

Three Ways to Use Social Media Missionally

Church leaders and pastors using social media and digital mediums is nothing new in recent years. Many Churches have live-streamed services and events, video recorded sermons, used Zoom for team meetings, or platforms such as Facebook and Instagram for connecting with their congregations and wider community.

Much of the Church's online use has typically been directed towards internal communication, but it has also been useful for people who are "seeking" or "on the edge" of Church life. These people can podcast our sermons, watch a livestream of our Church service, and connect with Church members in our Facebook Group, making the pathway easier as they move towards connecting physically when they are ready. These are good things, and good uses of digital mediums.

The ways Churches have engaged most effectively in their neighbourhoods missionally has usually been via person to person contact - events, programs, food and natural relationships. In a time of physical distancing and self-isolation, are there ways we can use social media missionally? While this list is not exhaustive, I want to suggest three ways to use social media, specifically Facebook, to connect with people in your neighbourhood.

1. Connect Where People are Already Connecting

You don't need to create a page or a group for people to connect online. The reality is that your neighbourhoods are already doing that. Perhaps you still need to create a place for your Church to connect online, but to think that this is where your community will naturally connect with you is about as likely as them randomly walking through the Church doors on a Sunday morning. While some might, most won't.

Most suburbs and towns already have a community Facebook Group. These are Groups where people ask questions, talk about community issues, advertise local businesses, and rant about the bins not being collected or the dog that keeps pooping on their front lawn. In addition, many suburbs or collection of suburbs have Facebook Pages dedicated to specific aspects of community life - things like "Buy Sway and Sell" groups, or a specific sporting club or community group page.

Mission 101 says, connect with people where they naturally connect. Don't expect the neighbourhood to do the "cross cultural" work and come to you - **you are the sent one**. So, go to the places your neighbours and your community already congregate - and this includes where they gather online.

2. Listen to the Stories of Your Neighbourhood

What should you do once you get online where your community gathers? My suggestion is not to post anything for a while, apart from maybe, "Hey, my name's Jono and I'm new here. Just wanted to say hi." Instead, read what other people are saying. Read their posts, read the comments, and for a couple of weeks and resist the urge to post yourself.

Missiologist Michael Frost encourages Christians to "listen deeply to the yearnings, desires, hopes and disappointments of their community."¹ When you start reading, you will begin to hear the things people take exception to, the injustices, the trials, and the challenges of neighbourhood life. You will see the joys,

¹ Blog post "Listening deeply to your city", Feb 16 2017, found at mikefrost.net



the funny side of life, and the characters who live in your neighbourhood. You will get to listen to the local businesses and to their customers as they rate and review them. You may even hear the fears, the racism, and the prejudices of your community. It is commonly said that people seem to speak without a filter when they hide behind a screen and a keyboard. By listening to your community online, you often get to see the good and the bad, completely unfiltered.

As you listen, begin to ask yourself (and even write down), Where is God in this? Where is God at work? Where can you see the Kingdom breaking in? Where is injustice, things which do not reflect the goodness of God's Kingdom displayed? What might be done to bring light, love, forgiveness, and grace in even deeper and meaningful ways?

3. Become a Known Character (Online)

When you finally begin to interact, you now need to consider what you choose to say and how often you choose to say it. This will have further impact later.

In the *New Parish*, co-authors Paul Sparks, Tim Sorens, & Dwight Friesen, speak about becoming a "known character" in the neighbourhood. This means becoming someone in your community who is recognizable, someone who plays a role in the neighbourhood, and someone whose presence would be missed if you were to leave.

One of the most common conversations I have in my neighbourhood when meeting someone in person for the first time goes a little like this:

Me: "Hi, my name's Jono. I don't think I have met you before?"

Person: "Hi Jono. No, we haven't met, but I've seen you on Facebook before."

The more you choose to interact and post online, the greater your online presence and more you will become known by others in your online community. They will recognize your profile picture and depending on what you have said previously, they will very quickly choose to scroll on past, or stop and read what you have to say.

The reality about having an online presence is that it translates into the real world. As people "get to know you" online, they see what you post, they see how you interact with others, and they will make a judgement of what you're like as a "real person". The beauty, and terror, of Facebook is that your profile picture makes you recognizable elsewhere. The reputation you have built online will determine the level of relationship others are willing to develop with you offline.

You can become a known character in your neighbourhood by virtue of your online presence. But the question is, what will you become known for?

As followers of Jesus, we should become known characters in our communities - known for justice, for mercy, and for humility. We should be known as the ones who display what we call the "fruit of the Spirit - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

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