

LDS Growth Encyclopedia on Missionary Work and Church Growth (Missiology)

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Social Media and the Internet

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The virtual interaction and networking of people constitutes social media. The internet enables the use of social media between people through social media sites such as Facebook, and online journals and interactive websites such as blogs, podcasts, wikis, and forums. Use of social media has proliferated in recent years throughout the world and permits communication with few, if any, constraints on money, time, and geographic distance and location. The Church has maintained websites about the Church and extended official proselytism-focused outreach 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, and maintains an official Facebook group and YouTube videos. These approaches often take little money and can reach a large audience if member participation occurs.

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 how members apply them in their everyday lives. In recent years, the Church has highly promoted its revamped mormon.org website where ordinary members can create profiles that relate 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.

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Mormon.org permits interested individuals to browse member profiles by the former religious affiliation, geographic location, age, gender, and ethnicity to demonstrate the growing diversity of church membership, and how individuals from different backgrounds gain a testimony and apply 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 inviting others to learn more about the Church through attending church services or taking the missionary lessons.

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 these 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 to 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 is generally not limited by geography. 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 and an LDS unit operating in their

location. For example, Facebook presents many opportunities for formal and informal proselytism efforts. The Church can set target populations for advertisements that provide free offers for a copy of the Book of Mormon or audiovisual materials such as The Restoration. Advertisements can be specialized 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 that specifically target that location. 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 means of reaching specific locations from anywhere in the world where there is an internet connection, and no government censorship of social media sites and religious content.

Internet-based outreach increases the number of self-referred individuals who have come into contact with the Church online or through friends and family. In Europe, church leaders have reported that self-referred investigators have frequently joined the Church and 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 extended. Social media can improve the efficiency of missionary activity as it reduces time spent on finding techniques that yield few interested investigators such as street contacting and tracting.

Internet websites and technologies can provide translation capabilities to help share the gospel with individuals who speak languages without translations of church materials. There are several free, user-friendly online resources that instantly translate text into scores of languages. For example, in early 2013 Google Translate provided translation abilities into 65 languages,[6] seven of which (Azerbaijani, Esperanto, Gacilian, Gujarati, Hebrew, Irish, and Yiddish) had no translations of LDS materials published. 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. Full-time missionaries have utilized these sites at times to communicate with investigators and teach missionary lessons.

Many church members and missionaries have voiced concern about the large amount of anti-LDS or anti-Mormon material on the internet published by disaffiliated members and counterproselytism groups. This concern centers on the belief that these sites have reduced receptivity to the Church, and have propagated apostasy and higher inactivity rates. The amount of negative information about the Church and its members has been especially concerning outside the United States where the Church has a smaller presence and lower member activity rates. However, the influence of the internet on LDS Church growth trends within the past decade appears mixed as some members or individuals lose interest in the Church when encountering negative information online, whereas other individuals learn about the Church or become reactivated through pro-church websites and social media. Factors identified that favor or deter LDS growth and statistical findings on internet usage and LDS growth rates indicate that the positive and negative influences of the internet on LDS growth are nearly equal in strength resulting in little to no fluctuation in membership and congregational growth trends from the recent past in most countries around the world. Rather, fluctuations in membership and congregational growth rates appear caused by changes in convert baptismal standards, mission and area policies, initiatives in mission outreach expansion, and the level of religiosity and receptivity to nontraditional Christian denominations in individual countries.

As the role of social media and internet-based technologies in society and culture continues to expand into the coming decades, the importance of conducting missionary work through this medium will continue to increase. Possibilities may include increased numbers of "virtual" branches for members who live in remote areas, full-time missionaries teaching the missionary lessons online through programs such as Skype to investigators in isolated locations, and the Church continuing to publish online translations of church materials and scriptures in additional languages.

[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://translate.google.com