

News of the Church

Role of Members Important in Sharing the Gospel Online

By Breanna Olaveson

Church Magazines

Missionaries across the world have encountered a problem in recent years: after only a visit or two, an investigator who had shown real interest cuts off contact. Researchers have found that most of those investigators have one thing in common: they lose interest after finding negative, inaccurate information about the Church online.

Six years ago 80 percent of search engine results for the term “Mormon” were negative or inaccurate. Today the situation has improved.

In some countries, Internet search results for “Mormon” are now up to 80 percent positive.

Why the significant change? In addition to official Church Web

Members are playing an increasingly vital role online as more and more people investigate the Church via the Web.

sites, unofficial Web sites sharing positive information about the Church are spreading across the Web. Individuals are using blogs to share their values, and gospel messages are making appearances on social networking sites. In short, because of how members are using it, the Internet is also helping bring people to the full-time missionaries.

Many Church members have been inspired by the counsel of Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, who said, “May I ask that you join the conversation by participating on the Internet to share the gospel and to explain in simple and clear terms the message of the Restoration.”¹

Here is a look at some of the ways members of the Church are using the Internet to spread the gospel in simple, yet meaningful ways.

New Mormon.org

Mormon.org, an official Church Web site and a well-established missionary tool, has been redesigned to connect users directly with Church members using personal profiles.

The new Mormon.org allows members to create profiles explaining their beliefs and lifestyle.

Visitors can view these profile pages and learn more about the Church directly from its members.

“We want visitors to get to know members of the Church and interact with them,” said Ron Wilson, manager of Internet and marketing in the Church’s Missionary Department.



(For more information on these profiles and other features on the new Mormon.org, see accompanying story.)

The More Good Foundation

The More Good Foundation is a nonprofit organization created by Church members that works to give the Church a positive online presence. Though the foundation is not directed or sponsored by the Church, it has played an important part in improving the Church's online presence.

The founders of the More Good Foundation began to study search engines and how they selected results. They learned that Google, a popular Internet search engine, allows one site to occupy only two spaces on a results page. That means that even if LDS.org has hundreds of relevant pages, only two will appear as search results. That left a lot of open space for negative sites, and people seemed to gravitate to sites that were unrelated to the Church as an institution.

"They're looking for their peers' perspectives rather than trusting the organization's," said Jonathan Johnson, president of the More Good Foundation. "If we understand that principle, we will understand why our leaders say we as members can be more effective. We avoid the walls that are created when people see someone in an official capacity."

The More Good Foundation gained rights to over 1,400 URLs and enlisted Church members to create Web sites that discuss gospel principles. Members associated with the More Good Foundation have developed 320 sites in as many as 12 languages. They have also posted over 1,900 videos on YouTube.

Blogs

For members who don't have the time or skills to create an entire Web site, blogging offers a convenient alternative. Blogs (short for "weblogs") are simple Web sites that are easy to maintain and usually free.

Hundreds of members of the Church throughout the world are using their blogs to share the gospel with family and friends. It's normal for bloggers to share things that are important to them, so it's a natural place to talk about the gospel.

One young mother who shares her faith online has developed a loyal following. Stephanie Nielson started a blog, nieniedialogues.blogspot.com, where she chronicled her life as a stay-at-home mom. She continued updating her blog after she survived a plane crash in 2008 that left her visibly scarred but spiritually rededicated.

A Mormon Messages video titled "My New Life" relates Stephanie's story and her message of motherhood and beauty. "They're the same thing to me," Stephanie says on the video. Stephanie shares the gospel on her blog through her posts and includes a large button with a link to LDS.org. She also offers visitors a free copy of her "favorite book"—the Book of Mormon—that she will send "anywhere in the world . . . anywhere!"

Social Media Web Sites

Millions of people are connecting on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, and Church members are sharing the gospel there too.

Information tends to spread quickly and easily on social networks, which makes it an appealing way to share the gospel. At LDS.org, all items in the Gospel Library section feature a "Share" tool, which allows users to easily share links to Church magazines articles, general conference talks, and lesson manuals on various social media sites.

