

**WEB OUTREACH AS PART OF CHURCH PLANTING STRATEGY
IN A CREATIVE ACCESS NATION**

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INTRODUCTION

Jesus Christ gave his followers the mandate of spreading His gospel to all the nations in the Great Commission (Matt.28:18-20). The hearers of His gospel must understand its relevancy if they are to accept it. It is the Christian worker's task to help make the message relevant to the people. The Internet has become a common source for entertainment, information and advice throughout the world. If the local people are using the Internet, then Christian ministry needs to use the Internet as a tool to propagate the gospel message.

Our Web site outreach project is part of our church planting strategy in a localized region of an urban center within a creative access nation (CAN). In this article, I will put this Web site ministry in its context, followed by a brief look at pertinent studies in the fields of Internet communication, persuasion, and online evangelism. Next I will give a description of our approach to Web site outreach. This will be followed with results data and an evaluation.

Our Web site outreach exists in a context. A brief glimpse into the cultural, and ministry context should suffice in providing background to the Christian ministry and our Web site outreach.

Cultural Context

Using Geert Hofstede's cultural taxonomy,¹ a comparison of CAN culture to a generalized North American culture shows that CAN culture has a higher power distance between social roles than that found in North America. This means that it is expected that power is distributed unequally among members of the society. People with authority are above, not level with, those

¹ Geert Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991).

under them. For CAN'ites, the power distance helps guide appropriate behavior in a particular context. North American culture seeks to minimize power distance which is disconcerting for those expecting defined roles and distance.² CAN culture is more collectivistic while North American culture is defined by its individualism. CAN'ites care and are concerned about the views and values of their group(s). Their identity is wrapped up in their group and even defined by the group.³ Members of CAN culture are higher on the uncertainty avoidance scale than North Americans. This means they are more likely to feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations.⁴ They can say that *different* is dangerous, while North Americans might say that *different* is interesting.

CAN culture values the social group and adopts technology that compliments social networking. Cell phones have become a standard accessory for every family member over 12 years old. Affordable access and use of the Internet has continued to grow in correspondence to a developing and modernizing economy. CAN'ites are using social networking technology like Facebook and MySpace in growing numbers. In response to the rapid adoption of new technology, there are concerns in CAN that the Internet can exacerbate social problems by allowing access to harmful ideas or images. The government is increasingly active in monitoring and blocking some Internet content it deems harmful to society.⁵ Some are also concerned about the effects the Internet has on personal relationships, yet research is showing that the Internet extends existing relationships for the satisfied and fulfills a relationship void for the dissatisfied.⁶

² Hofstede, ch. 2.

³ Hofstede, ch.3.

⁴ Hofstede, 113.

⁵ A department under the Ministry of Telecommunication has recently been appointed to monitor the Internet. It has articulated eight areas to which they are seeking to limit access; suicide guidance, child abuse, drug use, giving dangerous health advice, pornography, prostitution, gambling, and profaning founding fathers.

⁶ Gross, 87.

The citizens of CAN are overwhelmingly Muslim but with a long history of a Christian minority presence. Foreign governments actively sought to weaken CAN during the 19th century. Foreigners living in CAN at that time, both missionaries and non-missionaries, are considered to have used the Christian minorities to this end. In brief, today the general population of CAN views national Christians as citizens with dubious loyalties and foreign Christians as foreign government agents. These views continue to be reflected in the national media and by individual CAN'ites.

Ministry Context

The CAN government does not issue missionary visas. A missionary is generally viewed as a religious propagandist who comes to deceive the young, the naïve, and the needy. Missionaries are thought to offer money, jobs, and wives as tactics for proselytizing. Missionaries are supposedly employees or agents of foreign governments who come to spread the influence of imperialistic Western culture. Discussion in the press about modern missionaries, their motives and their activities, often refer back to the missionaries of 19th century. The entrenched distrust towards Christians and missionaries impacts the way followers of Christ share their faith today

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature that has been most relevant for developing our Web site outreach can be grouped into three main categories; Internet communication, persuasion, and online evangelism.

Internet Communication

Communication is a process for creating understanding in which two or more parties are involved.⁷ Dr. Donald K. Smith declares that the central problem in communication is achieving understanding across differences, no matter what causes them,⁸ and has developed a set of propositions to articulate what has been learned about communication.

