Digital Strategy for Reaching Young Professionals

A social media strategy for conferences, churches and ministries targeting the 18–30 demographic.
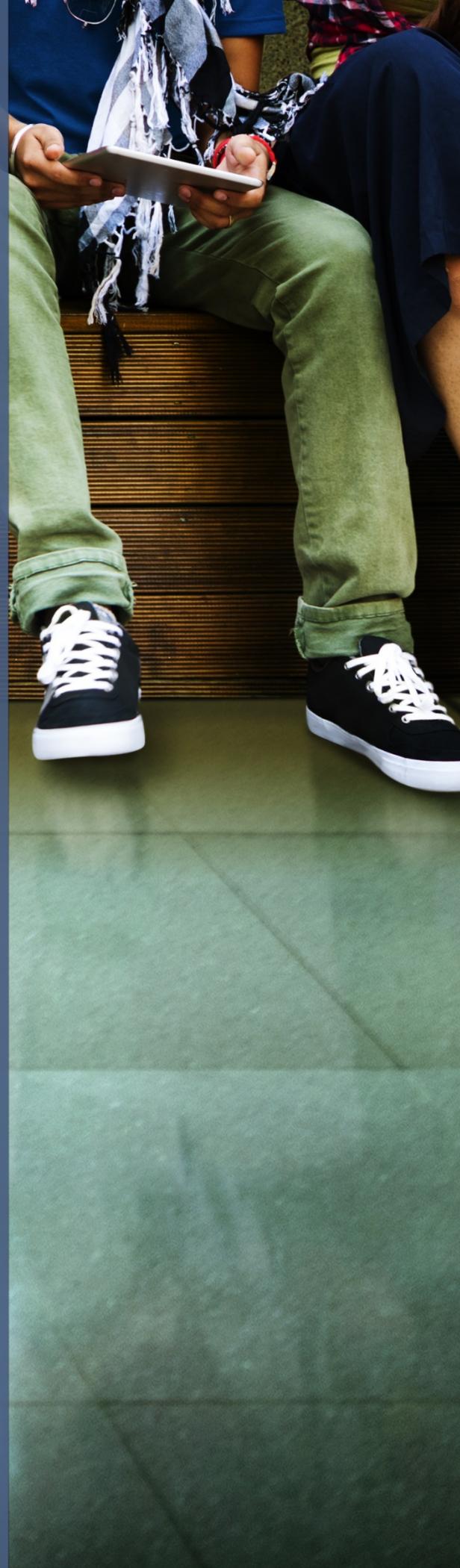
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Seventh-day
Adventist® Church
NORTH AMERICAN DIVISION

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Introduction

Humanity has been asking existential questions forever. We're wired for purpose, constantly seeking to answer the big question, "Why?" Although a record-breaking number of believers are leaving brick-and-mortar churches in America, every month, over 100,000 people go on Google and type into the search bar, "Is God Real?" Countless others search for Bible study tools. Our neighbors are asking Siri, not a pastor, "What happens after death?" or profoundly, "What is faith?" The world is going digital, but should the church? The answer is that the gospel should go to all the world, using whatever tools and gifts we have. The eyes of people are on screens, especially the youth. The church must be equipped to go where people's attention is focused— to be in the world, but not of it. In this handbook, we'll demonstrate how to use social media networks for ministry and evangelize to young adults ages 18–30.

Redefining Success: Content as Mission

We must redefine what we consider "success" in digital missions, as this era of technology is unprecedented. The measurement of successful outreach is now reflected by more than the simple metric of how many individuals showed up for church, but how many watched on a streaming service, followed a page, shared a video, engaged in a conversation, requested prayer etc.

In digital mission work, it's easy to believe two lies regarding numbers. First, it's natural to feel proud when a post goes viral and subscribers start rolling in. Conversely, it's easy to get discouraged and think it's not worth the effort when only a dozen people engage with a video that took you hours to create. In the same way God values the small local church of a dozen members and the mega church with tens or hundreds of thousands of members *equally*, the same is true for online posts. It doesn't matter if your content gets millions of views or dozens; God values it the same. What matters most to God is individual impact. It can be so easy to forget this simple fact, leading us to start interpreting views, engagements and website visits as simple metrics instead of what they really represent: actual, real-life humans who took time to interact with your content. No Bible worker would for a moment feel ashamed when only a dozen people showed up to their Bible study. No pastor would ever consider the many hours in sermon prep a waste if he only got to preach to 50 or 100 people. The same should be true for digital missionary and evangelism efforts. Why? Because each view isn't just a view, it's a person.

> *It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.— William L. Watkinson, English Methodist Minister*

With social media, one can now reach more eyes and ears for a fraction of the time and cost of paper mail and canvassing. Social media can be daunting. Yes, it holds much darkness, but God doesn't call us as a Church to fear the darkness but to bring His light to all the world. Just as our Church has always moved boldly into the changing landscapes of mission work, we must move boldly into this new digital frontier.

Content as Mission: Think Differently

Only **20% of Americans regularly attend church**, and only **two in 10 Millennials consider regular church attendance important**. What if your digital content is the only exposure to the gospel a person receives? We need to create content that is meaningful and relevant to people's daily lives and challenges. The truth is, some people may never come to church, but we can still touch their lives. How would you witness if your local church service, events and Bible studies did not exist? What would you want your community to know about Jesus? We're called to preach the gospel, especially to those outside the Church body. What ways can you accomplish that? Strategize, find solutions, and fulfill them intentionally.

Put Jesus/God on Display

The life, character and gift of Jesus Christ should be on display in your digital content and interactions. Jesus came not to uplift Himself, but to reveal an accurate picture of God's character. It's not about how many followers you have on your digital platforms, but how people can and do discover Jesus through you.

We've been going about digital missions backwards. We're spending most of our time and energy promoting events, resources or products when we should be ministering first to the needs of our community, just like Jesus. True Christianity is about helping those in need and seeking ways to elevate the well-being of others, all while reflecting the character of Christ.

We can use social media and digital tools to achieve our mission of spreading the gospel and helping people by creating content focusing on mental, physical and spiritual needs first. With this foundation established, we can invite our audience to "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8, NIV). When used for digital discipleship and evangelism, this shift in focus is a way we can follow Jesus' example for everyday ministry to real people. We can use social influence for kingdom building while utilizing modern tools and technologies.

Hootsuite reported on an extensive study conducted by *The New York Times* to uncover the top reasons people share content online and found the number-one reason people share

content is that they feel it will improve others' lives. As digital missionaries, it should be an essential part of our mission to share and create content to uplift, help and/or improve your audience's lives (and their audience's). The Church should be the clear leader in using digital influence to create media content that improves others' lives.

Empathy: Think Like a Seeker
Always remember: empathy first. Put yourself in a prospective visitor/viewer/engager's place, and seek to understand their needs and/or experience. Figure out what their barriers to entry or faith are, and try to diminish or address them through the content you create, services you provide and relationships you build. Create an online space for community, love, support and understanding through your content.

When creating, consider who might engage with your media.

Ask yourself:
- What questions might my audience have that I can answer?
- What questions could they have about my church or beliefs?
- What questions might they have about God?
- What would encourage them to attend church or reach out to a Christian to better understand Jesus, salvation or the Bible?
- What issues are they facing?
- What could encourage or help them in hard times?
- What are their barriers to faith or entry in my church?

Our goal as content creators is to reveal who God really is in a world that often views God, or religion generally, as vindictive, cruel and uncaring.

Don't just create content for content's sake. Ask:

How will my audience's attitude and perceptions of God change because of my [article/letter/post/video]?

Digital Distribution

This might be heretical to ask, but are we too focused on church attendance, at least in the short term? The COVID-19 crisis is a wake-up call to the Church. Many churches have been forced to shut their doors or limit attendance to help reduce the spread of the virus. Knowing what the Bible warns about end-time events, this won't be a unique historic moment, but just a precursor to the time of trouble. The Church will need to rely increasingly on digital technologies. The time to develop the necessary skills and shift our understanding of what Church means is now. Remember, Church is not a building; it's a people. When fleeing persecution, the early Church took the gospel to new regions out of necessity. So, too, we must now take the gospel message to the digital mission field and spread our message of hope and wholeness when it's needed most.

Modern technologies have decentralized the gospel message.

People used to travel, sometimes long distances, to hear the gospel message from a preacher or evangelist. Now, we can browse speakers on YouTube from the comfort of our home. Until recently, the barrier to entry was so high in publishing that only top theologians, pastors and authors could get their writing into the public's hands. With the advent of social media, blogs and vlogs, we're all publishers now, and we can each be distribution centers within our areas of digital influence.

We don't have a message problem; we have a distribution problem.
We have the gospel—the greatest story ever told—of Christ's birth, life, self-sacrificing death, resurrection and soon return. As the Seventh-day Adventist Church, we also have the Three Angels' Messages, sent to all God's children in every nation, tribe, tongue and people. We, as a people, have the gift of prophecy, the guidance of Ellen G. White and a health message for better living. Our job is to use digital tools and technologies to share these messages within our sphere of digital influence.

Although we're facing the biggest communication shift in 500 years, church communication hasn't really changed much in thirty years. God is using COVID-19 to push the Church into the digital age. Hopefully, in a few years, we'll look back and recognize this crisis as the catalyst that resulted in a major communication shift for the Church.

"And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28, NASB).

Five hundred years ago, the Gutenberg press was developed, and it revolutionized the world and helped rapidly spread the gospel. It dramatically sped up the process and reduced the cost of printing. It altered society through the unrestricted circulation of information and increased literacy. The printing of the Gutenberg Bible marked the start of the so-called "Gutenberg Revolution" and played a key role in the Protestant Reformation. Just as Protestant reformers leveraged the printing press, we must use digital tools to share our message. Again, society and the way we communicate has been dramatically altered. It has never been easier to communicate, but it's also never been harder to cut through the noise. Therefore, it's essential to be **intentional and strategic** with how we use digital tools to spread our message.

Digital as a distribution tool
I firmly believe the next great awakening will be digital. It will take everyone acting as digital disciples to share the gospel and spread the Three Angels' Messages, with a loud voice, to the ends of the earth. We can start by reaching those within our own spheres of digital influence. We use digital tools daily to communicate and share ideas, yet we haven't leveraged their potential for kingdom building.

Faith is on the decline in Western society, especially among the youth. Put simply, we've become the mission field. Instead of hopping on a plane to reach people where they are, we can now go online and use the platforms people use to share hope and wholeness in an accessible, comfortable way for them.

The mass of men leads lives of quiet desperation.
— Henry David Thoreau

People are busy. We're overworked, overloaded and overwhelmed, trying to keep up with a constantly growing to-do list. Many people are just trying to get by and get through the day. How many of us feel this way? Why would we expect our target audiences to be any different? Perhaps we lack community because we don't have time or energy left for our neighbors. This, of course, is the Devil's design: keep people busy enough that they don't have time for each other or God.

Amid the chaos, the younger generations feel safe behind screens, which provide a degree of distance and anonymity. Across all age groups, we spend almost **three times as much time socializing on social media as socializing in person**. This dramatically increases for individuals under 30. Remember, if you want to reach people, you must go where they are and spend time with them.

Three Main Benefits of Using Social Media

- **Increased Visibility**
  Social media channels like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, YouTube and Twitter have opened new avenues for ministry to increase the extent of its reach. Digitally created content that is readily available allows for immediate engagement with the public. If an article is written for a newspaper, it will be published, read by subscribers and tossed in the garbage bin. Those who don't receive the newspaper and were seeking that information might never know an article was written about their question. With social media, relevant content has a greater chance of recognition because it's strategically placed for those seeking it.

  To place content strategically means to feed key information to search engines like Google and YouTube, enabling your content to appear in relevant search queries. Once you learn how to be intentional with your posts, it allows people seeking your content to actually find it! To learn more about search engine optimization, download the North American Division's Comprehensive Guide to Search Engine Optimization at **SDAdata.org/SEO**.

- **Two-way conversation**
  Social media can create a safe space for questions. It provides a way to have pre-evangelistic conversations on a non-threatening bridge between Christians and non-Christians. People feel comfortable engaging with posts, because their screen separates them from the situation.

  With snail mail, invitations can be sent to hundreds of people for an evangelistic series, but you don't know what anyone thought of the messages they received. With popular social media platforms, people instantly engage with your content and events. Social media content is shareable and can be reposted by viewers, leading to great awareness and reach of your messages.

- **Ability to Scale**
  Digital communication is just communication with the ability to be scaled. Digital ministry is just ministry with the ability to be scaled. A conversation between two people generally stays between them. However, if that same conversation were held on the internet, its range would be limitless. The conversation and content would allow for the engagement of their immediate community (i.e., friend lists, followers etc.), and if it's shared, content spreads organically beyond the original audience and may even go viral, potentially reaching all who are online and interested.

The Seeker's Journey

To reach younger generations, we must take an integrated, holistic approach that considers the complexities of modern life and relationships. To help us better understand how the world of analog and digital experiences interact to move someone through their spiritual journey, we can consider a systems-thinking tool called *journey loops*.
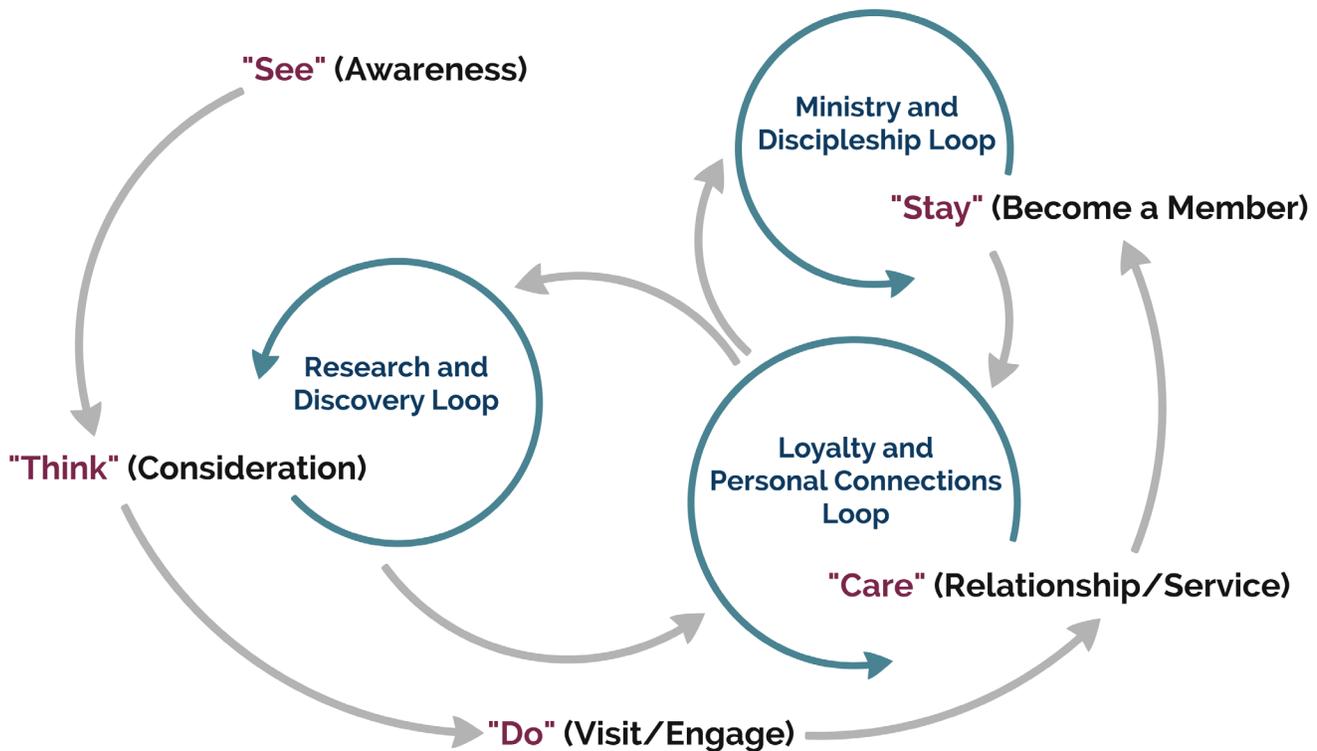
These steps or loops don't necessarily go in order. A seeker can start at any point, skip sections, leap from loop to loop and even backtrack. Each loop and experience feeds back into other steps in the process to reinforce the journey. This causal loop system isn't a perfect representation of the process, but it helps visualize what's happening in a complex system or, in this case, journey.

In today's world, where people turn to the Internet for answers, the first two parts of the journey are primarily spent in the digital space. Based on the person's situation, they may or may not transition to an in-person experience, though that's always one goal of this process. However, it's important to recognize that experiences in the "Care" and "Stay" loops are just as relevant in the digital space. Therefore, we must find ways to extend the Church experience online, because the in-person experience may not always be possible, at least in the short term.

Platform Breakdown

With so many platforms to pick from, it may be difficult to know where to start. In this section, we'll provide a brief summary of the most popular platforms in 2020, their demographics and their suitability for the 18–30 age group. Use this information to help you choose one or two platforms that best align with the interests of the young adults you're trying to reach through your digital strategy.

Facebook

Facebook has been around a while and is very popular and commonly used. While its popularity has diminished in some markets and age groups, Facebook has 2.6 billion monthly active users as of July 2020, making it the largest country in the world and is projected to keep growing. Most people come to Facebook for entertainment, news, education and socializing. Facebook is great for two-way communication between your audience and ministry. It allows for very quick feedback through comments, shares, reactions and direct messages. Users can post videos or livestream from their profile page. Facebook also permits very targeted marketing to very specific demographics. **Ad campaigns can be run for about $7.19 for 1,000 impressions**, making its advertising platform very affordable for small budgets. Another benefit of Facebook is it allows for easy monitoring with provided tools like Facebook Insights. With tools like this, you can gather in-depth insights into how your content is received.

The big disadvantage of Facebook is its diminishing popularity and adoption among younger generations. Nonetheless, organizations still have the potential to reach 113 million teens globally through Facebook advertising. However, Gen Z kids in North America and Europe prefer to engage socially on platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok and YouTube over Facebook. Second, Facebook restricts the organic newsfeed exposure of pages to reserve space for paid promotions. However, it's important to note a little budget can go a long way if your target audience is active on Facebook.

