



Big impact on a small screen



Ed Stetzer writes, “Throughout history, people of all generations have gathered in town squares – public spaces where the local community gathers for social and commercial purposes. In the old days, it used to be a literal ‘town square,’ and it still is in some places. Until social media came around, town squares were shopping malls and other social areas. Social media is the 21st century town square.”

So, what is your presence and visibility in this new town square? In New England, Unitarian congregations often had the good fortune to sit on the edge of the public commons. This prestigious location and resulting degree of visibility was lost long ago and we are now unknown to most and misunderstood by many who have heard of us. This, combined with the decline of religion in America where “church” is, at best, a damaged brand, means that we have a lot of work to do to survive, and even more to thrive.

Church consultant Thom Rainer observed that only 1 in 20 churches in America are actually growing, which means that the remaining 95% of churches are either plateaued or in decline. In addition, church attendance has been decreasing by 2% a year for many years.

Jim Burgen, senior minister of Flatirons Community Church in Lafayette, Colorado, writes, “We need to learn to speak to people whose eyes are fixed on small screens from smartphones to laptops. We are a screen culture. We can argue about that or we can leverage it. It is now possible to reach infinitely more people through media than we could ever hope to reach by standing in front of a room of people sitting in seats facing one direction.”

According to Pew Research (2016), 79% of internet users (which translates as 68% of all U.S. adults) use Facebook. This is followed by Instagram (32%), Pinterest (31%), LinkedIn (29%), and Twitter (24%). Pew also reports that, “For many users, social media is part of their daily routine. Roughly three-quarters of Facebook users – and around half of Instagram users – visit these sites at least once a day.”

You may find this infographic about the use of social media in churches interesting <http://mashable.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Churches-and-Social-Media.jpg>

The foundation for participating in the virtual public square is a good website. In thinking about content and design, consider two things:

- ◆ Who are you as a congregation?
- ◆ What value do you offer to someone who knows nothing about you as a congregation, and who has misgivings about religion in general? These are generally referred

to as value propositions, and they may include community, compassion, justice-making, spirituality, education, etc.

While for many congregations, social media can seem like one more thing on the to-do list of infinity, it should rise to the top in terms of priorities when it is properly understood as a public ministry to engage the community in which the congregation is located.

The holy grail of online engagement through social media is high quality, relevant content. It’s why consultants talk about content marketing and creating a content marketing strategy.

The people at ProChurchTools advocate the “80/20” rule, by which they mean post four things that are helpful to other people before you post something about your congregation.

To help you with social media, Touchstones offers a monthly, theme-based social media plan for your use along with high quality, engaging content (including videos) on the theme. (We can conduct an audit of your website to assess effectiveness.)

Visit the *Touchstones Project* at <https://www.touchstonesproject.com>

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