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From Static to Social. Marketing Religion in the Age of the Internet

(doi: 10.2383/79476)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 3, settembre-dicembre 2014

Ente di afferenza:

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From Static to Social

Marketing Religion in the Age of the Internet

by Mara Einstein

doi: 10.2383/79476

On March 13, 2013, the new pope was announced by a tweet proclaiming, “HABEMUS PAPAM FRANCISCUM,” roughly translated as “we have a pope.”

In the annals of religious promotion, this was perhaps the most significant marketing mistake ever made – not because they used social media, but because they used social media so quickly. In the several weeks before, traditional press outlets and Internet venues were teeming with news reports about Catholicism after Pope Benedict surprised the world on February 19, 2013 by being the first pontiff in 600 years to resign from the post. It seemed that all of the world’s media – from major broadcast television networks to local cable news outlets to international newspapers – had sent reporters to Rome to camp outside the Vatican to watch and wait for the white smoke to rise from the chimney announcing the installation of a new pope. While waiting, they talked about faith, explained the papal voting procedure, and analyzed the changing face of the institution getting evermore in-depth as the days went by. Most important, all of this press attention came at no expense to the church. However, instead of getting days of free positive messaging for the church – something much needed in light of the pedophile scandals of the last decade – this opportunity to frame the “Catholic brand” was thwarted when the cardinals picked a pope in less than a day.

This is a stunning example of how a traditional religious institution continues to fumble its way through the marketing and media landscape. While many institutions have come to embrace media forms and promotional messages, the vast majority seem still unsure how best to implement marketing strategies particularly when it comes to the online and social media environment. Here, we will look at a case study of the Episcopal Church in the United States as an example of how a church is striving to implement a number of promotional strategies and tools, includ-

ing social media, to market individual churches as well as the faith more broadly. First, however, we will examine the transition from traditional marketing to social media and the sociological shifts that have driven the need for increased religious promotion.

Religious Marketing: From Static to Social

Sociological changes begun in the 1960s drove the creation of a spiritual marketplace within the United States [Roof 1999] and with it a commensurate rise in the ways and extent of promotion that religious institutions needed to implement to attract and retain prospective “religious shoppers” [Cimino and Lattin 1998]. Notable among these changes: social connections were stronger at work than in the local congregation, increased interfaith marriage and social mobility, religion being taught on college campuses as an area of study and not of practice – all of which helped lead to baby boomers no longer feeling obliged to practice the faith they were born into. Moreover, the ability to practice faith outside the church was made easier by an ever increasing number of media outlets that allowed for practicing one’s own belief system or combining a number of faiths – both in and outside of an institution [Einstein 2007]. Praxis came to entail “believing but not belonging” as noted in Grace Davie’s [2007] work on vicarious religion, and people talked in terms of being spiritual as opposed to religious, distancing themselves from traditional institutions.¹ Thus, religion became attained, rather than ascribed, forcing churches to create appeals to attract those who had come to shop for faith, a phenomenon fueled by a society immersed in consumerism which was exacerbated in light of the widespread availability of television – not simply broadcast but the newly expanded cable – and the mass marketing that supported it.

Churches have long used traditional marketing methods [Finke and Iannaccone 1993; Moore 1994]. Billboards and newspaper announcements are standard fare, and Sunday morning religious programs were the infomercials of their day.² These older marketing forms were one-way communications that entailed churches telling

¹ Religious belief remains high (90 percent of Americans believe in a higher power), but church attendance is significantly lower than that (only 36 percent attend weekly religious services) suggesting that practice occurs outside of traditional organizations [Harris Interactive 2003].

² Today, the increase in dedicated religious television channels has led to a plethora of programming featuring televangelists, which act as an infomercial of the faith, but also as a means for selling the books and DVDs of the preacher. Joel Osteen, Joyce Meyers, and Creflo Dollar are good examples here.

people what they should think and feel about their institution, marketing that was in alignment with the way the church itself worked.

