You'll have the choice between "Community" and "Official". Go with official; community pages don't generate News Feed stories, which is something you definitely want to do.

Once you've named your page, Facebook will guide you through the basics of setting it up and inviting people to "like" it. Most of this I'm sure you can figure out yourself, but here's a few specific recommendations:

- *Set your Facebook page URL at http://www.facebook.com/username/ - This will make your Facebook page location easier to remember (and helps it look more professional).*
- *Make your image vertical not horizontal. Horizontal logos look weird as Facebook thumbnails, so create something taller. When in doubt, go square, making sure to leave a little extra space around the edge.*
- *include your service times and, if applicable, a launch date in the "Info" section underneath your profile picture.*
- *Look through everything in the "Edit Page" section underneath the profile picture including:*
    - *Permissions: Show posts by all users on the wall.*
    - *Basic Info: Include your church's website or blog as well as contact info.*
    - *Applications: Add applications sparingly but experiment with adding the "Twitter" app to your Facebook page to allow your page to post updates to your Twitter account automatically.*
    - *Consider importing your blog feed in your "Notes" tab to have your blog posts automatically (if somewhat sporadically) post to your Facebook page.*

Again, experimentation is key. Look at every element of your page and consider if it is serving any specific purpose. If not, can it be removed? The less clutter, the more clarity.

Facebook Person

You should be a Facebook Person. Chances are, you already joined the 500,000,000 people on Facebook and started sharing pictures of your kids with family members across the country.

If you weren't already aware, be warned that as a church leader your Facebook profile will be scrutinized by others. For better or for worse, social media means complete transparency about a lot of things. We advise not hiding or privatizing your Facebook page. Your personal profile can be a useful way to interact with your church's Facebook page and lets people know you are approachable in this medium.

You will want to take a few precautions.

- **Disclaim!** *You can't exactly say that your posts don't reflect the values and beliefs of your church (be honest, who would believe that?), but you can make a few things clear.*

- **Let people know you do not do Facebook counseling.** *People may message or write on your wall with serious personal requests. Not only do you probably not want to counsel them via Facebook comments, you also want to make sure they don't feel ignored if you don't happen to respond to their comments. The best solution: In the info section of your profile (right under your smiling mug), write something about how you don't always respond to requests on Facebook and offer the number of your administrative assistant*
  (if you have one) as a way for people to get in touch about personal issues.

That said, don't use your Facebook profile as a platform for doing church business. Keep it personal. Not that you can't mention your church, but your personal profile probably isn't the best outlet for dispensing church information. People want to see who you really are, and Facebook is a great place to keep it authentic. You will probably end up with your fair share of haters and dissenters, but that's for another page.

Facebook Groups

If you're asking why we are recommending a Facebook Page for your church instead of a Facebook group, it makes sense to understand the differences, subtle though they may be.

Facebook Pages are an adaptation of the Facebook Person so that the information makes sense when coming from an organization. For example, most people don't have a "relationship status" for their organization but might want to add business hours. Other than these adaptations, Pages behave in much the same way a Person does on a Facebook feed.

Groups however, behave very differently. They function as a community within a community and allow for chats between members and the creation of collaborative documents. Also, not all information from a group shows up in the main feed of group members.

The bottom line might be that groups offer a more aggressive platform for communication which might work great for your kids volunteers or small groups, but would be overkill for 200 church members. Remember, we're trying to meet people where they already are, not create another platform for them to use.

Facebook: What to Post and Why?

We'll cover this in the Next Steps section of this guide, but here are a few things we've learned about what kinds of stuff to post on Facebook.

- *Media rich: A fancy way of saying lots of pictures and videos*
- *Short: While you're not limited to Twitter's 140 characters, it's a pretty good guideline for how much people will actually read in their feeds.*
- *Reactive: Not controversial, but you do want to post something that people will respond to which leads us to....*
- *Responsive: The most important part of building a community is being disciplined about engaging people. Try to respond to every post or comment and use your response to start conversations.*

Building a Facebook community takes time but when done well it can be an incredibly useful tool for communicating with your church.

Twitter - Twit-a-What?