While we don't recommend using Facebook predominantly to reach the under-30 demographic, we do advise most ministries who seek to reach a broad age range to have a Facebook presence. It's also through Facebook ads manager that you can place targeted advertising on Instagram. To be successful, you'll need to commit to posting a mix of content throughout the week (daily or every other day) and actively engage with people's comments and messages in a timely manner.

Facebook Statistics (June 2020)

- Facebook users are **54% female and 46% male.**
- Of all internet users, **83% of women, and 75% of men** use Facebook.
- The average Facebook user has **155 friends**.
- Around **seven in ten** **U.S. adults** (69%) use Facebook.
- **Sixty-two percent** of online seniors **aged 65-plus** are on Facebook, and **72%** are between **ages 50 and 64.**
- **Eighty-eight percent of online users** **aged 18 to 29** are on Facebook; **84%** of internet users aged **30 to 49** are on Facebook.
- **Almost 90%** of Facebook's daily active users come from outside the US/Canada.
- **Ninety-six percent of Facebook users** accessed it via mobile devices**.**

Instagram

Instagram, like Facebook, is mainly used for entertainment, sharing, education and socializing. Instagram, however, is purely visually based. Pictures or short video clips are what is posted. This is one reason it's so popular with younger generations who prefer images, icons and symbols over text**.** On Instagram, it's expected to have beautiful aesthetics coupled with short, attention-grabbing captions. Instagram is great for discovering or being discovered. Hashtags are used heavily on this platform. When a hashtag is added to a caption, it will share that post to a live updating database of other people who have used that hashtag. Anyone who searches that hashtag can see your post organically.

Instagram is wonderful for being discovered and curating a beautiful archive of content, but once someone finds your profile, it's not easy to share content. They can, however, comment and "heart" posts. The other challenge with Instagram is that, because it's so visual, your content and brand are judged almost entirely by their cover. Users on this platform scroll through so many posts without spending even a second on each one, making it even more essential to catch their attention through standout visuals.

A unique feature to take advantage of on Instagram is the "stories" feature. Stories are a way to post quick content that will disappear after 24 hours. Stories are also a fun way to document live events or quick thoughts. Content can be uploaded straight from your phone's gallery and saved to your highlights if the content has value beyond the moment.

For vloggers, videographers, filmmakers and other personality-centered brands, IGTV enables users to post longer videos than Instagram stories and posts permit. Regular users can upload 10-minute-long videos, while verified users can post up to hour-long videos. There's also a series feature where creators can release videos on a scheduled basis.

The most successful Instagram accounts post daily and utilize a mix of content types, such as stories and posts. The app also offers built-in insights that enable business profiles to monitor their traffic, audience and engagement. In addition, **73% of U.S. teens** say Instagram is the best way for brands to reach them, so we highly recommend using Instagram to reach younger audiences.

Instagram Statistics (June 2020)
- **One billion** monthly active users
- Regarding Instagram users, **56.3% are females**, and **43.7% are male**.
- US citizens comprise **120.7 million** Instagram users.
- **Thirty-seven percent of US adults** use Instagram.
- **Eighty-nine percent of users** are outside the US.
- **Six in ten** online adults have Instagram accounts.
- **Thirty percent of global Instagram audiences** were aged between **18 and 24**, and **35%**, between **25 and 34**.
- Regarding teenagers, **72%** use Instagram.
- Instagram users will spend an average of **28 minutes daily** on the platform in 2020.
- **Thirty-five percent of US teenagers** say Instagram is their **preferred social media platform**.
- **Sixty-three percent of Americans** use Instagram daily.
- **Sixty-eight percent of people** visit Instagram to **interact with creators**.
- Sixty percent of people say they **discover new products on Instagram**.
- **IGTV** has **seven million installs** worldwide.

Podcasting

Podcasts are digital audio files, frequently episodic, users can subscribe to, download or stream through the internet via their smartphone, tablet or desktop. People listen to podcasts to gain exposure to creative ideas, learn more about topics that interest them, get inspired by thought leaders, stay up to date on current events and gain deep insight into complex issues in an entertaining way while on the go or running errands around the house. Because podcasts can be heard anywhere and anytime convenient to the listener, they're a great alternative to radio for busy people.

Podcast listeners are more likely to be college educated with advanced degrees and have a love for learning. A listener can search any topic and soon be connected with a choice of relevant series and episodes. Listeners tend to be much more active across all social media platforms and listen to an average of seven different shows a week.

Outside reviews, there isn't much opportunity for direct engagement with listeners. However, since listeners are highly active on social media, engagement can occur on a variety of social media platforms. The platform(s) you choose depend on where your target audience spends their time. To be successful, it's essential to be actively engaged on various social media platforms to create community around your content and encourage podcast ambassadors, helping people find your ministry's podcast. Many podcasts also videorecord episodes and post the video or soundwave video version on YouTube, optimized for search, to increase their listening audience. Video snippets can be repurposed to tease the full podcast on Instagram, IGTV, Facebook and any other platform that supports video. Many podcast listeners listen weekly and even daily, so plan to upload a new episode at least once a week, if not more. Podcasting analytic tools provide basic data analytics like subscribers, listens, time spent listening, percentage listened etc. to help you understand how your audience is growing and engaging with your content. Given that nearly 50% of listeners are under 35, podcasting would be an excellent choice for Bible studies and discussions about spiritual or social topics.

Click here for a step-by-step guide to starting a podcast.

Podcasting Statistics (June 2020)
- There are more than **850,000 active podcasts** and more than **30 million podcast episodes.**
- **Fifty-two percent of US podcast consumers** are male, and **48% are female**.
- **Twenty-two percent of the US population** listens to podcasts weekly.
- **Thirty-two percent of Americans** are monthly podcast listeners.
- **Eighteen percent of podcast listeners** are between **18 and 24; 28%** is **25 to 34** years old.
- **Smartphones are the no. 1 medium** for podcast consumption.
- **Forty-nine percent** of podcast listening is done at home; **22%** listens while driving.
- **Eighty percent** of listeners listen to an entire podcast or most of it.
- **Ninety-four percent** of podcast listeners are active on at least one social media channel.
- Weekly podcast listeners spend an average of **six hours and 37 minutes** listening to podcasts per week.
- Podcast listeners are **45% more likely** to have a college degree and **68% more likely** to have a post-graduate degree.

Snapchat

Snapchat is a video and image messaging app where messages (snaps) disappear after being received, leaving no potentially embarrassing history. Like real life, these brief, 10-second interactions are temporary and not stored. This mimics face-to-face conversations, but with added features like stories, filters and augmented reality through interactive lenses. For many young people, this creates a safe, fun environment to socialize with peers and share their daily

experiences. Recipients can take a screenshot of a snap, but the sender is notified. Depending on the nature of the message and relationship, a screenshot of another's snap may or may not be viewed well. **Eighty-two percent of Snapchat** users are 34 and younger, making this platform a great choice for reaching this demographic, especially since **one-third of users** cannot be found on Instagram.

The brevity of messages and peer-to-peer culture can make it challenging for brands to connect with youth. Snapchat isn't right for every ministry, but it can be a powerful way to engage a younger audience if strategically used in combination with other platforms. There is a lot of opportunity for personal ministries and youth leaders to use the application for building relationships with and ministering daily to local youth. Geofilters are a unique feature that can be used with live events to enable youth to share images and video clips about their in-person experience to their peers with a branded filter for your ministry. The cost of a geofilter depends on the length of time and distance it encompasses.

It's important to post often, since stories disappear after 24 hours. Plan to share stories four to seven times weekly, and be sure to engage directly with your connections daily, if possible. Insights are limited, but you receive an analytics report for geofilters.

Snapchat Statistics (June 2020)
- Users spend **30 minutes on average per day** using Snapchat.
- Daily active users: **218 million**.
- Every day, **three billion snaps** are created.
- Snapchat has **105.5 million users** in the US and Canada.
- **Seventy-eight percent of internet** users aged **18−24** use Snapchat.
- **Ninety percent of Snapchat** users are **13−24**.
- Roughly **61% of Snapchat** users are female, and **38% are male**.
- **Sixty-nine percent of US teens** say they use Snapchat.
- **Forty-one percent of US teenagers** say Snapchat is their **preferred social media platform.**
- Twenty percent of **US college students** use Snapchat.
- **Seventy-one percent of Snapchat users** **aged 18−24** use the platform multiple times daily.
- Active Snapchatters **open the app 30 times daily**.
- More than **60% of active Snapchatters** create new content daily.
- The Snapchat app is in **second place worldwide** based on overall mobile usage.

TikTok
Originally called musical.ly, TikTok is a social media platform popular among teens for sharing videos of users lip-synching to popular songs, comedy sketches, singing, dancing, participating in viral challenges or just talking. Users can browse and interact with other users' content, and videos are grouped by hashtags, often connected to challenges or memes. Its advanced algorithm utilizes artificial intelligence to make highly personalized recommendations to viewers, making videos highly discoverable.

This viral video app allows creators to upload or create videos in-app with stop and start recording, timers and livestreaming. Videos are stored on the user's profile. Like a bite-sized version of YouTube, videos range from five to 60 seconds, and creators can use filters, time effects, split screens, green screens, transitions, stickers, GIFs, emojis and a music library that can be added and remixed. TikTok includes a unique collaborate feature that allows users to sample another person's video to create duets, remixes and more.

Like other social media platforms, users can follow accounts, comment, share and give hearts. Users can curate a "favorites" section with videos, hashtags, sounds and effects. Profiles show how many followers a creator has, how many people they follow and total hearts received. One unique form of engagement for this platform is the ability to give virtual gifts that can be converted to emoji or diamonds, which can be exchanged for cash. To discover new videos and creators, users can search hashtags, keywords, users and more. Many users also share content to other social media platforms, and many themed videos like cringe and react end up as YouTube compilations.

TikTok offers much untapped potential for creative ministry-focused videos and community challenges concerning Christian themes or service. Rich video and engagement analytics are built into the platform for easy access, helping users understand their audience, how people interact with their content and what types of content resonate most with viewers. Video is king, and with the amount of time youths spend on this platform, it's important to create a regular stream of quality content for them to enjoy. If you choose to use this tool for reaching youths, be sure to empower youth to create content for your account, and stay on top of the latest trends to increase your chances of getting found. The content you create can be repurposed for other platforms to increase awareness.

TikTok Statistics (June 2020)
- **Eight hundred million monthly** active users.
- **One billion video views** **daily.**
- **Forty-one percent of TikTok users** are between **16 and 24**.
- Fifty-six percent of TikTok **users are male**, and **44% are female**.
- Roughly **50%** of **TikTok's global audience** is **under 34**, with **26% between 18 and 24**.
- TikTok users spend **an average of 52 minutes daily** on the app.

- The USA has **26.5 million** monthly active users.
- In less than 18 months, the number of **US adult TikTok users** grew 5.5 times.
- **Ninety percent of TIkTok users** visit the app more than once a day.
- TikTok is the most downloaded app on the Apple App Store, with **33 million downloads** in a quarter.
- **Sixty-eight percent of TikTok users** watch someone else's video, and 55 percent upload their own videos.
- **Fifty-two percent of TikTok users** are iPhone users.

Twitter

Twitter is a microblogging platform that allows users to share short messages (tweets), contribute to a collective conversation and follow other users. It's particularly popular among news junkies for its ability to create conversations around trending topics using hashtags. People generally use it to connect with friends, share thoughts to a wide audience, follow celebrities or politicians, discover brands and stay informed about breaking news. Tweets comprise images and text, text alone or short videos. Messages are limited to 280 characters, which makes content highly scannable for the casual scroller. These concise messages often include emojis and gifs that help convey additional meaning. Users can broadcast live on Twitter through Periscope. You can retweet (RT) another person's Tweet, like it or comment, direct message people and tag other users in Tweets. The platform can be used to share up-to-the-minute, groundbreaking information rapidly to a large audience who quickly disseminates information, sometimes before the media is even aware. This empowers citizen journalists to share experiences and perspectives in real time.

To be successful on Twitter, you must tweet daily—the more, the better—and actively engage the community. It's important to pay attention to trends related to your ministry and activity contribute to relevant conversations. Information moves fast, so you'll want to check in multiple times daily as much as possible. Therefore, whoever runs your organization's Twitter account must be highly communicative and socially sensitive. In-depth analytics are built directly into the platform, for easy access to information on demographics, engagement and reach. This makes it easy to determine which types of content resonate best with the people you're reaching and helps you determine whether you're connecting with your target audience. The platform skews male and younger, making it useful for connecting with young adults. If your ministry is cause-based or otherwise highly active concerning issues like social justice, Twitter is an obvious choice for generating awareness and building community.

The big disadvantage of Twitter is that information can often be heavily biased and shared without the full context. As a result, the speed at which information is shared and superficiality can result in a Twitter storm or mob, where the community gangs up on a person through collective bullying, doxing (exposing someone's name, address and/or employer) and general

harassment. Often, users join this frenzy without understanding the full context of what ignited the storm. For this reason, we recommend avoiding controversial topics, staying politically neutral and being careful with your words to avoid being misunderstood out of context.

Twitter Statistics (June 2020)
- **Monthly active users: 330 million**
- **Thirty-four percent of Twitter users** are females, and **66% are males**.
- **Twenty-two percent of US adults** use Twitter.
- **Twenty-four percent of all Internet male users** use Twitter, whereas 21% of all Internet female users use Twitter.
- There are **48.35 million** monthly active Twitter users in the US.
- Roughly **42% of Twitter users** are on the platform daily.
- **Thirty-eight percent of Twitter users** are between **18 and 29**; 26% are **30 to 49**.
- **Ninety-three percent of Twitter** community members are open to brands getting involved, if done correctly.
- **Eighty percent of Twitter users** access the platform on a mobile device, and 93% of video views are on mobile devices.
- **Seventy-one percent of Twitter users** say they use the network to get news.
- **Eighty-five percent of small and medium business** users utilize Twitter for customer service**.**
- Twitter is the preferred social network for **news consumption**.

YouTube

People visit YouTube for entertainment and education. It's not an exaggeration to say that video is king! Internet video traffic accounts for **80% of all consumer Internet traffic.** YouTube is the **second-largest search engine** and the **second most-visited website** in the world. This is where young people spend most of their time online.

Creating a YouTube account is very cheap. All you need is a camera and device to upload. YouTube is great for communicating ideas quickly and provides a storage place where content never dies. It can be revisited or reposted as many times as you want.

The platform offers in-depth analytics built into its Creator Studio and a convenient mobile app to allow timely responses to comments. To be successful, you'll need to commit to uploading at least one video per week. YouTube also offers a live video feature that can be utilized for interactive sessions with your audience.

If you have the calling to reach young people, YouTube is a must. **Click here** for a step-by-step guide on how to start a YouTube ministry.

YouTube Statistics (May 2020)

- More than **30 million daily users**.
- **Two billion monthly active users**.
- **Five hundred hours of video** are uploaded every minute.
- **Five billion videos** are watched on YouTube every day.
- The average viewing session on mobile phones is more than **40 minutes** (an over-50% increase per year).
- YouTube **reaches more than 18 to 34 year olds** than any cable network in the US.
- **Six out of 10 people** prefer online video platforms to live TV.
- **Ninety-three percent of Millennials** go to YouTube to learn how to do something.
- **Eighty-six percent of viewers** regularly use YouTube to learn new things.
- **Seventy percent of viewers** use YouTube to help solve a problem.

YouTube Demographics (May 2020)

- **Seventy-three percent** of US adults **use YouTube**.
- **Sixty-two percent** of YouTube users are **males**.
- **Seventy-eight percent** of US **male adults** use YouTube.
- **Sixty-eight percent** of US **female adults** use YouTube.
- **Eighty-one percent of 15– to 25-year-olds in the US** use YouTube.
- More than **15% of YouTube's site traffic comes from the US**.
- **The 35-plus and 55-plus age groups** are the fastest-growing YouTube demographics.
- **Seventy-five percent of Millennials prefer YouTube** over traditional television.
- **Fifty-one percent** of YouTube users visit the site daily.
- **Thirty-seven percent** of the coveted **18−34** demographic is binge-watching.
- **Ninety-four percent of American 18- to 24-year-olds** use YouTube.
- **Eighty-five percent of US teen boys** (**ages 13−17**) use YouTube daily.
- **Seventy percent of US teen girls** **aged 13−17** use YouTube daily.
- **Seventy percent** of YouTube watch time comes from **mobile devices**.
- YouTube services are available in more than **100 countries in 80 languages**.
- **Ninety-five percent** of the global internet population watches YouTube.

Understanding Your Audience

Good communication is when you communicate in a way your audience understands.

Writing for a marketing/evangelism goal requires significant thought and strategic planning. This section gives you a framework for successfully defining your target audience and determining how to speak to them in a relevant way, encouraging meaningful engagements. We must communicate clearly and take time to deeply understand our audience. It doesn't matter if *you* know what you mean. Put yourself in your audience's shoes, and speak to them accordingly. Speak to your audience in a way and with words that enable *them* to understand and connect with your message. REMEMBER: EMPATHY FIRST.

This means that when we communicate in the digital space, we must speak the language of the platform and recognize the cultural expectations and norms prevalent in the space, as well as within the culture(s) of the people we're communicating to. Without careful research, our words and intentions can easily be taken the wrong way, inadvertently offending and pushing away the very people we're trying to reach.

As Christians, we want to reach and include everyone. This is our ultimate goal as disciples. However, from a ministry standpoint, this approach ends up reducing the relevancy of the message and spreads efforts too thin for significant impact. After all, a standard marketing rule states:

If you try to reach everyone all the time, you'll end up
REACHING NO ONE.

Each person, ministry and local church is uniquely equipped and positioned to reach different types of people. Therefore, it's vital to understand who your audience is before you create content, write a single social media post or spend money on social advertisements. This section will help you learn how to effectively shape messages and content to match your audience's needs and reach them effectively, no matter their age, gender, ethnicity, location or situation.

Determine Your Target Audience

The first step in reaching your audience is to develop a clear picture of who you're talking to. Begin with surface-level demographic information. Use the space below to fill in information for your ministry's target audience.

Surface-Level Demographic Information

- Location

  _____

- Age

  _____

- Gender

  _____

- Ethnicity/Language

  _____

- Interests

  _____

  _____

  _____

Once you've determined the surface-level characteristics of your target audience, work down to a deeper level, which will help shape your messaging and the kind of content you'll create.

