



Overall LDS Growth Trend Case Studies

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Using Social Media in LDS Proselytism Efforts

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Introduction

The internet has permitted people to instantly communicate across vast geographic distances at little to no cost. The emergence of social media websites has provided the necessary tools for individuals and organizations to reach enormous global audiences. The social media website Facebook permits users to target specific locations and individuals with advertisements that are inexpensive and user-friendly. Social media advertizing has opened a new frontier in LDS missionary activity. Not only can the Church conduct official advertisement campaigns via social media outlets, but ordinary members can participate in missionary work on a global scale utilizing these platforms.

This case study provides an overview of social media. Internet technologies that appear effective for online missionary activity are discussed and resources and statements made by church leaders pertaining to social media and missionary work are reviewed. The author discusses his experience creating a social media webpage on Facebook and analyzes case examples of advertisement campaigns that have targeted specific locations. Opportunities and challenges for social media proselytism are explored. Limitations to this case study are identified.

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Social Media Overview (Adapted from the Missiology Encyclopedia)

The virtual interaction and networking of people online constitutes social media. The internet enables the use of social media through sites such as Facebook or online journals and interactive websites such as blogs, podcasts, wikis, and forums. The use of social media has proliferated in recent years and permits communication with few, if any, constraints on money, time, and geographic distance and location. The LDS Church has maintained websites and has conducted official online proselytism initiatives for approximately 15 years. The Church's official website for members is lds.org whereas the Church's official website for nonmembers who want to learn more about the Church is mormon.org.

The Church has published information on its official website lds.org regarding the use of social media and member-missionary work. Descriptions of common social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are provided as well as suggestions and warnings for how members can interact online when sharing the gospel through social media.^[1] Specific ideas on how members can increase the possibility of engaging in gospel-related conversations through social media are also provided such as sharing a favorite scripture through the Gospel Library Mobile Apps, clicking the "like" button for the Church's official pages on Facebook, and sharing one's testimony on a blog or in a video on YouTube.^[2] The Church has conducted official online proselytism efforts through many social media sites such as Facebook and YouTube. Social media has presented the opportunity for the Church to engage in cost-effective approaches to missionary work that often exact little money and reach large audiences.

The Church has taken advantage of social media to promote member-missionary work. Church leaders have encouraged members to create profiles on mormon.org for public view that personalize LDS teachings and illustrate members' application of church teachings in their everyday lives. In recent years, the Church has highly promoted its revamped mormon.org website where ordinary members can create profiles that describe their conversion to the Church, share the reason for their continued activity, and explain church teachings or commonly-asked questions regarding the Church and its beliefs. Mormon.org permits interested individuals to browse member profiles by former religious affiliation, geographic location, age, gender, and ethnicity. This website functionality highlights the growing diversity of church membership to website visitors and helps explain the process that individuals from different backgrounds have gained a testimony and have applied church teachings to their lives. Young single adults (YSAs) and youth are good resources in utilizing social media for member-missionary activity due to their

familiarity with the internet, often more nonmember friends and acquaintances than their older adult counterparts, and greater assertiveness in extending commitments and invitations.

LDS leaders have recently stressed the importance for members to conduct member-missionary work through social media. President Dieter F. Uchtdorf observed that "with so many social media resources and a multitude of more or less useful gadgets at our disposal, sharing the good news of the gospel is easier and the effects more far-reaching than ever before."^[3] Apostle Elder L. Tom Perry noted in regards to social media that "this is the time of expanding opportunities to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with others. May we prepare ourselves to take advantage of the opportunities given to us to share our beliefs..."^[4] Church leaders have encouraged members to share LDS resources with nonmember and less-active friends, family, and acquaintances through social media. In addition to formal efforts, the Church has encouraged its members to participate in online conversations about the Church and utilize social media to share the gospel with others.^[5]