As marketing methods became more sophisticated, however, so did church marketing. By the 1970s, churches – notably evangelical megachurches (defined as having 2,000 congregants or more) – used demographics to determine where to build churches. They used surveys and focus groups to find out how best to serve the new church “consumer.” They developed small group events around areas of interest from single mothers to addiction to networking [Thumma and Travis 2007]. Given this marketing savvy, it was not surprising that these churches also took the lead when new media became the means for maintaining current members while attempting to attract prospects. Promotion was not the only reason for this, however; becoming media literate came out of the necessity to communicate with thousands of congregants needing current and relevant information.

Today, traditional marketing, such as advertising and public relations, works in conjunction with online activities to create and manage one’s image and to drive prospects to online activities. A religious example of this is the “I’m a Mormon” campaign run by the Church of Latter Day Saints starting in the summer of 2010. The advertising consisted of print, radio and television spots with longer videos also available on YouTube. In the commercials, members talked about their lives and each spot ended with the line, “I’m ‘Susie Smith’ (or ‘Jimmy Jones’) and I’m a Mormon.” One of the key communications of these ads were that Mormons were special (enough so that people would want to join them), but not too special (so that viewers would think “they are just like me”). This was important because each advertisement ended with the call to action to go to the Mormon website where thousands of church member profiles were housed. There, visitors could look for a Mormon on the site who had similar characteristics to themselves. This could be done through a series of drop-down menus based on age, gender, ethnicity, and former religious affiliation. If the prospect was interested in the background of the person, they were encouraged to contact that member through Facebook, blogs, or Twitter. Thus Mormon.org was the entry point to creating an evangelical experience between the church member and the prospect [Einstein 2013].³ Interestingly, within this context, social media remains a top-down communication because all of the profiles are of church members who have been advised through years of indoctrination about how to evangelize with prospects. In doing so, the Mormon campaign works counter to the new technology.

³ Shortly thereafter, ex-Mormons responded with a similar campaign highlighting people who had left the church and explaining how the church had abused or dismissed them and ending with “I’m ‘Johnny Jones’ and I’m an ex-Mormon.”

The essence of Internet marketing, and more specifically social media, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and so on, is for people to interact and engage with brands and each other unfettered (or at least seemingly so).⁴ This has fundamentally changed promotional dynamics because it has put the power of the marketing message into the hands of consumers. Giving up complete control is a difficult concept for traditional organizations – religious or secular – to accept. Whereas marketing companies used to be able to define what their product stands for (Nike’s “Just Do It” or Coke’s “The Real Thing”), today they have decreasing hegemony over their message. Marketers have had to learn to allow consumers to come together to participate in co-creating brand messages around a product or service through social media. In the secular marketing world this has come to be known as creating a tribe or a movement around a product [Godin 2008; Goodson 2012]. For religious marketers, social media is providing opportunities to engage people with their “movement” in ways that are less restrictive than the Mormon campaign, as we will see in examples below.

No Separation between Church and Media

For people today, and in particular “Millennials” – the generation that has grown up with the Internet and cell phones and social media and are commonly known as digital natives – there is no difference between the online and the offline world. For this age cohort the melding of worlds is true for all aspects of their lives including faith. To quote Stewart Hoover [2006, 1]: “Religion and the media seem to be ever more connected as we move further into the Twenty-first century. It is through the media that much of contemporary religion and spirituality is known [...]. The realms of ‘religion’ and ‘media’ can no longer be easily separated [...]” Moreover, while there has been the prevailing notion that there is a conflict between technology and religion, Campbell [2010] disagrees. As social interactions move to the online space and as technologies proliferate, conflict between religion and technology has decreased because faith groups have learned to negotiate media usage within the terms of existing belief systems. Scholars have called this the mediatization of religion [Hjarvard 2008; Morgan 2011]. Understanding this blurred line between faith and media means practitioners have increasing acceptance of content (faith-based or marketing driven) delivered through both off- and online methods.