Create deep connections by identifying with
CORE VALUES, NEEDS AND COMMON EXPERIENCES.

People no longer fit into neat categories, so we must connect with them on a more profound level, transcending standard marketing demographics of age, ethnicity, gender, language, location and interests. If you can dig deeper, your audience will be loyal to your brand because you resonate with them at their *core*. The best way to do that is to investigate their needs, experiences, values and perceptions. Conducting surveys and interviews is one key way to collect more information. Then start asking yourself questions to get inside the minds of your audience members. What motivates their actions? What makes them who they are? What do they have in common? How can you speak and write in a way that your audience finds relatable? What do they value? What do they need?

Examples of needs may include: A spiritually supportive community, affordable education, employment, affordable medical care, safe spaces for their children, mentorship opportunities, a better future, healthier relationships, self-improvement, Christian guidance on real-life issues, food security or practical life-skills training.

Use the space below to write possible answers for your target audience.

Deep-Level Characteristics

- Needs

  _____

  _____

- Core Values

  _____

  _____

- Shared Experiences

  _____

  _____

- Motivations

  _____

  _____

- Additional Insights

  _____

  _____

Cultural Empathy in the Digital Mission Field

The concept of cultural empathy is well known in the physical mission field, and its principles should be applied to the digital mission field. We live in a world of intersecting cultures or communities, so our definition of *culture* must expand. Many now find themselves between cultures and functioning in multiple communities simultaneously. To identify the unifying threads between seemingly dissimilar people, we first need to unpack their many cultural influences.

These cultures are potentially endless in variety, but can include:
- Platform
- Age groups or generations
- Gender
- Language(s)
- People groups: Race, ethnic, immigrant vs. first generation etc.
- Current location: City/suburbs/country
- In school vs. out of school
- Lived in a specific geolocation their whole life vs. transplant
- Faith groups, life-long Adventists vs. converts vs. former Adventists/Christians
- Professional groups vs. homemakers vs. working mothers
- College-educated vs. blue-collar workers
- Offline social clubs vs. online identities and groups
- Poverty vs. middle class vs. wealthy

Use this section to unpack your own intersecting cultures and consider how they shape your core values and needs.

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Now use the following space to write the potential overlap in cultures within your church, community, ministry or target audience. How might they influence behavior and needs? What unifying factors can you identify?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Internal vs. External

Are you speaking to Adventists or non-Adventists? Your language may change based on the answer. We must modify how we communicate to effectively reach different audiences without creating barriers. For example, when we talk to our friends, we use a certain vernacular that's more playful and friendlier, but when we address our boss or elders, our persona is more serious and professional. The same is true with evangelism and discipleship. We may commonly use certain words such as *Sabbath* or *haystacks* that could seem foreign or confusing to non-Adventists. The list below offers guidelines on how to distinguish between internal and external audiences.

Internal
- Church members
- Church leaders
- North American Division constituents
- Bible study groups
- Pathfinder/Adventurer participants
- Those raised in the Church/long-time attendees
- Faith communities: City/neighborhoods/ministries

External
- Broader community: Neighborhoods/city/state/metro areas
- Businesses
- Related causes or non-profit missions
- Local news

Be careful not to use Adventist-speak when addressing external audiences. Use the space below to indicate who your ministry communicates to regularly, if they're Adventist or non-Adventist and how you currently interact with them. What changes should you make? What barriers to faith or entry might you be accidentally creating with words?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Audience Personas 101

When communicating to your audiences, visualize actual people—their interests, culture, wants, needs and expectations—to refine your voice. You'll probably need to create unique personas to represent different target groups within your audience. According to *The Guardian*, *personas* can be simply defined as:

"A fictional character that communicates the primary characteristics of a group or segment of your audience and takes into consideration needs, demographics, motivations and environments."

Determining your audience personas can help you develop and write content that's relevant and useful to your audience. The best personas are often created by simply talking to your audience, but social media insights, website analytics and surveys can also prove very useful. Personas give a human face to a collection of information, and they allow you to classify groups for different messaging campaigns and programs. The best personas combine quantitative and qualitative information.

Example of a persona:

About Bryce: Adventist College Persona
Age: 17
Education: High school senior
Interests: Business, sports, camping, meeting other young people, discipleship training
Salary: $3,000 a year
Location: Berkeley, Calif.
Family: Adopted, married parents, no siblings, Hispanic
Goals: Finding a good paying and meaningful job, mentoring younger peers, finding a girlfriend, finding a Christian friend group

Challenges: Finding friends with similar morals, avoiding drugs/alcohol, food insecurity, feelings of rejection by his biological parents and struggles to connect, struggles with religious doubt

Values: Fair justice system, the environment, good reputation, strong character, fairness, good citizenship, technology and flexibility, diversity, leadership training and experience

Fears: The unknown, poor work–life balance, affording college, student loan debt, getting a good job, rejection, finding purpose/meaning

Preferred platforms for Media: Snapchat, Instagram, YouTube

Messages applicable to Bryce: We're all adopted into God's family. Our church/school/ministry is a place to belong and grow. Connection to others and God. Diversity and purpose. Mentorship opportunities and support for leadership training or education.

Social media personas are developed based on your target audience, as defined earlier in this section. The key is finding what those people want and need; the rest is simply compiling those qualities into a made-up person. As a Church, we must constantly find ways to reach our audience for the kingdom in the best, most efficient way possible. Creating social media personas is a valuable exercise that enables us, as communicators, to view life from others' perspectives. Personas help us develop empathy with our audience.

Use the following framework to develop your own personas:
- Name:
- Age/Gender:
- Culture/Race/Community:
- Education:
- Profession:
- Income:
- Location:
- Family Situation:
- Faith:
- Goals:
- Challenges/Needs:
- Values:
- Fears:
- Platforms/Channels for Promotions:
- Messages That Would Resonate:

Special Note about Generation Z

The Church and wider Christian community have become increasingly concerned with reaching Generation Z, people born approximately 1997–2012 (Pew Research Center). However, the Church has not yet adapted to meet the needs of the generation before them, Millennials. We should be concerned, as these two age groups represent the largest divergence from traditional Christian values and lowest participation in faith institutions we've seen. To reach and retain these generations, we must reframe our approach based on their perspectives.

Generation Z lives in a totally different world and interacts totally differently from any generation before. When asked what was the most important historical event in the USA in the last 20 years, they responded, "The release of the iPhone." Most older people would say, "the terrorist attacks of 9/11" (Adam Fenner, Director, Adventist Learning Community).

From Gen Z and Millennial perspectives, their answer makes sense, given that technology and digital communications have completely reshaped society, how we connect with each other,

how we shop and how we live. They have grown up in an almost entirely digital world, and they relate to technology in a more integrated fashion than any generation before.

So, who is Gen Z? What to know when targeting this age group
- By 2020, people born after 1995 will be **one-third of the total population in North America** and account for **40% of all US consumers**.
- **It's the most diverse generation** in US history; they don't see diversity unless it's absent.
- **The majority are non-white**, mostly Hispanic.
- One out of ten will marry across racial/ethnic lines.
- Fifty-five percent prefer to buy clothes online; 53% prefer to buy books and electronics online.
- **They use technology for everything:** Grocery shopping, dating, socializing, studying, entertainment, communication, reading the Bible, cooking etc.
- Seventy percent watch **two-plus hours of YouTube a day.**
- **They prefer less public social media** (example: Snapchat).
- Gen Z has an average attention span of eight seconds; 11% have ADHD.
- **They prefer images, icons and symbols** (think emojis and gifs) over text.
- **This group is the least religious generation ever:** Only 63% are sure God exists, 35% are completely unaffiliated religiously, 28% have never attended a religious service, and 13% are atheist. This may seem discouraging, but shows a huge opportunity if we're willing to meet the challenge.

What are their core values and needs (broadly speaking)?
- Sixty percent **want their work to benefit the world.**
- Seventy-six percent are **concerned about humanity's impact** on the planet.
- **They're worried about success**, experienced a weak economy early on and have seen the impact of the student loan crisis on Millennials.
- Fifty-seven percent **prefer to save over spending** (cost–benefit analysis, very pragmatic).
- **They interact with media (two-way interactivity) and want it to work from anywhere they are to fit their lives** (example: online education, telecommuting, Uber/Lyft vs. personal vehicles, Airbnb vs. hotels).
- **They prefer one-on-one social media conversations** over lectures.
- They want **leadership opportunities.**
- **They believe in a social gospel: Action, not words.**
  Source: Adam Fenner, *Director, Adventist Learning Community*

What do Gen Z's values mean for the Church? We must innovate for meaningful impact. If we don't, we only have ourselves to blame for continuous departures. Change is hard, and the Church is notoriously slow to adapt. Now is the time to act if we're really concerned for the salvation of future generations. Institutions aren't permanent. After all, in the words of W. Edwards Deming, "It is not necessary to change. Survival is not mandatory." The good news is that God never fails. He will always have a people, and He has called us to participate in His great work.

In Summary
We must put our assumptions and judgements in the trash. Too often, we create programs and content based on our own interests, passions or what *we* think people need, according to our own perspective and bias. Use the audience factors discussed in this section to make data-informed decisions about your audience. Then, create programs, messaging and content based on what you discover. If you're still unsure where to start, spend more time with your target audience, and ask more questions. Find out directly from them what they need, what they feel will improve their lives and what will inspire them to develop a closer relationship with God.

To reach people, we must become a student of their culture: no judgement, only acceptance and adaptation. No one should know more about your audience than you. Strive to become an expert on the people you're trying to reach.

Speaking to the Collective "We"

> "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which one can say, 'Look! This is something new'? It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time. No one remembers the former generations, and even those yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow them." —Ecclesiastes 1:9–11 NIV

To gain insight into drivers behind collective shifts in society, read *Pendulum: How Past Generations Shape Our Present and Predict Our Future*, by Roy H. Williams and Michael R. Drew. These shifts impact communication and often drive technology and social change. I recommend that, as part of your efforts to understand how to communicate more effectively to your target audiences and fulfill their needs, you not only read and study this book, but also invest the time in reading *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069* by William Strauss and Neil Howe. Good communication requires speaking in a way audiences appreciate. As a religious organization, we should use digital technologies to fulfill our audiences' needs, but we must first understand what those needs are (as discussed in the previous section), their unspoken expectations and the forces for change that influence a generation. This section takes the 30,000-foot-view of broader trends that may be acting on your target audiences.

Generation Z and Millennials have been leaving the Church at alarming rates; could it be we simply don't understand them? We know that people of any given cultural group are always the best suited to reach out and evangelize to their peers. I contend the same is true with generations. Now, empowering and training members of the youth to reach their own does not permit us to abdicate our function as guides and mentors. We, too, must seek to understand and cultivate these relationships if we're to bridge the gap, secure the future of the Church in North America and promote the salvation of souls. *Pendulum* analyses current shifts in society and their impact on marketing, technology and communication. The Social Media + Big Data Department of the North American Division has repeatedly used these techniques across a broad range of messaging campaigns, consistently yielding successful results. Even if you don't have time to read the 200-page book, what follows is a summary of what you need to know to understand and utilize these communication techniques.

Pendulum takes Strauss and Howe's four "generations" (Idealist, Reactive, Civic, Adaptive) and reduces it to two generations covering forty years that oscillate between the "Me" philosophy of individuality, freedom, uniqueness and potential (peaking in 1983) to the collective "We," working together for the common good, fixing society's greatest problems and adopting a philosophy of authenticity and transparency. Sound familiar? According to this model, we're currently in the upswing of the "We" that should reach its zenith in 2023. Both ideals are always present in society, but shifts in dominance occur. Optimal balance is found between the two extremes, and either extreme has negative consequences.

The main point is that group behavior is predictable, and we can use this predictability to speak to the masses in a relevant way.

There will always be exceptions, and the authors point out:
- There is always a counterculture within a prevailing culture.
- Individuals are not predictable.

"The *Pendulum* predicts only the momentum and direction of the majority in a society—most of the people, most of the time. Certainly not everyone, and certainly not always" (Williams 25). For deeper insight into the pros and cons of each swing of the "pendulum," **read the book**.

To communicate, we must ask,
"What is driving the actions and attitudes of the group?"

Determine how your mission, programs, product and/or message fits or can be positioned into this paradigm. You may need to reevaluate what your ministry offers to better align with what is relevant to your target audience.

Figure: 2.3 *Values and beliefs that motivate society in "WE" and "ME" cycles* (Williams 17)
Drivers of a "WE" vs. drivers of a "ME"

WE "I'M OK. YOU'RE NOT OK." (Witch Hunt)	ME I'M NOT OK. YOU'RE OK. (Hero Worship)
• Demands conformity for the common good • Applauds personal responsibility • Believes a million men are wiser than one man (think Wikipedia) • Wants to create a better world: "I came, I saw, I *concurred*." • Is about small actions • Desires to be part of a productive team • Admires humility and thoughtful persons • Believes leadership is, "This is the problem as I see it. Let's solve it together." • Strengthens society's sense of purpose, focuses on solving problems (antiheroes)	• Demands freedom of expression • Applauds personal liberty • Wants to achieve a better life: "I came, I saw, I *conquered*." • Is about big dreams • Desires to be number one • Admires individual confidence and decisive persons • Believes leadership is, "Look at me. Admire me. Emulate me if you can." • Strengthens society's sense of identity, elevates attractive heroes

This shift can be seen in successful advertising campaigns that target a worldview/attitude instead of an age group.

In other words, instead of targeting people based on surface-level demographics, they're speaking to a shared value that transcends age and race, as discussed in the previous section.

In *Pendulum*, the authors point out a well-known example. "Remember L'Oréal's famous '**Me**' slogan, 'Because **I'm** worth it?' As society passed the tipping point of 2003 and the 'Me' became fully unwound, the old slogan was replaced with 'Because **you're** worth it'" (Williams 172).

During this same period, the successful Army slogan "Be All You Can Be" (1980−2001) changed to "Army of One" (2001−2006) but didn't perform well because it was "contrary to the idea of teamwork," said Frank Luntz, American political consultant, pollster and public opinion guru (Ball). The current, more "WE"-focused slogan is "Army Strong."

Figure 16.3 *Societal mindset and values during a "WE" cycle* (Williams 168)

WE
TIPS TO CREATE A SERIOUS INTERNET PRESENCE IN A "WE" CYCLE
• Informative content is the jumbo jet that will take you where you want to go. • The web is an information delivery system, not an advertising vehicle. • Use your site to build confidence, inform your customer (audience/member), and anticipate and answer questions—24/7. • Insightful website architecture and exceptional writing trump dazzling graphics. • Make it easy on your customers (audience/member). Frustrate them, and they're gone.

Social media is a powerful tool for **member care and service**. Never before has "truth in advertising" been so important. The younger generations are the most connected, more than any before, and they naturally turn to social media to voice their displeasure with a brand or experience.

"Your advertising [messaging] may fool one of us. But that one will tell the rest of us," says Roy H. Williams (172).

Figure 16.5 *Tips to create a serious Internet presence during a "WE" cycle* (Williams 172)

WE UPSWING INTO "WE"	
VALUES	REJECTS
• Authenticity • Teamwork • Humility • Small actions • Personal responsibility • Cold, hard truth	• Hype • Posing • Arrogance • Wishful thinking • Self-righteousness • Sugar-coated nonsense*

* This line was edited for our audience.

"Self-effacing transparency is utterly disarming." —Michael R. Drew

"We want the truth, even if it's ugly. Shrink-wrapped, sugar-coated, phony posing [of the '80s through the mid-'90s] is no longer acceptable" (Williams 163). Humility, straight talk and a genuine point of view is what the Adventist Church and its ministries need to embrace; we see the effectiveness of this strategy in the success of initiatives like Gorgeous2God. Gorgeous2God is a **community** of young Christian women tackling **real issues** from a godly perspective. True stories from the experiences of real girls are shared and communicated with a candidness the Church hasn't embraced previously. Topics include rape, self-harm, sex before marriage, depression, abuse and other "uncomfortable" topics. Recognizing the underlying cultural principles in a "WE" generation guides and strengthens our abilities to reach our target audience with relevant content, increasing meaningful impact. Because of continued audience-focused messaging and content development, Gorgeous2God has grown to over 45K followers on social media, with over 20K visitors to the website a year, countless interactions and hundreds of direct messages (as of July 2020).

Analyze your audience. Then, consider the factors discussed in this and the **previous section** to shape your communications in a way that aligns with drivers behind current (broad) shifts in society. Position your ministry for success. You'll always have outliers within your target audience, but utilizing this knowledge allows your ministry to fish more effectively and increases the potential for a larger catch.

Sources
Ball, Molly (January 6, 2014). "The Agony of Frank Luntz." *The Atlantic*.
Williams, R. H., & Drew, M. R. (2012). *Pendulum: How past generations shape our present and predict our future.* New York: Vanguard Press.

Creating a Strong Foundation
For Your Digital Strategy

....

A Strong Foundation Begins with Leadership.
Whether you're a ministry, church, conference or independent missionary, here's what leaders can start doing today to build a strong strategic foundation for sharing your ministry's message:

- Include digital strategies in short- and long-term visions and goals.

- Dedicate funds for social media promotions.

- Dedicate time for training you and your staff.

- Identify staff who could take on social media as part of their job duties. (*This may mean taking something else off their plate*).

- Invest in young people; give them space to utilize their skills in this area for the Church.

- Take advantage of all our free resources, classes and case studies on **SDAdata.org**.

- Purchase the *Digital Discipleship & Evangelism Guidebook* at **SDAdata.blog/book** or **SDAdata.blog/amazon** for your ministry leaders and pastors.
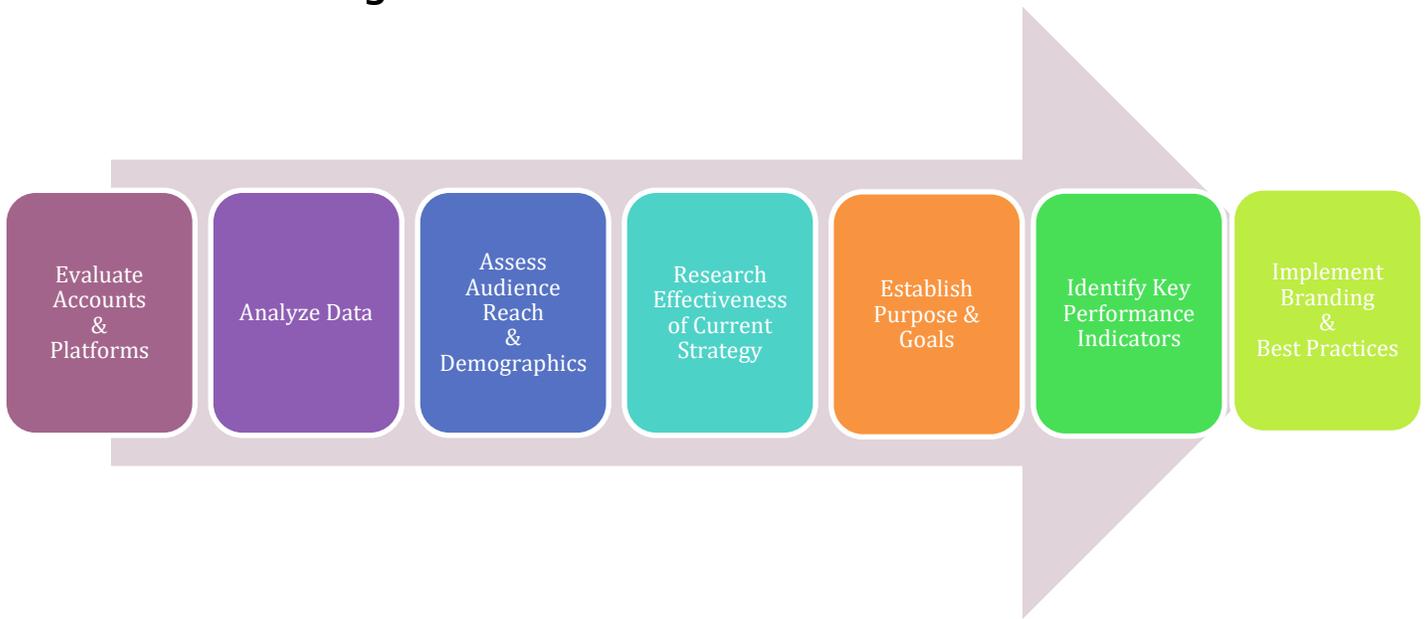

The stakes of our gospel calling are too high; your church, conference or ministry can no longer go without a digital strategy. It's imperative that we become just as effective as secular organizations at using digital media for communication and community building.

Strategic planning is simply the process of being intentional and thoughtful with your digital communications.

Social Media and Digital Communications Audit

Evaluate Accounts & Platforms	Analyze Data	Assess Audience Reach & Demographics	Research Effectiveness of Current Strategy	Establish Purpose & Goals	Identify Key Performance Indicators	Implement Branding & Best Practices

Begin by evaluating your existing accounts and platforms. Ask: "Are we using the right ones for our audience and mission?" and "Are there opportunities for consolidation?" **Less is more.** When you streamline communication efforts, you'll achieve greater impact.

Look at your data to determine who you're reaching, the effectiveness of your current strategy and areas for best-practice implementation. Look for issues with your foundation, and start thinking about digital strategy goals, target audiences, and key metrics.

Define your purpose for being on social media and utilizing digital tools. Then frame your strategy accordingly, identifying key performance indicators for success. Many ministries and churches fall into the trap of reactive digital communications versus proactive. Reshape your strategy so you're ahead of the ball. Develop and implement branding guidelines for all your digital communications (which should be an extension of your traditional media, like print) and make sure your team follows best practices.

Understanding Purpose

Start a Conversation	Make Connections	Break Down Barriers	Influence Network	Advance the Gospel
• Friendly • Human • Approachable • Sincere • Non-judgemental	• Connect to God • Connect with others • Connect others to gospel	• Open communication • Listen • Restore relationships	• Calls to action • Get involved • Connect/Follow • Share content • Invite others	• Grow God's kingdom • Encourage social media ambassadors • Serve the community

Credit: *Heidi Baumgartner, edited by Jamie Domm*

The auditing process should help you evaluate your current system of communication and develop clear objectives for your digital communications, such as: *advance the gospel and positively influence your community.* You and your team can then develop an ongoing approach that aims to achieve key areas listed above.

Setting Goals
Once you have a purpose, you can set goals. When you know what you're trying to achieve, you can set benchmarks for measurement and create a strategy and budget.

Examples of goals may include but are not limited to:
- **Increase fan base and drive traffic to the website.**

- **Increase event attendance and participation.**

- **Increase community awareness** to become more than the building up the street.

- **Get to know your membership/community better** and understand their felt needs.

- **Encourage social media ambassadors** to share your content, and invite people to your events.

- **Increase meaningful engagement online.**

- **Develop digital disciples** who actively share their faith in the digital space.

- **Reach target groups with meaningful content.**

- **Improve the lives of others.**

- **Communicate core values.**

- **Create connection** and foster relationships.

- **Define why you're a unique** community resource.

- **Set expectations** for those who interact with you and your team.

- **Create clarity and focus.** When everyone on your team (whether a few people or an entire church) understands what they're trying to achieve, it enables them to find their place within your mission.

Performance Metrics (a.k.a. Key Performance Indicators)
Once you've identified why you'll use digital media and who you're trying to reach, it's important to implement measures for success. Identify the most important metrics for your goals, and decide how to track them. If you don't have much time, set benchmarks, and track high-level numbers.

Types of Digital/Social Media Metrics
- **Activity metrics:** Quantity of posts and content created (great metric for beginners starting a content strategy from scratch)

- **Reach metrics:** Number of people who see your content and their demographic data

- **Engagement metrics:** Interactions and interest in your brand and content

- **Acquisition metrics:** Changes in engagement over time or "relationships developed"

- **Conversion metrics:** Actions, sales, registrations, resource requests and other results

- **Retention metrics:** Happy customers and brand evangelists

Source: [Buffer](#), *edited by Jamie Domm*

For example, KPIs for ministry could include but aren't limited to:
- **Activity metrics:** Number of videos/podcasts/new content created by the team

- **Reach metrics:** Reach/impressions/views for your content in general or from a specific age group, location or people group. Also, traffic to the website in general or from a specific channel, platform or location

- **Engagement metrics:** Quantity of followers, likes, shares, comments or messages

- **Acquisition metrics:** Empowerment of social media ambassadors and the resulting activity, number of questions submitted, active online Bible studies, Bible study requests or active (ongoing) conversations

- **Conversion metrics:** Number of volunteers, registration numbers, event attendance, donations, visits to the church, quantity of purchases, baptisms, one-on-one meetings, books, Bible study and resource requests

- **Retention metrics:** Testimonials, repeated visitors to your church, positive impressions shared, people sharing their experience with their online friends/followers, meeting felt needs, developing a presence in the community and increased involvement in ministry

Choosing the Right Platforms/Channels
Remember, to reach your target audience, you must go where they spend their time online and use their language. Refer to the "**Understanding Your Target Audience**" section to help identify the best platforms for your chosen target audience(s). It's very easy to become overwhelmed by all the possibilities. To avoid that, start with just a few platforms that make the most sense for your ministry, messages, available human resources and goals. It's best to pick a few platforms and do them well! A strategy stretched too thin won't get the results you want.

Remember the "Rule of 7"
The "Rule of Seven" states that a person needs to be exposed to a message at least seven times before they'll take a desired action, such as register, RSVP, attend an event, request a resource, send a message, read an article or participate in some other meaningful way.

Everyone, including our audience, experiences marketing messaging and content overload. It's estimated that the average adult is exposed to over 3,000 marketing messages a day! Therein lies the challenge. To cut through the clutter, we must utilize a multi-channel, multi-platform approach. Also, consistency with your branding and a regular messaging schedule will maximize effectiveness. *Channel* typically refers to the communication medium, such as radio, print, TV or social media. *Platform* refers to different kinds of social media such as Facebook, Snapchat, YouTube and Instagram. Truly effective communication strategies work across all channels and platforms to reach people where they are, conveying one consistent goal or message. This is often referred to as *integrated marketing* and may utilize the following channels.

Social media should be part of a comprehensive communication strategy that incorporates all your communication tools, working together to maximize impact.

But with the busyness of life, how can you ensure your audience prioritizes your messages? Your content must be read before it can have a life-changing effect. It's not enough to communicate often in different ways. To stand out and be effective, your messages should communicate directly to the reader in a way that is relevant to their life or situation, framed in a way that meets their needs. Messaging like: "This will make your life easier/help you with a problem," "Here's a chance to learn how to eat healthier/help the community" or "Here's an opportunity to gain insight on that nagging question you have" is strong, engaging content.

Another way to think about this is to seek to understand the motivating desires and core values of your community. Refer to the "**Understanding Your Target Audience**" section of this guide for more information on this topic. Then create programs, ministries and content that serves them. Too often, we create programs and content we *assume* our audience wants and don't end up with the results we were hoping for. When we combine a strong communications strategy with careful research about our target audience before creating programs and messages, we can increase our chances of success.

Implementing an effective strategy requires repeated, consistent messaging from multiple communication channels to have an informed audience or membership. In addition, those messages must serve your target audiences in a meaningful way. We now have more resources than ever before to reach audiences and reinforce our message. But with all the digital clutter, it might take up to a thousand tries to reach someone just seven times! Therefore, it's important to keep at it and develop relationships with those you are trying to serve.

Get Organized

Social media can seem daunting, but it needn't be. A streamlined approach allows you and your team to tackle multiple projects that must integrate an ever-growing list of communication channels.

Here are fundamental tips for getting organized:

- **Develop a content calendar** that enables you to plan across all channels and platforms.

- **Share the calendar with your entire communications team.** We recommend using Google Sheets.

- **Schedule posts in advance** for increased flexibility**.**

- **Download a free content calendar template** and modify it to incorporate all your communication channels (traditional + digital): **SDAdata.blog/calendartemplate**

Schedule Content in Batches

Scheduling your content (and ads) in advance helps you focus on big-picture items without the urgency of consistent posting. Plan regular content in advance, and make time to schedule it in monthly or two-week chunks. Then you can focus your attention on engagement, community building, data analysis, strategic planning and other projects. This also empowers you to be more *proactive* in your digital strategy, as opposed to *reactive*—freeing you to respond quickly to comments or address unexpected issues or changes.

Don't Give Up Too Soon!

Post reach and interaction will ebb and flow based on your audience's personal preferences, attitude of the day, the news, that evening's supper or just the busyness of life. Keep posting. Keep interacting. Keep adapting.

When you initially revamp your digital strategy, the changes in post engagement should show immediate and positive results. But over time, things may plateau or even dip, especially during the holidays. You'll learn to see and anticipate yearly patterns. Keep pressing forward. Often, efforts fail because people give up too early.

Social Media Best Practices Checklist

To fully realize the untapped potential of the digital mission field, each denominational entity, ministry or local church is encouraged to download the latest version of the **NAD Social Media Guidelines** for an in-depth manual with *resources and guidance regarding best practices for professional social media communication.*

Whether you're just getting started or conducting a social media audit, this checklist is designed to help you ensure your organization or ministry is maintaining basic best practices for social media.

The Basics

☐ **Name:** For all official denominational entities under the North American Division, use the North American Division name alongside your ministry's name whenever possible, and include the full division name (not the abbreviation "NAD") in the description for all social media accounts. Please refer to the **NAD Brand Guidelines**. For non-affiliated ministry entities or individuals, be sure to choose a name that accurately reflects your ministry and mission while staying consistent with your internal guidelines for use.

☐ **Consistent branding:** Use the same name, profile image, header images and bio on each platform to affirm brand recognition and help members identify official accounts.

☐ **Logo:** Branding and logo guidelines for the North American Division apply to social media, print and all other forms of communication. Please refer to the **NAD Brand Guidelines** for more information and downloadable logos. For non-affiliated ministry entities or individuals, be sure to develop a consistent logo and internal guidelines for use.

☐ **Optimize images per platform:** Be sure to use optimal image sizes for each social media platform to help your brand stand out and look professional. Refer to this **cheat sheet**.

☐ **Contact information:** Provide additional contact information, such as a phone number, business address and email address, where relevant, in the About section of your social media account profiles.

☐ **Ownership:** Posts should appear to come from the official brand of the account, not individuals. An exception would be Church or ministry officials providing a public statement.

☐ **Organization:** Plan your regular content, and schedule posts in advance whenever possible. We recommend that you create a shared content calendar for your team.

☐ **Content:** Post consistently, and be sure always to include an image/video, short teaser text, a call to action, relevant hashtags and a link.

- ☐ **Link to your website:** Your website is your biggest communications tool; link to your website in most posts.
- ☐ **Promote your social media:** Include your social media handles (names) in all your other communication channels, such as your website, emails, print material and spoken announcements.

Account Management

- ☐ **Work Facebook accounts:** We strongly recommend you create a separate work Facebook account to manage official pages to help separate your work from your personal social media. While we don't generally recommend a Facebook page for reaching young adults, you probably have one set up for older audiences, and you'll need a page to connect to a business Instagram profile and to ads manager for placing ads on Instagram targeting young adults.
- ☐ **Facebook page admins:** Facebook pages should have more than one staff admin on the page to prevent lockout.
- ☐ **Connected emails:** Never connect an organization's social media profiles to private email addresses or even an individual's work email addresses.
  - ☐ Create a dedicated social media address (**socialmedia@yourministry.com**) for your organization, and grant multiple people access. Contact your IT department for assistance, if applicable.
  - ☐ Connect social media accounts like Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube and Hootsuite to the work social media email address.
- ☐ **Page roles and access:** Regularly check Facebook page roles and account access to make sure it's up to date and excludes former employees. When social media managers/page editors/admins leave your organization and no longer require access to your social media accounts, update page roles immediately, and change passwords to all social media platforms, management accounts and emails.

Account Protection

- ☐ **Security:** Keep your account privacy and security settings updated with the latest best practices. This also applies to your laptops and devices.
- ☐ **Facebook:** We highly recommend that you set up the following safeguards:
  - ☐ **Two-factor authentication:** Two-factor authentication creates an extra layer of security when logins are attempted from unknown browsers. This will safeguard against hackers who could otherwise take control of personal profiles, organizational pages, ad accounts and credit cards. **Click here** to learn more about two-factor authentication.

- ☐ **Trusted contacts:** Choose coworkers to be trusted Facebook contacts to help you regain access to a compromised account.
- ☐ **Follow Facebook's recommended security updates:** Learn more about Facebook security features and tips **here**.
- ☐ **Passwords:** For all social media accounts (personal and organizational), please choose strong, unique passwords, and change them every six months.

Ideally, organizations should conduct a basic social media audit every six months as part of a larger digital communications strategy review. The digital mission field is dynamic and ever-changing, and the North American Division office of Big Data + Social Media is here to help you stay informed. Once you can check off everything on this list, visit **SDAdata.org** for more resources, tips and tutorials to continue to enhance your digital evangelism and discipleship strategies.

Brand and Content Principles

Young people are bombarded with information and marketing lines constantly. They're never without continual email promotions, social media updates, articles with more news on the crumbling state of our world … bing, bing, bing. They're used to being sold something, whether it's a product or an idea of how they should be living. With the oversaturation of information around them, it is confusing and hard to find truth. Young people are looking for content that rises above the noise and that they can trust. Ask yourself: What makes your brand rise above and become trustworthy?

- **To Be There** (brand consistency)
  We'll walk through developing your brand in the next section, but the main purpose for a brand is to build trust. People gravitate to different brand names because of their reputations. Timeliness, quality and even aesthetics are very important in this aspect. When grocery shopping for peanut butter, you'll encounter big brands like Jif and probably some "off-brands" that you might have never heard of. You know Jif and have seen it forever. If you liked it before, you can trust you'll still like it, because the recipe is consistent. If you haven't had it before, you've probably heard of it and know many other people trust this particular brand. However, you may not have heard of the other brands, and although they may be cheaper, you're likely to stick with Jif simply because it's familiar. This anecdote demonstrates why it's important to have a consistent brand through all your social media and digital presence. This includes your social media handles and design elements. The more predictable you are with your brand, the more trustworthy you are.

- **Engaging Content**
  While you should aim to be predictable with your brand, you should be unpredictable (yet consistent) with your content. Allow your content to be exciting, have a voice and spark people's interest. Get your audience to stop scrolling and pay attention to your content. All content you produce should offer value to your audience. This is where the Church has an incredible advantage, because the Church possesses information the world is hungering for! People are looking for answers. Give your audience Biblical answers to the questions they seek online. In addition, people are looking for community; show them where they can find it. In the next few sections of this guide, we'll dig deep into content creation.

Branding and Content Planning 101

"Branding is the process of revealing a holistic picture of an organization to its audience by curating a perception, experience and essence. Brands are communicated, not just created. A brand is based entirely on a person's experience." — Heidi Baumgartner

This process begins with one question: How do you want your ministry to be known? This is its brand. Once you understand your organization's mission and purpose, you can shape your brand around those goals.

Components of your brand strategy should cover three areas: marketing, public relations and corporate communication. Think of marketing as evangelism **(OUTREACH)** and corporate communications as internal or member-focused **messaging (INREACH)**. Public relations can be understood as what the general community knows or thinks about your church or organization. In other words, what are you known for in the community? Too often, our churches are simply "the building on the corner," not perceived as a center for positive influence.

To help shape this process, ask: What can your church or ministry become known for? What is unique about what your organization offers the community? If you don't already have a ministry name, website domain and social media handle, choose a name based on your organization's mission or purpose for use across all channels.

For established ministries, intentionally devising handles and constructing social media profiles can help you reshape or rebrand your image and voice for your online audiences. Base decisions on the vision you want to cast. Determine whether your primary goal falls into outreach, inreach or public relations. Your mission may cross over into more than one area. Then brainstorm name/handle ideas with your team, board or members that could fit into one, two or all three categories below. Through a process of elimination, narrow down the options, and come to a final decision. Make sure that, before you identify the top choices, you've first checked their availability on *sites like **knowem.com** (social media platforms)* and ***godaddy.com*** (for website domain names).

Refer to the chart on the next page when brainstorming name/handle ideas for your organization.

