

Churches behind the curve in social media strategies

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NASHVILLE (BP)—By the time churches have fully embraced Facebook, many of their members and those they are trying to reach may have left it behind, research indicates.

Nearly three-quarters of Facebook users (74 percent) have adjusted their connection with the social media platform in some way over the past year, according to Pew Research.

That reportedly includes the 54 percent who adjusted their privacy settings, 42 percent who took a break from checking it for several weeks or more, and 26 percent who deleted the app from their phone.

Young people have unfriended Facebook

Younger Facebook users are more likely to say they have done each of these. This is especially true in regard to removing the app from their phone. Those aged 18 to 29 were nearly four times as likely as users 65 and older (44 percent to 12 percent) to have deleted it.

Among teenagers, Facebook lags behind other social media platforms.

In a 2018 Pew Research survey of U.S. teens ages 13 to 17, half (51 percent) say they use Facebook, while larger numbers are on YouTube (85 percent), Instagram (72 percent) and Snapchat (69 percent).

That has fallen 20 percent in just three years. In 2014-15, 71 percent of

teenagers said they used Facebook, more than any other platform.

Only 10 percent say they use Facebook most often compared to other platforms. More say their preferred platform is Snapchat (35 percent), YouTube (32 percent), or Instagram (15 percent).

This decline in Facebook use by young people comes as churches increasingly are relying on Facebook as part of their ministry strategy.

In 2010, LifeWay Research found only 47 percent of churches had a Facebook page. By 2017, that number had jumped to 84 percent. The same percentage of churches have a website as use Facebook.

Relatively few, however, used a church Twitter (16 percent) or Instagram (13 percent) account.

Church leaders say their churches use social media to inform people of upcoming events (97 percent), interact with the congregation (87 percent), and interact with outsiders (86 percent).

However, social media users increasingly are scattered across numerous platforms. In one family, Mom may prefer Facebook, Dad scans Twitter, the daughter is on Instagram, and the son watches YouTube.

Multiply that across an entire congregation, and churches face a daunting task of trying to leverage social media to reach both insiders and outsiders.

Some analysts suggest ways to do both:

- **Diversify platforms.**

LifeWay Research found only 23 percent of churches say they proactively look for new technology that may help them. But if a church wants to reach

people on social media, research indicates the church needs to expand its social media presence beyond Facebook and a church website.

Some experts recommend adding a social media platform every few months to see the reaction from members and the extent of the reach beyond a church. Users don't have to be experts or post on every platform every day. They should just look for ways to go beyond what they have been doing.

- **Leverage people.**

According to the research, older pastors and pastors at small churches often are the least likely to try new technologies. But even if pastors are not up to date on the latest technology, chances are someone in the congregation will be.

Churches can involve young people in ministry by relying on their knowledge of social media to help reach others.

Church leaders also can encourage members to share information about the congregation on their own social media accounts. Even if a church does not have a presence on several social media platforms, people in the congregation do, and they can promote the church there.

- **Capture phone numbers.**

Church leaders may not know what type of social media people in the congregation use, but they can assume members have a cell phone. In the most recent survey, Pew Research found 95 percent of Americans own a cell phone of some kind, and 77 percent own a smartphone.

Even so, only 40 percent of churches use a text message service for group texts, according to LifeWay Research.

While church leaders should avoid bombarding members with daily

updates, occasional messages informing members of upcoming service opportunities or encouraging previous guests to attend a special event could be extremely effective, experts assert.