⁴ A few statistics on the expansion of social media: there are 1.3 billion active users of Facebook, double what it was three years ago; 74 percent of American Internet users use at least one social networking service, compared to 34 percent who did in 2008 [Pew Research 2014]. In terms of usage, Americans spend on average more than three hours per day with social media [Marketingcharts 2013].

To serve Millennials in particular – which has become ever more important as church membership wanes and as congregations are aging – churches have created opportunities to move back and forth between these online and offline worlds. An excellent example of this is the Life Covenant Church, or simply “Lifechurch.” Lifechurch is based in Oklahoma City and claims to have 32,000 members throughout its 14 physical locations. Sites outside of Oklahoma receive services via satellite which are supplemented by in-person pastors and worship songs. Elsewhere the church has a robust online community, which is served by more than 50 streamed services per week reaching a combined audience of 80,000 unique computers (and likely many more viewers). At this online church (live.lifechurch.tv), anyone can watch a taped sermon with a live feed running alongside it. Visitors communicate with others or comment on the sermon being viewed, creating in essence a virtual pew. In addition to the website, there is also a church “campus” in Second Life – an online virtual world – and a Bible app (YouVersion), among many other online and social sources (see lifechurch.tv). The ministry of Lifechurch understands that the worlds of religion and media have converged, and integrating media and faith is fundamental, especially for younger believers. Importantly, these sites are not only one-way communication; they are spaces where members and visitors are enabled to comment on, and even co-opt, church materials.

The Episcopal Church

Religious Consumer Landscape

The Episcopal Church is a Protestant denomination with traditional roots. Started in the United States shortly after the American Revolution, it is a main-line church that has a tradition of strict liturgy while supporting social justice causes including civil rights and the rights of women. By the late 1970s, the church ordained women into the priesthood and of late, the church has been widely publicized for its support of gay rights (including gay marriage) and for elevating a gay man to the position of bishop. Not surprisingly, the tension between tradition and more liberal acceptance has caused a rift within the denomination which serves close to two million members in the United States.

I met Jake Dell, Manager of Digital Marketing and Advertising Sales Communications for the Episcopal Church, in March of 2013 after he contacted me through Twitter. He explained to me that he had come from a corporate marketing and database development background, and that his boss, Anne Rudig the Director of Com-

munication for the church, had significant corporate marketing experience having worked as a senior creative director at a major advertising agency.

Four years prior, Rudig had been hired as a change agent for the church and under her direction the church began a concerted effort to bring marketing and social media tools to Episcopal congregations throughout the United States.⁵ This began with qualitative research into how the church was perceived, notably by newcomers. Choosing to focus on newcomers (defined as those who had joined the church in the last 6 months to 3 years) allowed the church marketing team to see what was appealing to people who opted to join the church now, who they were, and how best to communicate with them. Overlaid on these personal interviews were secondary data related to population growth and digital usage. Important findings coming out of this work was that the growing Hispanic population – and specifically Latinas – was an opportunity target for the organization; people like to be engaged through multiple forms of media; and, digital usage is up across all demographic age groups. This last finding provided further justification for the online and social media strategy that developed.

In addition, the church implemented social media monitoring to learn how their organization is being talked about online and where traffic to their site is originating from – a common secular marketing practice. Through this investigation, they learned that like most churches, people come to the Episcopal Church in times of major life change – having children or becoming an empty nester, for example. Women going through these life transitions were “talking” about church – but not necessarily on faith-based websites. Rather, these discussions were occurring on websites like Weight Watchers and Urban Baby, places where women share their struggles about dieting and childrearing and where conversations turn to spirituality as a source of help. Psychographics (lifestyles, values, and attitudes), then, were determined to be a key driver in motivating the urge to find faith, rather than demographics (statistical information, such age, income, and so on).⁶

In all, three target audiences were identified: moms with young children, Latinas, and young adults. Moms are “low hanging fruit” – they are a group that is already considering the church, and moms are traditionally the gatekeeper in determining what congregation the family will attend. Latinas provide an opportunity for the church for two reasons: they are a growing segment of the population, and they are attracted to The Episcopal Church because it provides the tradition they are ac-

⁵ Personal Interview, May 21, 2013. Also in attendance were Rick Miller (of Miller Communications) and Neva Fox (Communications Director, The Episcopal Church).

