

Web 2.0 for Churches and Ministries

Why FaceBook® and other open social networks are not the right choice for churches and ministries

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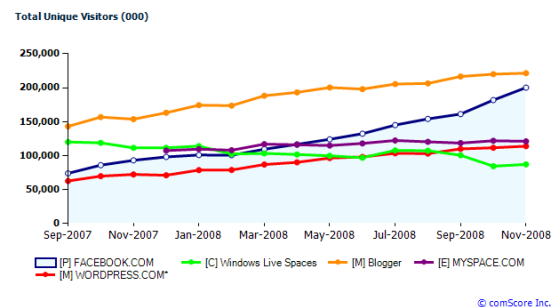
Online social networks have exploded in popularity—one-fifth of adults worldwide visit social networking sites. While increasingly embedded in our daily lives, this form of modern communication has a proven ability to fulfill a powerful longing for community—the exact force that propels successful churches and ministries. But churches and ministries have numerous unique organizational and congregational needs. This paper explores the criteria and issues faith-based organizations must explore when looking at online networking solutions.

Social Networking is exploding

Innovative technologies continue to expand the influence of the Internet into our daily lives. The resulting impact on business, political, economic, faith and social trends is unprecedented. The onslaught of social networks, interactivity and user-generated content—broadly labeled “Web 2.0”—has exploded over the last few years. Three trends demonstrate how pervasive has been the growth of social networking:

1. **Increased number of visits to social network websites.** The number of users at social network websites grew 25% between June 2007 and June 2008. As of June 2008, social network users represented 67% of all Internet users. Can we add faith-based site traffic
2. **Increased advertising spending on social networking Web sites.** Experts predict that between 2007 and 2011, U.S. ad spending on social networks will grow 180% from \$900 million to \$2.5 billion. Faith-based spending will hit \$x.f

Social networking websites have truly global reach. According to a 2006 multi-country survey, more than one-fifth of adults around the world visit social networking Web sites.



So what does that mean to your church and your congregation? **The powerful community and networking forces of today’s online networks are aligned perfectly with a congregation’s longing for a sense of spiritual community.** Further, recent research has shown that *online spiritual activities lead people to become more involved with their local faith communities and drive more face-to-face encounters.*

Your members are moving faith online

The Pew Internet and American Life Project has been monitoring digital life for over a decade. In 2004 they found that nearly two-thirds of online Americans—**representing nearly 82 million people—use the Internet for faith-related reasons.** Included in these reasons:

- 38% of the nation’s 128 million Internet users sent and received email with spiritual content.
- 35% sent or received online greeting cards related to religious holidays.

- 32% went online to read news accounts of religious events and affairs.
- 21% sought information about how to celebrate religious holidays.
- 17% looked for information about where they could attend religious services.
- 14% used email to plan church meetings.
- 11% downloaded or listened to religious music online.
- 7% made or responded to online prayer requests.
- 7% made donations to religious organizations or charities.

Co-author of this survey, Prof. Lynn Schofield Clark of the University of Colorado at Boulder, said at that time, “The online faithful are quite serious about their spiritual journeys, and they are committed to those in their social networks who accompany them on those journeys.”

didn't see the fit With the pace of users of these social media sites accelerating it is essential that churches and ministries understand the limitations of popular open social networks (SNs), like FaceBook® or MySpace®.

Open vs. Closed Networks

Think of building an open social network as similar to building a public square. This is a place where everyone—member, non-member, affiliated, unaffiliated—can gather together. In contrast, a closed social network—frequently called a “walled garden—is only made available to authorized individuals. Both types of networks serve beneficial purposes.

Like a public square, open SNs foster a broad community and have some functionality to help build specific interest-based groups. Sites like MySpace® and Facebook® are great places to reach out to those who are not already a part of your church or ministry community. As such, they are incredibly useful because of the millions of people that use these as a daily part of their life. They also represent a great way for your members to “fly the flag” and proudly display their affiliation.

But churches and ministries have numerous unique organizational and congregational needs. Based on our research and experience of working with faith-based organizations for nearly a decade, you should investigate the following list of criteria when implementing networking solutions.

Privacy

Do you want your organization to be completely open to the online world? Think about it more like the Internet (your website that anyone can access) versus an intranet (open only to members). How much privacy do you want to afford your members, especially the youth?

Open SNs offer little to no user privacy. It is very easy for outsiders to find any other user and relatively simple to connect by viewing their friends and sending them a message, even if their own profile is private. Many users make their personal profile public so that the entire world can view their information.

