

## **Why Your Church Can't Ignore the Web**

Imagine that you have a super usher. With extraordinary stamina, he stands by the doors of your church 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. His pants are always pressed, his tie is always straight, and he never runs out of Gospel tracts. Whenever people pass by, he invites them in and tells them about your church for as long as they will listen. Maybe a super usher sounds too good to be true, but most churches have one these days, even if they don't realize it. He's your church website. But how well has he been working for your ministry?

It's time to start thinking of your website as your primary communication tool. At the time of writing, the estimated US population is 302.5 million people. As of May 2007, 210.5 million of them were active internet users, and more are being added to this figure every day. A report from Pew Internet, also from May of 2007, showed that half of all American adults heavily use the internet and only 15% (mostly older adults) have no internet connectivity.

The simple truth is that in our day and age, your church's online presence is too important to ignore. When someone is searching for a local church to visit, the church with the most successful website will get the most attention. Taking a half-hearted attitude about your church website can mean losing potential visitors and fostering a poor perception of your ministry within your community, especially among the younger generation. It's interesting that many churches will keep their lawn neatly trimmed and their carpet clean while their website looks unkept and antiquated.

If you feel frustrated or discouraged with your website, you're not alone. According to a survey from the Center for Church Communications in 2005, although 83% of churches had websites, 59% of them were ambivalent or dissatisfied with their current site! Why are so many churches disappointed by their site? Perhaps they are overwhelmed by the time and effort it takes to keep their site up-to-date, or they have no budget for a website and are stuck with something created years ago by a volunteer, or they have been left out in the cold by an untrustworthy service provider who was more interested in collecting his fees than meeting their online needs.

Regardless of your church's current situation, this series of articles is designed to help you understand the importance and benefits of an effective, usable website, and to give you practical tips on how to take it to the next level of performance, efficiency and outreach.

### **It's All About Usability**

What do you think makes a website successful? Is it bright colors that appeal to you, flashing slide shows of smiling faces or video footage of all your sermons? We believe the most important criteria in evaluating whether or not a website is successful its usability.

We define Usability as the ease of which a site visitor can find desired information or complete a task. Whether you're evaluating your current website or planning for a new one, it's important to focus on your users from the very beginning. This may seem obvious, but you would be surprised how many times website owners overlook their users by putting bells and whistles before usability. An eye-popping design that causes your users to actively concentrate to find their desired information is, in our opinion, less successful than a plainer design that gets right to the point.

But the choice between great design and usability is not an either/or decision. It should be your goal to have a site that not only makes key information easy to find, but gives the user a pleasant time finding it.

Let's consider three broad categories of users who could potentially visit your site:

- The **Unbeliever**—who knows nothing about your church and is exploring to learn more
- The **Possible Future Member**—a believer, who is looking for a church of like faith with which to identify
- The **Current Church Member**—who is coming to the site seeking specific information

An effective user-centered site design anticipates the motives of each of these three types of users and makes it easy for each one to find what he or she is looking for. Let's begin our discussion about usability by evaluating the most important page of your site.

### **The Home Page—Built for Usability**

Your home page (the first page of any site that is displayed after entering its address in a browser) delivers an immediate first impression of your ministry to your users. A few seconds after they arrive, they have formed a mental picture about your church as either up-to-date or out-of-date, friendly or impersonal, traditional or contemporary.

Designing a successful home page can be very challenging, because you must communicate the most important and popular areas of your site to your users without creating an overcrowded, confusing mess. Here are few home page tips that will immediately make your site more usable and improve your users' perception of your ministry.

#### ***Home Page Do's***

1. **Keep it simple.** The home page should have a pleasing, uncluttered look. Refine your text. Keep it to a minimum, and only use imagery of an outstanding quality.
2. **Make your contact information easily accessible,** so that your users can e-mail you or find your phone number should they wish to call. Also, make your address, driving directions and a local area map showing your exact location also readily available.
3. **Clearly display the main navigation.** Your users won't stay on the home page for long. The main navigation is likely where they will go next.
4. **Carefully evaluate the content of your home page,** and leave out all but the most important information. If the content does not help one of the three types of users previously discussed, don't crowd your page with it.
5. **Keep your content fresh and current** as much as possible. Not only will this encourage repeat site visits, but it will also give search engines something new to read.

#### ***Home Page Dont's***

1. **Avoid distracting users with complicated animation** or delaying them with a mandatory splash screen. People are impatient and expect to get to the heart of your content as quickly as possible.