Of all the social media platforms, Twitter is the hardest for people to understand. It seems unnecessary and trivial to people who don't use it or understand it. For churches (in spite of some literature saying otherwise) Twitter use is limited in its use for one simple reason: Your church members have to be on Twitter for it to be useful.

If a huge percentage of your church members are active twitter users, then go for it. If not...

Consider it a base to be covered.
Get an account and link it to where you do your actual communicating (like Facebook) so that if at some point you have the users in your church, you can use it as a communication tool.

Twitter: Setting Up

Enter the e-mail address at which you want to receive updates, choose your Twitter handle (make it short and something un-fancy like @newharvestchurch) and tweet away.

You'll also want to

- *Add a logo for your profile picture.*
- *Add the URL of your primary communication platform (Facebook or blog) to your profile.*
- *If you're feeling ambitious, you can customize your Twitter profile design, but in most cases, isn't a necessary first step.*

Once you have your twitter address (twitter.com/username) you'll want to make sure you add it to your other social platforms when necessary, especially to your blog. There are numerous plugins/widgets for integrating twitter. Just download the Socail Widget Plugin for WordPress or google "wordpress twitter".

What to Post: Who's Listening?

Again, this will be covered more in the Next Steps section but here are a few guidelines for what kinds of things to post on Twitter.

- *Short: Obviously you are limited to 140 characters. There are services that will allow you to exceed that, but avoid those like the plague. (URL shortening services like bit.ly or yfrog are a must and are bundled into most Twitter apps.)*
- *Dense: It's amazing how efficient you have to be when trying to communicate in 140 characters.*
- *Links: Use twitter to link to other social media, blogs, videos, other pastor's blogs, but try to keep it relevant. It can easily seem spammy.*
- *Responses: If you really want to leverage Twitter well, you need to consume and respond to others' tweets. @Replies, ReTweets and Hashtags take a little while to grasp but are necessary if you want to establish your Tweet cred.*

#Hash-a-What?

Hash tags are words with no spaces following the # sign. They are used to categorize twitter posts into specific topics. Kind of. There are no regulations on using hash tags and they are frequently used by twitter spammers as a cheap marketing ploy. However, they can also be used to allow a quick search of all tweets containing #yourchurchname.

If you still don't understand, don't sweat it.
Just focus on producing quality Tweets without the hash tags.

Video Platform: YouTube or Vimeo

Some pastors find communicating through video easier than writing long posts, and honestly, most people would rather watch a video than read something. Web video sites like YouTube, Vimeo and Flickr (Flickr does video too), should be a key part of your social media strategy.

Which one Should I Choose?
We like vimeo, but here are plenty of good reasons to choose one of the others.

Vimeo:

Pros:
• *High aesthetic value.*
• *Positive Community*
• *Clean, hip and professional design*

Cons:
• *Not as much traffic as YouTube*
• *Free version does not have all the features (mobile device support, clean embedding)*

YouTube:

Pros:
• *High traffic: seriously.*
• *Huge community (though not always positive)*
• *Free!*

Cons:
• *Community is mostly irreverent 14 year-olds video gamers (which could be a pro if you're youth focused)*
• *Embedded player doesn't look as nice.*
• *User interface is a little noisy (related video feeds, etc).*

FlickR:

Pros:
• *Large community*

Cons:
• *No embedding (or at least we couldn't figure it out)*

YouTube is the obvious choice because it's free and easily embeddable, but we've had great experiences with Vimeo.

YouTube: Setup

Assuming you use YouTube,
here are a few guidelines for setting up your video platform.

- *Add a title to your home page.*
- *Under "Account Settings" add your logo to the profile picture, add your tagline to the description, and put the URL of your primary communications platform (Facebook or blog) in the URL box.*
- *Consider (carefully) adding "Account Sharing" settings that would link your YouTube account to Facebook and Twitter. Don't do it if you think it will clutter up your information flow.*
- *Remove junk modules from your channel. Other than Subscribers and Comments, you shouldn't need much on your YouTube Channel.*
- *Change the default Theme Colors. The "Clean" theme is always a good choice, but if you want to go custom, make sure to use mostly light colors. Too many dark colors and you may come across as an angsty teen.*

Similar things apply when setting up your Vimeo account, but it is much less customizable. Honestly, that can be a good thing.