There are many opportunities for utilizing social media to accelerate church growth and conduct missionary activity as social media has few geographical limitations. Church leaders, missionaries, and ordinary members have the opportunity of reach individuals in most areas of the world regardless of whether there are missionaries assigned to their area or if there is an LDS unit nearby. For example, advertisements on social media platforms such as Facebook can be modified to reach individuals on a variety of demographic domains ranging from personal interests, religious background, geographical location, marital status, and education. Mission leaders can maximize their efforts to open cities to proselytism by using social media to target these locations with advertisements. Advertisements can be tailored to meet local cultural conditions. For example, an advertisement providing an offer for a free copy of the Book of Mormon or an audiovisual material may be most appropriate in locations with moderate to high interest in organized religion such as in Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and some locations in Southeast Asia, whereas an advertisement providing information on a special musical performance at an LDS meetinghouse, English classes, or another passive proselytism approach may be most appropriate in locations with low receptivity. Advertizing on Facebook is relatively inexpensive and provides a methodological and coordinated method to reach specific locations from anywhere in the world where there is an internet connection and no government censorship of social media sites or religious content.

Internet-based outreach increases the number of self-referred individuals who have come into contact with the Church online or through friends or family. In Europe, church leaders have reported that self-referred investigators have frequently joined the Church and that these individuals comprise a sizable number of convert baptisms in some countries. Historically, instances of investigator self-referral through the internet have largely occurred due to members researching the church through country websites instead of through social media outlets. Social media has potential to dramatically increase the number of self-referred investigators who learn about the Church via the internet if member-missionary participation occurs and invitations to learn more about the Church are appropriately extended. Social media can improve the efficiency of missionary activity as it reduces time spent on full-time missionary finding efforts that generally yield few investigators such as street contacting or door-to-door tracting.

Method

The author created a Facebook page to promote member-missionary social media proselytism efforts called Go Ye Into All The World in December 2014. The Facebook page was created because the site requires users to have a Facebook page for their business or organization in order to create advertisements. A Facebook page not only meets the requirement to run advertisements on Facebook, but also serves as a method to attract additional individuals who are interested in contributing their time and financial means to a specific cause. Facebook pages include many functions that are effective in online proselytism efforts such as a summary of the purpose of the page, interested individuals "liking" the page, the ability for the page administrative to post comments that appear on the status bar of users who have liked the page, the ability for Facebook users to post a comment on the page, and the ability of the page administrator to message others to communicate and share information.

Cost

The cost to run social media advertisements is remarkably inexpensive for many areas of the world. Facebook requires users to spend at least one US dollar a day to run an advertisement campaign. The low cost permits many individuals with limited financial resources to run advertisement campaigns with a member-missionary focus. Advertisements can be run with an emphasis on reaching as many impressions as possible (individuals who view the advertisements in their status bar) or optimizing to have as many people who click on the advertisements. Users have the option to run an advertisement continuously for at least one dollar a day or to designate a "lifetime budget" for a specific period of time. Facebook permits users to adjust the dates and costs of an advertising campaign.

Targeting

Users are required to target a specific geographical location when using Facebook advertizing. Facebook permits city-by-city targeting for many of the most populous countries (i.e. India, Indonesia, Nigeria, and the Philippines). Advertisements that target populations in the United States can be as geographically specific as individual postal (ZIP) codes. The cost of advertisements varies significantly by city and country. Users also have the option of targeting populations with a wide range of variables. These variables are divided into general demographics (location, age, gender, language, relationship status, education, work, financial,

home, ethnic affinity, generation, parents, politics [US], life events), interests (business and industry, entertainment, family and relationships, fitness and wellness, food and drink, hobbies and activities, shopping and fashion, sports and outdoors, technology), behaviors (charitable donations, digital activities, expats, financial, job role, media, mobile device user, purchase behavior, residential profiles, seasonal and events, and travel), and connections (options to include or exclude people connected to particular pages, apps, or event names on Facebook). Facebook calculates an estimated reach for the variables entered into a prospective ad campaign. This allows users to adjust and modify the parameters of targeting to maximize the effectiveness of an ad campaign.

Creating an Advertisement

A Facebook page must be utilized to promote another website. An advertisement consists of an image, a headline text of up to 25 characters, and a description text of up to 90 characters. Users may choose any image to represent the advertisement. Any language can be used for advertisements as long as the language is supported by the user's computer operating system.

