

Most church websites ineffective, technology firm's study finds

By Mark Woods

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DIDCOT, England (ABP) -- Churches, by and large, still haven't entered the digital age when it comes to evangelism -- but those who have are reaping huge rewards, according to a new survey.

A poll conducted by Christian technology company **Endis**, which provides the ChurchInsight church web platform and has offices in the United States and the United Kingdom, indicates that when churches deliberately focus their websites on attracting outsiders they see a corresponding rise in the number of non-Christian visitors. But many focus on the internal life of the church, and their effectiveness is reduced.

Endis polled 1,600 churches for its **DigiMission** project, asking questions about church size, the website's target readership, the number of Christians and non-Christians coming to events, and the influence of the website on their decision to attend. The 120 churches that responded reported more than 1,300 non-Christian visitors in the last 12 months to church events, services and discipleship courses through the Web -- an average of 11 non-Christian visitors per church. For Christian visitors the figure is 1,600, an average of 14.

Among the survey's key findings were that most churches' websites were not created with the unchurched in mind. Only half offer an outline of the gospel, and only a quarter provide testimonies of people who have come to faith in Christ.

Endis spokesman Geoff Knott said there were clear differences in the effectiveness of different websites.

"When we looked at the successful sites, we found that they had the gospel on their site, and that people were able to book into events like Alpha courses," he said. "Interactivity is important, but we didn't find that blogs or forums did much. The other thing that was very successful was stories." It was also noticeable that larger churches were less effective than smaller ones at attracting unchurched people.



Churches are often ineffective at outreach and communication through their websites, a new survey finds. (Photo: Simon Cataudo/Internet Evangelism Day)

“Smaller churches of between 100 and 150 are very good at getting guests in. I think they push harder, using Google Adwords for instance -- they're trying to grow. Are we losing our mission edge as we grow bigger?”

He stressed that good content and ease of use were far more important than a sophisticated image or a multiplicity of functions.

The survey was welcomed by Tony Whittaker, the U.K. coordinator for **Internet Evangelism Day**. Most church websites fall short of what they could be for various reasons, he said. “They are often mainly 'brochureware' -- static informational pages with little interactive comment, or frequently updated material such as a blog or Twitter feed,” he said. “Another reason is that wittingly or unwittingly, they present the church as a building where there is a program of meetings. Obviously, there is some truth in this.

“But the greater, and more meaningful and biblical truth, is that the church is a big family in that community, which happens to meet together from time to time, as families do in one or more locations. In other words, it's people, not programs.”

There were many ways of showing this on websites, he said, such as including photographs of members.

He also referred to churches' habit of using Christian jargon. “Sites that are actually effective for outsiders have looked at themselves through an outsider's eyes -- or better, actually asked non-yet-believers to give an honest opinion of the site -- and built everything around that understanding.”

Tips for church websites from DigiMission:

- Identify your audience. Most church websites are designed for the reached, not the unreached.
- Try to be more interactive. Letting visitors sign up for events gives them an immediate opportunity to get engaged with you.
- The Web is just part of your mission effort. Multiple contact by different means increases chances of success. There's no substitute for personal contact.
- Be serious about the Web. It's the new printing press, and hundreds of millions of people use it every day.
- Think about what image you're communicating. What does your site say about your church?
- Put the gospel on your website. How would you explain the gospel simply to someone who never heard it before?

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