

Title: It's Your Web Site, Not Your Newsletter

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Summary: There are some differences in creating content for the web compared to print distribution - your web site will work if you can successfully translate activities to online equivalents and making them work in a web environment.

After you have created your site, identified and recruited people to maintain it, and put together the processes to keep things moving, you need to focus on consistency across. Since you already are publishing your message and information in some sense to be consistent and it can save you a lot of time to use as much as you have on your web site. You should already understand enough about the web to know the same as print and the experience is quite different. Print media are not linear and the page presentation is consistent. If I hand you an 8.5 x 11" in color, it is still an 8.5 x 11" piece of white paper printed in color and is in the same location it was when I created it. More photos don't make it heavier or make turning the page take longer. You also can (and usually do) from beginning to end - that is not something easily done on the web (it is not). Here are some specific dos and don'ts to help you fill your web site. Works for the web. Write for the web.

People read differently on the web. It is not a Herculean task, it just requires some effort. Earlier, I mentioned the line of sight is a term applied to print materials, but not to the web. In general, you read sooner online than you do in print. An online reader has much more material than someone holding a printed piece and the effort is much less to find a new item is for someone to find a new book or article offline.

Tip: Get to the point sooner

Also, for the same reason as above, online readers skim, only stopping when you catch their attention. Bold text, bullet points, and sub-headings all work to draw their attention to specific areas. Use them wisely and judiciously.

Another thing to remember - the people who view your web site may not be the same as those who pick up your newsletter, they may not even be in the same country as the newsletter. Carefully read your items in your newsletter and announcements to someone who has never been to your church - what assumptions were you making in that document? Be sure all abbreviations are spelled out, all acronyms are spelled out, and language is easily understood. No jargon.

Don't: Repurpose print publications

An all-too-common approach is to pick up your newsletter, your bulletin, your calendar and start to copy the information to your web site. While you copy information from those sources, you have to remember they were designed for a printed page and that doesn't always (read: almost never) translate to acceptable results on a web page.

You may use a specific font that is available on your computer - when you create the pages and it doesn't matter what font my computer has available on another computer. When you publish online, part of your design, you should be selecting 'safe' fonts, that view the same (or almost the same) on all computers and that fonts are specifically designed for optimum viewing on screen and improved readability.

Something that happens quite frequently is printing documents (PDF, Portable Document Format) or Word Document) files and then placed on the site for download. To provide the user the documents in the same layout as the original, but it often the print layout still doesn't match the screen dimensions, people are likely to use a printer on their computer that will open the PDF or DOC file, but it is not guaranteed they will know what the content is until after they download it, the search engines can't read it.

Do: Have web-only content

If I am a member of the congregation and I attend services regularly - why do I need a web site? Is there something on your web site that will keep me coming back? If I am a member of your congregation, but I am looking for a new church home in my area, about your church that I will not get by driving past your location, reading or calling your office?

The web gives you a unique vehicle to deliver content - make the most of it and reach. This may be your biggest challenge because you may not have experience creating online content. For this, you will need to spend some time looking for an idea of what is currently online. Combining video, audio, discussion forums, and a message beyond Sunday morning are all ways to leverage the power of the web.

Don't: Publish everything

The web can be an endless sea of information - use discretion when adding content to your site. The reality is - computers have moved us no closer to being a paperless society of redundancy online, ~~Don't take it into your own hands~~ members are getting announcements handed to them every week, why do they need to see them on the web? There may be people that are traveling, or unable to attend a particular service, your announcements appear for more than a week? I know I see a lot of redundant announcements and bulletins I receive.

As I stated above, each item you post online needs to be written for an online audience. Do you really have time to rewrite each of your articles for readability online? I have 1 thing in common - connecting with their viewers and leading them to you. The web is both informational and experiential. If you just dump everything on the web, do you have to connect with people? It is OK for people to have questions, have a way to ask those questions. Your goal is to engage and connect,