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SOCIAL MEDIA PRACTICES FOR CHURCHES

by

Jordyn Helgen

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master Science in Social Media and Digital Content Strategy
at
Lindenwood University

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Social Media and Digital Content Strategy
Department
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
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By

Jordyn Helgen

Saint Charles, Missouri

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ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: Best Practices Guide to Social Media for Churches

Jordyn Helgen, Master of Science, 2021

Thesis Directed by: Andrew Smith, Associate Professor of Communications

This project focuses on providing a resource for churches and similar nonprofit organizations to utilize in order to maximize their social media strategy and generate ideas for content. Furthermore, it will help these organizations to better understand social media and how they can use social media tools to accentuate their religious values and accomplish their mission.

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Introduction

As a communications and marketing professional who just transitioned out of a role as a church communications and marketing director, I found myself frustrated at the lack of resources there seemed to be available to church communicators as a whole. That's why I decided I wanted to create a website to help other church communicators navigate the ins and outs of social media and digital storytelling. I saw a need for a resource for churches (and other nonprofit organizations) to utilize in emphasizing their values and carrying out their mission.

For my project, I have created a website – helgenconsulting.com – that serves as a guide for churches and similar religious organizations. The guide functions as an interactive website that includes articles, interviews, and podcasts, and features graphics and videos in order to create visual interest and simplify the steps outlined. The guide is based on my research and personal experience in the field.

This project is important because it helps churches and nonprofit organizations who don't necessarily have the resources to outsource marketing professionals to help them engage and connect with their communities. This guide will be a free resource that will help such organizations maximize their potential and achieve their goals.

Below are several resources that I found to be useful during my research to help contextualize the state of my field. You'll find that I have included a variety of topics, ranging from the LGBTQ+ nonprofit organizations to churches and organizations in Sweden, China, and beyond. It is important to understand social media and how it has been used successfully by nonprofit organizations around the world, especially as Christianity continues to decline in the western hemisphere.

Literature Review

While some people are enthralled with social media, and others don't care for it, most of us can agree that social media is a powerful tool. It offers a variety of features that we can use to connect with friends and family and that businesses can use to market to customers, promote their messages, and develop a following. Cabosky (2016) found that quantitative data alone cannot always be used to predict trends in social media. He argues the value of other metrics, such as consumer demographics, the social media platform being used, and consumer engagement. Callahan (2019) examines social media as a tool for subcultures and minority groups to connect with each other. He finds that certain communities connect with each other online through specific apps such as Snapchat, which is the focus of his research. Carlson and Lee (2015) examine the impact of customer relationship management on social media by surveying college students and performing a statistical analysis. Their research determined that demographics, communication, and immersion have a "significant effect" on followership. Checketts (2018) uniquely explores the risks associated with a leader or person of authority, such as a pastor, who chooses to utilize social media. Because we have the option of creating personal accounts or professional accounts, we must be wise when posting about politics, religion, etc., since consumers might not choose to separate the two when deciding their opinions about the person/brand/account.

Clear (2018) gives some context as to the marketing practices of nonprofit organizations. Her research maintains that nonprofit organizations must use discretion and caution when implementing marketing strategies, ensuring that they are using innovative yet practical approaches. Crawford (2019) examines the social media trends of millennials. This provides

valuable information, as this particular demographic is not easily accessible by all nonprofit organizations. In “Digital Shepherding” (2018), the authors collectively examine the role of media and its effects on ministry. It specifically focuses on the religious sector and provides good information about the importance of social media to a nonprofit organization in today’s digital age. Dogaru-Tulica and Adina-Loredana (2019) perform a case study regarding Gabriela Firea, mayor of Bucharest in Romania. They find that social media can be a platform for the political climate and can tremendously sway public opinion.

