

Weaving the Nets: Building Your Internet Presence

The *Time* magazine 2006 Person of the Year was you—the individual. The Internet made this possible.

In declaring every person the Person of the Year in 2006, *Time* was recognizing a basic, fundamental shift in the state of communication, information, and ideas in this new millennium—and this was all made possible by the advent of the Internet—and more recently Web 2.0.

The editors of *Time* said this to justify their controversial selection of the 2006 Person of the Year:

Look at 2006 through a different lens and you'll see another story, one that isn't about conflict or great men. It's a story about community and collaboration on a scale never seen before. . . . It's about the many wresting power from the few and helping one another for nothing and how that will not only change the world, but also change the way the world changes.

The new Web is a very different thing. It's a tool for bringing together the small contributions of millions of people and making them matter. Silicon Valley consultants call it Web 2.0, as if it were a new version of some old software. But it's really a revolution.¹

Today the Internet is about relationships and communication—information, while still important, is secondary.

Definition of Internet Evangelism

To understand effective Internet evangelism, we first need to define what it is. Tony Whittaker is a leading NetCaster based in the United Kingdom who edits the monthly Web Evangelism Bulletin. He is also the driving force behind the annual Internet Evangelism Day, cosponsored by the U.S.-based Internet Evangelism Network (IEN). I asked him to describe what he believes to be effective outreach on the Web.

“Effective Internet evangelism almost always is one-on-one because a person reading a page is, of course, always one person. And so a writer should always be writing as if to one person, not preaching as if to a congregation. The gifts needed for a Web writer are those of a journalist, not a preacher. A preacher has a captive audience who has already decided to attend church, or another church-like event. A Web writer has no captive audience, since they can click away within seconds if they do not like the page. He or she must know how to write enticingly and keep the reader going down the page.

“Any conception of Web evangelism as some sort of magical broadcast effect that reaches people automatically is, of course, misplaced, just as TV broadcasting does not either. People actually have to decide to tune in for TV or click on a link, for the Web, and then decide to stick around.

“This concern about ‘real’ evangelism only being face-to-face evangelism is certainly something I come across. I guess some answers to this concern would be that most actual conversions I ever read about online usually result from a considerable time of e-mail (or similar) discussion and mentoring. Although I am sure it happens that people read something

and come to faith immediately, just as they may when receiving a tract or watching something on TV, in practice these things are only one link in a chain, and ongoing contact with a real, praying, person is actually the way it happens most of the time, just as in the non-Web world.”

Web evangelists, or NetCasters, have found ways in which an Internet-based relationship is both different and less deep than a face-to-face relationship. There is, on the other side, that sense of being able to ask and discuss with someone online things you would perhaps find hard or impossible to talk through face-to-face.

“For many people, face-to-face evangelism is not an option,” Whittaker explains. “Only if every person in the world had a good relationship with someone they knew as a Christian, or were likely to frequently meet a known Christian in a setting where they could share their faith, would other methods of evangelism not be needed. In many countries, the chances of ever meeting an evangelical are slim—Eastern Europe, Japan, or the Middle East, for example. Therefore Web evangelism becomes even more strategic in these places.”

The 99 to 1 Problem

Millions of Christians around the world are now on the Internet every day. As I have pointed out, globally, approximately 1.7 billion people are logging onto the Web on an ongoing basis.² The world is flocking to the Internet and digital media outlets. The Web is now the new electronic meeting place, especially for people age thirty and under.

The problem is that, just as in the real world, Christians and non-Christians are barely talking to each other online. While it seems that everyone is on the Web, there is a major disconnect between the majority of Bible-believing Christians and the rest of the online subculture.

Tony Whittaker has named this phenomenon the “99 percent rule since Christian Web sites are created for other Christians, while only 1 percent of Christian Web sites are designed to evangelize the lost.³

We can see this same rule reflected in Christian book and music publishing as well; an examination of titles and videos reveals that the vast majority of material, in terms of language, content, and worldview,

is produced entirely for Christians. The lack of truly evangelistic Web sites in the English language (let alone other languages) is a tremendous problem facing the church today. The vast majority of Web sites with Christian content are targeted to a Christian audience for the purpose of information or discipleship.

