



Top 10 Preparatory Tasks for an effective website

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- Who is your church? What do you wish to communicate?

Your website is a chance to tell your church's story. Potential visitors stop by your church because they want to learn as much as they can before they make the throat-gulping commitment to visit. What about your church will entice them to learn more and meet the people behind the ministries?

Top 10 Preparatory Tasks for an effective website

- Should your church even have a website?

If you cannot produce a concise story about why your church exists and its purpose and vision, perhaps a website is not necessary. If your church has a lot of internal strife or anxiety, white-washing the issues on the website will only turn visitors away when they realize that they've been misled. An accurate representation of your church is extremely important as potential visitors search for authenticity. If an honest assessment of your church is not good, revisit getting a website after the storm has passed.

Top 10 Preparatory Tasks for an effective website

- How will you approach the site?
 - (hint: it's a ministry)

Ideally you'll approach the site as a ministry. It is not just a brochure of signboard - it can be an active and effective ministry and outreach tool for both visitors and members. The website can function as a calendar, a brochure, a discussion forum for Sunday School classes or Bible studies, an alternative for a "tape ministry", and as a direct communication tool. Websites of the 21st century are dynamic and interactive - gone are the static websites of the 90s.

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- Who will be responsible for the site?

Ultimately, you, the pastor, is responsible. Even if you are not charged with updating it, the site is a ministry and like all the other ministries, it falls at your feet. Because of the importance of the website, oversight is critical. Just as you are in charge of ensuring the rest of your church's ministries are in line with its theology, you are responsible for the website accurately communicating your church's identity and theology.

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- How will be the website be administered?

Whether you do it, another staff member, a lay person, or some combination thereof in a committee, a plan should be in place in case that person or group stops working on the site. Will the site be web-based or with a specialized program such as FrontPage? Either way, logins, passwords, and procedures should be carefully monitored.

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- Is your church ready for visitors?

So you know what you want the site to communicate and how it will be administered - what happens when website visitors actually show up and become church visitors? For starters, if you spend a lot of time to make sure website navigation is smooth and that visitors can find what they want, is your building properly signed for hallway navigation? Can the smiling faces found on your homepage be found at the front door greeting visitors? Remember, consistency is key in responding to the need of authenticity. All the time and money invested in a website is for naught if the same 'experience' is not replicated at the church.

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- Are your people ready for visitors?

How will your members react if someone walks in with jeans? If a man walks in with a pony-tail? Or, if a person has different skin color than everyone else? The internet does not discriminate - anyone can view your site and each visitor will be affirmed and accepted by the smiling face or glowing text - will they find that smiling face if they look just a little bit different?

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- What will be their impression of your church?

As touched on earlier, consistency is the key. If you're seeking to create a certain impression with your website, make sure you build on that when they come to the church rather than undermine it.

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- How can I drive visitors away and cause them to flee for the hills?

1. Your site does not need cutesy graphics or loud fonts and colors.
2. Your site does not need old material.
3. Your site does not need to be all about the pastor.

People are funny - they could think "hm, if they don't spend time to update their website, how do I know they'll spend time on me and my needs?" Or, "if the pastor is so focused on himself/herself, will they have enough time to be focused on me?".

Keep the site about the church, it's identity and mission, and do so in a clean and balanced manner.

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- How will it be integrated to build community?

Most of the above was about the website and visitors, but how can the website be used when that visitor joins the church and becomes a member? Websites these days can very easily update members of the upcoming topic for Sunday, the latest prayer concerns, or they can become a discussion forum for different groups in the church. You as the pastor can regularly blog and stimulate discussion. Either way, building community in any venue can be an arduous task, but time and effort in investing in the site and communicating its presence should pay dividends over time.



10 Steps to an effective website

These are very generalized, but are the basic steps to obtaining a website that will meet your church's needs.

Step 1 – Buy a domain

- No more than \$10/year
- Buy for multiple years and then safely store the information
- Sometimes hosting companies will also register your domain.
- Churches usually have .org or .nets... also check out .us.
- Remember, the church owns the domain – protect it as such.

Some hosting companies will register your domain for free, but make sure you own it. A domain is a piece of property that the church owns. You can do anything you want with it. Also make sure you have automatic renewals for the domain and know where it's registered so the domain isn't lost after it expires.

Step 2: Pick a management system

- Web-based:
 - usually can be found free
 - can be updated from anywhere
 - usually easy for search engines to find
 - lots of support available
 - Wordpress
 - Typepad
 - Blogger

I'm a fan of web based solutions because that's the future of computing – the operating system and desktop programs are becoming less and less relevant. The flexibility is key and it eliminates steps in getting the site live.