Gelfgren (2015) further develops the conversation around religious leaders and social media, and highlights the risks of such leaders *not* having social media accounts. He examines a former Archbishop of Sweden and how him not having a Twitter account led to several impersonators to create accounts. Gao (2016) hones in on the role of social media for nonprofits in China. He determines the effectiveness of various strategies within the nonprofit segment. He et al. (2016) conduct a case study and describe a framework for analyzing and comparing social media content from business competitors. They argue that businesses and organizations should be monitoring and analyzing content regularly in order to carry out their mission as effectively as possible. Hutchings (2017) examines the Church of Sweden’s social media marketing efforts. His research found that consumers who develop an emotional attachment or receive some sort of emotional validation are more likely to follow and interact with a page than those who do not.

Knudsen and Nielsen (2019) analyze the marketing practices of various churches. They determine that all churches should move to having an online presence if they haven’t already. Lev-On and Lissitsa (2018) examine the social media habits of users with various religious backgrounds. They found that those coming from minority religions felt digitally divided, while those coming from more widespread religions and denominations were more likely to use social

media. Mazid (2019) explores Facebook and all its implications for the nonprofit sector. He specifically outlines the advantages of the platform for LGBTQ+ nonprofit organizations. Ming-Yi (2020) uses the Globalization Theory, Systems Theory, and Organization-Public Relationship Theory to dissect the various social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter) and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of using each for different businesses, including nonprofit organizations.

Based on his research, Newman (2016) reports that businesses (and nonprofits alike) could learn a lot from political pages when it comes to social media. Pressrove and Pardun (2016) examine the phenomenon known as a parasocial relationship and its importance in social media. They found that the more emotionally invested a person is to a company or account, the more likely they are to financially contribute to that cause. Rajan and Vaz (2018) focus on the social media platform Whatsapp and how acronyms emerge out of social media platforms. This gives some good context as to why a church or nonprofit organization should be aware of various acronyms and trends that are emerging and when not to use them. Raman (2016) examines the effects of social media, analytics, and cloud computing on nonprofit organizations in the context of India.

Ratcliff, et al. (2017) utilize the uses and gratifications model to examine why people utilize social media and how businesses, especially churches and other nonprofit organizations, can tailor their content to fit the various expectations that exist. Roy (2021) explores the idea of social media as “property” and how that gives a sense of ownership to the working class. Seeling et al. (2019) really delves into nonprofit social media and all of the implications associated with it. They find that, when best practices are implemented, success is reached not only in the social media realm but in other marketing endeavors as well. And, finally, Tully et al. (2019) analyzes

the Ebola virus and how social media (specifically Twitter) can be used to educate, promote, and raise awareness.

Bibliography

Cabosky, Joseph. "Social Media Opinion Sharing: Beyond Volume." *The Journal of Consumer Marketing*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2016. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JCM-02-2015-1323>.

Accessed 31 May 2020.

In this research paper, Cabosky takes a look at opinion sharing on social media. Although his research particularly emphasizes entertainment publicity, he still offers relevant statistics surrounding social media consumption and activity of various demographics, including young adults. His goal was to find the holes in research previously completed in the field and fill in those gaps with his own findings. His argument maintains the idea that marketing research solely takes into account social media consumer behavior on the basis of quantity, which is what creates these flaws in the research. He argues that the success of an entity cannot be measured by such metrics alone, especially when those metrics are based on volume rather than more situational contributors. Many of the stats he lays out in his paper are relevant to my topic because they give me an idea of who is using social media in terms of gender and race, in addition to the types of platforms they are using.

Callahan, Clark, et al. "Snapchat Usage Among Minority Populations." *Journal of Media & Religion*, vol. 18, no. 1, Jan. 2019, pp. 1–12. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/15348423.2

019.1639404. Accessed 12 September 2020.

In this interesting study, Snapchats were analyzed over a two-week period from the Snapchat story at Brigham Young University (BYU) in Provo, Utah. The

main purpose of this article and study are to highlight the idea of subcultures and minority populations being connected through social media. In this sense, this study analyzes the Snapchat subculture within BYU, within the Latter-Day Saint faith, and within the state of Utah. Information from this study can be leveraged in several ways within the religious community. Churches that may be becoming irrelevant towards different demographics may utilize the ideal of subcultures in order to increase its audience and community. This content may be a great podcast discussion.