The Internet has altered the mass communication landscape. There are various theories regarding this new medium's similarity and differences to the old media. However, many agree that one of the Internet's unique characteristics is its interactivity. Interactivity is the ability (and expectation) of the user to interact with the Web site's author, sponsor, or administrator.

The Internet is different from these more traditional media. Rather than changing the relationship between audiences and industries, the Net changes the *definition* of the different components of the process and, as a result changes their relationship. On the Net a single individual can communicate with as large an audience as can the giant, multinational corporation that produces a network television program.... Feedback in mass communication is traditionally described as inferential and delayed, but online feedback can be, and very often is, immediate and direct. It is more similar to feedback in interpersonal communication than to feedback in mass communication.⁹

Another important element of the Internet medium is its anonymity. Anonymity, or at least the illusion of anonymity, allows the user to pursue interests, gather information, and express oneself in ways that may be culturally taboo or even explicitly illegal. The rapid growth of Internet pornography is one expression of this. Anonymity via the Internet that allows pornography to be readily accessible also gives opportunity for those in restrictive environments to investigate different religious ideas. Related to anonymity is the user's online persona or identity. People develop their identities through real life interaction and experiences. The online

⁷ Donald K. Smith, *Creating Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 6.

⁸ Smith, 7.

⁹ Stanley J. Baran, *Introduction to Mass Communication* 4th ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2006), 316.

world, however, allows a user to build a different identity, or even experiment with several identities.¹⁰

Observers are finding that much of the Internet social working that occurs on popular sites like Facebook and through messaging software like MSN messenger, is simply a new use of technology in the context of existing relationships.¹¹ One's school, work, or family relationships have added another tool for maintaining connectedness. There is evidence that those users who are managing healthy personal relationships extend those relationships online. Those who have troubled real life relationships are more likely to maintain virtual relationships with people they have never met.¹² Anonymity allows a user to disengage from established relationships and the associated social mores.

Persuasion

Persuasion is the act of moving someone by argument or entreaty to a belief or course of action.¹³ Our Web site is designed to persuade users to re-evaluate their assumptions about the New Testament, Jesus Christ, and Christianity. We are trying to persuade users to read articles that respond to commonly asked questions followed by email interaction with us.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) is a persuasion theory that says the amount and nature of the thinking that occurs has an important influence on the nature of the outcome.¹⁴

The central route to persuasion, involves carefully thinking about and examining information pertinent (or central) to the merits of a topic.... The peripheral route to persuasion involves less cognitive effort and occurs when a person relies on a

¹⁰ Baran, 327.

¹¹ Elisheva F. Gross, et.al., "Internet Use and Well-Being in Adolescence," *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 58 No.1, 2002: 76. Online. EBSCO Host. 9 December 2007.

¹² Gross.

¹³ Miriam-Webster Online. Online. 13 Dec 2007 < <http://www.merriam-webster.com> >.

¹⁴ Richard Petty, et.al., "6 To Think Or Not To Think," *Persuasion: Psychological Insights and Perspectives*. Shavitt, 114.

relatively simple cue in the situation, such as whether the source appears to be an expert or whether a product comes in an attractive package”¹⁵

The central route occurs when people possess both the motivation and ability to elaborate carefully the arguments presented but that the peripheral route is more likely to occur when either motivation is low or ability is impaired.¹⁶

Opinions arrived at through the peripheral route come without much consideration while opinions arrived at through the central route of persuasion are more steadfast because they have been carefully weighed. We are trying to use the central route when we engage people on our Web site. Important to this type of persuasion is that a person is both motivated and able to evaluate an argument.¹⁷

In order to provoke a user to carefully think about the issues we present, research suggests that we can adjust variables to encourage central route persuasion. A high relevance message with strong arguments increases favorable opinions, whereas weak arguments actually decrease a favorable opinion even if the relevance is high.¹⁸ We can help make our message seem more relevant if it comes from more than one source. We can help a user engage in thinking about our arguments by minimizing distractions. However, if the arguments are weak, distractions will actually help the user come away with a more positive opinion than if there had been no distractions.¹⁹

Presenting ideas and beliefs that are contrary to the majority’s established religious beliefs can seem futile. However, studies have shown that a vocal minority can free others to disagree with the majority, even if only privately. Anonymity has also been found to decrease conformity. In the 1950s, S.E. Asch demonstrated how an erroneous majority can make a

¹⁵ Petty, 115.

