



5 Principles for Solid Website Communication

A strategic online communication plan will strengthen existing donor relationships while building new ones to enhance your business or ministry and expand its outreach

Your website can perform double duty in the arena of online communication.

1. It can strengthen the relationships you already have within your business or ministry – members, parishioners, clients, customers, etc., and it can help you minister and communicate to this constituency online.
2. It can also be an extraordinary tool for finding and developing new donor relationships ... prospecting.

This whitepaper by Pathmaker Marketing LLC can help you develop an online communication plan that does both well. But first, let's expand on the idea of prospecting, since this is where many organizations fall short in their online communication.

Think of prospecting as a billboard on the highway. For the most part billboards just sit there, conveying a message, hoping people notice them. A billboard provides information, but it has no relationship with you. It definitely does not know the names of the people who travel by it on the highway everyday.

A billboard is a good example of a website that doesn't work hard to help you achieve your online communication objectives. It may look nice — even convey a nifty message — but it fails in the category of a hard-working website if it doesn't have a way to develop relationships with those who visit it online.

Many good-looking websites are created, launched and even adequately promoted. If you're fortunate, yours might even be seen by thousands of people who pass by it on the Internet. But if your site doesn't capture their attention, and engage them in a dialogue, most of those surfers will move on to other places, without any strategic, long-term value to you.

It's not that much different than a church. Why would any pastor be content to know that thousands of cars drive by the church every Sunday? Wouldn't that pastor rather have them inside the church, experiencing worship, getting taught the Word, and enjoying fellowship with others afterward?

Don't misunderstand. Your website needs to both look good and convey a solid message. But it also needs to be designed to interact with your site visitors and begin to develop a pattern of communicating with them. This is how you will begin to use the web to expand your outreach and enlarge your ministry.

To develop a strategic online communication plan, you must proactively engage your website visitors in relationships that will translate into ministry growth.

Strategic Web Communication Principle #1:

Find your business or ministry niche that can be transferred online.

What is unique about what you do that separates you from many others? Isolate that area of differentiation and then determine the ways you might translate that uniqueness online. Another way to accomplish this objective is to think about the ways you already communicate with people.

- Do you have a radio show? Then place your radio broadcasts online in MP3 format.
- Are you a public speaker? Then have your messages converted into MP3 format and upload them online for people to hear 24/7.
- Do you have a television program? Then convert your TV programs into QuickTime or Windows Media file formats, for online viewing. Why not even release your shows on YouTube or other online video portals. In fact, if they're very long, you'll need to open an account on something like YouTube or Vimeo and then embed the videos into your website.
- Do you have a drama ministry you can videotape? Then do the same.
- Are you a prolific writer? Then consider publishing your books online as e-books. Or at least publish them via print on demand processing. Or develop White Papers on subjects of expertise for you. Or create an online library replete with articles on various topics of relevance to your audience. You could start a blog.

The key here is to isolate what you do offline, particularly those that are especially unique, and then determine if you can provide them online, or enhance them online. Here are some examples of the way this has worked in real life.

www.hearandplay.com

For starters, here is a great example of transferring an offline service online. In this example, the subject used to provide personal piano lessons. He was giving a limited number of private piano lessons each week until he wrestled with the question – “How can I give piano lessons online to expand my business?” Once he resolved that question, he began to experience a growth spurt in his business. Now he currently reaches more students and provides more lessons through his online website than he ever could have done through his private lessons.

www.oneplace.com

Here is a different example. OnePlace.com offers a service to ministries with radio programs. Through them, you can publish your radio program online, and then link to it from your website. By doing it this

way, you eliminate some of the technical challenges of building this on your own site, and you partner with numerous other broadcasting ministries, which are driving traffic to the site.

www.whitsend.org

Here is an example of a children's ministry that enhanced its services online. Focus on the Family does a children's radio program called Adventures in Odyssey, and Mr. Whit is one of the characters. He owns an inn. As a play on words, the official website of Adventures in Odyssey is Whitt's End. When Focus on the Family placed Adventures in Odyssey, or Whitt's End, online they took it a step farther than just the radio programs by incorporating interactivity into the site through games, podcasts and other nice features that make the site of interest to children, and their parents. Because the program airs on a regular schedule, people are constantly coming back to the site to interact with Whitt's End.

www.mysecret.tv

In this case, the church involved is out of Edmund, Oklahoma and has been recognized as one of the most innovative churches in America. Their website is www.Lifechurch.tv and is worth a review for many reasons. But one of the niftiest things is an innovative way they have provided a way for people to confess their secrets online in anonymity

Strategic Web Communication Principle #2: Develop your email communication tools.