⁶ For more on psychographics, see <http://www.strategicbusinessinsights.com/vals/ustypes.shtml>

customed to from the Catholic Church yet it is also more liberal on women's issues. Finally, young adults are the cohort most churches want to appeal to as they represent the next generation of churchgoers. Millennials are an opportunity target in that they are spiritually inclined and are concerned about issues of social justice – both of which are benefits that the church can provide.⁷

Marketing “Best Practices” for Individual Churches

To begin the work of moving information from the central office to individual churches, Dell developed two marketing white papers. These were downloaded 1,600 times and 10 percent of churches requested additional information. This confirmed for him that marketing support is of considerable interest to a significant number of member churches.

The first white paper was *Social Media and the Episcopal Church: A New Way to Tell a 2,000-Year-Old Story*, which provides a list of six “best practices” and “how to’s” for using social media within a religious setting. Much of what is in here would be a good reminder for almost any marketing organization. For example, the first recommendation is “know thyself,” specifically to understand the church’s “unique personality.” In this case, the “how to” is to “make a list of the top five programs that make your congregation unique [...] [and] create Facebook pages and Twitter accounts for each program, and delegate responsibility for each account to a member of your community who is active in that particular area.” Dell admitted that this is a good idea in theory, though the problem often is that there is no one in the congregation who is facile with these social media outlets. This is particularly true if the congregation has older members. And, the church has the same problem that secular institutions have – if you do not have a dedicated person to post to these sites continuously, they become dormant very quickly.

The other best practices were: Make your website the crown jewel of your communications strategy – and keep it fresh with constant updates; Make it a two-way conversation; Put someone in charge of your online strategy; Don't be too controlling, and Don't reinvent the wheel. Of these, the most important is the first. As has long been the case, people seek out faith at times of life change as noted above. The way they are most likely to find an institution is through the church website. Research has found that 77 percent of those that are prospects or new attendees of a church said that the web site was an important factor in their decision to attend a particular congregation [Goodmanson 2009]. Unfortunately, church sites are often static.

⁷ This information is from internal documents provided by the church.

Prospective congregants see a site that hasn't been updated since Easter of last year and turn away believing the church is not for them.

In 2013, this white paper was followed up by another entitled *Marketing Your Parish: Advertising Best Practices for Effective Evangelism*. It was interesting for me to see that much of what was in this pamphlet married up with what I had written in *Brands of Faith* back in 2007. In that work, I discuss that marketing and evangelizing are the same thing. And this is even truer today. In the age of social media, word-of-mouth marketing (when one person tells another person to buy a product) is the most effective form of persuasion. People don't trust advertisers; they trust their friends. Similarly, I demonstrated that the way in which people take on a brand as part of their personal identity is similar to a religious conversion, a topic that is also addressed in this work.

Marketing Your Parish provides concrete examples of how churches can effectively using social media as a sales tool. Among the tactics suggested once a church has a clear vision is to open up the conversation with those inside and outside of the church. This might include sharing sermons and creating congregants' testimonies, then making this information available in both print and video formats including through multiple social media platforms.