Mormon.org is the Church's official website for explaining LDS teachings to the general public and coordinating online missionary activity. Promoting mormon.org through social media advertizing presents an easy and efficient method for online proselytism efforts. The website is currently translated into 30 languages.^[6] Languages with the current mormon.org website translated include Albanian, Armenian, Cebuano, Chinese, Dutch, English, French, German, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Latvian, Polish, Russian, Spanish, Swedish, Tagalog, Thai, and Ukrainian. Languages with translations of a previous version of mormon.org include Croatian, Czech, Danish, Finnish, Greek, Hungarian, Portuguese, Romanian, and Slovenian.

Linking webpages from the various language versions of mormon.org provides a quick and efficient method for promoting a suitable website for online missionary efforts. Webpages on mormon.org that appear most appropriate for social media advertising campaigns include the order a free Book of Mormon page, the meet with Mormon missionaries page, learn about Joseph Smith page, chat with church representatives page, the Book of Mormon page, the Jesus Christ our Savior page, and the God's plan of salvation page.

The LDS Church has made many of its translations of gospel study materials, missionary resources, and scriptures available online through its official website lds.org. As of early 2015, the Church reported 105 languages in which there was at least one translation of an LDS material available on lds.org.^[7] These materials are provided without cost and are typically available in .html or .pdf formats.

Analysis Tools

Facebook provides several statistics to track the progress of advertisement campaigns. These statistics include the number of people the advertisement was served to, the number of people who clicked on the advertisement, and the average price per click. Users can also review which individuals have "liked" the advertisement and can read comments posted by people who have viewed the advertisement. Additional statistics are available regarding the demographic information of individuals who clicked on the advertisement such as age and gender.

Case Examples from the Author - December 2014-February 2015

Albania

This advertisement campaign was conducted in Albanian and consisted of a link to the .pdf version of the Albanian translation of the Book of Mormon on lds.org. A picture on the mormon.org webpage of Joseph Smith translating the Book of Mormon was used as the image for the advertisement. The campaign lasted one day and cost \$1. The campaign reached 3,038 people. 38 people clicked on the advertisement and one person "liked it." One person commented on the advertisement.

Armenia

This advertisement campaign was conducted in Armenian and consisted of a link to the order a free Book of Mormon page on the Armenian version of mormon.org. A picture on the mormon.org webpage of the Book of Mormon was used as the image for the advertisement. The campaign lasted one day and cost \$1. The campaign reached 2,240 people. 58 people clicked on the advertisement and two people "liked it." There were five comments on the advertisement.

Tucurui, Brazil

This advertisement campaign was conducted in Portuguese and consisted of a link to the order a free Book of Mormon page on the Portuguese version of mormon.org. A picture on the mormon.org webpage of the Book of Mormon was used as the image for the advertisement. The campaign lasted one day and cost \$1. The campaign reached 1,774 people. Seven people clicked on the advertisement and three people "liked it." There were no comments on the advertisement.

Kohima, India

This advertisement campaign was conducted in English and consisted of a link to the Book of Mormon page on the English version of mormon.org. A picture on the mormon.org webpage of Joseph Smith translating the Book of Mormon was used as the image for the advertisement. The campaign lasted one day and cost \$1. The campaign reached 1,500 people. 15 people clicked on the advertisement and one person "liked" the advertisement. There were no comments on the advertisement.

Ambon, Indonesia

This advertisement campaign was conducted in Indonesian and consisted of a link to the Book of Mormon page on the Indonesian version of mormon.org. A picture on the mormon.org webpage of Joseph Smith translating the Book of Mormon was used as the image for the advertisement. The campaign lasted for four days and cost \$4. The campaign reached 9,283 people. 581 people clicked on the advertisement and 14 people "liked it." There were two comments on the advertisement.

Medan, Indonesia

This advertisement campaign was conducted in Indonesian and consisted of a link to the order a free Book of Mormon page on the Indonesian version of mormon.org. A picture on the mormon.org webpage of the Book of Mormon was used as the image for the advertisement. The campaign lasted for four days and cost \$5. The campaign reached 16,035 people. 443 people clicked on the advertisement and 21 people "liked it." There were no comments on the advertisement.