Once your video platform is set up, start recording and uploading. Try to keep your videos short (under 3 minutes) and directly relevant to your church.

Photo Sharing Platform: Flickr and Picassa

Sharing images from your church events is a crucial part of maintaining your social media. People love seeing themselves in pictures (for the most part). There are dozens of photo sharing platforms out there, but the two most common are Flickr and Picassa. Each has its own set of pros and cons, but it doesn't matter because for your purposes, neither of them is as effective as Facebook.

Facebook is easy and already has half a billion users. You can add photo albums to Facebook a half dozen ways and tag the people in the pictures to help promote them in the feed. For us it's a no-brainer. We've used Picasa for embedding a slideshow in a blog post, but 99% of photo sharing happens on Facebook.

Just consider it one less platform you have to worry about.

Blog: What and Why?

What is a blog?
The technical definition: *a website where the content (posts or entries) shows up on the page in reverse chronological order.*

An unofficial definition might be: *A website that's so easy to produce that anyone can make one and complain about whatever they want to.*

Our goal is to keep you from complaining and keep you engaging your community.

A blog can actually be a lot of things: A journal, a news outlet, a community, a re-source...the list goes on, but from a church's perspective here are a few things a blog can be:

• **A News Platform:**
   Need a place to post information about an event? Are church members asking a specific question? Do you need a place to post that hilarious video of you doing the Macarena? A blog is the perfect place to post all this information. Any information that is time sensitive (i.e., that is more important now than it will be in a month) should be posted on your blog. Unchanging or static information, like your service times and theological distinctives, should probably not be posted on the blog. But if you wanted to draw attention to them, a blog post is a great place to highlight specific things.

• **A Place to Establish Your Identity:**
   People want to know who you are, both as an individual and as a church. A blog is a great place to philosophize about what makes your church unique, to express your DNA and core values.

• **A Place to Answer Questions:**
   All of your social media platforms provide an effective, speedy way for you to answer questions. Blogs are no different. Likely this will take the form of you posting about an event (say a pot-luck dinner) and someone asking via the comments of your blog post whether or not they should bring a green bean casserole. The comment section of your blog is a great place to give quick answers to questions (or point people to where they can get their question answered).

Choosing a blogging platform

Tentblogger.com has an ever expanding list of every single blogging platform and as of now there are 117 different blogging platforms. We'll save you the trouble of agonizing over which platform to use and say: Wordpress.

You can choose to host your blog on Wordpress.com's site (with some limitations) or set up Wordpress technology on your own domain. More on that later.

We <heart> wordpress.
There are lots of reasons, but here are a few important ones.

- *It's free.*
- *It's easy (comparatively)*
- *It's customizable*
- *It's SEO friendly*

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) probably deserves its own handbook, but it's of mammoth importance for churches since EVERYONE (well, most people) Googles a church before visiting.

Honestly, there are a few other good blogging platforms; Blogger, Tumblr, Posterous etc.., but because we think it's the best option - we're just going to continue this section assuming that you will be using Wordpress for your blog.

Wordpress.com vs Self-Hosted

This should be an easy decision for you to make. If words like FTP, CSS, mySql, domain and server scare you, then you should go with a Wordpress.com site.

Another option is to recruit a volunteer developer (or hire one) to help you with all of those scary words (or hire an extremely nice, experienced and good-looking service organization to set you up ;)).

Wordpress.com

The obvious downside to using a Wordpress.com blog is the lack of control over design. Fortunately there are a few concrete guidelines to follow to get your blog to look great. It might not be totally awesomely original, but it can still look clean and professional.

Choosing a Theme

Stay simple! Resist the urge for blog-bling. There are some awesome and flashy themes out there, but a simple theme that looks professional goes a long way. We recommend the K2 lite theme because it is simple and allows a graphical header, but there are literally hundreds of theme choices.

