Best Practices in Internet Ministry
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Introduction

For the past two years, I have been conducting research on Internet ministry. This has included one-on-one interviews with leaders in the field, case studies, the development of my own church's web site, and the implementation of a survey taken by over 300 different ministry organizations. This culminated last month in the presentation of the findings of my research as a keynote at the Internet Ministry Conference in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The focus of the presentation was on the "Best Practices" of Internet Ministry.

How does one determine best practices? My approach was to survey ministry organizations on how they implemented and maintained their Internet ministry, as well as to ask questions that let me determine how successful they view their ministry. By then selecting out the organizations that viewed their ministries as extremely successful, I could look for commonalities in how they answered the other questions. But what types of questions should be asked?

Internet Ministry Framework

As a researcher and professor in the information systems field, I have come to understand that the most difficult part of creating or implementing any system is not the technology; it is the people and processes involved that require the most effort. The Internet Ministry Framework, then, embodies all three different aspects of implementing an Internet ministry: technology, people, and process. This is an important definition because many, many organizations looking to start an online ministry immediately focus on the technology and completely ignore the more difficult decisions surrounding the people involved and the processes undertaken to implement and maintain the ministry. None of the three components are any important than the other: all three play an equal role in supporting a successful Internet ministry.

Demographics

Three hundred forty-four organizations took this survey, which was available online from November 2007 to April 2008. The majority of the organizations that took the survey could be classified as small ministries that had little resources available to devote to the Internet. A short breakdown of the demographics is as follows:

- 68% were churches, the other 32% were broken down between organizations focused on discipleship, evangelism, and education.
- 77% had 25 or fewer people on staff.
- 53% spent less than $1000 per year on their web ministry.
- 69% spent less than ten hours per week working on their web site.

Success

As explained above, several questions on the survey were directed towards understanding if the organization considered their Internet ministry successful. Depending upon how they answered these questions, a "success score" was developed and allowed me to then compare the answers of other questions to the success. But overall, how successful do these organizations feel their Internet ministry is? The answers were not real encouraging.

- Only 36% of the respondents felt their Internet ministry was successful.
- For churches only, the answer dropped to 33% success.
- Organization size did not seem to impact the success score, as organizations with only one staff member had higher average success (47%) than larger organizations, though not as high as those with over 100 on staff (49% success):
  - 47% of organizations with a staff size of 1 reported success.
  - 34% of organizations with a staff size of 2 to 5 reported success.
  - 29% of organizations with a staff size of 6 to 25 reported success.
  - 49% of organizations with a staff size of >25 reported success.
- Money did play a role. As budget sizes increased, so did success. However, a large majority of organizations taking the survey had budgets under $1000.
  - 25% of organizations with an annual budget <$500 reported success.
  - 30% of organizations with an annual budget $500 to $1000 reported success.
  - 36% of organizations with an annual budget $1000 to $10,000 reported success.
  - 64% of organizations with an annual budget >$10,000 reported success.
- The amount of time spent on the site did play a role as well, with higher success scores as the amount of time spent on the site increased. Again, though, 69% of the organizations reported spending <10 hours per week.
  - 24% of organizations who spent <10 hours per week reported success.
  - 57% of organizations who spent 10 to 20 hours per week reported success.
  - 71% of organizations who spent 20 to 40 hours per week reported success.
  - 73% of organizations who spent >40 hours per week reported success.

We can see from the above results that having more money to spend on Internet ministry and devoting more time to it brings about increased success. This should come as no surprise. However, many smaller organizations were still able to implement successful web ministries while having smaller budgets and limited time. What did these organizations have in common? What can we learn from these organizations?

Findings

As stated earlier, the survey asked questions in the three components of the Internet Ministry Framework: technology, people, and process. The findings will be categorized under those three categories as well.

Technology
The technology component of Internet ministry includes not just what server platform and web software used, but also the decisions surrounding what features should go on the web site (podcasts, blogs, videos, etc.), how much to integrate the ministry with existing sites (such as social networks, blogs, and photo sharing), data collection, and search engine optimization. The survey asked several questions in this area.

- Was the Internet technology used purchased from an outside organization or was it built internally? Those that indicated that they purchased their software reported success 36% of the time, those that indicated that they built it reported success 41% of the time.
- What features were included in the Internet ministry? Those that included more interactive features (such as blogs and videos) reported much greater success than those that did not:
    - Organizations that included announcements had a success rate 2% higher than those who did not.
    - Organizations that included a calendar had a success rate 4% higher than those who did not.
    - Organizations that included blogs had a success rate 19% higher than those who did not.
    - Organizations that included podcasts had a success rate 15% higher than those who did not.
    - Organizations that included videos had a success rate 22% higher than those who did not.
- What other web sites did you integrate with? Organizations that included integration with social media sites reported much greater success than those that did not:
    - Organizations that integrated with blog sites reported slightly higher success rates than those who did not (Blogger: 1% higher, Wordpress: 5% higher).
    - Organizations that integrated with photo sharing sites reported much higher success rates than those who did not (Photobucket: 15% higher, Flickr: 45% higher).
    - Organizations that integrated with video sharing sites reported much higher success rates than those who did not (YouTube: 25% higher, GodTube: 23% higher).
    - Organizations that integrated with social networking sites reported much higher success rates than those who did not (Facebook: 24% higher, MySpace: 22% higher).
- Organizations that collected data about their sites (via tools such as Google Analytics) were much more successful than those who did not. *This finding is one of the highest differences between those who reported success and those who did not.*

- - Organizations collecting data about their site reported success 51% of the time.
    - Organizations not collecting data about their site reported success 16% of the time.
  - Organizations who had done some form of search engine optimization were more successful than those who did not.
    - Organizations who did SEO reported success 51% of the time.
    - Organizations who did not do SEO reported success 25% of the time.