Carlson, Ashley, and C. Christopher Lee. "Followership and Social Media Marketing." *Academy of Marketing Studies Journal*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2015. *ProQuest*, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1693219326?accountid=12104>. Accessed 31 May 2020.

The authors of this research project examine the correlation of customer relationship management to social media marketing. Like the above study, the target audience in this research is college students. This study provides a lot of background information about social media that is very helpful for my project. Because it discusses the use of social media platforms by the millennial generation, I am able to apply much of what is discussed to my project of targeting young people and families with social media best practices. The article explores the different tendencies of social media consumers in various circumstances in regards to best marketing practices of organizations. It also explores the world of advertising to consumers on social media as part of the literature review. The study provides a lot of valuable information regarding

gender, immersion, and social media followership, but is lacking in the context of sample size (140 students).

Checketts, Levi. "The Persona of the Pastor on Social Media." *Communication Research Trends*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2018, pp. 25-33. *ProQuest*, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2080867262?accountid=12104>. Accessed 19 September 2020.

This article covers the risks presented to religious leaders by social media. It also covers some of the psychological aspects of socialization and claims that humans are meant to have a "division of performances." For example, does hypothetical Frank create a Facebook page for Pastor Frank, husband Frank, or grandson Frank? Since congregation members' perceptions may not be fully accurate, religious leaders should not assume that specific posts, comments, or photos will be taken within the correct context. The article also explores potential solutions to avoid these sorts of situations, such as public ministries, or group digital Bible studies.

Clear, Anne, et al. "Nonprofit Advocacy Tactics: Thinking Inside the Box?" *Voluntas*, vol. 29, no. 4, 857-869, 2018. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11266-017-9907-4>. Accessed 31 May 2020.

Unlike the two previous studies, this article addresses the practices of nonprofit organizations. It offers an interesting perspective which includes ideas such as the importance of nonprofit organizations (like churches) to be involved in social debate. Although this article offers information that sides on the political

spectrum, it provides a lot of keywords and details about nonprofits which serves as a good foundation for my research. The researchers examine two types of nonprofit organizations, including “insider” and “outsider” organizations. While churches would probably fall under the outsider category because they do not typically work with government and policy makers, this section does spark my critical thinking skills and makes me think about how these types of relationships might make themselves relevant in the church social media field. Overall, this article might be a bit of a stretch in some areas that don’t necessarily pertain to social media practices of churches, but there is still a lot of good information about nonprofits and the various nuances associated with the nonprofit industry that I can use in my project.

Crawford, Elizabeth, et al. “Philanthropy in the Millennial Age: Trends

Toward Polycentric Personalized Philanthropy.” *Independent Review*, vol. 23, no. 4, Spring 2019, pp. 551–568. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=buh&AN=135491443&site=ehost-live. Accessed 30 May 2021.

This study examines the philanthropic efforts of millennials and how they use social media to carry forth their goals.

“Digital Shepherding: Social Media Reshaping Religious Leadership and Pastoral Care.”

Communication Research Trends, vol. 37, no. 2, 2018, pp. 3-4. *ProQuest*,

<https://search.proquest.com/docview/2080868567?accountid=12104>. Accessed 19 September 2020.

This article focuses on the concept of “digital shepherding,” or how the digital world has directly affected how a pastor must act and change in communication patterns. How has the pastoral landscape changed after the widespread adoption of digital culture? This collection of papers goes into detail on how social media has affected the authority of religious leaders and churches overall. Additionally, this collection also goes into detail regarding how the focus of Christian life over the last couple millennia has been the oral proclamation of faith, not necessarily the written. How will religious leaders and congregations adjust to this transformation of worship? I look to utilize this collection to help increase the perspectives of the impact of social media on churches.