Setting up:
Details matter when setting up your blog. Your blog wants to know a lot of information about you. If you speed through and leave some of it blank, that will affect it's professionalism and hurt your ability to show up in search-engines. Here are a few tips for setting up your blog:

- *Make your site title practical. Resist the urge to call your blog "Cetological Musings" and stick with something like "New Harvest Church Blog".*
- *Come up with a punchy tagline. It's another high-ranking piece of information that will help communicate the purpose of your blog.*
- *Change your "theme options". Experiment with changing your theme as much as you can from t the default settings.*
- *Upload an icon or "Blavatar". It serves as your blog icon and "Favicon" and will help make your blog stand out.*
- *Be strategic about your categories. Before you even start posting, think about what categories of posts you will produce and add them to your blog. Then after you start posting, readjust them to reflect what content you are actually posting. Categories make it easy for people to find related posts or explore your previous postings according to their interests.*
- *Ignore post tags. They're not important.*
- *Delete all your "Links." It may clean up your sidebar.*
- *Add services to your "Sharing" under settings. Allowing people to share your content (via Face book, Twitter, E-mail, etc) is key.*
- *Remove widgets. A search widget and a subscribe widget are all you really need. Widgets are a number one, grade A way to clutter up your blog and slow down it's loading time.*
- *The list goes on. Spend time really digging into the Wordpress settings and experimenting with different settings. Remember the objective is CLEAN! Clean and simple helps bring out clarity and content of your blog.*

These are just a few of the customizations possible through Wordpress.com, but it's a good start to get you on the right path.

Adding a Custom Header

Adding a custom header is another way to brand your blog as your own, but it can also be a way to show the world you are not a graphic designer. When designing your own custom blog header, the key is again to keep it clean and simple.

Here are a few tips for a clean and simple blog header.

- *Make your background transparent.*
- *Use a simple, but not everyday font. (Avoid Times, Courier, and especially Comic Sans)*
    (Some nice, clean fonts include Helvetica Neue, Myriad Pro and Bebas Neue)
- *Experiment with what looks good.*
- *Keep it clean.*

Your Media

One of the greatest benefits of blogging, especially on Wordpress, is that your posts can easily contain media. Images and video separate boring blog posts from interesting ones and add yet another level of professionalism to your blog.

It's actually a good rule to try to include one piece of media on every blog post. For some reason people are turned off by text-only posts. Media helps keep interest. However, abusing media in your blogs can also add to the noise and clutter and we want to avoid that.

Here are a few simple guidelines to using media in your blog posts.

Images
Make your images the full width of your posts. If you use the Measure It extension in your browser you can figure out how wide images have to be. Otherwise just experiment until you figure out what size is exactly the full width of your post.

Use great images. That does not mean you have to spend a fortune on http://www.iStock-photo. The Wikimedia Commons are a great place to find public domain images, especially cool vintage ones. Also and http://www.flickr.com/creativecommons/ and http://www.sxc.hu (stock xchng) are great resources for finding professional-looking images that you can use (with a good conscience).

Video
Just like images, you'll want videos to be full width and to look professional.

Video blogs - delivering your blog post content through a talking-head video - offers a whole new world of possibilities for your blog.

We've found that many pastors are more comfortable talking than they are writing. If that's you, then Vlog like crazy. Vlogs, unlike post images, don't have to look slick or professional. They can just look like you set up a webcam in your office or living room (and in fact, that is usually the case). Even though the quality isn't required to be as high for Vlogs, here are a few guidelines to help your Vlog looks it's best.

Pay attention to your light. Webcams need a LOT of light to produce a good image, so make sure there is plenty of light on you (the subject). Also, try to film in a spot where your background is darker than you are - e.g. don't record in front of a bunch of windows or you'll end up with a pretty crazy silhouette going on.

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creating content

What to Talk About

Deciding what to talk about will probably vary church to church. The main question to ask is what will benefit your audience? Is it telling them information? Do you want to share encouraging messages with them? Do you want to ask them questions? Do you want to keep them posted on construction updates?

Defining your goals and objectives will help you decide what to talk about. For example, if your goal is to provide Bible reading resources, then you might not need to ask for prayer needs. On the other hand, if your goal is to build a community of care, then asking for prayer needs might be awesome.

A good rule is to not say something unless you have something to say. People don't need extra noise in their lives. The more you can give them only what benefits them, the better they are and the more valuable your content is.

Much of deciding what to talk about involves looking at your social media through your followers' eyes. If you were them (you're not), would your content be boring? Is there a better way to say this? Is this talking just to hear yourself talk, or is this helping them laugh, get excited, stay informed and have easy action steps to get involved?