¹⁶ Petty, 120.

¹⁷ Petty, 116.

¹⁸ Petty, 124.

¹⁹ Petty, 129.

minority conform.²⁰ Yet if there is a vocal minority, conformity dropped dramatically. Studies also find that a consistent minority view begins to gain credibility and review by the majority. The lack of obvious benefit in a minority position can add credibility to their sincerity and even provoke the majority to think about the minority's perspective.²¹ We believe our Internet site can help fill the role of the consistent minority which could then help free some to break with the majority's opinion.

Dr. B.J. Fogg uses the term *captology* for his interdisciplinary study of computers as persuasive technology. The three roles computers play in persuasion are as tools, as media, and as social actors.²² Our Internet site is likely to function in a persuasive social role more than any other role. In a persuasive social role it can take on the characteristics of a teacher, friend, or guide as people ask their questions. For some users, our Web site might even take on the role of antagonist or enemy of the existing system.

Credibility is a key issue in persuasion. Dr. Fogg defines credibility as perceived trustworthiness plus perceived expertise.²³ Trustworthiness is given when one is considered fair and unbiased, honest and truthful. Trustworthiness is also given through perceived similarity because people tend to trust others who are like them in personality, preferences, or attitude.²⁴

Research has shown that a Web site's perceived trustworthiness increases if it includes information about the people behind the site, provides access to outside sources to verify content, lists a physical address and phone number, and gives a contact email address.

Trustworthiness decreases if it is difficult to distinguish between ads and content, if the site links

²⁰ Shinobu Kitayama, and Eugene Burnstein. "8 Social Influence, Persuasion, and Group Decision Making." *Persuasion: Psychological Insights and Perspectives*, Shavitt, 180-182.

²¹ Kitayama, 183-184.

²² B.J. Fogg, *Persuasive Technology: Using Computers to Change What We Think and Do* (San Francisco: Morgan Kaufmann Publishers, 2003).

²³ Fogg, 123.

²⁴ Fogg, 95.

to another site that you think is not credible, if the site automatically pops up new ad windows, and the site's domain name does not match the company's name.²⁵

Perceived bias decreases a person's ability to persuade, because the one being persuaded is motivated to defend his position, whereas if one appears unbiased, the ability to persuade increases.²⁶ In a similar vein, a Web site can also increase its trustworthiness when it appears unbiased. Therefore, links to a competitor's Web site decrease the perception of bias because they give the user access to more facts, even those not under their control.²⁷

A site's perceived expertise is enhanced if it provides a quick response to inquiries, sends confirmation email, lists an author's credentials on an article, lets you search for past content, looks professionally designed, and is updated since your last visit. A site's perceived expertise is damaged when it is rarely updated with new content, has a link that does not work, contains typographical errors, and is sometimes unexpectedly unavailable.²⁸

Credibility requires perceived trustworthiness and expertise. "People rely on perceptions of trustworthiness in evaluating Web credibility."²⁹ A Web site's credibility is important for it to be effective in persuasion and is therefore an issue that needs to be taken very seriously by site designers.

²⁵ Fogg, 156-158.

²⁶ Petty, 131.

²⁷ Fogg, 164.

²⁸ Fogg, 160-162.

²⁹ Fogg, 156.

Online Evangelism

Overseas Christian workers may be skeptical of the claim that “the majority of Muslims making decisions for Christ are doing so online,”³⁰ but it cannot be denied that the Internet is playing a role in the process of conversion and discipleship. The Internet has become a major source of information which is why Christian workers need to be involved with it.

Online evangelism and cyber missions are relatively recent terms. Enthusiasts look to the global reach of Internet technology and see great opportunity. Ministries around the world are seeking to use Web sites to reach the unreached through direct evangelism, evangelism training, discipleship of believers, and Christian worker training. Our interest in this article is direct evangelism.