Like the previous white paper, it recommends that churches make the website a sales tool rather than simply a warehouse for information; this is a key shift in thinking. For example, in creating a website, they suggest "For almost every reason a person might Google your church, you should have a separate landing page for them to discover." It is important to have constantly updated information for existing parishioners, for example, but also a very easily navigable area for those who are coming to the site for the first time. This scenario parallels what is currently occurring with college websites. Traditionally, college websites have been places where current students and faculty learn about classes and events. However, in an increasingly competitive environment, it has become necessary to have a two-pronged strategy that appeals to a dual target audience of existing users and prospects. Most colleges, like churches, have traditionally developed their websites for the former. Today, however, as competition among colleges has increased they have had to revise their strategy – and their websites – to appeal to those who are shopping for their services. And here, too, the statistics are similar. Fifty-five percent of prospects turn away from a website if they cannot find the information they need. This has led to colleges creating sites that include an opening page that has obviously links for new students, parents and transfer students. The Episcopal Church recommends the same strategy to its members, while it has implemented something similar on its own site: readily noticeable links for "Worship with Us" (online worship content),

“Prayer” (an online prayer wall), and “Find your Church” (zip code locator of nearby churches).

Social Marketing and Individual Churches

Unlike evangelical churches that primarily answer to themselves alone, the Episcopal Church answers to a variety of stakeholders. And, while in some ways it is like a franchise (“we provide the product so you can distribute it into local markets”), it is not McDonald’s and not every Episcopal congregation is like every other Episcopal congregation.

I asked Dell to share some success stories with me. The examples he provided exemplify the breadth of what the Episcopal Church is. One example was of the Trinity Church in Clanton, Alabama. This church looks like a traditional white church you’d find almost anywhere in America, right down to the bell steeple on the top. The church had been floundering for many years when it realized its mission in 2005 to serve the wider community as a “beans and rice mission,” providing food to a mostly poor and underserved segment of the community. The mission is promoted through a simple sign and once a month people receive food from the church. As the priest says, “this defines who we are to the community,” the very definition of a brand. The website for this congregation, not surprisingly, is generic and static. This probably relates not only to the age of many of the congregants, but also the socio-economic status of the community. The other example was Thad’s of Santa Monica, California. This church is in a storefront of an upscale community where it caters to an “unchurched” mentality. As the pastor notes, most of the people served by the church wouldn’t be caught dead walking through the doors of a traditional church building. Similarly, a visit to their website continues this church’s brand. Rather than looking like a church site, one might easily mistake it for an upscale coffee shop site or even one for a marketing organization.⁸ Like Trinity the church is about inclusion and sharing the word of the church, but it does so in a completely different package.

Within this diversity of experiences, it becomes difficult – if not impossible – to create an individual brand for the Episcopal church. What is *its* unique personality? And, how do you overlay that personality on top of the “Beans and Rice Mission” and “Thad’s” without reducing their effectiveness? What the church seems to have found is that they do not have to.

Rather than brand the church, the organization has embraced the ethos of online media. The Episcopal Church is not a “top down brand,” as Rudig noted, and their

⁸ <http://thads.org/>

social media strategy reflects that.⁹ First, the home page of the website is of a stained glass window (reflecting the tradition) filled with images of what is happening in churches today (presenting what will appeal to newcomers now). In addition, there are buttons where visitors can customize the glass based on their interests, be it family, art, mission, and so on. There is a fairly robust multimedia section that includes a video series called “transforming churches.” This campaign started with stories of churches, but has now moved into a second phase of focusing on individual stories – an idea that is in alignment with the marketing goal of talking to newcomers. These taped pieces act as conversation starters, as a means for drawing in prospects through storytelling.¹⁰

A Twitter section is under a link entitled “social media.” Here, there are sections for “churches that tweet,” “clergy who tweet,” “dioceses that tweet,” and “bishops who tweet.” The home office tweets under @iamepiscopalian. Whether individual churches or the main institution, social media is used for everything from linking to sermons to showing pictures on Instagram or maps on Foursquare to drawing attention to websites and Facebook pages and YouTube Channels. The institutional office uses social media to primarily drive traffic to the website and secondarily to their Facebook page.