Keeping this in mind, check out our list of sample posts for some more ideas on what to talk about. But decide on your overall goal first.

How Often Should I Post?

It depends. If you're just posting the same announcement 5 times a day - that's annoying. If you're posting photos from an outreach that many followers were involved in, you probably can't post enough.

Let's just go back to our two guidelines:

1. Don't talk unless you have something worth saying.
2. If you were them, how often would you want updates?

A good rule is at least one post per day,
but don't post for the sake of posting: stick to the two guidelines.

Be Less Interesting...and More Interested (Conversation vs. Information)

Most of us love to talk and we think that what we have to say could change lives. That's fine if you're the President of the United States, Steve Jobs or Conan. Unless you're one of those 3 (and actually, even if you are), it might be best to stop talking and start listening a little.

Many people (ourselves included) think that what we have to say is epically important: If you just joined a group, it would change your life. If you came to this retreat, you would never be the same. If you just volunteered.., etc.

But the first rule of conversation is that it's a two-way street. It's not about you, it's about your reader or listener.

When an organization (or person, for that matter) only gives informational updates about themselves, it can get pretty boring pretty fast. Even when the info is captivating, if the whole goal of a social media outlet is to dispense information, you'll lose the opportunity for conversation - the opportunity to build a relationship - and you'll miss the social in social media.

As we said earlier, social media is an unparalleled opportunity to create community online that affects life off-line. For church planters, it dramatically increases opportunities for you to form relationships, reach out to those in need, and help create awareness of your community.

So instead of just giving information, maybe it would be beneficial to ask a few questions about your audience beforehand:

- *Who am I trying to reach?*
- *What are they interested in?*
- *How can you form relationships with them?*
- *How can social media help facilitate off-line relationships?*
- *How can you serve them?*
- *How can I leverage social media so that people within the community are empowered to reach out, answer questions and help meet needs?*

Find Your Voice (HOW, not just WHAT)

"Find Your Voice" sounds like a Disney teen movie, but despite the kitschy title we all know people who try to act differently than they really are. We try to act more cool, more hip, more artful, more smarter-er, more theologically trained, more world-wise, more…you name it, and while you can fool some people, most know when you're faking it.

The same is true in how you communicate online. How does your church communicate? What kind of tone do you use? Formal, casual, sarcastic? Do you use church language (brother, dearly beloved)? Academic language? Conversational language?

HOW you communicate is incredibly important. It needs to match who you are. If you're hip and trendy, you probably shouldn't say things like "Dearly Beloved" and "Brethren." If you're old school, you probably shouldn't say things like "Didn't the worship team totally PWN it this morning?"

The bottom line is that we all just need to be authentic and intentionally think through HOW we're communicating to make sure the tone of what we say is authentic and consistent with who we are. We all know we're not cool anyway.

Your Brand and Personality

What do people say about you (or your church)?

Whatever it is that they say, that's probably your personality. Expressing your church's personality is an incredibly vital communication practice. Much like your own personality, your church has a list of uniquenesses (did I make that word up too?) that would describe its personality.

For example: you personally might be an outgoing, extroverted, natural leader type. OR, you might have a nerdy, bookworm-ish, soft-spoken personality.

In the same way, your church might lean towards a specific personality or collection of personalities. For example, one church might be a small, casual, hipster house church. It has a very distinct personality. That church would differ dramatically in personality from a more progressive, mega-church that puts on big productions. Both would be great churches. Both love Jesus and people. Both have very different church personalities.

Just as the hipster house church shouldn't communicate in the same way as the mega-church, your church shouldn't try to communicate in a style that's not consistent or authentic to who you really are.

But how do you determine that?

You might be too much on the inside to have an objective opinion.
Start asking questions.

- *What do people say about you?*
- *What would others or the community describe your church as?*
- *Who do you desire to be?*

These questions can help get you started in expressing your unique church personality.

Overall Objectives

What are you trying to achieve through social media? Your long-term, big picture objectives should determine all of the content you produce for your social media.

