

## Take It Online!

For many Catholic parishes, the internet represents a new field for evangelization. Some parishes consider themselves well established in the digital world because they have a website. Other parishes are just realizing that people often go online before they approach the doors of a church. Newcomers and visitors will often make a judgment about a church even before they arrive in town. This is why attentive parishes know that a website must be functional, attractive and fresh to be considered welcoming or worth revisiting. In one sense, parish evangelization can start with a welcoming presence online. Consider these suggestions to renew your parish evangelization efforts online:

**1. Delete Jargon and Speak Simply** – We have to admit that church culture has a lingo just like every other culture. This language can be indecipherable to those who are out church-shopping. Ask someone who doesn't know your parish or a non-Catholic to look over your website and find the jargon words. For example, "outreach" and "welcome" are more understandable words than "evangelization" and "discipleship". Use language that is plain, personal, simple and warm. Make sure the links and menus are understandable to any visitor and provide descriptive taglines wherever it can be helpful.



**2. Put First Things First** - Answer the most likely questions first. Those questions are: who, what, when, where, how? If someone searches for you online, it is likely that they want quick information about you, including basic contact information, the distinctive purpose or mission of the parish, the worship schedule, events, practical ways to benefit and participate immediately, a facility map and directions. Establish a medial library online and fill it with podcasts of homilies, presentations, significant parish events and links to free religious content that is available from various sources online (see below).

Why not put your web address at the beginning of your phone message and encourage people to use the website for answers to basic questions? This can save people the frustration of leaving messages for basic information and save staff time wasted in responding to such calls. This is especially important at the holidays and for parishes with multiple worship sites that need to communicate locations and times for events frequently and accurately.

**3. Drop the Gimmicks and the Glitz** – A site that starts playing music or a video as soon as someone lands at the site is twice as likely to get the thumbs down. As one frustrated visitor muttered to himself, "Dude, I'm at work!" A brief flash presentation in the corner of the screen is more than enough to make a site visually attractive. Dump the mysterious roll-overs, pop-ups, animated clip-art and emoticons. These can add load time and be the first target for security filters on many web browsers and internet service providers. Even if a visitor accepts the gimmicks, they usually create a visually disorganized and distracting appearance.

**4. Replace Glitz with Good Organization** - Many people complain about difficulty finding basic information at an unorganized site. Regularly review the information that is available and test how easy it is to find it. Larger sites should have quick links, menus or built-in search engines built in to every page so that someone can easily navigate the site.

**5. Put Your Best Foot Forward** - Parish websites should say what matters most and what is most distinctive about its community (see for example the top of our own diocesan website home page). And do not hesitate to highlight plans and events each month that showcase your community at its best. With each month or liturgical season the homepage can be brightened up with small changes.

**6. Say It with Pictures** - Pictures drive traffic. People form emotional responses to everything first, including websites. Pictures and brief stories forge emotional bonds. Occasionally remind parishioners to visit the parish website to look for pictures of themselves or their friends at a church event. Pictures are the best way to communicate warmth and welcome. Always ask permission of parishioners (and send an advance copy of a photo) if you wish to display their picture or comments on the website. Take the time to lighten the image and crop it appropriately and attractively for the subjects. Resist using stock photos which often create emotional distance.

Let parishioners know that you are collecting pictures and video clips from them for every parish event. Enlist talented photographers (often young adults and teens) in the parish for this ministry. With digital cameras so cheap and easy to operate, a parish can buy a few and distribute them to different people at every significant event and ask them to be photographers. Post these pictures as a flash (slideshow) presentation with a brief explanation or add them to the parish facebook album. It will create a buzz.

**7. Don't Wait for Them to Come to You** - There are a variety of attractive online services today (E-mail, Twitter, and Instant Messaging). A parish can link to Twitter or Facebook and regularly contact parishioners through these services at any time. These services can drive traffic to your site and be used to promote parish events. People who visit attractive sites often linger to see if there is anything else of interest to them. While visiting your site you can invite them to events to feed them spiritually.

**8. Don't frustrate yourself if you lack the resources for a website.** Many non-profit organizations cannot afford to operate a website and use social networking (e.g. Facebook) as a free alternative. Other free services are mentioned in the suggestions below. If you have questions about these possibilities, contact the Office for Evangelization and Parish Life or call 716-847-8393.

### **What else can you do?**

**Get Help** - Recognize your limitations and call on the gifts of the church. There are professionals, retirees, college students and teens who are immersed in the digital world. These people can be a great asset in seeing and addressing the shortcomings of your online presence. Visit a successful non-denominational or evangelical church for examples of inviting wording and attractive designs. You can visit [www.OutreachMagazine.com](http://www.OutreachMagazine.com) for examples of some of the most web-savvy churches. For more guidance visit The Good News Web Designers Association or Building a Better Church Website.

**Start Saving Money** - Online promotion and communication services are being used by many churches who are going green and saving lots of money in the process for promoting parish events and emailing the parish bulletin. The internet can transmit a great wealth of information immediately and inexpensively. Some churches create a short welcome video and email it to visitors. Start now by collecting video clips from the best parish events, blend in a few words of welcome from friendly parishioners and mix it with one of the many movie making programs that are now standard on all computers. This makes a fabulous youth ministry or Confirmation service project. If it is really good, why not post it on YouTube?

**Get Published** – Some parishes post a video clip of their best and brightest moments at the parish website. Why not broadcast it online? Broadcasting services like GodTube.org and MyCatholicVoice.com operate like YouTube and offer amazing services for free to those with Good News to share. Because many young people are experts with publishing content online, authorize a young web-publisher and get started today.

**Get FREE Media and Materials** - Popular sites are amusing and include music, humor, story sharing and spiritual insights. Visit [mycatholicvoice.com](http://mycatholicvoice.com), [crazychurch.com](http://crazychurch.com), [bluefishtv.com](http://bluefishtv.com), [open.lifechurchtv/resources](http://open.lifechurchtv/resources), or [sermonspice.com/free](http://sermonspice.com/free) for videos, talks, movie clips, graphics, and other media. These resources can bring a dull web page to life. However, users must apply Catholic theology and teaching in discerning their use of these websites. Search Craigslist where you can find inexpensive or free staging materials and props for your next vacation bible school. Use the parish website to link parishioners to the most popular websites on Catholicism, prayer, and spirituality, etc.

**Get Serious.** Address serious issues online. Many industrious people are frustrated and discouraged by the complexity of global tensions and social ills. Visit [Catholic Charities USA](http://CatholicCharitiesUSA.org) a lead agent in explaining and unraveling these complexities. Unemployment and underemployment is a particularly insidious issue that still haunts many Americans. Why not partner with the unemployed to advocate for jobs and just wages? Why not provide online resources for dealing with financial decisions, job search techniques and career counseling? Why not provide space on the parish website for people to post resumes and where experts can offer tips and leads for job seekers? This is a great way to introduce your church to a wide variety of very capable people who will not forget the kindness.

**Put a Mission Trip Online** – Mission trips are one of the most dynamic experiences that parishes can offer their people. Facebook and other social networking services provide an ideal platform for mission groups to share the trip with supporters at home at no cost. The team that goes away takes responsibility to post stories, pictures, and requests for prayer in an online journal. The home team responds with prayers, questions, and words of encouragement for the traveling team while they are away. Part of the ministry of the home team can include preparation of a welcome home celebration, complete with slides. This allows any other interested parishioners to be part of the trip.

by Dennis Mahaney, Office for Evangelization and Parish Life

For more suggestions on evangelization online contact Dennis Mahaney or call 716-847-8393.