Ideas for Developing Handles

PATHS OF CREATIVITY Emphasis: **Marketing** Example: **@gorgeous2god**	KEYWORD THEME Emphasis: **Public Relations** Example: **@enditnowNAD**	ORG NAME Emphasis: **Corp. Communication** Example: **@NADadventist**
•Name concepts that connect to mission and vision •Appeal to external audiences •Promote evangelism (outreach) •Build community within a specific target audience	•Utilize keywords that describe themes/mission •Intentionally blend marketing and corporate communications •Encourage community awareness and influence	•Use the organizational name in various iterations •Focus on internal audiences •Emphasize offical statements, polices, beliefs, etc. •Distribute member information (inreach)

Credit: *Heidi Baumgartner, edited by Jamie Domm*

Your social media handle should reflect your brand and purpose for being online or using the platform. A handle is a unique identifying username representing your organization. In other words, it's your social media nickname. Keep your handle consistent across all platforms so potential followers find you easily. It's also a good idea to reserve your handle on a wide range of platforms, even if you can't consistently post on all of them right now, to prevent brand confusion and save them for future use as your social media strategy expands. We recommend choosing a website domain that matches your ministry's name and handle to further reinforce your brand across multiple channels and touchpoints. An example of a ministry with consistent branding is **Gorgeous2God**, whose mission primarily falls under outreach. Their social media handle across all their platforms is **@gorgeous2god**, and their domain is **gorgeous2god.org**. They even utilize a branded hashtag when relevant, **#gorgeous2god**.

Your branding should:

- Promote awareness
- Foster emotional connectedness
- Communicate your mission and values **(brand story)**
- Encourage brand ambassadors
- Provide strategic direction to your team and set clear goals/objectives **(mission/vision)**
- Shape expectations for those you serve **(brand promise)**

Your brand strategy and digital strategy work together and are part of an overarching, grand communication strategy.

Brand Basics
Brand: Represented by its logo, color, typefaces, images, designs, tone of voice and customer service

Brand strategy: Defines the organization's central message and how to say it

Brand guidelines: A system of managing the brand visually

The biggest problem I see with ministries using social media is that they have no clear objectives. You must determine your purpose and shape your online communications and brand accordingly. In addition, **determine your target audience**, goals and key performance indicators, as discussed in the **previous section on strong foundations**, and conduct a thorough *communications* and *social media* audit (examining all touchpoints). Then, based on all your findings, conduct a thorough *branding* audit, establishing where you are and where you want to go. This process helps you evaluate your overall communication strategies and can direct your rebranding. Once you've defined your purpose(s), shape your brand name, design and messaging style to help you steer toward your desired perception and achieve your mission goals.

Next, develop your identity across all platforms and channels as part of your overall brand. Social media does not work in a silo; it should be integrated into your broader communications, both digital and traditional.

Helpful resource: identity.adventist.org

Establish Branding Consistency

Make sure all your social media profiles look consistent and use the same name.

- Reserve your name on all platforms.
- Use a consistent name (15 characters or less; short/simple; stands the test of time; no numbers, symbols or punctuation).
- Use the same profile photo and a consistent design look.
- Use the same headline, blurb or bio.
- Develop a consistent voice/tone.
- Clearly articulate what you offer through your mission, brand promise and brand story.

Your digital presence is an extension of your church brand and voice into the online world. Your brand is how your church or ministry is perceived.

How we feel about a brand ultimately stems from our experiences with it. Put yourself in the shoes of a person experiencing your brand for the first time, and view your ministry through an outsider's perspective. Evaluate their experience objectively, and make changes based on your communication objectives. Develop a clear **brand promise** (what your organization offers), and make sure all aspects of your organization deliver on that promise.

Strong digital brands create connections with real people and take a comprehensive approach to the member experience because seekers don't experience their journey in silos. Remember every experience—physical or digital—says something about your brand.

Content Planning

As digital evangelists, we want to create relevant content but may not always be sure what people are searching for online. Our purpose is to meet the needs of people in the digital space, and luckily, the inspiration we need lies in tools many of us use every day. Being strategic and intentional with the content we create can help us provide people with the answers and connections they are seeking.

Each year, there are millions of Google searches for answers to questions like:

- Is God real?

- What happens when we die?

- How do I know I'm saved?

- Why is there so much suffering in the world?

There is a great need for our message of hope and wholeness. Additionally, many people are hurting emotionally, entertaining suicidal thoughts or feel there is no hope for their situation. They turn to the Internet for companionship, understanding, information, anonymity and more. It's easier for them to pour out their heartfelt searching to Google or on social media than talk to a friend, neighbor, co-worker or family member. Consequently, this is where we, as disciples, need to cast our net. We need to provide the kind of spiritual food the fish want to eat.

Here is an easy tip for a wealth of content ideas:
Find, write and curate content related to top Google searches. Frame your posts to pique curiosity and answer people's questions, addressing their deepest longings. You can get top search data from any search engine, YouTube and other social media trend tracking sites. Try it. Start typing a question, and let the search engine auto-finish. The top results represent the most popular search queries. In other words, you'll see what large numbers of people are searching for online. It gives you a sneak peek into their needs, worries, nagging questions and often hidden yearnings.
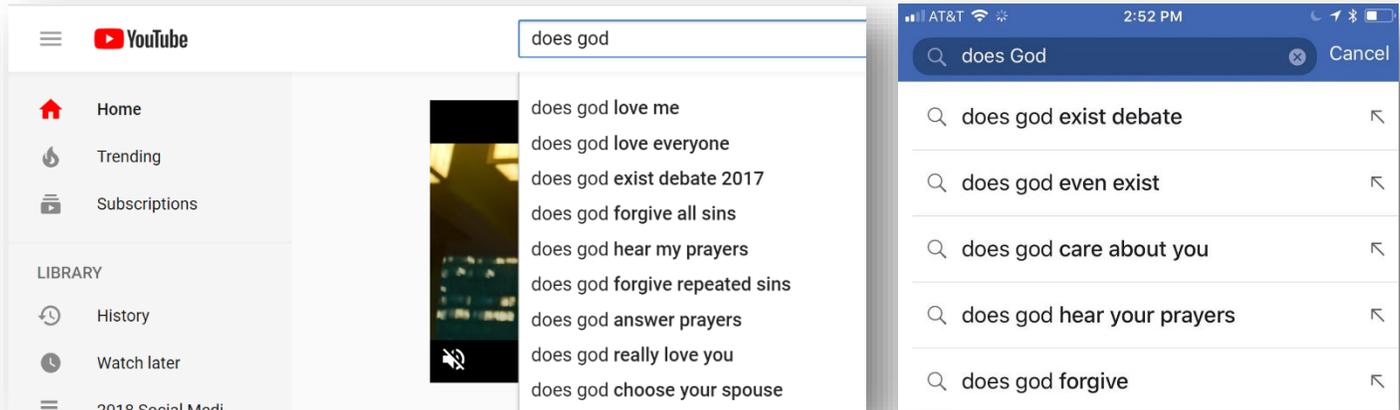
These trends allow us to predict what topics audiences may find interesting, and we can use this predictability to speak to the masses in a relevant way. When we make content that speaks to people's spiritual needs and seeks to address their deepest longings, we can change lives through digital evangelism. Being strategic and intentional with the content we create allows us to provide people with the answers and connections they are looking for online.

Jesus Spent Time with People

"You must come close to those for whom you labor, that they may not only hear your voice, but shake your hand, learn your principles, feel your sympathy." —Ellen White, Ministry of Healing

I cannot stress this enough: While data and research can be huge assets when trying to find relevant content to create and issues to address, nothing replaces quality time with those you're seeking to reach. The best thing you can do to **understand the needs and interests** of your audience is to engage with them personally. Talk to them, ask questions, show them you

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care, and dig deep into their perspectives and challenges. This kind of relationship building can also take place in the digital space when necessary.

Additional Content Tips and Ideas

- Try new things, and see how your audience responds.
- Crowd-source content from your church community (members' content as well as conference, union and division resources) to help when you have limited time or manpower. You don't have to create everything.
- Break the scroll, think differently, and allow creativity in your team.
- Build predictability/expectations for when new content will be released (like a new blog post every week or new podcast episode released on the first of each month), but don't be so predictable it's boring.
- Develop a multi-generational creative team with room to innovate and fail.
- Lower the barrier to entry by demonstrating what it's like to be part of your church community. Peel back the corporate-ness of a brand to reveal humanity by featuring behind-the-scenes videos and live streams.
- Put your church culture on display. Give your audience a glimpse of the events, spiritual life and friends they might make.
- Champion your ministries, team and member achievements online.
- Find ways to showcase how non-members could fit in and be welcomed in your church.
- Tell stories, and share experiences and testimonies online.
- Offer digital Bible studies, live-streamed prayer sessions, webinars etc.
- Share inspirational passages, health nuggets, practical advice for day-to-day challenges, marriage and parenting tips, community alerts, resources relevant to community issues etc.

Your digital strategy must go beyond "content out, bodies in." Strive to create content that moves people through their spiritual journey. Find ways to feed your community's spiritual needs beyond the few hours they spend in a church service each week. Provide spiritual guidance to those people who may never attend a church service. After all, the kingdom of God is an all-day, every-day pursuit. His Church and teachings should be available 24/7.

Done Is Better Than Perfect
People are drawn to authenticity in communications, not perfection. **This trend** is likely to hold true over the next decade, and this is good news for content creators. There is a place for highly produced, professional content, but don't let resource or skill-set limitations prevent you from attempting to create valuable content.

Remember:

<div align="center" style="color:blue">God doesn't call the qualified; He qualifies the called.</div>

Keep learning, and keep trying. You and your team will improve with time and practice. Your videos and content do not always have to be produced pieces—nor should they be—to optimize relatability and impact. In fact, overly produced content can turn people away. That doesn't mean be sloppy or allow typos, but understand that you're not competing with Fortune 500 advertising campaigns or mega-church branding. Local churches and ministries have the advantage when it comes to showcasing real people, authenticity and community in a way that doesn't feel contrived. Don't hesitate to go live on your mission trip, post your event pictures, and share your in-the-moment thoughts online.

Fail Productively

It's fine to fail; just make sure you learn. Not every idea will be a winner, but each piece of content you produce enables you and your team to see in real time what resonates with people and what doesn't. Your team, through trial and error, can steer toward content that is most impactful to your target audience. Digital media allows us to test, change and update our content and messages until we get it right, without the burden of high costs. Remember, you're not in this alone. The Holy Spirit is working alongside you. Your message might only reach a limited number of eyes at first, but it could be the exact message those people needed to hear. *Small impact* doesn't necessarily mean *no impact.*

Keyword Research for Advanced Content Planning

People value content that helps them make better decisions, answers their questions and speaks to their core values or interests. Optimizing your content based on search engine queries (what people are searching for) helps you best match your products and resources to the needs and interests of your audience. We previously took a bird's-eye look at using search results to find relevant content ideas. This section will go into greater depth for ministries that want to focus more on creating digital content related to their mission and themes. If you're a digital missionary looking to develop a content creation strategy that will reach beyond a geographical location, bookmark this section. This type of digital evangelism helps expand your messaging to new audiences who are hungry for the resources you provide.

Writer's block? Find out what people are searching for.

Keyword **research** is the core of what is known as *SEO copywriting*: writing content based on **search engine optimization principles**. Search engine optimization is a set of strategies that help organizations reach more of their online target audience. A website's visibility in search engine results can be elevated by utilizing certain content development techniques. The higher a website ranks when a person googles search terms related to it, the more web traffic it receives. Visit **SDAdata.org/SEO** to learn more about SEO.

Researching keywords removes much of the guesswork when trying to figure out which topics (related to your ministry and mission) make the most sense to explore for your content. It bridges the gap between your hunches, the data and what information people need or want. This technique uses search query data from Google and other search engines to determine what kind of topics interest people. Creating content focused on *commonly searched topics* improves the visibility of your content in search results, which helps users find your ministry and increases the impact of your message.

Use the following framework as a guide to creating content based on keywords.

1) Define the main topic of your online ministry.

For example, you decide you want to start a blog to help Pathfinder leaders.

Pathfinders, of course, is the topic. But if you title your blog "Pathfinders," it's not specific enough to get search traffic. You have to differentiate from Nissan Pathfinders, Pathfinder International and the Pathfinder role-playing game.

Familiarity with your audience allows you to feature relevant keywords in your titles, headlines and posts, such as:

- Pathfinder leadership
- Pathfinder club meetings
- Pathfinder honors
- Pathfinder investiture
- Pathfinder campouts

While definitely more specific than "Pathfinder" alone, these are also considered **broad-match keywords,** as they can still have a wide variety of subtopics. They're certainly good ideas, and posts on these topics can be helpful for your audience. However, they're harder to rank highly in Google search results without further specificity.

Let's say there's a burgeoning trend to create Pathfinder blogs. The broad topic of Pathfinder leadership is now a highly competitive arena. How do you get your blog to stand out? Considering the clear, central purpose of your ministry is a useful exercise for most types of digital content, but you'll quickly need to distinguish how you'll provide something different from the competition.

2) Refine your topic.

You have to get more specialized in your focus, so start brainstorming **"niche topics"**— subtopics within the broad subjects of Pathfinders, meetings, honors and campouts that people might be searching for information about. Some of these might be:

- Pathfinder knot-tying honor
- Pathfinder winter campouts
- Pathfinder club meeting activities
- Pathfinder Bible Experience prep
- Pathfinder Oshkosh fundraising ideas

These are considered **[long-tail keywords](#)**, or keyphrases. Long-tail keywords are low volume and highly focused search queries that **tend to convert visitors to engaged readers/followers exceptionally well.**

You can also start brainstorming possible blog, social media and video posts for these subtopics and long-tail keywords:

- How to teach knot-tying to Pathfinders
- Make your Pathfinder investiture fun and memorable
- Top 10 activities for Pathfinder campouts
- Tips for teaching Pathfinders with disabilities
- Preparing your Pathfinders for a Pathfinder Bible Experience
- Best Pathfinder fundraising ideas to cover Oshkosh expenses

3) Test your topic.

Start by googling your topics, exploring related words or phrases, and coming up with post ideas. **Then ask yourself the following questions:**

- What exists already?
- Can you improve on what's already written?
- Are there certain aspects of the topic that aren't already covered in depth (or at all)?
- How are other users responding to this competing content? Review their comments on posts.

This is your first peek at your opportunities to enter the discussion.

Maybe you find that the knot-tying honor already has several articles that are well-written and popular. There are many positive comments on those posts. Therefore, another topic would be more effective in making your content stand out in search results.

However, maybe there's one particular knot you don't feel other writers have explained very well, even though the rest of the post is good. Maybe you've found a couple comments on other blogs about how they'd like more information on the hunter's bend. You might then decide to write a post titled "How to teach the hunter's bend knot."

This is a simple example of how research and testing can help shape meaningful content creation.

4) Test some more.

Here's where dedicated keyword research tools come in.

These tools access data that tells how many people are searching for a certain keyword or keyphrase (**search volume**), as well as how much content already exists about that keyword (**competition**). The sweet spot is when you find a word or phrase that has high search volume and low competition.

Here's an example from **Google Keyword Planner**:

Keyword (by relevance)	Avg. monthly searches		Competition
seventh day advent...	40,500		Low
sda	12,100		Low
seventh day advent...	14,800		Low
sda church	4,400		Low
7th day adventist	14,800		Low
sda songs	260		Low
adventist church	2,900		Low
seventh day advent...	5,400		Low

Many keyword research tools provide a ratio of search volume and competition. Some tools require a paid subscription, but some are completely free and offer similar data. These free keyword tools may also show related keywords or phrases, which can be helpful for determining good content ideas. Overall, you'll get a general idea of what people are searching for, enabling you to create content that will connect your ministry with the needs and interests of your audience.

5) Create content from keyword research.

Once you've utilized these tactics and tools, it's time to use this knowledge for your content planning. Keyword research does more than just tell you which words to use. It tells you which topics are popular, which topics are competitive and what your best content opportunities may be.

This is good news! This means the organizational methods you learned for writing essays and research papers in school will now pay off in a practical way. For blogs and websites, begin by

writing an introduction to a topic (one webpage). Then, cover the topic (another webpage), and then cover related topics (more separate webpages) or background information (another separate webpage or two). It's essentially writing an outline, and each section of the outline is a webpage. Blogs organized like this score highly in both search engine visibility and user-friendliness. For a good example, visit **sdadata.org/seo**. From a visitor's perspective, this streamlines navigation within a specific topic. But be careful not to take this concept to the extreme, creating a confusing maze of short pages.

Remember that relevant topics and strong topic coverage have a stronger influence on search engine ranking than using individual words or phrases repetitively. The algorithm rewards quality writing and presentation.

However, keywords do still matter!

Keyword research helps us know what words and phrases people are using. We still want to use those words and phrases as often as we can on a page—*naturally*. If it sounds hokey to keep repeating a phrase, find another way to say it that means the same thing. Overall, you still want the content to read as naturally and conversationally as possible, as if you were telling this information to a friend. **Click here** for tips on how to write conversationally.

Here are tips for thorough topic coverage in natural language that can be adapted for a variety of content types:

- If you were telling your friend about Pathfinder knots because you'd done the research and knew they were interested in teaching this honor, you'd certainly use the proper names of each knot and common nicknames or synonyms.
- You'd also provide context for how you learned to master each knot and highlight trickier parts of the learning process.
- You'd give advice regarding the best time to use one knot over others.
- You'd highlight common mistakes people make when trying to determine which knot to use.
- Then, if you had a rope and video camera (or smart phone), you'd do a demonstration.
- You'd summarize the main ideas and conclude knot-tying is important and the reason so many knots exist is because they all serve a unique purpose.
- After that, you might ask if your friend had any questions.

Work your way through a topic, creating as much applicable content as possible over multiple digital media posts and platforms. Content organization techniques that may help you include outlines, topic trees, bubble graphs etc. Using these as your foundation for content creation helps you determine topical goals, objectives and key takeaways, and makes the whole writing process easier.

Content Evangelism Strategy

When it comes to digital evangelism and discipleship, content is made to inform, educate and inspire—to attract and nurture a loyal audience that connects with your ministry's message. Ultimately, your goal is to support their growth in their spiritual journey.

The currency of content marketing (or, in our case, evangelism) is ACT: Authority, Credibility and Trustworthiness (though we should add "Empathy" to this list, especially when dealing with spiritual topics and life lessons).

Use multiple forms of content to maximize your organization's ability to get picked up by Google's search algorithms and further engage your audience**.** Remember, certain forms of content will perform better with some audiences than others. By diversifying your content creation strategy, you optimize your reach and increase your impact across a variety of demographics.