Your objectives could include:

- *Connecting with people outside the church.*
- *Building an online community from within your church.*
- *Creating community awareness of your church ministry.*
- *Providing information for your congregation.*

Your church is unique, with a specific mission, and your social media objectives (or how you go about them) will most likely be unique as well.

Defining your objectives helps you to determine what will be a "#WIN" for your social media and what the best practices for you are.

Here's some sample objectives to help get you going (and remember, these aren't set in stone)

- *Create community and conversations.*
- *Create awareness in the local community*
- *Provide information to your community.*
- *Provide information to your congregation.*
- *Build relationships.*
- *Find needs.*
- *Provide discipleship resources (e.g. devotional blogs/videos, Scriptures, links to resources).*

Your big-picture objectives should be few (no more than three or four) and as specific as you can make them.

Your Volunteer Team

A social media team is not an easy thing to build, and no one has done it perfectly (to our knowledge). However we had the privilege in one instance of working with a volunteer social-media-ninja named Steve during our launch campaign for One Life Church - Henderson. He approached us and offered to help, and soon we realized he was way better at all this than we were.

Having a volunteer social media-er (or social media communicator) can easily be a double edged sword and for this reason, church staff can fear them. It takes a lot of trust to allow someone besides you to post on your social media platforms. There are many reasons to not let volunteers manage your online community, but there's one good reason why you should think about it:

You're not super-human. Surprise!

If you haven't figured it out by now, doing social media well takes a LOT of time and effort. It's nearly impossible to stay on top of every single platform, producing daily content and responding to every single comment.

The best solution is to build a team of people responsible for your social media. It can be you, your spouse, your worship leader and your mom OR a team of volunteers. Before giving someone the keys to your communication kingdom here are some things to look for:

- *DNA: Do they really (and I mean REALLY) understand the vision behind your church?*
    Can they recite your core values and are they passionate about where your church is going?
- *They already kill it on their own social media: If their last facebook post was 4 months ago,*
    they might not be an ideal pick for your social media team.
- *They're conversational: They not only produce content on their own social media,*
    but are great about responding to comments.
- *They're diffusers, not dissenters: If you can find them involved in social media arguments*
    that got out of hand, that should raise a red flag. As you'll read later,
    handling social media "haters" is a unique challenge for churches.

The great thing about most high capacity volunteers is that they are willing to learn. Follow your volunteer team's content and comments and give them good feedback so they know whether or not they're on the right track.

best practices

C'mon Get Happy vs. The End of the World as We Know It (Setting a positive tone)

We've probably all heard it before:
"Please, pleeeeeeeeeeeeeeease sign up to work in KIDS ministry because no one wants to help out there, and there's only like 2 volunteers there who do all the work and they hate it and want out and we REALLY need more volunteers. Sign up today. Please."

While guilt and obligation can work on some people for a limited amount of time, long-term this approach isn't going to help build your ministry or find the kind of people you're looking for - those who ENJOY working in kids ministry.

People don't want to jump on board a sinking ship. They want to be a part of something that's going somewhere. Just like the Partridge family makes you want to wear bell bottoms, hop in a van and sing "C'mon Get Happy" - it's an invitation, not an obligation. Serving in church can be an invitation to an opportunity that people want to be a part of. Can we ask that way?

The idea is not to spin something -
if kids ministry is truly awful to volunteer in, you have larger issues to deal with -
it's just communicating the invitation over the obligation.

What if you reworded the above plea for help to something like this:
"Do you enjoy working with kids? Do you like being silly and brightening a child's day? If so, KIDS ministry might be for you."

Handling the Haters

Haters are the fun part of both ministry and social media, aren't they? One pastor told us that a former attendee of his church began a radio program and used it to preach against his former church…fun, fun, fun.

How do you handle the haters in social media - people who post extremely negative comments about your church or your mom? Where do you draw the line between letting people be honest and open vs. censoring the weirdness.

We sure don't know.

It's most likely a matter of you deciding in advance what crosses the line and what's acceptable discussion. Each church's line will probably be a little different.

We've decided to not have hard and fast rules on this, but to take it on a case by case basis. Obviously anything indecent gets cut and anything over the top weird or rude would get cut, but beyond that we've decided to experiment and evaluate each one individually.

