

Web 2.0 for Churches and Ministries:

Why FaceBook® and other “open” social networks might not be the right choice for churches and ministries

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Online social networks have exploded in popularity with one-fifth of adults worldwide visiting 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—a force that not so coincidentally propels many successful churches and ministries. Churches and ministries have numerous unique organizational and congregational needs that open social networks cannot meet. 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, including faith social sites.** As of June 2008, social network users represented 67% of all Internet users. GodTube™ was the #1 fastest growing website in 2007.
2. **Advertising spending is increasing and faith-based sites are becoming increasingly attractive to advertisers.** Experts predict that between 2007 and 2011, U.S. ad spending on social networks will grow 180% from \$900 million to \$2.5 billion. No wonder traditional media companies like News Corp have bought sites like BeliefNet and FaceBook.
3. **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.

Figure 1: Top 5 Social Media 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.

Prof. Lynn Schofield Clark of the University of Colorado at Boulder, the survey's co-author, went on to explain, **"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."**

With the pace of users of these social media sites accelerating it is essential that churches and ministries understand both the potential and the limitations of popular open social networks (SNs), like FaceBook® or MySpace®.

Open vs. Closed Networks

Think of an open social network as similar to 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 serve beneficial purposes.

Like public squares, open SNs foster a *broad community* and have some functionality to help build specific interest-based groups. Just like your organization's own website, places like MySpace® and Facebook® are great 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 visit there 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 consider the following criteria when implementing your own networking solutions.

Privacy

Do you want your organization to be completely open to the online world? Think about it more like the Internet (a 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 or no user privacy. It is very easy for outsiders to find any other user and relatively simple to connect to someone 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 anyone can view their information.

For churches and ministries, this type of openness can raise serious liability issues. For instance, if an organization creates a private group on an open SN can it reasonably protect a member's privacy? If that member's privacy is violated is the organization at fault?

Moderated content

Do you want to control who can create 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.

Time and again, experience has shown that organizations like to have the option to moderate content at many different levels. For instance, moderation may not be necessary for the men's ministry but it might be required for content posted to the organization's youth groups. Or it might be fine for "everyone" to create events but only "authorized" individuals can write a blog.

Groups within Groups

So let's say you set up the First Community Church networking group on an open SN. A typical church or ministry has numerous smaller groups within it. Some may even have several hundred small groups. Open SN's allow you to create new groups but you cannot *aggregate* them under a single community. So there's no "there" there where all of your organization's small groups can be seen.

Faith-based networks allow the creation of multiple groups under the overall church or ministry community. More sophisticatedly platforms allow

“nested” groups so that groups can be connected within the community.

And what if you want one of your groups—say a Recovery Ministry—to be private so that only members of that group have access?

Your brand

Members can find a wide number and variety of spiritual opportunities during their online wandering. For your organization to stand out you need the capability to build **your message, your images and your content**, not propagate and promote the brand of online social networks. While open SNs offer limited branding for your organization they leave the user with no doubt that they are still on *their* site.

In order to have a seamless branding experience—particularly as members move from your website to your member community—your own website and organization branding elements need to be clean, clear and 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. These desirable tools are unlikely to be found on general-purpose SN sites. Rather, specialized faith-based networking platforms are required to 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.

Most open SN 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. Some specialized faith-based sites, however, do provide both site and application statistics.

Online giving

The Internet has radically changed the way we shop, conduct our finances, get our news, and participate in politics. And it’s changing the way we give. In today’s anytime, anywhere culture, more and more church members are making donations and giving tithes with the click of a mouse or by setting up an

automatic draft from their online bank accounts. Writes the Christian Science Monitor in Jun 2008:

“Not only is online giving favored by tech-savvy younger generations, but 51 percent of wealthy donors in a recent study said they prefer to give via the Internet. *The Wired Wealthy* study also revealed that 46 percent intend to make a greater percentage of their donations online in the next five years.

New websites and technologies that offer donors more immediate and personal forms of giving, including direct engagement with favorite causes and grass-roots projects, are mushrooming. And first gifts given online are 1½ times larger than first gifts via mail; repeat gifts are also larger.”

"The trend in e-giving is a cultural move as fewer people of the younger generations carry cash," said Ben Stroup, coordinator of LifeWay Christian Stores’ offering envelope services. "We live in a plastic, online banking world where growing numbers of people prefer to exchange funds electronically rather than carry a checkbook or cash."

Statistics show continued growth in the use of the Internet for financial transactions. As noted above, the Pew Internet and the American Life Project reported that 53 percent of American adults participate in online banking and more than 35 percent pay their bills online.

Online giving is proven to both increase overall donations and help smooth cash flow over the year. Open SNs, at best, allow you to post a “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 supported and integrated online payment vehicle where members can set up either one time or recurring payments. As well, churches and ministries should consider integrating an online non-cash donation option allowing members to donate anything from a vehicle to a business ownership.

Advertising

Open SNs are supported by mainstream advertising. This means that *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. Members 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 organization's 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 sites 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 a member's self-defined individual interests and preferences.

Figure 2: Summary of Open Social Networks vs. 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.

About the Author

Howard Brown is CEO and Co-Founder at CircleBuilder Software, LLC. He has 20 years of widespread experience in management, business development and sales in the online networking domain. He has held executive positions in technology startup companies including Avid Technology, Liquid Audio and CMGI's NaviSite. Howard is an accomplished board member / lay leader in numerous local and national non-profit organizations.