Despite negative press about spamming and phishing, email is still the most prevalent method of communicating with people online. It can become your chief method for delivering your messages, to both old friends and new.

The key in building a permission-based opt-in email list is to figure out what useful things you can exchange for names and email addresses. Once you have your strategy devised, you'll begin to establish a list that nurtures your current relationships while developing new ones. Some examples of potential incentives that people might sign up for include: daily inspirational quotes, weekly encouragement or ideas on how to improve personally or professionally, topical e-newsletters, special premiums, prayer, discount coupons, downloads, welcome kits and so on.

Usually, your primary e-newsletter can be the vehicle for getting this process started. The goal is to build your email list by providing a way for people to begin interacting with you while you help them. The e-newsletter can be your core ingredient, to be complemented by other ideas that enhance the offer. In either case, this whole process needs to be incentive based. People need some kind of compelling reason for reading your e-newsletter, whether it is unique content or discount coupons for your products.

If you send your e-newsletter via email, also publish it online. Many people can't read emails on their systems, but if you provide a quick link they can click to get through to your site, then they'll be able to read it and respond there.

It is worth mentioning here that it is important to never send emails to people who haven't opted in to your lists. If you do, you'll most likely be identified as a spammer and may even lose your ability to email at all. You need to post your privacy policy on your website and stick to it – avoid selling or renting your list to others, no matter how great the offer. (Quick Aside: By way of contrast, you can take advertisers in your e-newsletters).

Practical Tip #1: Develop an incentive based email offer page.

Identify what you're already doing that can become an email communication (e-newsletter opportunity). The key to this is a good landing page. This is a page that people click to from the email. This page needs to repeat the offer, go into more detail, and convince people to do whatever it is you're asking them to do. Answer the visitor's question: what's in it for me?

Salem Communications (www.salem.cc/WebSalemSites.aspx) provides an excellent example of getting people to sign up for newsletters.

They have many different e-newsletters to which you could opt. Each time someone opts in to one of these, Salem collects an email address that they use to provide ministry that enhances their existing relationships while establishing new ones. In addition, they can market to these e-newsletter names on alternatives matters.

If you have a sales-based newsletter, the very least you need to do is offer discount coupons. Research shows this is a #1 reason why many women sign up for emailed newsletters – to get the discount offers.

But developing your email communication tools involves more than just going into your email software and sending an email. If you do it right, you'll have a strategic email effort that is both parallel to and integrated with your offline communications, such as direct mail, radio programs, articles, etc. Email can become a valuable tool for getting people to your website – and interacting with you on it.

Before you send your first email, you need to figure out what metrics you will use to measure your success. For example, if your objective is to get people to your site to take a specific action, how will you know how many came to your site as a result of any specific email? There are tools that help you measure how many of your emails went to bad email addresses or were rejected for some reason, how many of the recipients opened them, how many clicked through to your site, and how many took the desired action. You can even go beyond that by learning what people are clicking on to isolate what's working and what's not in the body of your email.

Some examples of email blasting tools that you could use include these three: www.icontact.com; www.exacttarget.com; www.constantcontact.com.

Practical Tip #2: Implement an electronic welcome series.

The primary goal of your welcome series is to accelerate the process of getting acquainted with your new members. Don't make sales or solicitations for gifts part of a welcome series – that would be like asking someone to marry you on the first date. After you've convinced them to opt-in initially, say "thanks" then offer them ministry freebies or some other incentive-based opportunity.

Here's an example from one of our clients: www.changinglives.org/signupnw.htm. This is an incentive-based landing page. Notice all the incentives for signing up? This page asks the visitor to exchange their

name and email address for the goodies. You don't need to ask for more information than two things at first: First Name and Email address. With these two things you can correspond with someone in a personalized way by email. Anything more causes anxiety and leads to reductions in sign ups.

www.changinglives.org/welcomekit.htm is the "Thank You" page that appears after the sign-up process occurs. The page includes another incentive-based offer – a Free Welcome Kit in exchange for mailing address. In real life examples, we've converted up to 60% of those who supplied their First Name and Email address to also give us their Full Mailing Address and Phone in exchange for the Free Welcome Kit. Once this occurs, you now have a full range of marketing data: Name, Email, Snail Mail, Telephone to begin to dialogue with your new-found friend. This page provides links to the promised benefits page(s) online.

This entire process can happen in a few moments. In addition, auto-responder emails are sent at each transaction point, repeating the information.

Practical Tip #3: Develop effective transactional email.

The primary objective of transactional email is to thank people for doing business with you. This kind of email is the number one read emails of all organizations — they typically get opened at a rate of 60% or more — much higher than e-appeal offers or even weekly e-newsletters. Unfortunately, most organizations don't put a lot of strategic thought into developing them, and that's a big oversight. Because they are generated by your system, it is easy to forget them, and they are often very outdated.