One thing is sure, don't let your fear of haters
get in the way of being open and authentic on social media.
Just put lots of energy on building a positive community.

Responding to Weird Comments

You know you've seen these as well. Comments that you can't tell if they're jabbing at you or not. Ones that don't make sense. Posts that make everyone go "Huh?". If your goal is interaction, how do you respectfully, firmly and publicly have an awkward conversation?

Again, this probably isn't a "rule" kind of thing as much as establishing values beforehand to help you make the decision.

Here are some guidelines we tend to run by:

- *Respect. Always, always, always respect the person commenting. Enough said.*

- *Positive. While admitting any mistakes and apologizing for anything necessary, we always try to keep things as positive as possible (without spinning).*

- *Offer Help. If there's a need behind an angry comment, offer prayer, help or encouragement to the person who made the comment.*

You might not have a quick response to a question concerning whether or not your church is an apostasy, but a respectful response is almost always feasible.

Marketing and Awareness on Facebook and Twitter

How do I create awareness for my church through Facebook?
Facebook is an incredible marketing tool. But it can be counter-productive if you approach it like traditional marketing.

Traditional marketing works likes this: I interrupt you to get your attention, hope you keep paying attention, remember my web address, and check it out if you're interested in what I'm selling.

The problem with this approach: "Hey! Listen! We have a church you should come to." is that it comes across as inauthentic if you're talking about yourself. It just sounds like someone else selling their goods and trying to convince you to buy what they're selling.

This problem leads us to one of the strengths of social media: word of mouth marketing.

As traditional marketing is becoming less and less effective, word of mouth is replacing it. Why? Because we trust what our friends say. We trust the word of someone who doesn't have something to gain by telling us they like something. It's authentic.

So to create awareness (marketing) on Facebook, the question shifts to: How can we equip people to spread the word themselves?

The obvious but difficult answer is to create something worth talking about. Not in a gimmick kind of way, but in a real way. Is there something unique happening that attenders can or would want to share about? Are there stories being told that are worth sharing? Are there interesting photos or videos posted?

It would be nice if there were an easy answer to prompt word of mouth, but there's not. Over time, person by person, people will start talking if you give them the opportunity. Then, person by person, they will hear of what God's doing. They might get connected online. They might take a risk to try a service. And, in the process, God can change their lives.

It's real people sharing real life through a real Savior.

Blogging with SEO in mind.

We mentioned previously that when setting up your social media, its best avoid flowery metaphors and be practical - e.g. titling the blog "The New Harvest Church Blog". One reason for this is search engine optimization (SEO).

Search engines, like Google, are always combing the web trying to index sites to make it easier for people to find them. This is great new for you. You want people to be able to find you on search engines.

However, this also means that you need to provide Google with the most specific and relevant information about your church in every single post. This is easier than you might think but requires you to refrain from doing things like referring to your middle-school ministry "Quintessence" instead of "New Harvest: Middle School". Someone trying to find out information about your church's middle school ministry isn't going to search "quintessence", they'll search "New Hope Middle School" or something else practical.

Again the key is to provide search engines with specific and relevant information that will easily guide Googlers to your site.

This is a very brief look at SEO. Volumes can and have been written on SEO best practices, just type it in a search engine to see what I'm talking about.

We Are Family
(Your social media working together)

Getting all of your social media platforms to work together takes a little bit of work up front, but should ideally make life easier in the long run. You don't want to have to compose a new post for every single platform (Facebook, Twitter, blog) every time you have a new piece of information to communicate.

The first step in connecting all of your social media will be deciding which platform will be your primary communication tool. Likely, it will either be Facebook or your blog.

Here are a few steps for getting all of your platforms linked.

- *Link your Facebook page to your Twitter account.*
- *Point your blog feed to your Facebook page.*
- *Include links to your Facebook page on all of your social media (blog sharing icons and Twitter profile).*

Twitterfeed is a great tool for connecting your blog feed to facebook and twitter.

Also, determining what kinds of information go to what social media platforms helps to ensure your social media is working together. For example, you might post on Facebook and Twitter that someone can sign up to work in kids ministry, but actually have the content, details and sign up form on your blog. Deciding in advance what info goes where will go a long way towards streamlining your social media and helping them work together.