Mali

This advertisement campaign was conducted in French and consisted of a link to the Book of Mormon page on the French version of mormon.org. A picture on the mormon.org webpage of Joseph Smith translating the Book of Mormon was used as the image for the advertisement. The campaign lasted for three days and cost \$3. The campaign reached 12,799 people. 136 people clicked on the advertisement and 17 people "liked it." There were 20 comments on the advertisement.

Astrakhan, Russia

This advertisement campaign was conducted in Russian and consisted of a link to the Book of Mormon page on the Russian version of mormon.org. A picture on the mormon.org webpage of the Book of Mormon was used as the image for the advertisement. The campaign lasted one day and cost \$1. The campaign reached 404 people. Six people clicked on the advertisement. There were no "likes" or comments on the advertisement.

Opportunities

Missionaries serving in many areas of the world struggle to find a sufficient number of investigators to teach. The use of social media advertizing can help augment the number of investigators within individual missionary companionship teaching pools and the number of self-referred investigators. Self-referred investigators found through social media advertizing or through their own efforts to research about the Church online have often exhibited greater interest and desire to learn about the Church and consider membership than investigators found through the efforts of full-time missionaries. Nearly all areas of the world appeared favorable for use of social media advertizing to bolster the teaching pools of full-time missionaries. However, this approach may be a critical method to implement more effective finding strategies in industrialized and secular nations such as in Australia, the Caribbean, Europe, East Asia, New Zealand, and North America.

Social media advertizing provides one of the most effective methods to opening a city or country to missionary work. Mission presidents or ordinary members can run advertisements that target a specific country or a specific city to assess receptivity and establish contacts within potential investigators. Facebook permits page administrators to contact individuals who have liked or commented on an advertisement that their Facebook page has sponsored. This permits members or church leaders to message individuals who have responded to an advertisement and query whether these individuals are interested in meeting with church representatives or receiving additional information about the Church.

Social media advertizing presents good opportunities for greater member-missionary involvement around the world, especially in locations with a well-established LDS presence. Online proselytism can help many overcome anxiety and fear associated with talking to others about the gospel or extending invitations. Some areas of the world have significant member-missionary resources such as Utah but relatively few opportunities to utilize these resources within their communities due to relatively few nonmembers. Latter-day Saints in these locations can contribute their time, energy, and financial resources to target areas of the world that present greater opportunities for proselytism such as Asia, Europe, and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Social media proselytism can be utilized to help districts advance to stake status. Many of the Church's approximately 560

districts meet multiple qualifications to become stakes such as the number of congregations (at least five) and the number of nominal members on church records (at least 1,900). However, many districts that are close to reaching the minimum criteria for a stake to be organized lack the minimum number of active, full-tithe paying Melchizedek Priesthood holders (at least 120). Social media advertizing can be used to target adult men in locations where districts operate with the goal to convert larger numbers of men who can one day become active, full-tithe paying Melchizedek Priesthood holders. Social media advertizing can also be used in districts that do not have the minimum number of congregations to operate as stakes by targeting cities without an official branch within the geographical boundaries of the district. Local church leaders and members targeting locations where member groups operate or where no LDS congregation operates may be an effective strategy to organize additional congregations within the district and help make greater progress for the district to reach the qualifications to become a stake one day.

Internet websites and technologies can provide informal translation assistance to share the gospel with individuals who speak languages without official translations of church materials. There are several free, user-friendly online resources that instantly translate text into scores of languages. For example, in early 2015 Google Translate provided translation abilities into 90 languages,^[8] 12 of which (Azerbaijani, Bosnian, Esperanto, Gacilian, Gujarati, Hebrew, Irish, Javanese, Latin, Sundanese, Tajik, and Yiddish) had no translations of LDS materials available. These translation resources do not provide complete and accurate translations and at times are not equipped to properly translate specific terms and language unique to the LDS Church, but nonetheless provide at least some method for interacting with individuals who do not speak a language with translations of LDS materials available. Full-time missionaries have utilized these sites at times to communicate with investigators and teach missionary lessons.