Here are the four major components that work together in a comprehensive content creation process:

> **Strategy—Defining your** ministry's purpose, goals and niche opportunities to target. Effective strategies outline topic coverage and evaluate means of distribution, measurement and analysis.

> **Copy—The words** within the content. What messages are conveyed to your audience? How can the language best reflect the culture of the medium and the target audience so the desired meaning can be best understood? Remember, good communication is when we speak so our intended audience not only hears our message, but also understands its intended meaning or purpose.

> **Imagery—Pictures,** videos, icons and graphics. What's your visual theme? What emotional response or mood are your trying to evoke? What perception(s) of your brand will your audience develop based on the images you utilize?

> **Medium/Media—**The final home(s) for copy and imagery content. Where will it live? Your website? An app? Another website? Various social media platforms?

As you continue through this section, consider how each of the following elements will fit into the above four categories.

Most Popular Types of Online Content

Text

The written word is the foundation of any type of content, and, therefore, this is where we must begin. Ideas are usually written first—whether in the form of notes, scripts or outlines—before they're turned into anything else. Even in visual media like video, written content often accompanies and supports other content types. When you set your content evangelism goals, you'll want to prioritize quality writing.

Keep in mind, however, that good academic writing isn't the same as good *content* writing or *copy*writing. Writing for digital environments is much more straightforward, casual, conversational and concise.

The most common forms of written content online are:

- **Website copy**, as in the text found throughout your organization or ministry website. A thorough outline or bubble diagram is a must for planning website content. Each page should have a clear purpose made obvious in the headline and introductory sentences. Typically, you'll start with writing copy for the following standard pages: "Home," "About," "Services" and "Contact Us." You'll expand from there, depending on your type of ministry.

  The more high-quality content your website has, the more likely it is to show up in search results for topics concerning your mission—especially if it has a blog.

- **[Blogs](#)**, or a consistently updated collection of topical articles. The word *blog* originated in the word *weblog*, back when blogs were more like online journals for individuals posting opinions or recipes, documenting their parenting journey etc. Now blogs are used individually and commercially to engage in conversation and inform (or persuade) readers.

  Many blogs have inspired the formation of online communities, especially if they prominently link to their corresponding social media profiles on Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter etc. Many commercial websites also leverage blogs to build or grow a community around brand values. **[If an organization's blog contains useful or thought-provoking information and is properly promoted](#)**, it can skyrocket in online influence. Often, this increases audience conversions (taking a desired action).

- **Landing pages** or a stand-alone page dedicated to one important message, campaign and/or call to action. It's more than just a page where users happen to land after a search. Landing pages are where visitors are directed via a website link, social media post, paid advertising campaign, email button etc. , for the purpose of taking a specific

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action. A landing page is where a visitor would be directed to learn about a specific campaign, cause or opportunity, and is designed to encourage them to get involved or sign up for a special offer. The call to action would ask them to enter an email address (or other information) in exchange for something like:

- A subscription to your newsletter on marriage

- Registration for a webinar or upcoming event on healthy eating

- The opportunity to sign up to meet with a local Bible worker or pastor

- A "lead magnet," such as a free e-book (or physical book) on a topic of interest, such as "What happens when we die?"

The primary purpose of landing pages should be to gather email addresses and other contact information for your marketing list and analytic data on how many people are interested in what you're offering. With the right promotional strategy, landing pages are valuable tools for growing your digital influence.

Landing pages can also help your organization increase registrations, sign-ups, downloads, purchases etc. When applicable, build in buzzwords that create a sense of urgency or exclusivity that urge visitors to take action or that make them feel special.

- **Email content. [Email marketing](#)** is still a key player when it comes to optimizing your digital influence. While this content is not indexed by search engines, it serves a vital function in nurturing the relationship your ministry builds with its audience. It helps to grow an actively engaged digital following across multiple mediums and platforms, which boosts your SEO.

  However, for your message to have an impact, your audience must first open your email. Strategically written subject lines convince the reader to *open* your email. And once they do, the email content should be written as concisely and in as straightforward a manner as possible, as you only have seconds to engage readers and pique their interest.

  Most email marketing content is in the form of e-newsletters that keep your community informed on news, events, resources, new content etc. Emails may be notifications of new blog posts, or sometimes, email campaigns can be an educational series in and of themselves.

  Think about what you get in your inbox. Maybe you're on an email list that sends you a daily devotional. Whatever type of email you receive, understand that careful thought (hopefully) went into how that content was presented. Email content is intentionally designed to keep readers engaged and feeling special so they don't wander down to the footer to click "unsubscribe."

- **Testimonials.** This content features member/participant stories and testimonies that promote your mission, message, event or cause. Storytelling remains central to evangelism because we're drawn to the narrative of someone "just like us" experiencing a problem, seeking the right solution, trying this and trying that and finally discovering how to overcome the problem.

  Testimonials allow your ministry to be the "great discovery," demonstrating that it can help people succeed and find a happy ending to their story. Around the testimonial, you can highlight your mission, what your ministry provides that others don't and give people a glimpse of what their lives would be like if they embraced your ideas or joined your faith community.

- **E-books.** E-books educate readers (provide value) about a topic of interest. For an audience that might be looking for more depth, an e-book is a good option for going deeper than a blog or social media post allows. E-books can be terrific lead magnets as well. You can use landing pages to encourage people to sign up to receive e-books and physical books.

- **Social media posts**. Many organizations assign their best writers to engage with their followers on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn and various niche-specific platforms. Social media writing requires short, punchy messaging that encourages discussion, inspires shares or includes an enticing call to action that directs to a landing page, blog, registration page, full video etc. We'll discuss more about how to write effectively for social media and online audiences in the next section.

  Social media is today's word of mouth. It's the hub of online conversations, and if they want their posts read, liked and shared, social media writers need to write in word-of-mouth style, catering to the audience's interests, frustrations and convictions, and using strong, specific calls to action.

  Social media buzz can dramatically increase your ministry's web presence and impact. Not only is it a good source of active backlinks that can drive traffic to your website, but your social media profiles also can appear as additional search results—further elevating your findability online.

- **SEO titles and tags**, such as page titles, headlines (or H1s), **meta descriptions** (the intro blurb that appears underneath the page title and link in search results) and ALT tags. All of these are priorities for SEO copywriters, as the content found in these areas can make a big difference in which webpages get clicked on and rank in search results.

- **Microcontent, or "scannable web copy,"** which refers to headlines, subtitles, subheaders, lists, pulled quotes, sidebars, meta descriptions, calls to action etc. **These are very important**, and it's actually an area that demands the most creativity from the writer. The purpose is to make content more scannable, overcoming the "wall of text" issue that deters so many potential readers. Usually, microcontent convinces a reader to *start* reading and *keep* reading.

- **Transcripts** for videos or podcasts. Some sites post them verbatim, while others optimize them for readability and add microcontent. This can make the transcript just as popular as the recording, especially for those (**about 16% of web users**) who prefer to read content. It's highly valuable for making the content of the recording indexable for search engines. It's also a good way to promote accessibility for visitors who use screen readers. Accessible content is valued by search engines.

- **Checklists,** as they can stand alone as their own type of post. They can appeal to hurried readers who love scannability *and* to thorough readers who like the idea of a concrete list they can check off as they apply each step. Detailed checklists can also be effective lead magnets to the right audience, especially if your content teaches a complex process or provides ways to improve an existing skill or behavior.

Video

One-third of *all online activity* is spent watching video. This isn't surprising. People, as visual creatures, have been naturally drawn to online video and made it one of the most popular ways to consume content **for all ages!** The increase in mobile device usage has made video more popular as well. With a smaller screen, it's easier and faster to watch videos than to read text.

Video is a great enhancer. Have you noticed that, when you click on a news story, the page often has both the written article *and* the video from the newscast? Not only does it offer two options for content consumption, it adds a perception of depth and authority to the story.

Video content is particularly useful for educational topics, especially "how-to" tutorials and storytelling. Demonstrations, interviews, personal testimonies, time-lapses…some things are just better presented via video.

When it comes to **YouTube**, this platform has created its own niche of search engine optimization. YouTube's search algorithms rely heavily on keywords, titles, tags, thumbnail images, and microcontent, such as video descriptions and channel descriptions.

YouTube also measures "**watch time**," or how long a viewer watches before clicking away or going back to search results. The more time a video is watched, the better that video must be,

so YouTube ranks it higher in search results. Longer videos, especially if frequently watched until the end, get even more of a boost (on other social media platforms, however, it's still generally recommended to keep videos short, around three to five minutes or less).

Livestreams

With livestreaming, longer videos are always acceptable, regardless of platform. **Livestream**ing your events, whether on **Facebook Live**, YouTube, IGTV or your website, can widen your audience, further engage your existing audience and provide an archivable piece of **evergreen content** to repurpose later. This is great for church services, special performances, **programs at a school or university**, conference sessions and more.

Regarding SEO, livestreams can have a sizeable effect. Facebook **announced** its ranking algorithm favors live videos in searches. YouTube promotes YouTube Live videos. And even if your organization's livestreams are hosted off-site, it's another link to your content that could show up in search results—especially if you're live often!

Webinars (Online training or Bible studies)

Taking video up another notch, **webinars** are exclusive, live, educational presentations. Like the name suggests, webinars are a seminar broadcast over the web using tools such as **GoToMeeting**, **Zoom** or **Lifesize**. Participants are typically invited to webinars and provided with a private link.

While the webinar itself would not be indexed by search engines, its power to engage audiences boosts SEO through lead generation and by increasing engagement, trust and loyalty to your ministry. Webinars can provide a valuable service to your constituents when used to teach useful information (such as tips to improve your marriage), provide background on a popular issue, or facilitate live online discussions. They can also be an effective and convenient way to host digital Bible studies for small groups, allowing face-to-face interaction and relationship building regardless of location.

Images

While the right pictures can elicit emotion, the right designs can inspire action and highlight strategic details. Careful planning is necessary to make sure the images you've chosen indeed emphasize the intended emotion. It must be clear what the picture is portraying, and it should look genuine, not like a cliché corporate **stock photo.**

Used sparingly, stock photography can be a great resource to enhance your ministry's brand online, and it's easy to find free stock images at **pixabay**, **pexels**, **unsplash** and **free-images.com**. **Click here** for more free or low-cost stock photography and design resources.

For websites, **hero images** (the large, single images that dominate the top area of a website) continue to trend. These pictures must be high enough resolution to avoid appearing pixelated (about 1,600 pixels wide), but low enough resolution to avoid slowing down the site's load time.

For other images that appear on your website, stick to file sizes under 250 kilobytes if possible. **Learn more** about image best practices for church websites.

For each image on your website, blog or Instagram profile, make sure to apply **ALT text**, which is indexed by search engines to determine what the picture is about. It also acts as text that can be read by screen readers to tell visually impaired Internet users what pictures are on a page.

Infographics

When explaining a process in text, an accompanying visual is a must.

If, when discussing your topic, you find yourself saying, "Here, let me show you..." or "Why don't I just draw this out?" an infographic would probably come in handy.

Infographics illustrate each step or point of a process and include short, straightforward text to accompany imagery, making complicated information easier to understand.

Designers and writers must work closely to create an infographic with a clear direction so the eye knows what to read first and where to go next.

If you're short a graphic designer, **free tools** like **Canva** can help you create simple infographics, which add a splash of color to your page, post or feed while informing and engaging your audience in a creative way.

Infographics don't just make your page more pleasant to look at—people actually *search for infographics* on certain topics. They're also shared frequently on social media. Think of creative ways to use infographics for ministry, such as mapping out "How to Study the Bible for Beginners."

Podcasts

Audio content can include interviews, sermons, vocal essays, monologues, presentations, seminars and more. Podcasts created from this audio content should be distributed as widely as possible, including on your website, iTunes and other hosting platforms so users can subscribe. Even if you're already hosting through a provider such as **SoundCloud**, **Blubrry**, **Google Drive** or **archive.org**, it's worth uploading to other hosting platforms in addition. These simple audio files are a highly shareable piece of content people can listen to while driving, walking, exercising or cleaning their garage.

Having podcasts with your ministry's name in the title, or hosted by a prominent personality associated with your ministry, can do wonders for brand awareness, which ultimately benefits overall SEO.

Interactive content (quizzes, polls, calculators, etc.)

This type of content requires audience participation, making their interaction with your ministry far more memorable.

You've probably seen various character quizzes on Facebook or Twitter. They're highly shareable because, to the audience, it feels like they're sharing information about *themselves*, not the organization that designed the quiz.

Interactive content that strives to be helpful or practical might include assessment-type quizzes, calculators, interactive graphs or charts, or polls and surveys. They can also help you with demographic info gathering for your ministry's strategic planning. Remember, anything that deepens engagement also boosts SEO! It's always beneficial to keep people on your website longer.

Many tools can help you create interactive content, including **qzzr**, **SurveyMonkey**, **Doodle**, **Vizia** and more.

Courses

This type of content can be important for building what Google refers to as an organization's E−A−T (Expertise, Authority, Trustworthiness). Simultaneously, courses provide yet another way for your audience to consume your content. If your organization is qualified to teach even a simple skill that has value in your audience's life (healthy cooking or practical discipleship tips), creating courses can bolster your content marketing and SEO and become a relevant resource for your site visitors. Not only can this type of content boost your credibility, but it also can empower your audience for positive change.

Beginning Content Strategy Worksheet

Filling out this structural worksheet can guide your brainstorming process and help you solidify your content strategy.

1. **Which topics do you wish to cover in-depth for your content evangelism?**

2. **What goals and objectives do you have for your content evangelism?**

3. **What keywords relate to your topic? Brainstorm below.**

4. **Run your topic and keyword ideas through a keyword research tool. What results do you find?**

5. **Are the terms you thought would be popular showing high search volume?**

6. **Which keywords show the most favorable ratio of search volume to competition?**

7. **Using what you've determined from your keyword research, what's the main topic that will guide your content development?**

8. **List a few substantial subtopics that can branch out from your main topic.**

9. **Create a "topic tree" or bubble diagram to outline your content's topical progression.**

10. **What possible content titles come to mind? Brainstorm below.**

11. **For which of these subtopics would it be most useful to invest in a visual element, such as a video, infographic or image?**

12. **Which platforms best suit these topics and/or content types? Which platforms would best reach your target audience?**

13. **Start drafting content assignments and/or a publishing schedule, include guidelines for visual content, and describe the places and forms it will be published in.**

How to Write for Online Audiences

Even the best writers must adapt their style for online writing.

Copy written for an online audience may seem too simple, even formulaic, since this type of writing is more casual and straightforward. However, years of research prove its effectiveness in the digital space.

Bottom line: The goal of writing online content is to connect with the reader, not elevate the author. It's about meeting the reader where they are and giving them the information they seek, all while "desiring their good" (**sound familiar? MH, 143**).

In other words, it's not about us; it's about those we're seeking to serve. As you read this section, remember:

Good communication is when you communicate in a way your audience understands.

Our goal is always to uplift Christ first, which means putting oneself aside in all aspects of ministry and prioritizing the needs of those we serve. We should endeavor to meet people where they are, on the platforms where they spend their time, in the way they prefer to consume content and with language they can connect with.

7 PRINCIPLES FOR WRITING STRONG ONLINE CONTENT

1) Remember the four primary purposes for online writing (content evangelism).

Effective online writing has at least one of the following primary goals. This is especially true for content marketing/evangelism, which requires consistent production and distribution of quality content to attract, engage and nurture an audience.

The four purposes are:

- **To inform** your readers about a topic of interest, providing new information—or old information—with a unique twist, new application or original perspective. Aimed at providing value, this type of content makes the reader feel like they've become more knowledgeable because of engaging with your content.
- **To educate** your readers with answers to questions or solutions to problems. This can demonstrate authority while providing a service to your audience. Most educational article titles start with "How," "How to" or "Learn."
- **To entertain** people searching for something lighthearted to pass the time or who need a pick-me-up. This type of content can even inform or educate in a fun way, but without demanding too much brainpower. Here, you'll want to utilize forms of content such as quizzes, games, polls, short videos, memes or humorous writing.
- **To inspire** your readers to take action, such as changing a habit, sharing a post, registering for your event, signing up for a free resource, supporting your cause or donating. Inspiring content targets emotions, stirring up feelings of agitation that could be positive (excited, emboldened) or negative (angry, shocked). However, this type of content must be used carefully. Always strive to be realistic and authentic.

2) Write like you're talking to a friend: conversationally.

The best online writing is conversational yet straightforward. Think about how you'd explain something new to someone you know, and write just like you'd speak (minus tics, fillers and mannerisms).

You wouldn't waste time on flowery, poetic words, and you'd try to relate your concept to your friend's life. You'd be up front about why this subject might be of interest and how it could benefit them in particular. The number-one reason people share content online is because they feel it will improve the lives of others. As digital evangelists, our goal should be to create sharable content that benefits the lives of others.

In addition, you shouldn't spend a lot of time on technical details or bells and whistles, unless you know your friend is interested in that. Instead, you'd focus on how this topic will affect them personally.

Getting to your point early—in the headline, subtitle and opening paragraph—is key.

Think about that conversation with a friend. Have you ever been in a conversation where your counterpart struggled to get to the point?

They're over-explaining peripheral details, giving too many examples or metaphors, or trying to come up with language that softens the blow of an edgy idea or uncomfortable topic instead of outright saying what they mean. You'd quickly realize how much time is wasted, and you'll wish you'd asked someone else!

That's how an online reader feels when content doesn't get to the point.

They'll click "back" and go to the next link in the search results.

Tips for writing conversationally
- **Use:**
  - Simple, easy-to-understand language.
  - Words with fewer syllables. Words with more syllables reduce readability.
  - *You*, *your* and *I*. This makes it seem like you're speaking to your audience personally.
  - Active voice, not passive.
  - Examples, similes and metaphors (but don't go overboard).
  - Contractions.
- **Be sure to:**
  - Tell stories. These are easy to remember and more engaging.
  - Keep it short and digestible. Break long sentences into several short ones. Long sentences will reduce readability. Blog posts, for example, should be no more than 800 to 1,200 words.
  - Ask questions.
  - Write to your target audience.

- **Finally …**
  - Don't ramble.

Fancy, academic writing doesn't work for digital media. Aim to write simply, honestly and conversationally.

3) Evoke an emotional response.
Reaching your target audiences in a deep, emotionally compelling way is key to effective communication, powerful evangelism (marketing) and creating authentic connections. In the case of mission work and cause-based initiatives, the strategic placement of key words can help facilitate deeper thought and increase impact on readers, driving them to action.

The best headlines and teaser lines receive an Emotional Marketing Value (EMV) score of over 40. In other words, the best online writing incorporates high-impact words in a way that is quickly understood by the reader and evokes an emotional response. We are, after all, highly emotional beings, who often make decisions based on what directly affects us. In a world of

competing priorities and overwhelming need, this can be a useful tool to help your message stand out among the digital clutter. Afterall, your message must be read to have impact.

The emotional richness of copy is evaluated based on three categories:

Intellectual	Empathetic	Spiritual
Words that are effective when offering products and services that require reasoning or careful evaluation.	Words that bring out profound, strong, positive emotional reactions.	Words with the strongest potential for influence and often appeal to people at a very deep emotional level.

Source: aminstitute.com/headline

Gorgeous2God example: Life is tough, but you're not alone. Join our community of young Christian women tackling real issues from a godly perspective.

- **EMV = 42.86%**

Seminar Example: Feeling defeated? Marriage is hard, and you're struggling. We're here for you. Join us for a free seminar. Click here to register in advance and get a free book with 5 practical tips for improving your marriage.
- **EMV = 50%** for "Feeling defeated? Marriage is hard, and you're struggling. We're here for you. Join us for a free seminar."

Visit **aminstitute.com/headline** to learn more and check the EMV score of your messages and headlines.

Remember to boldly make your claim up front, then use the rest of your content to back it up. If the point you're making is a bit jarring, that's not necessarily bad. Plus, by getting to the point early, you tell your audience why they should prioritize your content over someone else's. People are busy. State the value up front, and then deliver on that promise.

Example: Feeling depressed? You're not alone. 10 ways a relationship with Jesus will dramatically improve your life.

- **EMV = 50%**

Example: You probably know someone who has been abused. You CAN do something. Learn the signs and red flags. Know what to do.

- **EMV = 45%**

We're emotional beings, and the most effective writing tugs at these emotions without going overboard and *without being manipulative or sensational*.

4) Move your reader to action.

The heart of **copywriting** is persuading readers to take action.

Sometimes, when we think of marketing copy, we think about those spammy e-mail subject lines that over-promise and over-guarantee, or we cringe at clickbait headlines for videos or blog posts.

Well, if sales copy puts a bad taste in your mouth, keep in mind that you're thinking of *bad* sales copy. **When copywriting is done conversationally**, with the reader's feelings, interests and beliefs/core values in mind, it can be incredibly effective. Remember, people are drawn to **authenticity and honesty**. Church messaging should always demonstrate the highest level of integrity.

Define the problem

Throughout a piece of writing, a reader is moved to action by **introducing a problem the reader needs to solve**. They want something, they're confused about something, or they don't know the next step in a process.

You outline the problem, describe the implications of this problem and then give them the solution—your resource, your solution, your method, your information etc.

Benefits vs. features

When describing how great your resources/belief/method/service/information is, don't just list its features—describe the benefits it will provide to your reader and why those benefits are in their best interest. People want to know *why* before they take time to understand *how*.

For example:

> "Buy our hibiscus tea!"
>
> *Why?*
>
> "Our blend has more antioxidants."
>
> *Ok…what does that mean?*
>
> "Antioxidants decrease free radicals in your bloodstream."

Ok…what does that mean?

"Antioxidants keep the cells in your body from breaking down!"

Ok…but what does that mean for me?

"Well, this tea has been shown to help lower high blood pressure, according to the American Heart Association's 2008 study."

That sounds pretty important. How does it taste?

"Great! Especially with honey!"

Well, all right then—why didn't you say so?

When we're personally invested in the subject of our writing, we can get lost in the details. Remember that the readers aren't there yet. They need to see a connection between what they're searching for and what you have to offer.

For example:

"You've been diagnosed with high blood pressure, and it can be tough to give up some of the foods and beverages you've enjoyed for years—like coffee, black tea and soda."

You speak the truth. It's like you've been there, man!

"But what if there was a soothing hot drink that could be just as tasty AND help lower your blood pressure simultaneously?"

Is there? That would be so helpful right now! Tell me more!

Superperfect Tea Company offers premium hibiscus tea. And, according to a 2008 study by the American Heart Association, it lowers blood pressure in pre-hypertensive and mildly hypertensive adults.

I could use that! How does it taste?

This ruby-red herbal tea has a slight tart flavor reminiscent of cranberries. Add a little honey, and it delivers a light, tangy "bite" that can pick you up in the afternoon or calm you down in the evening.

Mmm. Can I try some?

Notice how the problem was outlined in the introduction, with the primary benefits immediately following. Meet the readers where they are, and *then* tell how your amazing product is just what they need…and why.

Now, if we frame this in the context of ministry, your product is your message, which may be hope, wholeness, health, lifestyle, truth that answers their deepest longing, answers to their physical/spiritual needs, sound advice and more.

Calls to action (CTA)

Once you've "sold" the product by connecting with your readers' needs, it's time to tell them to buy it! In ministry, this may mean subscribing to your newsletter, registering for a seminar or health clinic, coming to an event or joining a small group dedicated to a particular topic.

Don't leave them hanging. They *want* to take action, and the clearer and more straightforward the call, the more likely they are to follow through.

Copywriting isn't complete without a call to action. It doesn't have to be overly clever or cute; it just needs to make sense. Here are the most common calls to action that appear in online marketing:

- Order now!
- Download here.
- Watch this video.
- Join today!
- Donate to [insert organization name] and get a free travel mug!
- Listen now!
- Register now, and get a free [insert item]!
- Start your free trial today!
- Secure your spot!
- Get the full version!
- Access exclusive information!
- Sponsor a child today!
- Book your appointment now!
- Find out if you qualify!

5) Tell stories.

To share stories is human and approachable. Storytelling is a powerful means of communication online because:

Stories never tell us what to think, they give us something to think about.
Stories don't tell us what to feel; they cause us to feel.

A great way to add creativity to the elements of formulaic copywriting is through storytelling. People can't help but be interested in stories. As humans, we want to know how things turn out!

Not only is storytelling a powerful means of communication, but a vital tool for sharing a message of hope. Jesus told parables because truths revealed through stories are an effective way to reach people with thought-provoking topics that are easy to remember. We, like Jesus, should become expert storytellers. Storytelling connects people and gets them engaged and interested in each other. Social media is people connecting with people to create a collective human story. Our job is to frame that story within the context of our faith. We can provide the answers and connection online users are looking for, if we're strategic and intentional with what we write and the content we create.

Stories can be in the form of case studies, testimonials, video retellings or simple anecdotes that describe how a person—just like the reader—struggled with a specific problem. Maybe they tried several things until finally discovering what really worked.

Where can you find real stories? As a ministry, you might already have them. Think of the people you've served. Think of the events you've held. Think of the testimonies your constituents have shared with you. How does their journey reflect a common need or experience within your target audience?

Going deeper, what analogies or metaphors can you draw from what you do? Can it be related to common daily life concerns? How does your ministry offer practical solutions?

Write a story you'd share with your audience that could come across as relatable and relevant to their core values or needs.

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

6) Know how to use evergreen vs. time-sensitive content.

There are two primary categories to consider when crafting your overall website content: time-sensitive content and evergreen content.

While, indeed, simple concepts, when it comes to SEO, content marketing and user experience, there are strategies to consider in the implementation of these two content types.

Announcements, breaking news, special offers or promotions, seasonal content and events are time sensitive by nature. It's good to have some time-sensitive information on your website and social media—if you consistently keep it updated. That demonstrates to site visitors that your organization is active and aware.

It's more frustrating to visit a website/profile with out-of-date information than to go to a website/profile with no time-sensitive information at all. If an event from a couple months ago is still headlining, how can the visitor trust that the rest of your information is current?

Evergreen content, however, refers to elements on your page without an expiration date. It's static content that doesn't change (much) over time. It doesn't need to. It's written to stay relevant and useful to your audience regardless of when they read it.

Special care should be taken when creating this copy, so it will stay relevant for as long as possible with minimal upkeep.

Effective messaging, whether you're publishing content regularly on a blog, posting on social media or sending emails, requires new, helpful content to stay fresh and current. However, that doesn't mean each piece of content must be time-sensitive. You can cultivate your content to be evergreen and timely.

To keep new content evergreen, the key is to stick with topics, not dates.

While some of your social media or email content may contain time-sensitive information, they can link back to an evergreen blog post that covers a related topic thoroughly and that you periodically update as information changes.

To help your posts, pages and articles stay evergreen in SERPs (search engine results pages), try removing the publication date from your post (unless it's necessary). For the many seekers who check the date on webpages before clicking on them in search results, removing the date altogether can help present your content as timeless.

If you're posting weekly sermons as videos or podcasts, the first priority to keep these elements evergreen is to title each one topically rather than with the date of the service (i.e., "Does Prayer Work?" vs. "Sermon 4-25-17 on Prayer"). Note that you can still show the date in the subtitle or descriptions for members that search by date, but the title should be presented like a headline.

The topics covered in evergreen content must be enduring, discussing common experiences of the human condition (job interview best practices, dealing with grief and loss), timeless skills

(how to pray, how to change a tire) or opinion/discussion pieces. (Which translation of the Bible is best? Is it better to exercise in the morning or evening?)

7) Find ways of repurposing content to diversify your presence across multiple platforms and channels.

We've covered the **[different types of content](#)** that can be created to reach a variety of content consumers and what makes content "evergreen," or relevant past its publication date.

These principles can come in handy in the beginning stages of your content evangelism strategy *and* when repurposing content. Instead of creating a different piece of content for each platform you publish to, you can repurpose one core content piece to work across a variety of channels.

Here's an example of how you can make one blog post explode into ten different pieces of shareable content:

You, a nationally renowned sandwich artist, wrote a winning post for your sandwich-making fans.

- **Publish blog post on your website:** "5 Creative Ways to Slice Sandwiches for Dazzling Hors D'oeuvre Trays."
- **Create teasers** for your blog post for your followers on:
  - **Facebook**
  - **Twitter**
  - **Instagram**
  - **Pinterest**
  - **Snapchat**
  - **Etc.**
- Create an **infographic**, illustrating the step-by-step process of each fancy slicing technique.
- Put together a **slide deck** for further details on each step of sandwich-slicing artistry.
- Announce this fantastic post to your **email list.**
  - You could even create an exclusive **autoresponder series** (emails sent automatically to a mailing list based on specific rules/or subscriber behavior at defined intervals) that focuses even more in-depth on each of the five sandwich slicing methods.
- Host a **webinar or an IGTV live video** about the five slicing strategies for aspiring sandwich artists, with a Q&A afterward.

- Turn that webinar into an evergreen **video** that will live on your YouTube or Vimeo channel.
- Host a **podcast**, where you gather with a fellow sandwich aficionado or two and discuss these five slicing techniques.
- Type **transcripts** of the podcast discussion for those who prefer reading.
- **Turn your feedback into more shareable content.** Are you getting lots of comments on your blog post, social media channels or videos? Did anyone submit ideas or questions? Publish a follow-up post or video that showcases your followers' pictures of their own slicing results, blooper videos or new discoveries. Or create a quick video to share tips about part of the third slicing method that your virtual protégés are having a tough time with.

Repurposing content can allow a specific topic to be discussed online longer by spreading out the publication of each repurposed item. Furthermore, the same topic repurposed into ten different forms (example above) can create a bigger splash as it makes its online debut. This strategy creates more options for Google to index, increasing your chances of showing up prominently in search results, and it also allows your content to show up in the search engine results for various social media platforms.

How to Create Strong Social Media Posts

While **understanding your audience** and **developing a content strategy** takes a lot of effort, constructing your social media posts is actually pretty straightforward and mostly formulaic. Once you have your content planned and your target audience determined, there are basic principles to follow to maximize effectiveness across any channel. Even as technology changes, these principles will largely stay the same. In this section, we'll cover how to create posts and write messages for social media that effectively communicate with and engage your target audience.

Main principles for creating a post (also applies to paid ads)
- Get to the point, and focus your message.
- **Less IS MORE** (think snackable content).
- Include a call to action (should reflect goals/objectives).
- Include a link (so taking action is easy).
- Limit text in images, and use high-quality images.
- Video is king.
- Use the lingo of the platform.
- Be honest; no bait-and-switch.
- Include captioning on videos and always provide context.
- Tag relevant accounts. This increases your reach and encourages partners to share.
- Use relevant hashtags.

Visit **SDAdata.org/social-media-resources** for a complete cheat sheet to write for specific social media platforms.

Guidelines for choosing good visuals (also applies to paid ads):
- Keep it visual; less text is more.
- **Optimize your images** for each platform.
- High quality (take your own or use stock images).
- Consider the Rule of Thirds.
- Invoke an emotional response/tell a story.
- People are attracted to bright colors and group shots.
- Keep a consistent look, brand and color/font palette (see **Branding for Ministry**).
- Be creative.
- Use contrast to help your image stand out.
- Keep it simple.

It's okay if you don't have a designer on your team to help you create compelling visuals. While proper Photoshop and design training is a valuable asset in communication and should be utilized if at all possible, you're not limited to bad graphics, even if your skillset or resources are limited.

There are many FREE or low-cost web-based tools out there like **Canva** with pre-made templates for social media images. If you're short on high-quality images, there are also **stock photo resources** online where you can get professional images for free or very low cost.

When laying out your images and designs, utilize the Rule of Thirds. This guideline divides an image into nine equal parts. Important elements of the image are placed along (or near) intersecting lines. This helps create tension, energy and increases interest.

Visit **SDAdata.org/branding-image-design-resources** for guidance on free and low-cost stock images, design tips and branding guides.

General Tips for Getting Your Social Media Posts Noticed

- **List posts perform well.**
  This content allows for a highly shareable headline for an article or video: "7 Ways to Reach Young Adults," for example. People love that list posts are highly skimmable and offer clear takeaways. This is what we consider "snackable content." *Snackable content* is short content that is easily understood, quickly consumed and memorable.
- **Use *you* and *your* frequently.**
  These words tell a person's brain that this message is about them—which draws them in.
- **Enable your readers to envision a better life.**
  If readers believe they'll learn how to do something better, get an answer to that nagging question or have their mind blown, they'll be more likely to stop, pay attention and share.
- **Slightly alter headlines for different channels.**
  By reflecting the culture and expectations of each platform, you're more likely to connect with your audience.
- **Tug at emotions. Validate people, and let them know you're here to help.**
  Acknowledge your audience's felt needs, and tell them how your content addresses their situation. Create conversations, answer questions, solve problems and address their pain points. Ask questions; even venture assumptions, such as "Feeling stuck?" or "Life is tough." Then offer solutions. Do this without asking for anything in return. Build a relationship based on your service to the community. Refer to **element 3 in the previous section** on writing for online audiences.
- **Stay real and conversational.**
  When in doubt, write as though you're writing to a friend. Refer to **element 2 in the previous section** on writing for online audiences.

Example: Feeling defeated? Marriage is hard, and you're struggling. We're here for you. Join us for a free seminar. Click here to register in advance and get a free book with 5 practical tips for improving your marriage.

Guidelines for Choosing Hashtags

A hashtag is simply a way for people to search for posts on social media that have a common topic and to join or being a conversation. You may recognize it as the pound sign or if you're a musician, a sharp sign. Hashtags can be used in many platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. When searching for hashtags on a particular platform, like Twitter, your results will only be pulled from Twitter. To see posts with the same hashtag on other platforms, you must search them separately. Instagram posts with the highest number of engagements have 11 or more hashtags attached.

The ability to create a collective conversation has made hashtags a vital tool for reaching and engaging audiences that share a particular interest. **For maximum impact and reach, use a combination of three types of hashtags:**

- **Popular.** These are widely used or trending hashtags. You can find these in the trending section of Facebook and Twitter, or use sites like trendsmap.com. Make sure your hashtags will actually yield results—sometimes people make up hashtags that are never searched and, therefore, will not increase your reach. Instead, search for popular hashtags relevant to your post, and use them.

- **Niche hashtags.** These hashtags are less common and tend to reach a targeted audience. For example, to reach the Adventist community, you should use hashtags like #Adventist, #SeventhdayAdventist, #NADadventist, #SDA, #SDAchurch and #HappySabbath.

- **Branded hashtags.** These hashtags should be unique to your brand, not used by anyone else and reflect your message in less than 20 characters. Branded hashtags are a great way to reinforce your brand, start a themed conversation and create a curated stock of content that tells your story. They also enable your audience to engage with you, contribute to the conversation and become part of a collective story. #DigitalEvangelism and #enditnowNAD are examples of branded hashtags, and you can use them to engage directly with the associated ministries.

TIP: Hashtags aren't used much on Facebook. The platform's current search capability (as of 2020) isn't polished and, often, relevant posts don't show up when searched. It doesn't necessarily hurt to add a couple hashtags on Facebook to help people understand what you're talking about or reinforce branding. In general, take advantage of hashtags on Instagram and Twitter.

Download the Hashtag library to help with your hashtag strategy.

Anatomy of a Strong Social Media Post

Use the following format to write a practice post for your ministry and brainstorm visuals. Follow this format for each platform the message will be posted to.

Message (Copy)

- Teaser language (one to three sentences)

  _____
  _____
  _____

- Call to action

  _____

- Link

  _____
  _____

- Relevant hashtags (if applicable for the platform)

  _____
  _____

- Relevant accounts to tag (if applicable for the platform)

  _____
  _____

Visual/media: Use the following space to determine if your visual is well suited to your message and goals. *(Applicable to either pictures or video.)*

- What mood or emotion are you trying to convey?

  _____
  _____

- What mood or emotion are you trying to evoke in your audience?

  _____
  _____

- What story are you trying to tell?

  _____
  _____
  _____

- Is the message of the visual focused and clear?

  _____

- Does your chosen visual tell a story? What is it? Does that story align with your message?
  _____
  _____
  _____

- Does your chosen visual fit your overall look and branding?
  _____
  _____

- Will your visual stand out in the newsfeed, stopping the viewer from scrolling past your message? What can you do to make it stand out?
  _____
  _____
  _____

- Is the visual clear and easy to see on a small screen?
  _____

- Is the visual easy to understand without much context?
  _____

- Is text on the image or video easy to read on a small screen?
  _____

- Does the visual help inspire the viewer to take a specific action?
  _____
  _____

Monitoring and Audience Engagement

Monitoring your social channels involves watching user engagement. When a post goes live, how many users engage with comments, likes and shares. Note how people react, and respond accordingly. If one post sparks a lot of conversation, consider making another post related to it as a follow up or elaboration about previous popular content.

The Proper Care and Feeding of Followers

Social media is a valuable tool for listening to the needs of your audience and building relationships. However, simply having a social media presence is not enough anymore. Your audience expects a response when they engage with you online—often within a few hours.

Your goal in using social media for ministry ultimately should be to understand and fulfill a need, making a tangible impact in the real world. This means listening and taking action on a daily basis.

How your online followers perceive your ministry influences their perception of not only the Adventist Church corporately, but God. Your digital voice may be the only opportunity your followers have to see Christ's love demonstrated in their lives.

Strong digital brands create connection and take a comprehensive approach to the member experience. Treat your audience members online as if you're talking with them face to face. Their online interactions with you should make them want to experience your faith/mission in person. When they come to you for that personal experience, it should be a continuation of the positive relationship you've built with them online.

Every opportunity to connect is an opportunity to advance the kingdom of God. Do not waste your digital influence. Social media provides a unique opportunity for long-term personal care that can enhance and strengthen the relationships you cultivate with members, as well as the community your ministry serves.

People search online for answers to their problems—what better place for the Church to engage them?

If someone approached you in person and told you about a struggle or loss, you'd respond, right? But when people pour out their hearts online to you or your ministry, are they getting a timely, meaningful response? Does your church or ministry have a team dedicated to responding to people online and providing a network of support? Not everyone is ready to walk through the doors of your church, but we can still show them God's love through the care we provide online.

Your digital content may answer some of their needs or questions, but not all. Be the voice that answers and engages with them in a meaningful way. This is what we call a 360° community care strategy. Like Christ, we should be willing and prepared to meet people where they are, and today, that is frequently online.

360° member/community care includes addressing the negative. By being actively engaged online, you have the opportunity to turn negatives into positives by addressing issues and resolving problems promptly. This is especially relevant to younger generations, who naturally turn to social media first to share their thoughts and feelings. Through a culture of online customer service and digital discipleship, you can build a reputation as an organization that truly cares about its members and the community it serves.

Nearly half (46%) of people have used social media to "call out" or complain about a business. That number jumps even higher when you slice the data by generation. Unsurprisingly, Millennials are quick to take their frustration to the keyboard—56% of them have complained or called out brands on social media. **That means that millennials are 43% more likely to call out a brand on social media than other generations ([sproutsocial](https://sproutsocial.com)).** Therefore, we should endeavor to be present in the digital spaces where millennials and younger generations are likely to express their dissatisfaction with religion, Church or the daily struggles of life. This affords us the opportunity to not only gain a better understanding of the challenges they face but also to intervene in a positive way that can prevent them from leaving the Church or bring them into a community of faith.

Do not underestimate the power of engagement. There's no ROI (return on investment) without it!

Invest the time. Build a committee of digital disciples who are available to respond to comments and messages online promptly, while being human. *Leads*, in marketing terms, are potential customers who have expressed interest in your product. In the context of digital missions, leads are still anyone who has expressed interest in your content. The beginning

signs of interest are people that maybe just clicked on one of your posts or watched one of your videos. The more someone engages with your content, the more information you can gather about them and, in turn, the stronger the lead they become. Remember that, although we use this formulaic language, each of these leads are real people. In any relationship, it takes time to get to know someone and trust them. We want to keep leads curious and interested until they trust our brand enough to become personally invested in your ministry's goals. This means engaging with a personal tone that conveys Christ-like care. It will pay dividends for your mission. By living out our mission online and exemplifying the character of Christ, we can become social media ambassadors for the Gospel who eagerly share our content and messages online.

Engagement Is a Personal Ministry Opportunity.
This is not a job for one person or just pastors. Engagement is a personal ministry opportunity for non-techie, nurturing individuals to be involved in digital discipleship and evangelism on an ongoing basis, from anywhere.

Leaders can divide their teams into three groups based on connections, interests and talents.
- People dedicated to connecting with church members online and responding to their needs
- People dedicated to responding to comments, questions and needs directed to the church in the digital space
- Trained digital disciples who intentionally build relationships with non-members online and look for opportunities to serve

Digital interactions should be treated like real-life conversations in which we respond to audience interactions, share community-generated content and like or react to comments. Engagers should follow relevant online conversations and actively participate in a Christ-like manner. Digital disciples should seek to understand their audience's needs and respond in a meaningful way. The goal is to break down the perceived barrier between the individual and your corporate brand. Strive to be as authentic and transparent as possible. This is how you build trust and authenticity.

Brands Are Communicated, Not Just Created
A brand is based entirely on a person's experience. Think holistically about your engagement strategy, and remember that evangelism is more effective when it's built on a relationship. Therefore, our online identity or Adventist brand and faith must go beyond what we know and the message we have to share; it must be based on how much we care if we're serious about

digital evangelism. Aim to create conversations and meaningful community that bridges the gap between the digital and real world. Then be prepared to meet in the real world.

There should be no disconnect between how a person is nurtured in the pews and how they're treated online, and vice versa.

Social media is an extension of our church brand and voice online. Our brand is how our church is perceived. Our online interactions with people should make them want to experience our faith/mission in person. Then, when they come for that on-site experience, it should be a continuation of the positive relationship you've built with them online. Therefore, your church greeters and hospitality teams are also part of the engagers team. They're the onsite church ambassadors, and the atmosphere they create is vital to the visitor/member experience.

How our online community perceives us influences their perception of not only the Adventist Church corporately but also God. Our digital voice may be the only opportunity they have to see Christ's love demonstrated in their life.

The Church should be the clear leader in people care.

Major corporations know that customer service is the key to long-term growth. Loyalty comes when organizations (brands) help people solve problems and address their felt needs.

Loyalty is created when brands help people solve problems and address their felt needs. The Church should be a clear leader in member and visitor experience as well as in people care. We should be using digital tools to understand perceptions and needs to determine the most meaningful ways to serve. The Gospel of Action is what speaks the loudest to young people. To build trust with this demographic, we must use our influence for tangible impact.

Investing time can make a huge difference in the health of the local church and its ability to effectively build relationships with the community it serves. When we use our social influence to listen and ask simple questions like, "Are you okay?" or "How can I help?", the intentionality behind our interactions becomes a powerful witnessing tool. Whether from a personal or ministry account, engaging in genuine conversations online is a means to live out Christ's example of meeting people where they are and tending to their needs. We embody the spirit of the good Samaritan every time we respond to a cry for help. A 360° community care strategy is driven by purposely reaching out to whoever we encounter online.

Practical Tips for Engagement

Let the members of your online community know through action that you're fully invested in their lives. This is a Biblical concept found in Romans 12 that can be translated to the modern world.

Don't just pretend to love others. **Really love them.** *Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. Love each other with genuine affection and take delight in honoring each other. Never be lazy but work hard and serve the Lord enthusiastically. Rejoice in our confident hope.* **Be patient in trouble and keep on praying.** *When God's people are in need, be ready to help them. Always be eager to practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you. Don't curse them; pray that God will bless them.* **Be happy with those who are happy, and weep with those who weep.** *Live in harmony with each other. Don't be too proud to enjoy the company of ordinary people. And don't think you know it all! Never pay back evil with more evil.* **Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honorable.** *Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone.*
– Romans 12:9−18, NLT

As digital disciples, we can live out Romans 12:15 online. Practically, this means when someone online expresses sadness, anxiety about a life challenge or excitement about a happy event, we can empathize with them. Engage with their post, or send a personal message to let them know you're with them along the way, that you're there if they need help. Be consistent and purposeful in your relationship building.

Jesus calls us to be a practical witness, one that puts Him on display in all aspects of our lives. Jesus sought first to fulfill people's needs; He then invited them to follow. We can use our digital and social influence to gain insights and focus on meeting the mental, physical and spiritual needs of those around us. Remember, what starts in the digital space can transfer into the real world. Once relationships and trust are built, we can extend our invitation to "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8, NIV). The gospel of action can further our ministry of hope and wholeness among an increasingly secular generation.

By embracing the attitude of a servant first and apologist second, light will shine through us to draw others to the God we represent. Be consistent in building relationships with others with

very different beliefs. Once they know how much you care, they're more likely to come and reason with you over truth.

Understanding that acceptance does not mean approval. What if we became known as people who listened and helped first—without conditions—and people who proactively seek ways to improve the lives of others in practical, meaningful ways, regardless of who they are, without judgement. What if the Church became a safe place to land, regardless of one's affiliation or interest in faith?

People share a surprising amount of information online. It's up to us to act on that information. Modern technology gives us the opportunity to reach into gated communities and closed-off hearts, allowing us to build bridges on common ground. Every post represents a real person, both their experiences and their needs. **What prayers can we answer by simply paying attention?**

The Lord is coming soon because God has made it possible for the gospel to reach the entire world. Digital disciples can change hearts and minds by living out Jesus both online and offline.

Develop a Relationship-first, Empathy-first Engagement Strategy

This means redefining our notion of success to include metrics outside of attendance and baptisms.

Examples of questions you can ask to gauge success
- How many times did you (or your team) share the love of Christ?
- How many conversations did you start or engage in on social media?
- How are you painting a more authentic picture of yourself, faith or the Church?
- How are you building relationships?
- Do you better understand the needs of those you're connecting with online?
- Have you found meaningful and practical ways to help people?

These questions represent personal ministry opportunities that anyone in the church can pursue through their social influence.

Invest the time to build a team. Build a committee of digital disciples who are available to respond to all online comments and messages to your ministry promptly and in a meaningful way, while being human. If someone sends your ministry an email or messages your ministry with a prayer request, challenging question or personal crisis, they should not have to wait more than one business day for a response. Even if you can't answer their question right away, it's vital to let them know you received their message, are praying for them and will have a response or resources for them shortly.

Christ-like care and an empathy-first engagement checklist

- ☐ Treat online conversations like real-life conversations.
- ☐ Respond meaningfully.
- ☐ Like or react to comments.
- ☐ Follow conversations, and actively participate.
- ☐ Ask questions.
- ☐ Seek to understand people and their needs.
- ☐ Be authentic and transparent.
- ☐ Build trust, and strive to break down the perceived barrier between the individual and your "corporate brand" (a.k.a. big Church).

Additional guidance for assessing your online engagement for ministries:

- Check daily for comments, questions and messages, and respond in a timely manner. Not every comment needs to be answered, but you're encouraged to like them. Don't forget: Engaging with positive comments or messages is an opportunity to affirm and strengthen a relationship. Sometimes, legitimate inquiries or simple misunderstandings are expressed that can open an opportunity to serve the needs of members by providing clarification or rectifying the situation.
- Offensive comments should be deleted or hidden immediately, but don't automatically delete negative comments. These are an opportunity to listen and respond to the needs of the community. Depending on the situation, respond publicly to the person or via direct message. Use your discretion. Remove spam posts accordingly.
- Talk with, not at, your audience. Follow the conversation, and actively participate. Seek to understand their needs, ask questions and respond in a meaningful way.
- Frame every response with the salvation of others as your number-one priority. Be diplomatic, professional and empathetic. Always reflect the values of the Church.
- Redirect people to the proper resources when needed. Follow up to make sure they received an answer or help with their question.
- If a person seems volatile, don't respond, and hide the comment. If the person is aggressive, block or mute them, if needed.
- If the person is a victim of a crime, abuse or other forms of violence, direct them immediately to the proper authorities and resources found here: **https://www.enditnownorthamerica.org/get-help**
- If a person appears suicidal, direct them to the national suicide prevention center: **https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/**

Assessing Your Response

You find a blog, video, or social media post about your organization.
How should you respond?

ASSESSMENT
Is it positive?

YES / **NO**

CONCURRENCE
Provide a factual and well-cited response that may agree or disagree with the post, using an uplifting tone in either case.

You can affirm the post, let it stand, or provide a positive review.

Do you want to respond?

NO

LET POST STAND
Leave it alone, no response.

EVALUATE

"TROLLS"
Is this profile or site dedicated to bashing and degrading others, especially the church, our beliefs, leaders or ministries?

YES → **NO**

"RAGER"
Is the post a rant, rage, joke, or ridiculing or satirical in nature?

YES → **NO**

"MISGUIDED"
Are there erroneous facts or other misinformation in the post?

YES → **NO**

"UNHAPPY MEMBER"
Is the post a result of a negative experience with one of our churches, ministries, leaders, or members?

YES → **NO**

MONITOR ONLY
Avoid responding to specific posts or individuals as this can sometimes escalate the behavior. Monitor the situation for relevant information, comments, engagements, and potential to go viral. Consider banning repeat offenders/abusers if their activity is harmful to other followers or staff.

FIX THE FACTS
Respond directly with factual information. (Refer to the response considerations below.)

RESTORATION
Rectify the situation, respond, and act upon a reasonable solution. (Refer to the response considerations below.)

RESPOND

SHARE SUCCESS
Proactively share your story and mission with the individual. Thank them for their positive feedback. (Refer to the response considerations below.

FINAL EVALUATION
Base response on present circumstances, the influence of the post, and credibility of the poster.

Will you respond?

NO → **LET POST STAND**
Leave it alone, no response.

YES   **YES**   **YES**

DIGITAL RESPONSE CONSIDERATIONS

TRANSPARENCY
Disclose your church or ministry connection.

SOURCING
Cite your sources by including hyperlinks, video, images, or other references.

TIMELINESS
Take time to craft good responses, but respond within 24 hours as much as possible.

TONE
Respond in a tone that reflects the love of Christ and the standards of the Seventh-day Adventist church

INFLUENCE
Focus your attention on the most influential people and institutions related to your ministry, and the church.

Please remember to reflect the love of Christ always. Though it may be difficult to respond to every post, every opportunity to connect is an opportunity to advance the kingdom. For ministry leaders, understand that social media provides a unique opportunity for long-term pastoral care that can serve to enhance the relationship you cultivate with your members as well as the community your ministry serves.

Becoming Future-Proof

While you can't become immune to the rapidly changing world of social media, your organization can implement strategies to stay ahead of the curve by recognizing new opportunities and being able to identify threats.

Start with consistently researching blogs and articles about new developments and updates on social media platforms. There is so much information for free on the Internet about marketing strategies and ways to optimize your social channels. All you have to do is look for it. By keeping an eye on innovations and trends, your team will learn to discern between fads and market disruptions. Follow blogs like **TechCrunch**, **Moz** and **HubSpot**. You can also take cheap or free courses on sites like **Lynda.com** or **skillshare.com**.

This can take a lot of time, though, so another option is to contract this work out to somebody. Full-time employees in your ministry might not have the time to dive into each rabbit hole of social media trends, so hiring someone to do the deep diving and provide your organization with reports on what it needs to know (with practical steps) is a great option if time is limited.

We highly recommend that you also build a network of practitioners and experts. Talking with other people invested in the same field will give you lots of insights and new ideas to try. Begin by following successful social media influencers to see what they're doing, as well as Fortune 500 companies. Many of their "big-budget" campaigns and tricks can be adapted for ministry purposes—and small budgets.

Last, this is an opportunity for you to empower and involve younger members of the Church. This might be a little out of your comfort zone, but to stay relevant, we must let the youth lead. After all, they're in the best position to know how to reach their own demographic. Create space for them, and allow them to try new ideas. Create a culture of creativity and innovation that accepts failure as part of the learning process.

Self-Assessment Worksheet

Use the document below to define your ministry's strategy.

"Thou shalt have a clearly defined target market."
Stop trying to reach everyone! Make it your goal to reach one person, and create a persona profile for that person. Below are some questions to really help you map the journey of the person you're trying to reach. What do they like to do? Do they have a family? Where did they grow up? Write it all out to really understand who you're trying to reach. Remember, it's all about empathy! The goal is that, when people find your ministry, they'll feel like they found a channel specifically tailored to them. After a while, you'll have created a community with similar backgrounds and interests who will self-select your content. In other words, to have a bigger influence, focus on one person.

Who are they?

Primary Segment
Demographics (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, location, income and education) and psychographics (e.g., social identity, purchasing trends, leisure activities and any other insights)

Secondary Segment
Your primary segment, but with a broader perspective. For example, if your primary segment is Adventist college students, your secondary segment would be all Christian college students.

Your Identity (Brand)
(What you're offering, and why people should care)

Ethos
(What you believe)

Mission
(How your beliefs manifest)

Vision
(The future, if your mission is accomplished)

Values
(The strategic context that guides the brand—these statements define how you do what you do to ensure the mission is fulfilled with integrity.)

Unique Value Proposition
(Single phrase that can be shared easily and distinguishes your brand from others.)

User Engagement

Increasing social media traffic happens when you're dedicated to engaging and building relationships on each network. Consistency and availability add a lot of credibility to your brand. As a ministry, look at the questions below, and based on your mission, decide how you want to demonstrate consistency to your followers.

What conversion (tangible action) is your campaign trying to get people to achieve?
(*e.g., passive observer to active engager, participating in Bible studies, baptism etc.*)

What will be your calls to action?
What are you asking your audience to do? With calls to action, it's important to invite people audibly (if your content is video) and visibly (share icons, graphics and captions). Examples include asking them to like, share or give their thoughts in the comments, sign up for a weekly newsletter or sign up for a Bible study.

How will you follow up?
Followup is one of the biggest ways you can grow trust and can be done with many methods, for example*, responding to every comment and email, reaching out and offering to call them, praying with people, sending links, creating content around how people are reacting and inviting someone to a Bible study.*

Final Note

All the advice found in this guide can seem overwhelming at first, but remember, if you're giving glory to God, you're achieving your most important goal.

If you want to dig deeper into these topics, we highly recommend you get the *Digital Discipleship and Evangelism Guide* available from AdventSource.

Links to purchase:
AdventSource: **SDAdata.blog/book**
Amazon: **SDAdata.blog/amazon**

Available in print and digital formats.

<p style="text-align:center">**********************</p>

Let us know how we can help you navigate and utilize the transformative power of data and social media.

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