The Internet is a pull media where one goes looking for specific information rather than a push media where a switch is flipped and the network pushes its content to you. As stated previously, one of the unique aspects of the Internet is its interactivity. The authors of the *Online Evangelism: A Guide to Web Outreach* feel that interactivity, specifically developing a sense of community, is key to an effective Internet outreach.

For evangelistic Web sites, this interaction is very important. Very few people become Christians just by reading something. Conversion is usually a long process, and involves friendly interaction with people who are already Christians. Think back to how you became a Christian. For most people, seeing the life of Jesus in someone else, usually through experiencing friendship, is the most powerful witness.³¹

The *Online Evangelism* guide uses the Engel scale to talk about how people proceed in knowledge of the Gospel. It then goes on to talk about the Gray Matrix which puts conversion on a matrix with the y-axis representing knowledge of the gospel (like the Engel scale) and the x-

³⁰John Edmiston. “Internet Evangelism & Cybermissions and Their Impact upon How We will Do Missions in the 21st Century.” Online. 23 Oct 2007. < http://www.cybermissions.org/articles/21stC_missions.pdf > 19.

³¹ “Online Evangelism: A Guide to Web Outreach,” Online. 23 Oct 2007 <<http://guide.gospelcom.net/>>.

axis represents attitude towards the gospel. The Gray Matrix shows that effective evangelism is not just about knowledge but also about changing attitudes.³² Therefore helping someone have a more positive attitude towards Christianity can be as “evangelistic” as increasing their knowledge of the gospel.³³ This could be the biggest impact a site like ours could have.

APPROACH TO WEB SITE OUTREACH

Our approach to the task of managing a Web site outreach as part of our church planting evangelism can be described by first explaining our Web site goals followed by an explanation of the process a visitor experiences in finding our site and exploring its content. I then explain how we have advertised our site and what that entails. This is followed by our rationale for our approach to the task.

Web Site Goals

Our purpose for our Web site is for it to be a contact point for Christians and seekers³⁴ in our target area that will lead to personal contact. We do not want our Internet site to be a ministry with nationwide reach. We want this site to be a church planting tool to help our church planting team in our geographically delimited area.

The Web site itself attempts to be a credible source and engage people in a way that will encourage email correspondence. Through email correspondence we answer questions and

³² “The Matrix Explained,” Online. 21 Dec 2007 <http://tgm.integralgc.com/tgm_matrixexplained.shtml>.

³³ “Online Evangelism: A Guide to Web Outreach.”

³⁴ A “seeker” is a term used to refer to those who are seeking information about Christian beliefs, asking questions relating to the Bible, or are trying to understand Christianity.

attempt to gauge sincerity and intent. Visitors who appear sincere in their research of our faith are presented with an opportunity to meet personally with a follower of Christ.

Process

Our Web site is set up in the name of “ABC Fellowship.” This fellowship of believers is in the process of being established and currently meets as a small house group. A user comes to our Web site by one of five ways: (1) directly by typing in the site’s URL into the browser, (2) referral from other sites that have linked to it, (3) a link from search engine results, (4) a link from inside an email we have sent out, and (5) clicking on an Internet ad.

The Web site generally tries to minimize the use of Christian terminology. Therefore, we use “believers in Christ” instead of “Christian” and “fellowship” instead of “church.” However, the more traditional terms are being used more and more by CAN believers, and thus many of the borrowed (and referenced) articles on our site use these Christian terms.

The progression of communication for the majority of our visitors is as follows:

- Internet ad – Small ad that should be relevant or provocative enough for the user to click on it.
- Homepage or Landing page – This is the first page people see. Most people will make judgments about credibility, the subject, and the people behind it in relatively short time.³⁵ It should be attractive, inviting, and visually pleasing. We want to use attention getting phrases that whet appetites for more.
- Relevant Articles – We want to encourage people to think about what they read and what they already believe. We have chosen to highlight questions that we know

³⁵ B.J. Fogg, Ph.D. et.al. “How Do People Evaluate a Web Site’s Credibility? Results from a Large Study.” Online. 9 Dec 2007 < <http://www.consumerwebwatch.org/pdfs/stanfordPTL.pdf> >.

people ask. We want to respond to questions, give information, draw people in, provoke thinking, and engage in interaction.

- Opportunity to respond – We give opportunity to respond by email.
- Opportunity to meet – We make ourselves available to meet with those who do not seem to have threatening intentions.