2. **Never use blinking or scrolling text.** Text that travels from side to side or top to bottom (also known as a marquee) was an interesting trick ten years ago. Now it is an outdated cliché that no one appreciates and many find frustrating.
3. **Avoid animated clip art**—even if it was free. Spinning crosses, animated icons and the like are about as annoying as cell phones ringing during the invitation. Don't use them.
4. **Say No to busy background patterns and textures.** You worked hard to get rid of the old wallpaper in the bathroom. Don't let it stay on your website.
5. **Don't startle your users** with video, music or sound effects. Songs that start playing or welcome messages that blare out automatically are not welcome by site visitors. If you have a well-produced welcome video that your users would benefit from watching, let them initiate contact by first clicking on an icon to play it.
6. **Summarize large blocks of text into smaller ones.** People don't read websites, they browse them. It is certain that your ten-paragraph-long welcome letter will not be read. Use the space more profitably.
7. **Never let your home page have horizontal scroll bars.** Ideally your site should always fit comfortably from left to right without the need to scroll. Most users will scroll vertically to access material on the bottom of the site, but your most important content should probably be accessible without scrolling.
8. **Don't use excessively large images that would cause the page to load slowly.** Web visitors are an impatient sort. If your website is not loading quickly, some users may not wait for it, others may develop a bad impression of it. Test your site load time. If it takes longer than a few seconds, it probably needs some work.
9. **Avoid posting out-dated events,** articles or sermons that make it appear as if you haven't updated your site in quite some time.
10. **Don't display hit counters.** Although we encourage you to monitor your site statistics, use a service that allows you to collect this information with hidden stat counters. The days of seeing "You are visitor number 74,933" are long gone. (We recommend using Google Analytics if you're looking for an excellent free stats package.)

## Beyond the Home Page

Following a few online conventions will help improve your users' experience as they navigate the other pages of your site.

- The **site navigation needs to be consistently displayed, logically organized and easy to access** so that your users know where they are now, where they came from and where they will go next. Your users should be able to find what they are looking for with a minimum of mouse clicks and should not have to pour through text-laden pages to find specific data.
- **Use 10 or fewer top level links in your main navigation.** If your site has more than 10 pages, group them into sections, or your navigation will quickly become overwhelming.
- **Include a site map link on every page** that displays the complete content of your site at a glance.
- If your site is growing rapidly, **include a search box** (the top right of the page is the most common place users look for a search box) that will display a list of all pages of the site related to any key word entered into it.

Beyond the basic informational pages, there are several features you can include on your website that will enhance its effectiveness. Here are some that we have found many users appreciate:

### ***Visitors' Center***

One of the most effective ways to reach those who have never before visited your church is to have a dominant link on the home page to a Visitors' Center page. Put curious future visitors at ease by answering frequently asked questions such as: When are the services? What are the services like? Where do we go when we arrive? What do I wear to church? What activities are there for my children?

### ***News and Events***

Provide juicy descriptions and details about your special meetings. Members need to be reminded about them, and there's no faster way of connecting them to up-to-date information than your website.

### ***Photo Gallery***

A photo gallery of church activities will not only excite your members but also give those unacquainted with your ministry a positive feel for your congregation. If you have a photo gallery, resist the urge to post every photo you take online. Put your best foot forward by selecting only the finest ones for the site; five good photos are better than twenty mediocre ones. Emphasize close-ups of faces and group events. If you choose to include photos of your facilities, make sure those photos are flattering. A word of caution—we recommend ensuring that you have your members' permission before posting their photos online.

### ***Links Page***

A page dedicated to linking to other websites of organizations with which your church identifies is useful in many ways. Church members may find the links helpful, visitors can associate your ministry with other organizations with which they may be familiar, and search engines will better understand the content of your site by the other sites to which you link. (We will explain more about search engine ranking later in this book.) Potential links can include Christian colleges, mission agencies, Bible search sites, individual missionary pages, etc.

### ***Church Directory***

Most churches wrestle with keeping their printed church directory up-to-date. Why not consider making it an online resource where members can manage their own addresses, phone numbers or even pictures? The directory should not be accessible to anyone. By safeguarding it with a password, you can ensure that only church members can access it.

### ***Opt-in E-mail Newsletter***

Personal websites, blogs, and instant messaging are currently very popular, but tried and true e-mail communication is still alive and well. You could use e-mail newsletters to communicate with members in specific church ministries (like choirs or youth workers) or to all your members, promoting special announcements, prayer requests and the like. You may find it a helpful tool to make your e-mail newsletter available to everyone, members and non-members, by placing a link on your site for users to join your e-mail list. If you do, be sure to respect your users privacy by giving them the option to remove

themselves from the list in the future. Even if you don't have this functionality built into your site, there are several online services you can use to manage a mass e-mail list.