Social network users can also become a fan of the Church's official Facebook pages. The Church has more than 280,000 fans, the Book of Mormon has more than 162,000 fans, and thousands more users have joined other Church-affiliated pages. When a Facebook user joins and participates in a group, his or her friends are notified. Thus, the friends of hundreds of thousands of Facebook users have been exposed to the Church through Facebook.

Church members are also using Twitter, a social networking Web site used to send brief messages (“tweets”) via the Internet, to share the gospel. Most notably, general conference was Twitter’s top trend in April 2009,² meaning general conference was mentioned in more tweets than any other subject.

The Church has also established a presence on YouTube, a popular video posting Web site, which has generated a positive reaction from members and nonmembers alike. Every Mormon Messages video, like all others

posted to YouTube, can be easily posted on a blog or shared via e-mail, Facebook, or Twitter.

The Internet provides a way for Church members to reach people in ways unimaginable a generation ago, and as technologies improve, so will Church members’ ability to share the gospel. ■

NOTES

1. M. Russell Ballard, “Sharing the Gospel Using the Internet,” *Liahona*, June 2008, N1.
2. “Top Twitter trend: LDS General Conference,” Mary Richards, *ksl.com*, April 6, 2009. <http://www.ksl.com/?nid=148&sid=6074101>.

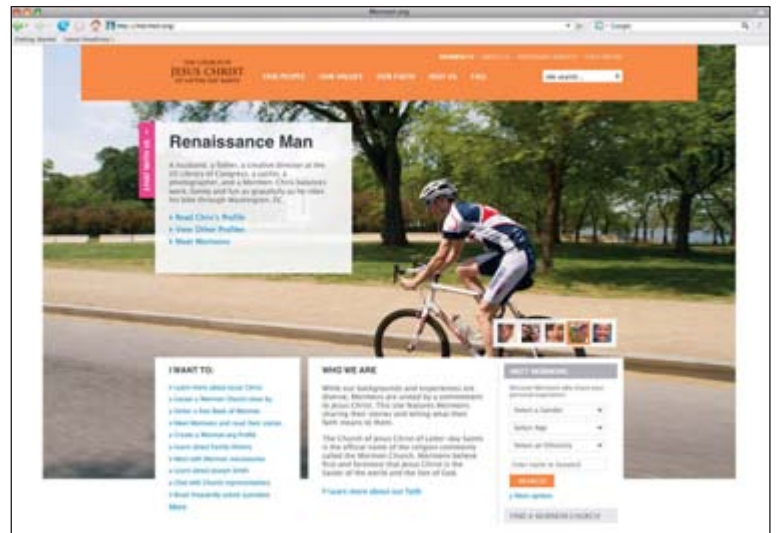
Mormon.org Redesign Connects Members and Investigators

Since its launch in 2001, Mormon.org has helped people get straightforward, honest answers to their questions about the Church. Those answers came primarily from Church headquarters.

Mormon.org’s most recent update—including a complete redesign—still offers plenty of answers and a way to contact missionaries. But now, thanks to a new online profile feature, many answers come directly from Church members around the world.

Visitors to the site will be able to sort thousands of member profiles by gender, age, ethnicity, religious background, and other qualifiers to find Church members who are similar to themselves. Once on a profile page, users can read testimonies, ask further questions, and in some cases, connect with

The redesigned Mormon.org makes an effort to connect investigators with members of the Church.



Church members on social networking Web sites. This peer-to-peer contact allows investigators to get a non-authoritative viewpoint of the Church.

“When people search the Internet for information, they give more credence to the opinions of their peers than to what an organization says about itself, especially when it

comes to organized religion,” said Elder Richard G. Hinckley, Executive Director of the Missionary Department. “That is why member profiles are such a valuable part of the new Mormon.org.”

The new Mormon.org is divided into four major areas, each focused on teaching about a certain aspect of the Church: