

# Spinning the Web

## An Effective Online Ministry in 6 Steps

By Dillon Burroughs

It's official: Most Americans search the Web first.

As early as 2002, the Pew Internet & American Life Project discovered that the majority of Americans search online for information before using any other source. What does that mean for your church? Several things.

Instead of budgeting the majority of advertising funds for yellow-page ads, newspaper, TV or radio, churches looking ahead will be required to focus more on websites, online advertising, and even emerging communications such as podcasting (If you don't know what that is, visit [www.podcasting.com](http://www.podcasting.com) and find out.)

While there are endless tools and tips for impacting your church and community through Web ministry, experience and research are revealing six surprising trends. This month, we'll discuss the first two and follow up with the other four in the November and December issues of *Church Business*.

### Step 1: Start with a Focused Purpose

*If you build it, they will come.*

That approach might have worked in *Field of Dreams*, but it doesn't accurately communicate what's required to develop a high-impact Web ministry. The average attendee now *expects* you to have a website. Whether they use it or not depends on the effort you invest in understanding and communicating the site's purpose.

Look at your current church website and ask yourself, *Would I be attracted to attend based solely on this site?* For 98 percent of you, the answer will be no.

The most common story of how a church website comes to be goes like this:

"We need a website," says a church leader.

"I think I can put that together for free," replies a volunteer.

End of story.

The Church has the most amazing message in the world to deliver. To be effective, its Web ministries must reflect focused thinking regarding this purpose. There are some critical factors to consider when doing so.

**Domain name.** First, be aware that [www.bentonfirst.com](http://www.bentonfirst.com) is a better domain name than [bentonfarkansasirfbaptistchurch.ws](http://bentonfarkansasirfbaptistchurch.ws). For most companies today, you can simply enter [www.target.com](http://www.target.com) and find the right site. Churches would do well to follow suit.

Here's the test: How easily could someone find your website without using a search engine? Try this using the names of a few churches you know and see what happens.

**Look and feel.** What people see on your homepage determines what they'll think of your church. This is especially true if you're a church-planting leader or lead a congregation that leases its facility.

Do they see a picture of a building or of changed lives? Will they find a kind welcome or a list of who's responsible for locking the church for the next three Sundays?

Do everything possible to make your initial entry point a hub of creativity and excellence. Professional design for your initial setup can make or break your Web ministry. Visit [www.embassymetro.org](http://www.embassymetro.org) and [www.kineticchurch.com](http://www.kineticchurch.com) for two great examples of church plants that are taking their look and feel seriously.

**Ease of use.** Look at your site through the eyes of a first-time visitor. How long does it take to find the phone number, staff directory and service times? What about directions? If any of these tasks take more than five seconds, change your site.

Also resist adding high-demand graphics, blaring music or video clips to your homepage. Half of Americans still use dial-up connections.

**Connecting points.** Visitors will ask a handful of questions most often: *Where can I go to request more information? How do I get involved in service? How can I give? What are this church's beliefs? Where can I find a small group in my neighborhood? How can I send a prayer request?*

The more connecting points you create, the more effective your church will be in bridging the gap from casual guest to committed member.

### Step 2: Find the Right People

Face it: You need help building this Web ministry. You're already expected to work 132 hours a week for little pay, little respect, and no rest while people continue to ask, *What do you do the rest of the*



*week?* Unless God is calling you personally to do this, find someone in your church (or even outside it) who can keep update it.

Most people mistakenly think developing a Web ministry requires a person to possess a few key qualities:

- He/she must enjoy writing code until 3 a.m.
- He/she must wear cool, thick-rimmed glasses.
- He/she must be painfully introverted.
- He/she must drink lots of coffee or other highly caffeinated drinks.
- He/she must be a professional Web designer or computer programmer.

While some of these stereotypes were once important (*Who doesn't enjoy a good mocha?*), today's Web ministries require much less technical ability than in the past. A more accurate, biblical checklist looks like this:

- He/she is faithful.
- He/she has technical ability. (The more the better, but a little is enough.)
- He/she loves God.
- He/she loves people.

Many of today's best church websites are maintained by members who know nothing about html, javascript or .asp. They do, however, know how to use a computer, they care about their churches' Web ministries, and they're faithful in serving God and others with their time and talents.

For those of you overwhelmed by the perceived time or expense of developing a Web ministry, know that several companies are available to do it for you at reasonable monthly rates.

Combined with some basic custom design from a Christian company or church member, you can have an effective Web ministry.

Dillon Burroughs is a Web ministry consultant for Dream 3 and a frequent writer and communicator on ministry technology issues. Reach him by e-mail at [dburroughs@dream3.org](mailto:dburroughs@dream3.org).