Some interesting tactics used by the church are worth noting. Facebook has become an important space for engagement. They use the site for posting prayers after a crisis, such as the tornado in Oklahoma, but also more consistently they post evening prayers, an intricate part of the Episcopal tradition. These posts get hundreds and sometimes thousands of shares, which can be from individuals or church leaders alike. Given the limited staff, it is not surprising that Pinterest is given limited attention. However, they did create an Advent calendar that drew close to 1,700 followers. Finally, the church is finding ways to use the rift within the church to their advantage. In 2010, when the Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori presided at a Eucharist in London, she was told by the Archbishop of Canterbury that she not allowed to wear her mitre, or bishop’s hat, during a three-day meeting of Anglican bishops. This was dubbed with the hashtag “#mitregate” and fairly quickly received significant coverage in major media outlets.

⁹ <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/>

¹⁰ <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/video/transforming-churches-christ-church-philadelphia>

Conclusion

Social media have provided new promotional opportunities for religious institutions. Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have enabled churches to engage and interact with members and prospects to co-create their messaging – the newest form of branding, defined by tribes and movements. While many traditional institutions have clung to the notion that marketing must be a top-down brand, this philosophy runs counter to the strengths of social media. The “I’m a Mormon” campaign is a perfect example of this; while the campaign exists in the online space, it is still managed by the not-quite-invisible hand of the church. The Episcopal Church, on the other hand, has begun to embrace the possibilities afforded by interactive technologies.

The Episcopal Church stands out as a traditional church marketer because they have approached the task using standard marketing practices: they researched what attributes and benefits appeal to newcomers to their institution, they learned how people were finding out about them, and they developed defined target audiences to address their messages to. Based on this, they have developed an online strategy that marries up with their brand concept: to be a “speed ramp to Jesus within the context of an authentic Christian community based on unconditional acceptance.” This means allowing debate and discussion and even disagreement with the church. And social media provides the context within which this can occur.

I am not convinced that all faith traditions could embrace social media in the same way. In part this is true because of the faith tradition, but I believe it is also true because of who is running the marketing program. Evangelicals turned to Disney consultants in their quest for marketing success; now the Episcopalians have turned to Madison Avenue veterans. As they said to me in one of our discussions, “It’s marketing, but they [church leaders] are nervous when they hear that word. So we call it evangelizing and they feel much better.” Unless other churches become comfortable with the tools of marketing – whether we call it that or not – it is unlikely that they will grow or even sustain their membership numbers.

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From Static to Social

Marketing Religion in the Age of the Internet

Abstract: Traditional religious institutions have been slow to adapt to the new media environment and its marketing potential. This online space requires interaction with congregants and prospects, which is fundamentally opposed to the traditional top-down commandment framework these organizations are used to. Though many institutions have come to embrace media forms and even outright promotional messages, the vast majority seem still unsure how best to implement marketing strategies particularly when it comes to the online and social media environment. Evangelical churches have been most successful in using this medium by implementing a combination of consumer research and online savvy including congregations in Second Life, bible apps, virtual pews, and streaming video sermons. Slower to come to these marketing forms have been the more traditional churches. This is due to a confluence of issues: bureaucracy, lack of experience with technology, tradition and needing to appease a number of stakeholders being key among them. One exception is the Episcopal Church, which has come to embrace new media while maintaining their traditional roots. This paper will examine the landscape of social media marketing as used by “untraditional” churches in the United States and what traditional faiths have come to realize they, too, must implement in order to remain part of the cultural conversation in the midst of dwindling attendance figures.

Keywords: Religion; Marketing; Social Media; Episcopal Church.

Mara Einstein is currently Professor of Media Studies at Queens College, City University of New York. She studies the intersection of marketing and commodity culture with social and cultural institutions. She is the author of several books, including *Compassion Inc.: How Corporate America Blurs the Line Between What We Buy, Who We Are and Those We Help* [University of California Press, 2012] and *Brands of Faith: Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age* [Routledge, 2007]. Her work has appeared in scholarly journals as well as in the popular press and business publications.