For organizations, this type of openness raises numerous issues. If an organization creates a group on an open SN, even if it is private, it cannot fully protect a member's privacy.

Moderated content

Do you want to moderate content like blogs, group formation and events? Most open SNs have an ‘either-or’ approach to content moderations: Either members are allowed to post anything or only administrators can post content.

Ideally, you should have the option to moderate content at many levels (say no moderation for the men's ministry but some moderation for the youth groups).

Groups within Groups

So let's say you set up First Community Church group on an open SN. Churches and ministries may have several to hundreds of small groups. Open SN's allow you to create new groups but you cannot ‘aggregate’ them under your Church community.

Faith-based networks typically allow multiple groups under the community. More sophisticatedly platforms allow “nested” groups

so that groups can be connected within the community.

Your brand

Members can find numerous and different spiritual opportunities in many venues. You need the capability to build your message, your images and your content, not propagate the social networks brand. Open SNs offer some limited branding but leave no doubt you are still on their site.

In order to have a seamless branding experience, particularly as members move from your website to your member community, website and organization branding elements need to be consistent.

Spiritual functionality

The core objective for any faith-based online community is to grow their faith. To do this, churches and ministries need specialized functions like prayer requests, scripture access, and bible tools to build a true faith-based networking platform. Only specialized faith-based networking platforms will address these needs.

Reporting

So what happens between Sundays? How effective are your ministries? How many members were online last week? What did they do? Online platforms provide the unique ability to track and record activity beyond simple website statistics.

Open SNs sites do not provide any type of reporting. You may not have a person's email address or phone number. If that person opts out of the network you have no way of getting in touch with them. Specialized faith-based sites do provide both site and application statistics.

Online giving

Online giving is proven to both increase overall giving and help smooth cash flow over the summer months. Open SNs, at best, allow you to a post "link" to your online giving but they do not help you set up this link and the link must be managed as it can move down the list as more links are posted.

A better solution is to have a support, integrated online payment vehicle where members can set up either one time or reoccurring payments. As well, churches and ministries should integrate a non-cash donation option allowing members to donate anything from a vehicle to a business ownership.

Advertising

Open SNs are supported by mainstream advertising meaning any type of ad may appear on your group's site. A few sites offer to remove ads for a monthly fee. Free faith-based networking platforms are supported by Christian and family-friendly advertising only. As well, you can remove the ads entirely in subscription packages.

Interests and Gifts

Open SNs allow members to fill out their interests in the profile. Member start with a 'blank screen' so it's up to each member to fill it out. Unique faith-based networks not only allow members to enter interests but also add organization-specific interest and gift "tags" that can be customized to the specific organizations needs.

Weekly member emails tied to member interests.

Ever get a huge newsletter then have to hunt for events and news that matters to you? Open SN don't offer any kind of information and event 'filtering'. Unique faith-based networks provide interest-matching algorithms that send weekly event emails specifically tied to the members' individual interests and preferences.

Summary of Open Social Networks v. Faith-Based Networking Platforms

Key Need	Open Social Networks	Faith-Based Networking Platforms
Privacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Any member can be located and sent a message - Profile and groups can be private 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Entire online community and members can be private - Profile and groups can be private
Moderation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Open or group admin only 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Open, group-level and group admin
Branding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social Network brand is most prominent, allows logo/picture upload 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Options range from uploading your logo/picture to full branding of your community
Spiritual Functionality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - None 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Prayer request (with responses), daily bible verses, bible journaling and more
Reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - None 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Track membership, usage, specific activities over time
Online giving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Can post link 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Can be integrated with organization logo, cash and non-cash donations
Advertising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Free sites have general ads; can pay on some sites to remove ads 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Free sites are Christian-ad supported. Subscription services are ad-free.
Interest tags	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Members can fill in 'interests' in profile 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Organizations can customize interest tags to match needs. Members can also fill in interests on profile.
Weekly event emails	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - None 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provides weekly summary of upcoming events tied directly to members interests

About CircleBuilder

CircleBuilder is a private, branded, rules-based networking and connectivity engine built solely for churches and ministries that advances community, communication, participation, membership, serving and stewardship. Through our simple to use web-based interface we create numerous touch points - personalized emails, shared calendars, blogs, text messages, online donations, ecommerce store fronts, audio / video podcasting and electronic newsletters - by which members can communicate with the organization and with each other securely. Our service operates as a stand-alone service or as a "mash up" into an existing website. Churches and ministries can start for FREE at www.circlebuilder.com.