

The Alabama-West Florida Office of Communications has created a Communications Audit for local churches to help evaluate their current communications presence and *explore ideas* of what more could be done to *increase visibility*. Whether you have a minimal budget for communications or a team of professionals, it is important these tools *work together to enhance your message* to current members, staff and potential new members.

WEBSITE

Your church Website could be one of the most important tools in your ministry. People who have never stepped foot in your church will immediately form impressions based on your Website. A clean, easy to navigate site helps interested visitors feel welcome. Conversely, an outdated, disorganized Website leads people to believe you aren't interested in visitors and caring for what you have. The Website will not be the location for weekly information in most circumstances. Therefore, it should be visually compelling and helpful in connecting new people.



THE FOLLOWING LIST IS APPROPRIATE TO CONSIDER:

- Do you have a Website?
- Is it current?
- Is it easily managed/content updated?
- Does it cover the main topics (pastor, worship times, small groups, age-level ministries, location, directions)?
- Is one person overseeing updates or managing those that do?
- Invite someone not associated with your church to do an audit and ask for honest opinions (the AWF Office of Communications is available to help you with this request).
- If you are interested in various Website options, contact marycatherine@awfumc.org.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Social Media can supplement your communication efforts. It should be used to reinforce regular church programming and also announce time-sensitive information such as changes to an upcoming event, Wednesday night supper menu, death/birth announcements, etc. Remember that your entire congregation will not use social media so it should only be used as a supplement. You must constantly promote various social media accounts to gain followers. Publish your social media accounts everywhere!

- **Facebook** boasts 1.39 billion active users across the globe and 890 million people log onto Facebook daily.* Despite chatter about social media trends, Facebook is too large to ignore. Recent changes have made it harder for businesses and non profits to have visibility but it doesn't mean you should give up this communications channel. An active page can still have a major impact on their readers. Consider some things below:
 - Have your pastor, lay leader and church members share your message as much as possible. The more activity a post has, the more visibility it creates.
 - Is one person assigned to make updates, or a team? Regardless, this group must communicate with each other to strike the right balance in order to have an appropriate amount of posts (not too many, not too few).
 - Photos always tell a great story—even camera phone photos!
- **Twitter** is usually used for commentary and must be 140 characters or less. It tends to reach a younger, male audience. You can setup your Facebook page to automatically update your Twitter account. This is helpful if you are short staffed or want to reach various social media audiences.



- **Instagram** can be an easy and fun way to create social media activity. Is there someone in your congregation that has a love for photography? Let them start an Instagram account for your congregation. This person must be working with staff or the person in charge of your church communications to reinforce your message. Snapshots from events, worship or around the church can create a positive buzz.



E-MAIL

With the ever-changing social media industry, e-mail continues to be a proven method of communication. A strategic effort should be made to acquire and maintain a database of member e-mail addresses. You should be using a program such as Constant Contact or MailChimp to manage your e-mail communications if a method is not built into your database system. Do not send e-mails to hundreds of people through Outlook. This practice could potentially land your church on an e-mail black list. Which is very, very difficult to undo. These e-mail programs allow people to opt out of e-mails should they not wish to be contacted in the future. Consider these e-mail communications tips:

- ***Make a concerted effort*** to update your e-mail database and ask members to notify the church office if there is a change in e-mail address.
- Send e-mail when needed but ***do not oversend***. Setup a schedule to send out a weekly or bi-weekly newsletter and only send additional notices if there is breaking news (death, church office closing due to weather, etc).
- Keep information in the e-mail ***short and to the point***. If you need to include a long article, include the headline and a lead-in paragraph with a link to the full article elsewhere. People usually only read headlines and a few sentences of articles.
- All e-mail header designs should ***be consistent*** with what you do in printed communications.
- If you are able, ***include one or two photos*** to accompany your articles to add a visual.

CHECK OUT THESE RESOURCES



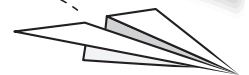
Find templates and more to make your e-mail pop. Remember to keep your look consistent regardless of what communications tool you are using.

PRINTED MATERIALS

Churches often utilize printed materials to promote events happening at their local church. Printed newsletters, postcards, signs/posters around the church campus help reinforce your message. Avoid the easy trap of overdoing design. Many times, a simple design is easier to understand and process. Keep content brief so that the reader can quickly understand the message. Contact the Office of Communications if you need recommendations on professional design services.

BELOW ARE SOME TIPS TO ENSURE THAT YOUR NEWSLETTER & BULLETIN ANNOUNCEMENTS ARE READ.

- Keep announcements in worship to changes in events, church-wide events, or imminent events.
- Narrow your target for communication as closely as possible. Newsletter space should be a premium and not used for meetings that only involve a few people.
- Pictures are better than clipart.
- If the same announcement (call for volunteers, announcement about an upcoming event, etc.) is in the newsletter for three consecutive publishings, you will lose readers.
- Include a brief feature, including a photo, on a member or a staff person in your newsletter. Everyone loves seeing a familiar face!





YOUR CHURCH BRAND

Larger membership churches may have the resources for full-time, on-staff employees that strategically collaborate to build their church's brand. A brand can be graphics, logos, slogans or anything that helps people identify communications with a church. Not all churches have the ability to hire a full marketing team. It doesn't mean your brand isn't just as important; regardless of the size of your church. Newsletters, posters, Websites, social media are all part of your brand. Consistency is key in your message. The phrase, "less is more" certainly applies to a visual brand. A simple cross and flame and the UMC mission can be all you need. Another option is to explore hiring a part-time designer to get you started.

PUBLIC RELATIONS & COMMUNITY PRESENCE

Communicating to your internal audience (your members and staff) is crucial. However, in our continuous effort to make disciples, it is essential you consider your outside, non-member audience. The area in close proximity to your church address is worth your attention. Do you have a guest speaker coming to your church? Is Vacation Bible School registration ongoing? Perhaps your church is planning a special music event. Many new members introduce themselves to your congregation through special events – especially related to children and youth. Consider how you might inform your non-member audience about your church calendar. In larger towns, press releases to major TV and radio stations and newspapers are helpful. Smaller town media outlets are always looking for good content. Always consider any published community calendar. Also consider looking for consistent ways your senior pastor or a senior staff member can be in front of the community.

Do you have a guest speaker coming to your church? Is Vacation Bible School registration ongoing?

Would your local church newspaper like a guest columnist? To be considered a thriving church, you must be active in the community (civic, volunteer and neighborhood groups).

THESE QUESTIONS

COULD BE HELPFUL TO
YOUR LOCAL CHURCH AND
COMMUNICATIONS TEAM.

AFTER EVALUATING THE
ABOVE INFORMATION, YOU
MIGHT ASK YOUR GROUP:

- *What are we doing* in communications that is working well?
- What are two or three things we could do to *improve our communication* and brand?
- What is happening in our church right now that is *good, hopeful and helpful* for our community to know about?
- What are the *key events* that will occur in the next year and how will our community hear of them?
- What *could we do more* of based upon the information above?