Our Web site's structure is intentionally simple. Under the homepage, the next level consists of these five Web pages:

1. "About Us" tells people that we are believers in Christ who are starting a fellowship of believers in Christ in the area. We encourage people to get in contact with us through the page and that we are eager to answer questions about our beliefs. There is also a link to a list of our beliefs but this is seldom clicked.
2. "Frequently Asked Questions" started with a list of three responses to the most common questions CAN'ites ask about Christian beliefs and has grown to seven as we have added additional pages relating to the Muslim holidays.
3. "Useful Links" gives links to some of the nationwide outreach ministries. We have only linked to sites with which we are comfortable being associated. We avoid linking to unmonitored discussion boards or confrontational evangelistic sites. We also link to resources like "New Testament listening," "Bible search," and "free Christian materials." Currently we only have five links.
4. "New Testament" supplies basic information about the New Testament. We define various terms in a question-answer format. "What is the Injil?" "What is the Holy Book?" "Has the Injil been changed?" And "How can I get an Injil to read?" Some of

the links go to other pages on our site, other links take the user to another organization's Web site.

5. "Contact Us" is a Web based email form. The user is asked to give us the name of the county in which they live, a response email address, and their question. None of these fields are required.

The only second level pages that have a third level under them are the "Frequently Asked Questions" page which has the question response articles under it and the "About Us" page which has "Our Beliefs" under it.

Advertising

We published our Web site in virtually the same form and format as it currently exists beginning in June 2005. In March 2007 we provided a link to our site in some email messages we sent to BCC³⁶ contacts. In June 2007 we started advertising our site using the Internet.

We used a commercial internet advertising program. The availability of internet advertising in the local language varies in each country. The prices and policies of the each advertising program also vary. Some programs that use search terms price Internet advertising by a proprietary scheme which depends on variables like search term relevancy and space competition. In other words, the more relevant an ad is to the search term the cheaper it is. The more competition there is for the page space, the more expensive it becomes. The advertiser is charged a fee by the company every time a user clicks on the advertisement. The programs often allow for daily and monthly customization so that you can control your own advertising budget. Our cost ranges between five and twenty cents per click and we average about \$110 per month.

³⁶ BCC is an acronym for the nationwide Bible Correspondence Course

Information about the efficiency of an advertisement and usage of a Web site is invaluable for evaluation. Statistics provided by the advertising program can be very useful in determining the efficiency of a) a specific advertisement, b) a specific Web site that hosts your ad, and, if you are using a search engine based advertising program, c) the search words that lead to clicks on your ad. In addition to this is Web site analysis which requires a separate setup. Web site analysis can tell you the physical location of Web site visitors (city, province, country), how they came to your site (via advertisement, email link, referring site, or directly), which ad they clicked to come to your site, whether they had visited before, which pages were visited, and more.

We are trying to reach out to people who may not necessarily be looking for us, or our advertisement, but do have a connection to our targeted geographic area. Therefore, we want our ads to be relevant by means of geography but not necessarily to the search subject. In other words, a person searching for real estate in our targeted area may see our advertisement about Jesus appear. Our Web site analysis program tells us that about 50% of our visitors who come to our Web site via an advertisement view the home page and then leave. Those who go beyond the home page look at three other pages on average.

Rational

Our church planting approach has always been cautious due to our context, philosophy, and personalities. Our evangelism methods have focused on friendship evangelism and contact follow-up. Contacts come via Christian network referrals, through the national Bible correspondence course (BCC), and through our Internet site. Christian workers, if they are considered “missionaries” as understood by most CAN’ites, are met with misunderstanding and

suspicion. The more traditional an area is, the more suspicious the authorities and local seem to be of Christian workers. However, the biggest concerns are the nationalistic groups. These groups are known to take the law into their own hands in order to “cleanse” their land of polluting influences. The prevalent attitude in the press and society regarding the murders and beatings of Christians is that Christians somehow deserved it because they were doing such terrible things (selling drugs, deceiving naïve youth, paying people to convert, etc). Thirty to forty percent of the email we receive to our Web site contains either foul language or threats.

