

8 Hot Internet Tools to Expand and Grow Your Ministry

Your church Web site can be a portal to enhance community

by Lauren Hunter

Many hot Internet tools that will truly help to expand and grow your ministry begin with creating a powerful church Web site. More than just a place to state what your church is all about and list service times, your church Web site can be a portal to enhance community through harnessing new technologies and using them to reach attenders and the local and online community. According to a recent Barna Group report on technology and the church, over 90 percent of churches with more than 250 members have a Web site (Barna Group, April 2008). When used well, having an interactive church Web site and incorporating other effective Internet tools into your online ministry strategy can empower your congregation and engage them in new and powerful ways.

1 Blog—Many pastors and Christians alike are seeing the value in creating a blog and making regular posts. Think of a blog, short for “weblog”, as an online journal for things you wish to share with your congregation, Christians on the Internet, and even those who don’t yet know Christ. It’s a relatively easy and free way to increase regular communication within your church body and provide a way for people to comment and weigh in on issues that one might never have the opportunity to discuss with others. Pastors should jump on this hot Internet tool and use blogs to post additional notes from the Sunday sermon, make comments on issues in the church that pertain to the entire congregation or churches in general, and encourage members to share comments and thoughts. Link to this blog right on the homepage of your church’s Web site. Another great benefit of blogs is that search engines like Yahoo! and Google give greater Internet ranking to blogs than Web sites, so your blog will help give your church Web site a better ranking online when people search for churches in your area. (Resources: www.blogger.com; www.wordpress.com; www.typepad.com)

2 Volunteer Matching—The Internet is making it possible to provide continually up-to-date databases of volunteer opportunities for churches through a password protected section of their Web

site. This is exciting, as it takes some of the burden off the church staff members and allows church attenders to search volunteer listings online. Some church management software providers (ChMS) that are web-based provide these types of features. To best use a volunteer matching system, users need to login and fill out their profiles with details on their gifts, skills, styles, and passions. Then, volunteer coordinators can 1) search the database for people that match the position they are trying to fill and 2) view the list of open opportunities that can be made available online for anyone to search. This bumps a church’s Web site up a notch and makes it a necessary tool for staff and members to become active participants in their church life. (Resources: www.ChurchCommunityBuilder.com)

3 Give Now Button—Do you remember those commercials for Staples where they showed someone in a difficult situation at work, and suddenly, they remember they have an “easy” button? They press it, and the situation is magically fixed. I know we all wish for an “easy” button from time to time, but churches can make giving easier, by adding a “Give Now Button” to their Web site homepage or on the right or left side of every page on their Web site. Online giving is now becoming a standard for many churches. People lead busy and complicated lives, and many only attend church one or two times per month. In order to keep giving consistent—especially during the holidays and summertime when people travel more—online giving makes it possible for people to make one-time payments and also set up recurring payments for the specific amount and date they wish payments to be made on their behalf. Many online giving applications offer payments to be made by online check or credit cards (which includes debit cards with the VISA or MasterCard logo). (Resources: www.GiveNowButton.com, www.TransactU.com)

4 Small Groups Listings—Several Web-based church management software (ChMS) providers out there now offer tools to make it possible to provide all info regarding a church’s small group offerings online. Small group leaders and participants can work together in new ways by utilizing the church’s Web site to search and view small group listings, see where a group meets, find out if the group provides childcare, and more. The Web makes it possible to provide quick access to information that can expand and grow community by connecting group leaders with potential participants instantly. Even more, some ChMS providers have the ability to provide individual password-protected Web pages for each small group where participants can chat, post messages and prayer requests, and review assignments. (Resources: www.BuildCommunityNow.com)

5 Public Events Calendar—Providing your church calendar in real time online on your Web site has become a standard. Web-based events management technology has made this possible for the last 10 years, and many churches that never considered this are finding that the benefits are lasting. Using an online events and resource management application is simple and makes it possible for multiple people at your church to enter events, check

resource availability such as room and vehicle reservations, and have your online public church calendar always available and completely up-to-date on your Web site. This is a great way to increase involvement, and expand individual ministries within your church. (Resources: www.EventU.com)

6 E-mail Newsletters—To take things a step further, why not e-mail your congregation with news and updates about your church, messages from the pastor, and event listings for the upcoming week? Want to really get people involved—send out e-newsletters at least once a week to stay in communication, remind people of upcoming events, and encourage prayer requests all through e-mail newsletter communication. Some ChMS providers and resource applications have built in applications to do this, or you can use an independent provider that offers customized solutions. Make it possible for people to sign up to receive your e-newsletter on your church's Web site homepage, and you'll be ready to go. (Resources: www.constantcontact.com; www.synergema.com; www.ServiceU.com)

7 Podcasts (and Vodcasts)—Podcasting has quickly become a standard for providing previously recorded sermons in a downloadable format such as mp3 on a church's Web site, from iTunes, or as an RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feed. Many churches began streaming sermons from their Web sites in the 90s, but by posting podcasts, people can listen to sermons on their computers, or download them to their ipod or other digital media player to enjoy on the go. Some churches are now providing vodcasts (or vidcasts), terms used for the online delivery of video, which is just like an audio podcast, but includes audio and video together. Some churches are including podcasts and vodcasts as a part of their online ministry strategy and have found that their church can have a global reach through these Internet technologies. (Resources: www.how-to-podcast-tutorial.com; www.oneplace.com/podcasts)

8 Private Member Communities—Lastly, perhaps the hottest Internet tools available today are private online communities. For lots of people, using Facebook, MySpace and

some of the other public community sites can be overwhelming and purposeless. You don't wish to spend countless hours filling out online profiles only to network with a few friends you lost touch with in high school. Granted, there are some career focused networks such as LinkedIn.com and Plaxo.com that are effective at developing and maintaining business relationships, for churches, the best option is to look at setting up a private member community just for their church. Some ChMS providers are beginning to offer this option, and there are also other providers out there that offer a boatload of features such as private calendar, chat, profiles, file sharing, instant messaging, video sharing, photo commenting and more. Bottom line: want to get people involved and growing? Give them a place where they can connect with others 24/7. Of course, face-to-face community is the first priority, but technology is making it possible to have real community amidst our busy lives from any computer with an Internet connection—anytime! (Resources: www.oikoshq.com; www.ChurchCommunityNow.com) ❖

Lauren Hunter is a freelance writer and owner of Lauren Hunter Public Relations, a communications firm dedicated to the faith-based technology market. For more information on how Internet technology can improve your organization, contact Lauren at lauren@laurenhunter.net, visit www.laurenhunter.net, or check out her blog at www.churchtechtoday.com.