People

The people component of the framework incorporates all the individuals who are a part of your ministry and how they are going to be used as part of the Internet presence you are developing. Who is ultimately responsible for the web site - and is it in their job description? Who is going to be doing the web site updating? Who sets the direction for the web site? Who is going to build the site - do you have the ability to do this in-house or should an outside consultant be brought in? And finally - what about using volunteers for your web ministry?

- Is there one person who is responsible for the web site? 49% of organizations who had one person responsible for the site reported success, compared to 22% of those who did not have one responsible person.
- Is there a group of people who meets regularly to set direction for the web site? 52% of organizations who had such a team reported success, compared to 31% of those who did not have a team.
- Who gave input into the features that went into the web site?
  - Organizations who had volunteers give input into the features on the web site reported success 5% *less often* than those who did not.
  - Organizations who had staff give input into the features on the web site reported success 5% *less often* than those who did not.
  - Organizations who had leadership give input into the features on the web site reported success 6% more often than those who did not.
  - Organizations who had an outside consultant give input into the features on the web site reported success 10% more often than those who did not.
- Who built the web site? Did you use volunteers, internal staff, outside consultants, or did you license the software from a vendor?
  - Organizations who had volunteers build the web site reported success 16% *less often* than those who did not.
  - Organizations who licensed their web site from a vendor/provider reported success 3% more than those who did not.
  - Organizations who used outside consultant to build their web site reported success 6% more than those who did not.
  - Organizations who utilized their internal IT staff to build their web site reported success 9% more than those who did not.

As you can see from the last two questions, the use of volunteers seems to have quite a

negative impact on the success of Internet ministry. However, we also know that many ministry organizations have no choice but to rely on volunteers. An open-ended question on the survey that asked for more feedback on the use of volunteers also trended negative: it seems that relying on volunteers to be an integral part of creating or maintaining a web ministry does not work out well. However, in several of the case studies I have done as a follow-up to this research, I found that many organizations have found success with volunteers to do less mission-critical tasks, such as moderating forums or one-time content creation projects.

Process

The "process" component of the Internet Ministry Framework is really just defining the steps the organization will be taking to implement and maintain the Internet ministry. This includes the planning process: creating goals for the online ministry and researching its needs. It also includes the process for maintaining the site once it is up and running. Here are the results from some of the key questions:

- Did you have any written goals or a mission statement for your Internet ministry? 45% of organizations that answered "yes" reported success, compared to 30% success for those who reported "no".
- Did you develop a profile of your target user? 46% of organizations that answered "yes" reported success, compared to 28% success for those who reported "no".
- Did you collect any data or do any research in preparation for developing your web ministry? 52% of organizations that answered "yes" reported success, compared to 26% success for those who reported "no".
- Did you provide any training on your web ministry? 42% of organizations that answered "yes" reported success, compared to 32% success for those who reported "no".
- Do you have a centralized approval process? 43% of organizations that answered "yes" reported success, compared to 35% success for those who reported "no".
- Do you allow ministries to directly update their own related pages? 44% of organizations that answered "yes" reported success, compared to 30% success for those who reported "no".

Best Practices

After reviewing the above findings, I identified several organizations that were (according to their survey responses) extremely successful at their Internet ministry. I talked with several of them in-depth about how they implemented their ministries and specifically followed up on many of questions listed in the findings above. This gave me a more in-depth understanding of how these findings could be put in context. By combining the survey data with the case studies, I have developed a set of twelve "best practices" that I believe will help ministries be more successful using the Internet. These are summarized below:

Technology

- The specific software you use is not as important as content. While a nice looking site is important, it is the content that provides the value to the users.
- Use interactive content such as blogs, podcasts, and videos as much as possible.

- Do not build new features yourself if you can integrate with existing sites that do the same thing. For example: put your videos on YouTube and integrate them into your site instead of hosting the videos yourself.
- Install data collection code on your site and analyze it!

People
- Recognize your limits – gets outside help if you need it!
- Use volunteers wisely, sparingly.
- Have a team responsible for setting direction.
- Designate one person to be ultimately responsible for the site.

Process
- Planning may be the most important step in the implementation of an Internet ministry.
- Develop written goals and/or a mission statement to guide you. Refer to these as you make decisions about features and technologies for your ministry.
- Have a centralized approval process for site updating.
- Allow for distributed updating of information that belongs to different parts of your ministry.

I realize that not all of these best practices will make sense for every organization. These are meant as general guidelines that will assist ministries in developing the most successful Internet ministry possible. These best practices are skewed towards smaller organizations that have limited resources. As we saw when reviewing the success data, organizations that can spend money and devote a lot of time to their Internet ministries will be more successful.