We have chosen a non-confrontational attitude towards Islam. We do not want to publish articles that can be construed as critical of Islam, specifically of their book or their prophet. When we are asked directly what we think of the book or the prophet, we divert our answer to say that we are here to talk about our beliefs. We are of the opinion that argumentation³⁷ is counter-productive at this level of contact. We also believe that there are multiple audiences following our Internet site and we do not feel it is necessary to provoke them.³⁸

Our Web site is set up as a contact point for “ABC Fellowship” which does not have a physical address or give any allusion that it does. The site speaks of a group of “believers in the Messiah” meeting together in the local area.

Our target area includes three geographical area names on one side of a large city in CAN. These are known as “ABC,” “MNO,” and “XYZ.” One of these names we have included in our original domain name (“abc-fellowship.com”).

³⁷ Smith, Proposition 8.

³⁸ Smith, Proposition 9.

Our goal is to meet and engage seekers and Christians in a personal relationship to help them mature in Christ. However, we will not meet with everyone who wants to meet.³⁹ Generally, we have found that believers can at least rudimentally articulate something about their faith and seekers can tell us about what they have done so far in their search or have specific questions. However, troublemakers usually have not made the effort to know how to even sound sincerely interested in learning about Jesus.

We have chosen to address people in the third person when speaking in the name of “ABC Fellowship.” If the seeker wants to meet someone then we try to solicit enough basic information in order to know with whom to put him or her in contact. Once that happens, a believer takes over correspondence and addresses in a more familiar manner and uses his or her name.

The design of our site is kept simple for two main reasons. First, we needed to manage the time, skills, and resources available to us. We have tried to keep this Web site focused to a small geographical area. Often Internet advertising allows an advertiser to have an ad shown only to users within a geographical area. We decided to use geographical terms as our search words rather than conceptual or religious terminology. Fortunately for us, our geographical terms are unique in CAN, so it is less likely to receive false positive search results.

Our second reason for keeping a simple design comes from our own Internet experience. We thought that a pleasant, focused, and easy to use Web site would be more effective for our

³⁹ We do not give a physical address on our web site. It’s not unusual for someone to write and ask for our address saying that he and some friends want to talk with us about “religion.” Our response is to thank him for writing and confirm that we would like to meet him too but perhaps he could give us an idea what some of his questions might be.

purposes of making initial contact with people. B.J. Fogg confirms that ease of use and structure is a viable approach in enhancing a degree of credibility.⁴⁰

We placed an attractive spring wild flower photograph of our target area as our Web sites' thematic background in order to identify the site with the local area. Similarity increases a perception of trustworthiness.⁴¹ Recently, we also added a small CAN national flag and clear glass of tea to the homepage as well. This was placed on the Web site to again identify ourselves more closely with the values of the people but also to symbolically express a loyalty to this nation. National Christians are frequently looked upon as suspicious characters with dubious loyalties because they have changed their faith, when, in fact, they are loyal and patriotic citizens.⁴²

We try to minimize our use of the words "Christian" and "church" because of their association with ethnic minority groups. We try to avoid the miscommunication these words can bring. These Christian terms are used by the national CAN'ite believers but not exclusively.

RESULTS

We measure the number of times our ads are shown and clicked on, the percentage of people that only view the home page then leave, the location of the user, an advertisement's effectiveness, the pages viewed, the email received, and the expense.

Received emails are placed into one of five categories; positive, negative, neutral, address only, and empty. A positive email is one in which the writer has asked what seems to be an honest question about our faith or the content of our Web site. In October and November 42% of

⁴⁰ Fogg, 167-169.

⁴¹ Fogg, 95.

⁴² Smith, Propositions 13, 14, 17, and 20.

our emails were considered positive. A negative email is one in which the writer's intent is to convert us to Islam, threaten us, or swear at us. 35 % of our emails during this period were placed in the negative category. A neutral email is one in which the writer's intent is unclear, yet they wrote and gave us a response email address for us that has been 12%. For example, one person told us about his money problems, another person asked if we would sponsor an ad on our Web site. An address only email has a response email address that has been entered in by the user. An empty email message occurs when a user goes to the email form page and pushes the send button without entering either a message or an email address. We received 5% address only and 7% empty emails during October and November. If we only consider the advertising cost for this Web site outreach we can say that it cost us \$11.95 for each positive email that we received.