### ***Staff Page***

A page detailing the contacts for various church ministries (including their e-mail address) can make your communication very efficient. Use caution, however. If you post an e-mail address online, it will eventually become harvested by malicious software and receive unsolicited messages (or spam). In order to protect your e-mail accounts from being spammed, it is important that any e-mail address on your website be encrypted in such a way that it is not collectable for spamming. You can also use an online form to send contact messages from your site without posting any e-mail address at all. View an example [here](#).

### ***Helpful Documents***

There are plenty of documents that a ministry can make available on their website to help their users learn more about them. Some examples include Doctrinal Statements, School Handbooks, Sunday School Policies, etc. All of these can be posted on your site and made available for download.

### ***E-commerce and Online Event Registration***

Instead of requiring parents to manually fill out tedious forms to enroll their children for camp, why not allow them to register online and pay conveniently with a credit card? Many churches also offer online resources like books, sermon recordings, and cd's for sale on their site.

### ***Where Do I Start?***

Having an attractive, usable website is vitally important for your church communication, but the idea of building one from scratch probably seems very intimidating. Let's look at five simple steps that will let you break up the massive project of building a church website into bite-sized chunks.

#### ***Step 1-Secure Your Domain***

Your domain is your web address-for example, yourchurch.org. Typing your domain into a web browser (like Internet Explorer or Firefox) points a user to your website. If you don't already have one, you can check the availability of a domain at any of the popular registrars. We recommend trying register.com, networksolutions.com or godaddy.com.

Domains can be purchased for a set amount of time (usually from \$5 to \$35 per year depending on the registrar used). Once you purchase a domain, it is yours for as long as you keep it renewed. It is often a good idea to purchase several domains (for example, both yourchurch.com and yourchurch.org) and point them all to your site.

Securing your domain has nothing to do with who hosts, designs, or maintains your website. More information on these areas will follow.

You will probably find that the simplest domain for your church is already taken (calvarybaptist.org for example), and you will need to spend some time trying other variations such as: mycalvarybaptist.org, mycbc.org, cbc4me.org, calvarychicago.org, cbcchicago.org, chicagocbc.org, cbconline.org, calvarybaptistonline.org, or any other variations unique to your location. Strive to keep your domain as short and easy to remember as possible. Long domains become very difficult to type.

There is no hard and fast rule regarding which suffix to use, but the most popular are .org and .com. Typically, ministries and non-profit organizations use .org if it is available.

### ***Step 2-Plan Your Project***

It's tempting to jump right into the visual design of your site, but resist the urge. Your site and your users will benefit from careful planning at the outset. Spend some time reviewing other church websites, and make a list of which ones appeal to you. Ask yourself why you like these sites. What makes them successful? Could they be improved?

In addition, ask yourself some key questions about your site, such as:

1. Who is my audience, and what are they looking for?
2. What is my budget for a church website?
3. Who will be responsible for the content?
4. What is my deadline?

Be aware, as you browse other sites looking for inspiration, that sometimes ideas will quickly grow beyond what your timetable or budget will allow. Divide your brainstorming into a "must have" list for immediate implementation and a "wish list" for future development after the site is live. In one sense, a website is like a car. The more bells and whistles you add to it, the more expensive it gets. Are you looking for a high-end luxury sedan or just something reliable that gets you where you need to go?

### ***Step 3-Organize Your Navigation Structure***

In web lingo, the fancy term for outlining your navigation is putting together your Information Architecture. You need to consider the main categories of your site's content and sort them into logical primary and secondary categories. Sometimes it's advantageous to call upon the tried and true 3 x 5 card. Distribute cards to every ministry that would like to contribute content to the site. Try to limit each card to one specific piece of information. Once the cards are collected, sort them into piles by primary categories and then into sub-categories.

Some churches find it helpful to include a major, dominant navigation structure for information applicable to new visitors and a smaller navigation structure for information applicable to church members. It is a good general practice to limit your top level sections to 10 or fewer so your users don't become overwhelmed with the amount of content.

### ***Step 4-Design the Visual Interface***

Once you have a clear outline of your site content in place, you can begin to design the look and feel. It's best if you are 95% happy with the visual design of your site before any serious page building begins.

The further you progress down the road of the site's development, the more difficult it is to make major design changes.

### ***Step 5-Develop & Test***

Set up a private staging area where you can access your site while it is under development. When most of the heavy building is done, test your site in as many browsers and computers as possible. No two computers, monitors or browsers will look and behave alike, and it is important to discover under which circumstances your site does not work correctly.

