



What to avoid on your website

TN113 Training Notes series: Communication

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Some church websites are brilliant: contemporary, informative, highly visual, people-centred, displaying Christian good news. They are easy to read and view, full of life, clearly appropriate for those outside the Christian community as well as giving information for church members.

But whether they have been designed and built specifically for that church or taken from one of the web templates on offer, many sites fall well short of this standard.

So, putting myself in the shoes of a website user, here are some of the features I see that worry me. Check your church site out to see if you are guilty of any of these 18 features.

1 **DIY design**

First, there is the site built DIY by someone who knows a little about the software involved, but less about design. There are fewer of these around than was the case ten years ago because there are professional-looking templates now available at reasonable cost, but many DIY sites are no longer good enough. They often use too many colours, fonts and special features and so look a mess.

2 **Non-responsive or non-secure technology**

These features apply to many of the DIY sites but others too. First, there are still sites engineered only for a PC screen which do not automatically reformat for a mobile. That will upset many users as mobile access is so common today.

Secondly, a current development is for sites whose URL starts 'https://' (including the 's' for 'secure'). This means communication from your browser to the site is encrypted. Lack of the 's' is starting to look rather behind-the-times.

3 **Fast-scrolling screens**

But state-of-the-art sites can have their problems too. It is in fashion at the moment to have scrolling pictures for the home page. The trouble is some of these scroll so quickly that they make me feel queasy (web-sick?). I've seen sites where the staff team scroll across the page. You click on one to find their details, but you are too slow and get the next person instead.

Scrolling has the advantage of showing a variety of pictures, but please don't turn it into one of those TV ads that flashes images at high speed.

4 **Unclear navigation**

In modern sites it can also be difficult to find your way around. There may be one set of navigation areas listed at the top of the page and another at the bottom. Or long pages with lots of visuals but little that enables you to discover something specific.

Non-members need to find a welcome, who this church is, what it's all about, main meetings/services, how a visit will benefit them, what to expect and how to get there. But is this clearly found from the home page?

5 **Hidden contact details**

In particular, I often want to find the church email, telephone or address but it takes a search to discover where this information is displayed. Sometimes the postal address is completely absent.

Then I see there is a 'Contact us' page only to discover there's a form to fill in without giving me direct contact details. Do you really need to be quite so secretive, even though I know there are dangers in being too open?

6 **Failed links**

This is a standard fault for all sites. But I find plenty of examples of out-of-date links, pages that have changed or, in general, a site that simply shows up its neglect. Check all your links on a regular basis.

7 **Out-of-date information**

This is so common but it creates a really bad impression. Perhaps there's a news page with just one entry from six months ago so that is not exactly 'news' today. It may be the weekly news-sheet is several weeks old, or the vision statement is looking ahead to a date now passed.

I have turned up for a church service based on what seemed like current website information only to find that the time had been changed a year earlier. If I was a 'real' visitor that Sunday, think of what it might do to my impressions of both that church and the Christian faith.

8 **Missing details**

I was checking a site today and found a page about the Minister. His name was, say, Pete. Well that's informal but I needed to know his surname too so I could write to him. But that was not included.

Or I am told that the Sunday service is at 10.00 am. at St Mary's, but nowhere can I find where St Mary's is. I need postcode for satnav and address with map if I am walking. I also need to know service details for this coming weekend.

Then again if I am coming by car I need to know where to park. One church site told me it was difficult to park nearby but did not suggest what I should do instead.

9 Little welcome

Some sites provide factual information in a way that comes across as cold. People need to feel the warmth of a welcome as they log on, demonstrating that the church is glad they have paid a visit and showing some real humanity within the information that is included. That is more than just the word 'welcome' in the first line too. The warmth needs to extend to each page as far as is possible offering an engagement not just an advertisement.

10 Unanswered questions

This is a variation on the previous point. Sites have to cope with a range of different visitors from the curious to the committed. But too often the content is geared for the committed without realising what the curious want to discover.

These are the kind of questions a visitor to one of your Sunday services might have:

- When is it? When will it finish?
- What goes on?
- What should I wear?
- What is there for my kids?
- Are there loos?
- Where can I park?
- Will I be made to feel awkward?

Is your site answering these and similar questions, perhaps in a FAQ section?