Dogaru-Tulica, and Adina-Loredana. “How Do Women Politicians Display Their Online Faith in Social Media? Case Study: The Mayor of Bucharest, Gabriela Firea.” *Journal of Media Research*, vol. 12, no. 1, Mar. 2019, pp. 92–113. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.24193/jmr.33.6. Accessed 19 September 2020.

This interesting case study reviews how Gabriela Firea, mayor of Bucharest in Romania, has risen to the third most popular public figure in Romania, behind the male Romanian President and Prime Minister. In post-communist Romania, mayor Gabriela Firea displays her online faith in social media, and it has paid off. The case study analyzes Firea’s posts and finds that faith-based posts result in the largest social media interactions. These posts attract new fans and help retain existing ones. This unique scenario, being a post-communist country with a female political underdog, really shows the true power of social media when

applied correctly. It provides a new medium, which previously would likely not have worked.

Gelfgren, Stefan. "Why Does the Archbishop Not Tweet?" *NORDICOM Review*, vol. 36, no. 1, June 2015, pp. 109–123. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1515/nor-2015-0009. Accessed 12 September 2020.

This article addresses the issue of the Archbishop of Sweden not having a Twitter account. Due to this void, a local congregation member created a fake account impersonating the Archbishop and began to gather a large gathering of followers. Although the account was banned after the Catholic Church contacted Twitter Inc., this article analyzes the outcomes of this event and goes into detail of the potential dangers of religious social media presence. This article mainly goes into the dangers of online presence, and the increased risk of impersonation and fraud. Oddly enough, the successor to the Archbishop in question did become an active user of social media, particularly Twitter. This offers a unique comparison between the two concepts.

Gao, Fangfang. "Social Media as a Communication Strategy: Content Analysis of Top Nonprofit Foundations' Micro-Blogs in China." *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, vol. 10, no. 4, Sept. 2016, pp. 255–271. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1080/1553118X.2016.1196693. Accessed 30 May 2021.

This study offers a lot of information about nonprofit foundations in China that decided to utilize social media in order to carry out their strategic

communication. It specifically focuses on Sina Weibo, a popular microblogging platform in China, and examines which strategies were more effective in carrying forth the various missions of these nonprofit public-fundraising organizations.

He, Wu, et al. "Actionable Social Media Competitive Analytics for Understanding Customer Experiences." *The Journal of Computer Information Systems*, 56(2), 145-155, 2016. *ProQuest*, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1795622769?accountid=12104>. Accessed 31 May 2020.

In this next article, the researchers explore the value of monitoring and analyzing an organization's rivals, per se, on social media in order to gain a competitive edge. Although this study is centered on a business model, the information and opinions presented are directly applicable to the church model as well. The study deeply examines social media and the competitive analytics associated, then walks us through a case study that was directed. It outlines the importance of collecting and analyzing a company's products, services, strategies, etc. This is great information for me to use in my study, because the same strategy can be used in the church industry. Although churches aren't necessarily "competing" with each other, it can be very helpful to take a look at what other churches are doing to engage their audience on the various social media platforms, and analyzing the content so that they can apply the successful approaches to their own channels.

Hutchings, Timothy. "'We Are a United Humanity': Death, Emotion and Digital Media in the

Church of Sweden.” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, vol. 61, no. 1, Mar. 2017, pp. 90–107. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1080/08838151.2016.1273930. Accessed 19 September 2020.

This unique case study covers the attempt by the Church of Sweden, or the Svenska Kyrkan, to display and respond to difficult emotions such as grief through social media and hybrid digital-physical innovations. One of the driving ideologies behind this campaign is that emotional and shared experiences can unite all humanity, whether they are religious or not. This case study is particularly interesting because the church has a large membership that was on a decline. These efforts of emotional outreach, and an emotional anchor of familiarity, help unite and attract potential members to the church.