For the most part, your site must look identical on Internet Explorer 6 and above, Firefox, and Safari. If any portions of the site or features do not display or work correctly in these browsers, then corrections to the code are necessary.

### ***Working with Web Design Agencies***

As the web has matured and technology has become more complex, it has become increasingly difficult to design, program, and maintain a quality website without professional help. It is not unreasonable for you to pursue assistance in creating a site for your church much the same way you would bring in a special speaker for revival meetings. If you decide to work with a web service provider to develop your site, here are some important considerations:

Make sure your provider either specializes in church sites or has several church sites in their portfolio. Church sites are unique. Each ministry cares greatly about the standards their graphics convey, and working with an agency with a heart for ministry makes the need to communicate these concerns much easier.

Beware of free or low cost offers. Sometimes the most expensive website you can own is the one you get for free. In the same way you would not let any traveling preacher take your pulpit for a week just because they volunteered, you need to be cautious with whom you trust your website. There are numerous companies who offer free hosting and design services, but these will either fail to meet your needs, provide no customer service, or include unwanted ad content in your site pages.

Host your site with the agency that designed it, if it is a part of their package. By way of explanation, hosting refers to the place your website actually "lives," on a server (an actual computer "box") housed with a hosting company. There are hosting companies catering to every website budget, all of which utilize some sort of monthly hosting fee for the use of space on their servers. Monthly fees range from a few dollars a month to hundreds of dollars a month, depending on the quality of the hosting service and the size of the website to be hosted. We recommend allowing your design agency to arrange and provide your hosting, if their costs are reasonable. (Some design firms will only design a site that they also host and maintain in the future.) There are several advantages to allowing them to host your site. Typically, they will have access to better servers than would be available to you, and keeping them working in the areas in which they are most comfortable will work to your benefit. Most design firms who provide hosting use a monthly fee as a way to stay involved in your site and support you with answers to your questions and simple upgrades as needed.

Pricing structures will vary. Each firm will charge for their services differently, but the bottom line is that professional level site development takes time for which developers must be paid. Some firms will charge a fixed amount for the design of the site and then a smaller amount as a monthly hosting fee.

Others do not charge for the design but charge higher hosting fees and insist upon payment on a yearly basis. Others will charge one lump sum that includes design and hosting. Design agencies should be evaluated by the work they have done and the total price structure. Asking a lot of questions early in the decision process will eliminate many problems later on. One last note regarding finances. Never pay more than 1/2 the cost of the site design prior to beginning the project. Some providers will charge considerable amounts up-front before beginning the work. It is customary to pay a deposit toward the project in the beginning, but keep it no more than 1/2 of the total. Under no circumstances should you pay any additional funds prior to seeing substantial progress on the site, and never make full payment until every aspect of the site is just as it should be and the site has been thoroughly tested.

### **Promoting Your Church Website**

What good is an expensive website if no one ever visits it? You've invested your time and money to create a successful communication tool, and now it's time to use it and promote it in every way you can.

#### ***Stay on Top of Updates***

**Designate a webmaster for your ministry.** Websites are a team effort, but every team needs a leader. If you have not done so already, designate one person who will be the contact for all things related to the website. The webmaster can delegate control over certain portions of the site to other members (the youth staff would have responsibility over the youth section for example), but ultimately the webmaster will be the one to whom everyone can come with web-related issues.

**Use the features of your site as much as possible.** Post your latest sermons, news, and photos of your special events! Assuming that your site has a calendar module, use it as the master calendar for your ministry. Users will be encouraged to return frequently if you regularly publish up-to-date content.

**Drive traffic to your site by publishing your web address everywhere you can.** Include it on your church brochures, bulletins, business cards, and other printed material. Add a signature containing your church web address and telephone number to all of your e-mail messages if you haven't done so already. Include your web address on your recorded voice mail messages and encourage your secretary to promote it to those who call. And, of course, point your congregation to your site whenever possible.

In addition to frequent smaller updates, **schedule 2 to 4 times a year when you evaluate your site as a whole.** Ask yourself and your staff a few key questions at these meetings, for example: What feedback have you gotten since the last meeting? What areas of the site can be improved? What additional features can or should be added to make the site more user-friendly?

#### ***Search Engine Ranking & Submittal***

One of the primary ways that online visitors will find your site is through the use of search engines. Don't underestimate their influence; during usability studies, 88% of web users went to a search engine first to accomplish a task.

The top contenders in this arena are Google, Yahoo, and MSN. Search engines use small automated computer programs (called "bots" or "spiders" for short) that crawl through the entire web and catalog

information for each site they come across. High traffic sites can have bots crawling them and indexing results several times a day!

