

End Notes:

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There are few controls in public platforms, and for all of the positive benefits social media brings to today's churches, there are very real risks. Here are some things to consider in developing a strategy:

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Find out what people are already saying. Chances are the blogosphere or public forums have information on your church that is not generated by your team. Search for your church online using the name of your church in quotes + the city—or better yet, set up a Google alert to send you an e-mail when someone posts content about your church. While you can't control the content others post, you can get a sense of what the community thinks of your church and engage if there are any issues.

Manage your settings. Facebook has recently overhauled their privacy settings to allow users greater control over who has access to content. For churches, this is particularly sensitive in the area of pictures. Posting photos that are viewable by "everyone" means that they can be viewed by anyone who stumbles across them, "friends only" limits to friends you've approved and "friends of friends" extends the reach. Leadership teams need to decide what the settings should be up front and clearly communicate the policy to contributors. While tight controls are safer, they also narrow the openness that makes social media effective.

Respond to negative content. With social media, it isn't a matter of "if" you get negative content, but when. Make sure you have enough staff to cover monitoring of your social media channels and that they understand how to respond. For example, you may set a policy to delete obscene comments, but to respond to criticism of the organization or leadership with grace and leave the comments posted. There is no bulletproof vest for social media, so embrace each hit as a ministry opportunity. People will learn your character as they watch your church navigate difficult interactions.

Be proactive rather than reactive. One negative review of a product on Amazon gets buried if there is an avalanche of positive comments by other reviewers. One of the best social media strategies you can possibly have is to be the type of organization people write good things about. The second is to encourage the people who love you to do so.