Knudsen, Gry Høngsmark, and Marie Vejrup Nielsen. “Exploring the Mediatization of Organizational Communication by Religious Communities in Digital Media.” *MedieKultur: Journal of Media & Communication Research*, vol. 35, no. 66, Jan. 2019, pp. 101–121. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=ufh&AN=141164238&site=ehost-live. Accessed 19 September 2020.

This article focuses on the analysis of the digital media presence of 10 different Christian churches in Denmark. It compares and contrasts the ways in which these religious communities communicate and engage through digital platforms. One of the most significant outcomes from this analysis was the advisement that established religious institutions should transition slowly towards an online presence. Churches that were more established in this case study saw difficult

adoptions of social media due to their deep, traditional roots. More contemporary churches did not have as much of an issue migrating to a digital platform. Data and analytics are used extensively in the case study and will be a great reference.

Lev-On, Azi, and Sabina Lissitsa. "Facilitating Cross-Cleavage Communication Online: Findings from Interviews with Ultra-Orthodox, Religious, and Secular Participants." *Communication Review*, vol. 21, no. 3, July 2018, pp. 212–227. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/10714421.2018.1495434. Accessed 19 September 2020.

This research covers whether social media facilitates communication between members of different communities, religions, nationality, or ethnic backgrounds. The study consists of 93 separate interviews. One of the interesting finds from the study found that sampled participants belonging to minority religious groups tended to use social media for professional use, while members of majority religious institutions were more motivated to use social media to interact with others. They found that minority religions felt more "digitally divided" from other communities, while majorities felt social media facilitated the crossover of communication.

Mazid, Imran. "Dialogic Public Relations and Social Presence Strategies of LGBTQ+ Nonprofit Organizations." *Kentucky Journal of Communication*, vol. 38, no. 1, Spring 2019, pp. 43–64. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=ufh&AN=139397331&site=ehost-live. Accessed 30 May 2021.

This article is a great resource which delves into the ins and outs of Facebook as a marketing tool.

Ming-Yi Wu. "Exploring Organizational Use of Social Media Marketing: A Global Perspective." *China Media Research*, vol. 16, no. 1, Jan. 2020, pp. 92–101. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=ufh&AN=141619887&site=ehost-live. Accessed 30 May 2021.

This study utilizes the Globalization Theory, Systems Theory, and Organization-Public Relationship Theory to examine a variety of organizations' use of social media marketing. They determine which social media platforms are most popular, which social media marketing goals are the most common, and the relationships of business-to-customer, business-to-business, and nonprofit organizations in respect to the platforms and strategies they utilize.

Newman, Bruce I. "Reinforcing Lessons for Business from the Marketing Revolution in U.S. Presidential Politics: A Strategic Triad." *Psychology & Marketing*, vol. 33, no. 10, Oct. 2016, pp. 781–795. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1002/mar.20917. Accessed 30 May 2021.

This is an interesting study which examines how the same techniques used for marketing in American politics can be translated to businesses everywhere. Because one of the main goals of political marketing is to raise funds, there are a lot of similarities when it comes to the social media marketing strategies used today.

Pressrove, Geah, and Carol J. Pardun. "Relationship between Personal Technology Use and the Donor/Volunteer: A Parasocial Approach." *Journal of Promotion Management*, vol. 22, no. 1, Jan. 2016, pp. 137–150. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/10496491.2015.1107012. Accessed 30 May 2021.

These researchers examine the effects of nonprofit organizations developing parasocial relationships with followers/donors via social media. They found that stakeholders are much more likely to give to the cause if they feel like they have a deeply personal relationship with the organization.

Rajan, Benson, and Elishia Vaz. "Sacred Texting: A Study on Social Media Language Trends in New Delhi and Bengaluru Churches." *Amity Journal of Media & Communications Studies (AJMCS)*, vol. 8, no. 1, Jan. 2018, pp. 24–35. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=ufh&AN=141621913&site=ehost-live. Accessed 12 September 2020.