Step 2: Pick a management system

- Desktop-based:
 - Less flexibility with updating it.
 - Can be expensive.
 - Can be difficult to learn.

Desktop systems can also be dangerous if the program is only installed on one computer and then the hard drive dies.

What about all the website files? What was the name of the program? Where's the CD?

Consider yourself lucky if you don't ever have to answer those questions.

Step 3: Find affordable hosting

- Fair price: No more than \$10/month
- Fair terms: You should easily be able to have enough email addresses for staff
- Fair storage: You should have more than enough room for your site
 - 100mb – good for a few email addresses and pictures
 - 1GB – More than enough for email, photo galleries, some sermon mp3s
 - 10GB+ Anything you want.

Hosting: The particular computer where your site sits. Remember that the computer is simply your computer talking to a bunch of other computers. There are many places to host your site where you'll get a great deal and great service. However, make sure you do some research as it can be difficult moving your site to another server.

Step 3: Find affordable hosting

- Recommend company – bluehost.com
 - 600GB, \$6.95/month, free domain, 24/7 service
 - Look for companies that host the service you wish to use.
 - Also, look for companies that use CPanel
- Other companies – GoDaddy.com, IpowerWeb.com
- Look for review sites

Full disclosure – I'm part of an affiliate program that they host. I used to host my own sites and can no longer do so. I was impressed by Bluehost and by their incredible deals. I'm a fan of one-stop places that register your domain and host. Remember, if you do something like this and want to move to another site down the line, you still own the domain name.

Step 4: Familiarizing yourself with the software

- Are there any books available or resources online?
- Are there any terms you need to know?
- Wordpress tour:
 - posts and pages
 - plugins
 - design
 - privacy

Most of the web-based services have great documentation and support. For Wordpress, you have:

<http://www.churchcommunicationspro.com/using-wordpress-to-run-church-websites-tutorial-series/> - Great resource.

http://codex.wordpress.org/Main_Page
Official Wordpress Instructions

Step 5: Must have plugins

- Page order
- Role Manager
- Plugin Upload
- Statistics
- Backup

A good website installer/designer that uses Wordpress should at least include these plugins. They make life much easier for you.

More can be found here:

<http://wordpress.org/extend/plugins/>

<http://wp-plugins.net/>

Step 6: Must have features

- Photo Gallery
- Map
- Google Calendar
- PodPress

Some of these are Wordpress features while others are external. Wordpress works especially well with Google services. Whatever system you go with, make sure it does whatever you want, and more!

Step 7: Logo

- Build off one if you already have it
- If not, a nice text based logo can be easily created
- If something more is desired, there are plenty of places to get one
- Whatever you do, make sure it's everywhere

Your logo doesn't have to be fancy at all. Much like your website, it should reflect the identity of the church. Some places that have done church logos before:

<http://logoworks.com>

<http://www.churchlogogallery.com/>

http://www.lifewaystores.com/lwstore/ch_1_logos.asp

Step 8: Design

- Subtle, yet memorable colors and images
- Balance between text and images
- Clean lines and flow
- One or two fonts throughout
- Consistency is key

You want one solid and consistent look to the site so visitors will focus on the content.

If there are too many distractions, the message you are trying to convey can be lost.

You don't need anything fancy, but you want something that's aesthetically pleasing.

<http://themes.wordpress.net/> - A great site to find free Wordpress themes.

Step 9: Evaluation and Education

- Get your church excited about the site
- Does it tell the story?
- Educate them about the site, how it will be used, how they can help, etc.
- Let them offer ideas for how it can be used
- Word of mouth...

Remember, you are not the user. Don't let the site get caught up in “church-ese”.

If no one knows the site is there, no one will visit it.

Ask visitors how they found the church – if they join the church, perhaps ask them how the site could be better. Outside views of the church need to be encouraged as you can learn from them.

Step 10: Marketing...er... communicating the site

- Slap that URL everywhere
 - bulletins, newsletters, brochures, signs, flyers, newspaper ads
- Talk about it
 - Mention it in the service, or say “further information can be found on the website”.
 - Encourage small groups to use it for ministry throughout the week

If no one knows about the site, it won't be used. If Sears-Craftsman made an awesome tool but didn't advertise it, chances of them selling the tool are slim. Apply the same principles to getting the word out about other ministries to the website.

Wrap-up

- Know your identity and tell the story
- Websites don't have to be expensive or difficult
- Know your audience and constantly evaluate your site's effectiveness
- Prepare your church to both use the website and welcome any results it may help to achieve
- Everything you do makes a theological statement – even online.

When I've studied advanced math and physics, I made the mistake of trying to learn the formulas and equations before learning the theory. With websites, if you have the purpose and theology behind your efforts, the actual technical piece will fall into place.