Practical Tip #4: Develop your primary email e-fundraising plan.

The primary goal of your e-fundraising plan is to raise gifts or sell products, not to deliver ministry, as your e-newsletter will do. E-Fundraising is an entire course unto itself, but done effectively, it can become an income producing channel for your ministry that might rival direct mail and telephone fundraising. But you're not ready to do e-appeals until you've properly introduced your new found friends to your ministry. Once they know who you are and what you stand for, then you can begin to request their support for your worthy causes.

In general, the basic components of any email solicitation include your Subject Line, your email in HTML or Text, and your Landing page. The primary goal of the Subject Line is to get your emails opened in the inbox. The primary goal of the email in HTML is to get click through traffic to your Landing page. And the primary goal of your Landing page is to get closure on your offer (i.e., gifts or sales). **Each component has a specific goal, but they must all work together harmoniously to produce effective results.**

In addition, you have the email blasting process, which brings to mind the importance of your opt-in email lists, and the software functions necessary to manage un-subscriptions and bounces. This subject is a big one and we're only touching it on the surface here, but to show you how advanced you can become in this arena, here is a patented formula I've been trained to use to **improve landing page conversion**:

$$\text{Landing Page Conversion} = 4m+3v+2(i-f)-2a$$

M= the motivation of the user; v= clarity of the value proposition; i=incentive to take action; f=friction elements of the process; a=anxiety about entering information. A proper use of this formula significantly

improves landing page conversions. Unfortunately, we'll have to deal with this depth of detail at another time.

Practical Tip #5: Learn to use email surveys to engage people with your organization.

Surveys provide a great way to allow people to give their opinion and they provide a way for people to interact with you. In addition, you get solid feedback that can help you improve your ministry, products or services. Using surveys can help you better communicate with your online visitors, since they're constantly telling you what interests them – what they like and don't like. So don't get shy about this method of interaction. Instead, use it to help you build and maintain loyalty. Surveys can also provide material you might use in press releases and in your promotions, which can further help to get the word out about your ministry to build your list.

**Strategic Web Communication Principle #3:
Link relevant content to search-centric promotion.**

The reality of communicating with people online, and particularly via email, is that you have to constantly be collecting new email addresses. The typical rate of growth for any list is 25% per year now, which is comprised of 5% new names less 3% name loss to unsubs and bounces (mostly bounces). Said differently, if you're not prospecting for new names constantly you can expect to see a 3% per month attrition in your email lists. Since people will move on for one reason or another, you need to replace those friends with new friends.

The way to do this online is to populate your website with relevant content that is consistent with search-centric promotions that you conduct online. Relevance is the key in this area. If someone is searching the Internet for a church in Dallas, and you are one, that's relevant. But if you were a homeless shelter in New York or even Dallas, and they were searching for a church in Dallas, that is NOT relevant. You need to determine the Internet search streams that are relevant to what you offer, and then optimize your site to those searches via your site content and code. That way, your site is more likely to pop up on a search and get you traffic from people who are searching for what you have to offer. That means you need to be constantly updating your website to relate to changes in relevant terms. One of the best methods to do that is through search engines.

Practical Tip #6: Search engine optimize your site.

So let's talk about optimizing your website so that you can be found easily when someone searches terms that apply to you on a search engine such as Google or Yahoo.

If someone searches for information on a topic, such as "how to help a troubled teen," your site can get listed in the results. But unless it's in the top 10 results, or on the first page, your site probably won't get many visitors from those search results. There is a science to getting your site listed at the top, but that's not a subject of this whitepaper. The basic process is something you need to learn though. It involves finding the search terms that are relevant to your organization, then putting relevant content on your site that pertains to those search terms, the optimizing your site for the search engines, and finally submitting your site to them. In many cases, this process will result in you getting ranked highly, and therefore drive qualified search traffic to your website.

Google, Yahoo and Wordtracker offer a free keyword research tool for finding common search terms.
<https://adwords.google.com/select/KeywordToolExternal>
<http://inventory.overture.com/d/searchinventory/suggestion/>
<http://freekeywords.wordtracker.com/>

You can input keywords you're thinking of to see how many people are searching those terms.

Don't get tempted to expand your terms just because you see people searching on a topic that doesn't relate to your primary goal – instead stick to what you know. You won't be sorry if you put the effort into thinking up and searching for relevant terms that relate to your ministry people are looking for online.

What do you have within the confines of your organization that you can develop and put online that is relevant to what people are searching for? This is a new level of site content depth – deepening the relevance of what you're saying overall. You may have a particular niche – maybe issues related to teens, or matters of the heart for women, or guy stuff. By deepening your content in these areas, you establish a deeper focus that is really relevant in a particular area, and then you develop it and make it search centric.