Challenges

Online proselytism efforts continue to face limitations in regards to religious freedom conditions in some nations or a lack of internet users. Proselytism efforts that target countries that prohibit proselytism should be avoided in order to comply with local laws. Examples of these nations include many countries where Islam is the state religion, mainland China, and Central Asian republics. Proselytism in many of these nations is illegal and can result in criminal charges. Many undeveloped or developing nations have few people who regularly use the internet. Consequently social media proselytism efforts have a limited reach in many of these nations due to a lack of internet users.

The Church has yet to translate its current version of mormon.org into many of the world's most commonly spoken languages. Languages with at least 50 million native speakers with no translation of mormon.org include Hindi (260 million), Arabic (237 million), Bengali (193 million), Javanese (84 million), Lahnda (83 million), Telugu (74 million), Marathi (72 million), Turkish (71 million), Tamil (69 million), Vietnamese (68 million), Urdu (64 million), Malay (60 million), and Persian [Farsi] (57 million).^[9] Social media proselytism efforts among speakers of languages with no current version of mormon.org will likely experienced diminished efficiency compared to proselytism efforts among speakers of languages with a current version of mormon.org.

It is difficult to assess the success of social media advertizing in online proselytism efforts. Ordinary members who run advertisement campaigns in social media have no method to track the actions of users once they visit a church website. Mission presidents, the Missionary Department, and Church Headquarters have access to the data regarding actions performed by users who visit church websites as it relates to their jurisdictions. However, these church leaders and official organizations also face limitations in analyzing data. For example, some individuals who are targeted in specific locations may be only temporarily visiting the targeted location. These individuals may later take action to investigate the Church or join the Church when they return to their home city or country.

Limitations

Other social media advertizing platforms such as Google+ or Google Ads were not explored in this case study. Data on the number of requests for missionary visits or orders for free copies of the Book of Mormon or audiovisual materials were not available from the Missionary Department, LDS Church Headquarters, or individual missions. Consequently the effectiveness of social media proselytism efforts is unknown as there was no reliable method to assess whether targeting specific locations resulted in increasing numbers of referrals to full-time missionaries, investigators attending church, or convert baptisms.

Conclusion

Social media presents exciting, cost-effective opportunities for the Church to use advertizing in reaching populations around the world and overcome geographical constraints. These efforts have potential to motivate members to participate in member-missionary activity and contribute their time, energy, and financial resources to online proselytism efforts. Domains available for targeting populations permits specialized outreach among individual ethnolinguistic groups and to achieve specific goals such as opening a city or country to missionary work, helping a district advance into a stake, or enhancing the efficiency of investigator finding in industrialized, secular nations. However, these efforts continue to be limited to locations where missionary activity is legal and where populations have regular access to the internet. Resources available for online proselytism efforts continue to be limited for many of the most commonly spoken languages. As there is no reliable method for ordinary members to track the actions of people after they have clicked on an advertisement sponsoring a church website, this may result in diminished interest and problems with accurately assessing the efficiency of social media advertizing in online proselytism efforts.

- [1] "Social Media Helps for Members," www.lds.org, retrieved 20 February 2013. <http://www.lds.org/pages/social-media-helps>
- [2] "Sharing via Social Media," www.lds.org, retrieved 20 February 2013. <http://www.lds.org/church/share/sharing-the-gospel-via-social-media>
- [3] Uchtdorf, Dieter F. "Waiting on the Road to Damascus," General Conference, April 2011. <http://www.lds.org/general-conference/2011/04/waiting-on-the-road-to-damascus>
- [4] Perry, L. Tom. "Perfect Love Casteth Out Fear," General Conference, October 2011. <http://www.lds.org/general-conference/2011/10/perfect-love-casteth-out-fear>
- [5] Perry, L. Tom. "Perfect Love Casteth Out Fear," General Conference, October 2011. <http://www.lds.org/general-conference/2011/10/perfect-love-casteth-out-fear>
- [6] <http://www.mormon.org/>, retrieved 22 January 2015. NOTE: although Arabic is listed, there is no translation of mormon.org currently available as of January 2015.
- [7] <https://www.lds.org/languages?lang=eng>, retrieved 22 January 2015.
- [8] <http://translate.google.com>, retrieved 23 January 2015
- [9] "Summary by language size," [ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com), retrieved 23 January 2015. <http://www.ethnologue.com/statistics/size>