Taking a snapshot of our Web site activity, our Web site analytics data tells us that we received 2209 visits to our Web site during the thirty days of November. 62 (2.81%) came from direct traffic, 58 (2.67%) came from referring sites, and 1838 (88%) came from our Internet advertising campaign. Our largest referring site belongs to the Bible correspondence course site which referred 44 visitors during this period. It is significant to note that 9 % of these BCC referrals result in an email message to our site compared to 1.25 % for the site overall. The reason for the much higher email rate is likely due to a higher motivation by the visitor who has already assigned a certain degree of relevancy to our site. This visitor has come to us via another Christian ministry, whereas our most common visitor comes to our site almost unexpectedly via our Internet ad.

The nationwide Bible correspondence ministry has greatly benefited from the accessibility of the Internet throughout the country. Their focus is to provide a gospel access point for anyone who wants it wherever they are. Their main key-words that activate their Internet ad are Christian words;

e.g. “Christian,” “Injil,” “Isa,” and “free New Testament.” The BCC wants their ad to appear whenever someone wants to find information related to those search terms. In other words, the visitor has already determined that the BCC ad has a degree of relevance to what is being searched, thus their motivation is higher to click through to their Internet site.

Internet Advertising Nov 1 – 30, 2007	Ad Clicks	Ad Showings	Click Rate on Ad	Average Cost/Click
“ABC Fellowship”	2,140	83,373	2.57%	\$0.06
BCC – all campaigns	44,061	22,230,206	0.19%	\$0.07
BCC – Injil campaign	3,923	113,903	3.44%	\$0.07
BCC – injil campaign non-Christian words	447	54,332	0.82%	\$0.11

Figure 1. ABC and BBC Campaign Data

Even though the goals of our two sites are different, the comparative data for our “ABC Fellowship” and the BCC is provided in Figure 1. The BCC runs several campaigns simultaneously. The “Injil campaign” is one of their more productive ones. This campaign also contains non-Christian key-words such as “religion,” “exalted Kuran,” “suicide,” and “depression.” The data for this group of key-words is listed separately. We would expect the visitor who finds their site through these search terms to be closer to kind of visitor who sees our ad as well. That is, this type of visitor is likely to unexpectedly come upon their text ad while searching for a completely different subject.

EVALUATION

Evaluation of our Internet outreach tries to look at our tangible and intangible results. This is followed by some ideas for change and development to help make our Internet site more effective in achieving our goals.

Evaluation of Our Internet Outreach

Mass communication theorists accept that people gather information from media sources that are consistent with their own beliefs and attitudes.⁴³ Smith points out that this selective process reinforces existing attitudes since they come from like-minded people. However, in times of crisis a person's existing values may be found wanting and alternatives are sought out, and thus, new ideas have an opportunity to be heard.⁴⁴ People who use search engines to find our Web site typically fall into this category. They are already looking for alternative beliefs or they have a sympathy towards some of the beliefs we espouse. They have entered search terms like Christian, church, Jesus, or New Testament. The search page results have listed our page or a page that links to us. This type of user accounts for only 6% of the traffic to our Web site. Yet, we have found that 3.5 % of those who come to our site by intentionally searching for it will send us an email asking questions.

The Bible correspondence site links to our site on their "local churches" page. Visitors who have made it to their site and want to find a local church can click on the link to our Web site. Referrals coming from the Bible correspondence site have averaged an even higher 9% email rate.

⁴³ Baran, 424.

⁴⁴ Smith, 176.

It is our Internet advertising that accounts for 88 % of the traffic to our Web site. These visitors generally were not looking for new ideas. Rather, they entered geographical terms in order to find out information about our area, available rentals, or real estate. For some reason, our three line text ad prompted them to click on it which brought them to our site. Over half of them immediately leave, while the other half look at a few pages. Of the people who come to our Web site through our Internet advertising, only 1.3 % sends us an email asking questions.

The only way we have to gage their motivations in coming to our site is through our email correspondence with those who write.⁴⁵ We assume that the unknown responses reflect what we learn from email. That is, some seek information, some are looking for alternatives, some are offended that we have a site like this, and some are angry.⁴⁶

Credibility is an important issue in persuasion and for our Internet outreach. Yet we find that our cautious approach knowingly holds back credibility enhancing information because of the context of the ministry. Specifically, we are unwilling to post details on our Web site about who we are, our names, or our physical location.