11 Suspect or coded words

So many churches describe themselves as 'vibrant' these days. Others say they are 'welcoming' – which in my experience can often be far from true. A church I was with the other day say they are 'growing' on their website but the statistics tell a different story. It is vital that the website is true in content and in style to the church it represents, not promising something different that a visit will quickly show up.

Then there are the terms that belong to certain Christian traditions. Some churches pepper the site with the word 'godly' or 'gospel' used as an adjective. Others keep adding a code such as 'in the power of the Spirit' or explain that their speakers are all 'anointed' or 'prophetic'.

So watch out if you are encouraged to hear an anointed preacher at a vibrant church with a gospel ministry – especially if it's all in the power of the Spirit!

12 Jargon terms

But there is more. There are plenty of examples of churchy terms that Christians (perhaps just those of your denomination) can decode but which mystify others.

Saying a service is a 'Eucharist' in an Anglican church means nothing to most people. Introducing some of your staff as Readers sounds odd. Beware mnemonics too: if you have LLMs, try to put it differently.

Non-Anglicans have their own terminology too. 'Elders', 'stewards', 'intermissions', are all terms that can confuse sane people. And what about over-used words like 'worship', 'fellowship' and 'ministry'? I am not saying you can never use official church terms – but they need explaining if you do.

13 **Typos or poor grammar**

Another standard fault. Perhaps the person running the site isn't bothered about where apostrophes go but some of us are. Get your spelling properly proof-read. I am not asking for perfection on launch, and I have had plenty of mistakes on my site over the years, but I hope typos will be spotted quickly and corrected (apart from the two in this paragraph!).

14 **Lengthy paragraphs**

If you are a writer, a paragraph may have ten or more sentences in it. If you write for the press, a typical paragraph has one or, at most, two sentences in it.

Websites need to have the text broken up in this latter way, with gaps between paragraphs and sub-heads. Use bullet points whenever it makes good sense.

Some church sites show turgid prose written as if for a book. That's a turn-off on the screen.

15 **People-less content**

It is interesting what some churches see as the Really Important Information to put across. Sometimes it's a basis of faith (is that really what you want to lead on?), sometimes the architecture of the church building or its history (I thought the church was all about people).

What will draw me in is people: photographs of people, stories about people, short pieces from people (be careful, though, about safeguarding). On some websites they hardly get a look in amidst all the architecture, service details, financial appeals and doctrine. A site with plenty of good people-photos usually breathes life. But...

16 **Stock photos**

You look at the home page and see a smiling family presumably coming up your church path, or the group of 20s and 30s all laughing as they drink their coffee. But, wait a minute. Is that really your church path? And I did not know you had any under-40s in the congregation so who are those people?

The answer, of course, is that these pictures have been taken from a website of stock photographs (and paid for, I trust, unless on a copyright-free site).

The visitor to the site is being led to assume something that is not true. Better to show the congregation looking their normal, miserable selves than to pretend these people are yours. Or perhaps not.

17 Hierarchical teams

However, many churches do put on names and photographs of their staff and/or leadership team. So far so good. It's great to see who is involved and photos bring the site alive.

But for some the order is interesting. The Minister comes first, the youth people next, and the office staff may not even get a look in. But it is the Office Administrator (if they exist) who will be my first point of contact when I ring or email so are they not the first photograph to go on? Or does this church have a clear hierarchy of importance and that is what has determined how the staff or leaders are shown?

18 Delayed response

I have several times filled in a website response form only to hear nothing. When I chase up with an email or phone call a week later, I receive no apology but an explanation that they haven't checked last week yet or something similar.

Responses to website enquiries need to be within 24 hours if at all possible, or with an explanation if the church office is only open on certain days. A delayed response is irritating for many people and a bad witness by the church.

You cannot meet everyone's needs and match their tastes all in one site, especially if yours is trying to reach both the curious and the committed. I am not pretending it's easy. But your church website is your high-street shop window and it's worth making an effort to get it right.

In all I have written I hear the words 'Physician, heal thyself' ringing in my ears. If you check out my website and find I am guilty of any of the above, please tell me and I will aim to put it right.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN113. See also Article A14, *Create a quality website*, and Training Notes TN22, *Appoint a church photographer*, TN38/39, *We've got news for us/you!* and TN123, *Speaking-to-camera tips*

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of training in or review of some aspect of church communication.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN113 under Communication.

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