Facebook Landing Page

Landing pages are custom tabs on your Facebook page that guests who land on your page can see before clicking on the wall or other section of your page. The benefits of a landing page include:

- *Establishing the personality of your church immediately.*
  Those who click directly to your page (without going through your website) have an opportunity to see what you're like.
- *Extending your website. You can give your Facebook page a similar feel to that of your website.*
- *Providing important info immediately. Just as you do on your website, you can help guests find important links (e.g. welcome video, where do my KIDS go, service times & directions) on the landing page that they may not find on your Facebook wall.*

While a Facebook landing page, done well, can increase the "professional" look of your page, it requires quite a bit of coding knowledge and can cause more than a little frustration for even experienced developers.

If you decide to go for it:

- *Keep it simple.*
- *Stay within your brand/identity*
- *Make it relevant.*

Our advice - first focus on creating awesome content on your facebook community. After that, you can looking at a landing page.

content starter kit

Sample Posts
(some ideas to get you started)

What do you think people need in a church?
How would you reach people in your community?
We're kicking off on 10/10/10, any ideas for the opening song?
How do you rock your _____ church tee?
Rick Warren Quote.
Kicking off in 10 Days - It's the Final Countdown (w link to YouTube video)
Sneak Preview Service this Sunday evening (it would be a secret if everyone wasn't invited)
What are values and why do they matter? See our blog.
Meet _____, lead worshiper. (links to blog)
Check out these photos from construction this past Saturday.
Check out _____ talking about construction and facility needs this weekend
Live Big, go Small. Check out a small group.
Photo from a preview service - tag yourself in this photo.
Why does (your city) need a new church? (link to blog)
What do we believe? Check it out here.
How can we pray for you?
What do people in your community need?
What's the best restaurant in town?
What's the best coffee shop in town?
Approx 1,234.5678 hours till launch (give or take).

Sample One Month Schedule

Week 1

M - Resource Update: Check out Pastor Cedrick's Bible reading vlog.
T - Info Update: Service Day this Saturday - Come help clean and build stuff this Saturday from 8 a.m. to 12 noon.
W - Thanks to everyone who helped work on the building this weekend. Great job.
T - Connection Update: Looking to get involved? Small groups are a great way to meet people.
F - Photo: Check out photos from this life group outreach.

Week 2

M - Info Update: Do you sing or play and instrument? Check out Open Mic Night next Thursday.
T - Question: Anyone coming to the Middle School Stryper/WhiteHeart concert next week?
W - Photo: Check out photos from service day last week.
T - Resource Update: Check out Pastor Cedrick's Bible reading vlog.
F - Connection Update: Looking to get involved? Small groups are a great way to meet people.

Week 3

M - Question: How do you rock your New Harvest tee? Post your photo.
T - Resource Update: Check out Pastor Cedrick's Bible reading vlog.
W - Connection Update: Looking to get involved? Small groups are a great way to meet people.
T - Video: Check out this video - Josh's story.
F - Info Update: Interested in volunteering w Kids ministry? Check out the orientation this Sunday at 10 a.m. in the conference room.

Week 4

M - Info Update: Want to get more involved? Check out core class 101 happening this Sunday at 10 a.m.
T - Resource Update: Check out Pastor Cedrick's Bible reading vlog.
W - Question: Any ideas for an opening song for the band?
T - Connection Update: Looking to get involved? Small groups are a great way to meet people.
F - Photo: Check out photos from the Middle School Stryper/WhiteHeart concert.

that's all, folks

well, almost

Putting It All Together

So, if we had more charisma, we'd try to do a "win one for the gipper" motivational speech about getting out there and doing it. But let's just bottom line it:

People need Jesus.
Your church is part of God's solution.
Social media is a fantastic platform as part of that solution.

About Three Story Studio
Three Story Studio is about helping church plants create fantastic media.
Check out our blog at gothreestory.com.

About Brian:
Brian is building an organization devoted to helping churches and non-profits produce FANTASTIC media (three story studio). He also develops media at One Life Church and can keep a beat with no metronome.

About Jeremy:
Jeremy directs communication at One Life Church and writes tween pop songs (unfortunately, that's not a joke).

gothreestory.com