When a user searches the web for key words that pertain to your ministry (for example "church", "baptist" and "St. Louis"), ideally you want your church web site to appear as high as possible in the list of results. The process of improving your position in the list of search results is called Search Engine Optimization (SEO), and it has become an industry unto itself.

Some of the criteria that Search Engines use to determine how high your site should rank in the list are the following:

- How long your domain has existed
- How much content is available for their bots to read
- How many websites link to your website and how popular they are
- How clearly your navigation is organized
- How well your pages are built
- How relevant your content is to your users

With these criteria in mind, let's look at a few tips that will help search engines understand your site and increase its page ranking over time.

**Submit your site manually to the major search engines.** Each search engine will have a link somewhere where you can manually enter your URL (web address for your site) and request that your site be cataloged. They will catalog your site eventually without your submittal, but it is also advantageous to submit your site manually.

**Build your site using web standards.** The heart of web standards is to make your site accessible to as many users as possible by following certain best practices. Though this can be somewhat of a complex topic for the non-technical, one of those practices is to separate your content from your design by using CSS based layout. To learn more about what web standards are, we encourage you to watch the video at this link. If you are working with an outside vendor to produce your site, explain to them that web standards are important to you and that you would like to avoid using tables for your site's layout.

Make sure your site content contains words that visitors would use when searching for your site. For example if you are a Baptist Church in St. Louis, try to include the words "Church", "Baptist", and "St. Louis" somewhere in your content. Limit the number of different keywords you include. If you try to include too many, you might as well include none at all. The ratio of how many keywords are in your content compared to the total amount of words is known as Keyword Density. An appropriate goal for your sites content is a keyword density of 5%. So for every 100 words of content, 5 of them would be keywords. This may seem obvious, but don't expect your site to show up in search results for key words that are nowhere to be found in your content.

To ensure that every page has something for the bots to read **try to have at least 50 words of content per page.**

**Include unique, thorough titles and descriptions on every page of your site.** The page title is the text displayed in the very top of your browser window. Instead of titling your home page "Welcome to

Calvary Baptist Church" consider using "Calvary Baptist Church, Bringing the Gospel to Ourtown, USA." The more thorough each page's title is and the more keywords it contains, the better search engine bots can understand and catalog it. Page descriptions are similar to titles but are invisible to the site visitor without viewing the source code of the page; however, they are visible to bots and can be helpful in that regard.

**Keep the page content consistent with the URL (web address) and page title.** Bots evaluate the text within your page to see how closely it matches the title, URL, headings and keywords you are focusing on. The more they recognize similar phrases and terms in all three, the higher they will prioritize your content. In other words, don't have a page with a title "hamburgers" and talk about "hot dogs." This may seem obvious, but occasionally a page's content will change and the title and URL is never updated.

**Refrain from gratuitous use of flash, javascript or image-based text.** Because of the limited amount of fonts available on the web, a designer will often create a graphic that displays text as an image in order to improve its visual appeal. Excessive use of this can be a dangerous practice, because bots cannot read images, and therefore have no data to store. If your designer must use text as an image, be sure that they include a proper alt tag with it or use a CSS image replacement technique. Search engines cannot successfully read flash or javascript at this time so avoid serving up important content with these technologies.

**Frequently link to other sites and other pages within your own site.** Your outbound links help bots understand your content and to what it is related. Links also help your users learn more about your topic.

**Request inbound links whenever possible.** The most important factor that will affect your page rank is the number of other sites that link to yours. The more bots see your site URL appearing on the web, the more important they think you are. Seek out other sites that will be willing to put a link back to your site from theirs. Here are a few ideas: mission boards, church associations and fellowships, online church directories, community sites and church listings, and church members' personal sites.

In conclusion, **be patient** and search engine results naturally will come. Search engine optimization takes time, especially for a new domain, and anyone who promises to get your site to the top of Google's list overnight is likely practicing some underhanded techniques that will only hurt your page rank in the long run. After several months of best practices your site will eventually make its way up the list.

Paying for professional SEO is usually not necessary. Become familiar with the process yourself, put to practice what you have learned, and your site ranking will naturally come. If you would like to learn more, there is a great deal of information available online about how to improve your page ranking. Take some time to browse the resources listed at the end of this chapter.

### ***Don't Give Up***

The process of developing and maintaining a quality website can be tedious, but do not give up! As you take on the challenge of creating or improving the quality of your online presence, don't forget how very important this task is. Your website is the front-line representation of your ministry on the internet frontier. Your ministry will be well-served by a job well done.

And remember, the job of webmaster is never over. The burden and benefit of your website is that it will always be growing, changing, and improving. As your ministry expands, so will your site. Use it to God's glory!