The article "Sacred Texting: A Study on Social Media Language Trends in New Delhi and Bengaluru Churches" provides a unique perspective on churches based out of India that adopt social media platforms and how they tend to have unintended adoption of "Social Media Language." The article covers the social media platform, WhatsApp, quite extensively. One of the discoveries of this study was that acronyms were finding their way into religious mediums, especially acronyms that translate into relatively profane language, such as "LMAO" or "OMG" (from a religious context).

Raman, Aparna. “How Do Social Media, Mobility, Analytics and Cloud Computing Impact Nonprofit Organizations? A Pluralistic Study of Information and Communication Technologies in Indian Context.” *Information Technology for Development*, vol. 22, no. 3, July 2016, pp. 400–421. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/02681102.2014.992002. Accessed 30 May 2021.

This offers some interesting information on not only social media but cloud computing and how they might affect nonprofit organizations.

Ratcliff, Amanda Jo, et al. “Religion and New Media: A Uses and Gratifications Approach.” *Journal of Media & Religion*, vol. 16, no. 1, Jan. 2017, pp. 15–26. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/15348423.2017.1274589. Accessed 19 September 2020.

This is a fantastic article on the research of general attitudes towards social media adoptions within religious organizations. The research is drawn from a sample of 423 subjects from multiple religious and cultural backgrounds. One of the discoveries from this study was that expectations from religious organizations fall into three categories: religion as a means of passing time, religion as a mode of meeting self needs, and religion as a catalyst for learning. This research can be referenced to help target the foundational needs of specific demographics.

Roy, Suddhabrata Deb. “The Political Economy of Working-Class Social Media Commerce: Digital Capitalism and the Engelsian Concept of Working-Class ‘Property.’” *TripleC (Cognition, Communication, Co-Operation): Open Access Journal for a Global*

Sustainable Information Society, vol. 19, no. 1, Jan. 2021, pp. 171–194. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=ufh&AN=147799729 &site=ehost-live. Accessed 30 May 2021.

This New Zealand study examines social media as a tool described as “property” and its relationship to the working class. It argues that working class users feel like they are in control by having “ownership” over their social media accounts in an age of digital capitalism.

Seelig, Michelle I., et al. “A New Culture of Advocacy: An Exploratory Analysis of Social Activism on the Web and Social Media.” *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, vol. 27, no. 1, Jan. 2019, pp. 15–29. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/15456870.2019.1540418. Accessed 30 May 2021.

This is an extremely relevant study, as it examines how nonprofit organizations have adapted to the use of social media as a marketing tool to facilitate engagement and connect with users. It indicates that when good social media strategies are practiced, the effectiveness of campaigns extends beyond other forms of marketing.

Soukup, Paul, et al. “Social Media and Faith Formation: Editor’s Introduction.” *Communication Research Trends*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2019, p. 3+. *Gale OneFile: Communications and Mass Media*. Accessed 31 May 2020.

This last article is definitely the most relevant to my topic. This essay actually serves as the editors’ introduction in an issue of *Communication Research*

Trends. The authors offer a religious perspective on the role of communication – particularly social media – in the church. The introduction begins with interesting pieces of background information, including the point that church communication media in some cases can weaken the church’s identity. However, it also goes on to highlight some of the various ways that social media can be used to deepen an individual’s faith and serve the church well. The essay provides a lot of quality quotes and information from experts in the church and nonprofit fields, as well as in the area of social media. It serves as another great foundational piece of research that is guiding my research further. It provides a lot of information about the state of the field, and also addresses the evolution of technology in the church over time.

Tully, Melissa, et al. “Contextualizing Nonprofits’ Use of Links on Twitter During the West African Ebola Virus Epidemic.” *Communication Studies*, vol. 70, no. 3, July 2019, pp. 313–331. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/10510974.2018.1539021. Accessed 30 May 2021. This study delves deep into the topic of health care and how nonprofit organizations use embedded links on Twitter for strategic communication.