We do receive email from unthreatening people who say they want to meet face to face. However, when we have tried to pursue meeting, we receive an unexpectedly high drop-off rate. The typical pattern is for a visitor to suggest we meet face to face to talk. We respond encouragingly and ask for them to introduce themselves a little so we know with whom to put them in contact, in particular, we want to know if the person is male or female. It is not unusual to not receive a response. We do not know why people drop-off at this point. We surmise that they realize they are losing their anonymity when asked to give a name or tell about themselves. We also wonder if it does not have something to do with a fear of the unknown.

⁴⁵ Smith, Proposition 23.

⁴⁶ Smith, Proposition 15.

We have to ask ourselves if the Internet outreach is worth the investment of time and money. From our measurable data, we know that it costs us about \$12 in advertising to receive a positive email response. We also have to consider that 4,100 clicks in a three month period has generated over 1,600 people⁴⁷ who have come to our site and looked at more than just the first page. That means that 18 people a day have become aware that a) there are Christians in the neighborhood and b) have glanced at an article responding to a question they have probably asked or heard asked about Christianity. We hope that we are a consistent minority view that can encourage others.

Ideas for Change and Development

We would like to increase the number of times our ad is displayed (impressions), increase the daily number of clicks on our ad, decrease the per click cost, and decrease the bounce rate. We found with our brief experiment with buying a new domain name and redirecting it to our main page that the costs per click did decrease while also increasing our impressions and click thru rate. The decrease was large enough to suggest that the cost-per-click savings would offset the cost of a completely separate hosted site and new domain name.

We are not willing to post a physical address on our Web site. Even if we were willing, we would have to carefully weigh the risks and rewards of freely giving such information. We would like to post a cell phone number so that we can send or receive calls and text messages. However, we are cautious about putting our names on the subscription line for this kind of contact. We have yet to find someone else who is willing.

⁴⁷ 4,100 clicks have shown to produce about 85% follow through to our web site. We know that 52% leave after viewing the first page. However, 48% of those coming to our site go beyond the first page to go on and view 4 pages on average.

We are considering ways to develop social characters on our site, that is, characters that could fill social roles from the perspective of the visitor. These would simply be names that would author articles, questions, and responses. Some of the characters we have considered are the teacher, the guide, the student, and the antagonist. The “Eloquent Teacher” could articulate biblical knowledge and principles. The “Wise Uncle” could help guide visitors into applying biblical truths. The “Eager Apprentice” could embody commitment to Christ and eagerness to learn. The “Antagonist” could put forth the accusative questions and precipitate the common struggles seekers experience.

In our attempts to more closely identify Christian CAN’ites with average CAN’ites we have considered writing an article critical of Western foreign policies in light of biblical values. This would be an attempt to emphasize that followers of Christ need not become Westerners.

We should also consider different funnels for visitors depending on their source. Internet ad referrals are likely to have a different level of interest and motivation than those who intentionally seek out our site. Those who are seeking our Web site already sense that it has some degree of relevancy and they are motivated to look at it, whereas Internet ad visitors were unexpectedly presented with our advertisement. Their initial judgment of relevancy is likely related to either its geographical location or questions they already have regarding Jesus the Messiah. It is likely that curiosity, surprise, or anger motivate Internet ad visitors to click on our ad and come to our Web site.⁴⁸

The ability to gather information about a visitor and how they use our Web site is invaluable. We are able to tell if someone goes to our new article about ceremonial sacrifices or

⁴⁸ We see all of these thoughts and feelings articulated in the email we receive.

not. We can see which pages are of most interest to the visitor and which referrals resulted in a sent email.

CONCLUSION

Christian ministry needs to engage the local culture and attempt to make the gospel message relevant to the people. If the people are using the Internet to pursue interests and seek out information, then Christian ministry also needs to use the Internet medium. Our Web site ministry has provided us a degree of access to people that was not possible before. While the Internet has its limitations, it is a tool that needs to be used in the process of sowing and cultivating the gospel message in the local culture. An Internet outreach can be a viable evangelism tool for a local church plant when used in conjunction with resident Christians who will engage with seekers.

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