For example, you might learn that a lot of people are searching for War in Iraq. Probably your ministry doesn't have anything relevant on this subject though, so you wouldn't want to develop it just because someone is searching for it.

On the other hand, when *The Presidential Prayer Team* learned that a lot of people were searching for a soldier's prayer because of the war, PPT developed a printed version of a soldier's prayer, entered into a pay-per-click advertising agreement with Yahoo and Google, and then asked people to adopt a soldier for prayer when they clicked to the site to get the soldier's prayer. They also could sign up for the Adopt Our Troops e-newsletter. The strategy did a great job of building the Adopt Our Troops email list.

If someone finds your site through a search, they will quickly leave if they don't think the content applies to their needs. The way to have a better chance of helping them see the relevance of your site to them is to avoid the common mistake of talking too much about your needs, such as ushers and gifts. They came there wanting information that addresses their search needs, and that's what you should give them.

Once you've learned how to get listed in the search results, your qualified site traffic will take off giving you plenty of new friends to start building relationships with. So, optimize your pages so people can find you through search engines, and then make sure your pages are relevant to those search terms.

Practical Tip #7: Develop inbound links to your site.

There are multiple ways to accomplish this. You can connect with other like-minded website and ask for them to link to your site. This can often yield positive results in two ways: it increases inbound traffic to your site, and it gives you increased rankings with the search engine algorithms, which consider inbound links a sign of popularity, and popularity a reason to rank a site higher up the page. Another way to generate links is to establish your listings in online directories.

Another way is to encourage your friends and supporters to link to you. You might even provide them with site banners they can install on their own pages.

Practical Tip #8: Launch a Pay-per-click campaign.

Pay per click advertising is a wonderful way to begin to quickly drive qualified search traffic to your email sign up landing pages. Otherwise known as Sponsored Ads online, pay-per-click is a paid advertising mechanism for moving Internet searchers onto your website. You can launch a PPC campaign in under one week, and start moving searchers onto your relevant landing pages to get desired actions right away.

Practical Tip #9: Consider banner advertising.

Banner advertising often is overlooked by advertisers because of the perceived cost. However, you need to use a comprehensive approach to advertising your website. For example, many organizations may pay a lot of money to advertise on television during the Super Bowl. But they don't usually bet their entire business on that one, very expensive ad. It is part of an integrated campaign of building awareness and selling products. Banner advertising helps build awareness for your site and will result in clicks to your site along with sales.

When measuring the three methods mentioned here – search engine optimization, pay-per-click advertising and banner advertising – consider them together in an integrated campaign. You need to measure the effectiveness of each method on its own, but don't dump one prematurely thinking it's not performing if its real value is in helping to get your message out more often so awareness is built.

You may need to fine-tune your list of specific marketing tools, but the point is to have a broad list so that you reach the most people possible so you can constantly be replacing friends that fell off your list with new friends that come on.

Strategic Web Communication Principle #4: Build interactivity into your website.

To keep people coming back to your site, you'll need to do more than just design a good site. You need a hard working site, and that site needs to be updated regularly.

Many of today's most successful websites are interactive, meaning they allow people to participate in the updated content in some way. The best example of this is Wikipedia.com where up to 7,000 volunteer contributors update and monitor the encyclopedia daily.

Other sites develop interactivity by providing games people can play, ways to pray with people (Prayer Walls), chat rooms, forums, contests, blogs, libraries, photo sharing, even wikis can get people coming back to your site – building a community of people interested in your topics and endeavors.

A Wiki – such as Wikipedia.com – is a site that is completely user written and updated. Maybe you had the objective of offering the world's largest prayer library online. A wiki would be a good approach to reaching your goal in an interactive manner by engage others to submit their resources and comments.

Strategic Web Communication Principle #5: Integrate your online and offline communications.

An important mistake that many organizations make is to consider online communication and e-fundraising to be a different silo from your offline communication and fundraising. But savvy marketers are now putting their web addresses on all printed materials, and even in their radio and television advertising. Likewise, your website should contain toll-free phone numbers and mailing addresses. Cross promote in this way. You should also put your web address in your catalogs, brochures, business cards, in your radio or television program. You get the idea.

Another good strategy is to cross-pollinate your monthly direct mail appeals with an e-appeal effort. You could precede your snail mail drop with an email send, then do a follow up blast 10 days later. The combination of the two channels – direct mail and email -- working in tandem with each other to promote the same initiative will raise the water table overall on your fundraising results. Combine telemarketing in this mix and you have a powerful one, two, three punch for your fundraising efforts.