In order for the NetCaster to overcome this 99 to 1 problem, he or she must first recognize the importance of stepping out of his or her comfort zones and into something that might be new and different. And they must have a thorough understanding of what the Internet is and what methods are effective in catching the attention of the masses and directing them to Christ.

That chasm between those who need to know Jesus as their Savior and those who are actually doing Internet evangelism is very wide indeed. But people around the world are going online every day seeking truth. There is an incredible opportunity for evangelism and discipleship on the Internet.

“God is behind Internet evangelism in a very real and powerful way,” says NetCaster John Edmiston. “People do their secret thinking on the Internet, and because of that people explore things on the Web—such as who Jesus Christ is—that they can’t or won’t explore in public.”²⁴

Walt Wilson, founder and chairman of Global Media Outreach, agrees that the Internet provides a golden opportunity to reach the nations for Christ. “You and I are the first generation to hold the technology to reach every person with the gospel and to accomplish the task of the Great Commission. What is our strategy to tell people about Jesus?” he challenges. “Will we act on what we believe?”²⁵

In order to harness the power of the Internet for evangelism, the NetCaster must have a firm understanding of the current state of digital technology, and also a sense of where the Internet is going from here.

Internet and Modern Communication

The Internet is rapidly evolving—constantly reinventing itself. Convergence, community, collaboration, and interactivity are the words

that best describe the direction the Internet is taking in this new millennium. In his groundbreaking book *Wikinomics*, futurist and Internet analyst Don Tapscott, along with Anthony D. Williams, shares the results of a \$9 million research project that investigated how collaboration through Internet communities is creating an explosion in innovation, communication, creativity, and mankind's overall knowledge.

"From the Internet's inception its creators envisioned a universal substrate linking all mankind and its artifacts in a seamless, interconnected Web of knowledge," Tapscott and Williams observe. "This was the World Wide Web's great promise: an Alexandrian library of all past and present information and a platform for collaboration to unite communities of all stripes in any conceivable act of creative enterprise.

"The Internet is becoming a giant computer that everyone can program, providing a global infrastructure for creativity, participation, sharing, and self-organization. . . . The new Web is fundamentally different in both its architecture and applications. . . . Whether people are creating, sharing, or socializing, the new Web is principally about participating rather than about passively receiving information.

"The bottom line is this: The immutable, standalone Web site is dead. Say hello to a Web that increasingly looks like a library full of chatty components that interact and talk to one another. . . . This makes it very easy to build new Web services out of the existing components by mashing them together in fresh combinations."⁶

This "new Web" that Tapscott and Williams describe has come to be known as Web 2.0. The thrilling news for the NetCaster is that most people who receive Christ online come to the point of praying a prayer of salvation through one-on-one relationships that are built naturally. These kinds of personal relationships and conversations have exploded in growth through the advent of Web 2.0—and all the interactivity it encourages.

The Emergence of Web 2.0

Web 2.0 represents the convergence of a number of elements that make up the modern Internet: broadband penetration, online video, and communication tools like e-mail, chat, forums and message boards,

individualized content creation, social networking, microblogs, blogs, vlogs, mobile digital devices, and podcasting. This phenomenon presents a plethora of opportunities for the Internet evangelist to connect with seekers and point them to Jesus.

Web 2.0 can also be applied to changes in the ways software developers and end users view the Web. According to Tim O'Reilly, "Chief among those rules is this: Build applications that harness network effects to get better the more people use them. This is what I've elsewhere called 'harnessing collective intelligence.'"⁷

Author Rex Miller thinks tools like these present ministries with a huge opportunity for reaching the next generation. "Web 2.0 represents a new revolution on the Internet—open participation," he says. "It also provides a wonderful model for change and creates a critical mass that I hope unleashes an iGeneration revolution."⁸

Kevin Hendricks wrote of the phenomenon, "The simplest way to understand Web 2.0 is that it has given power to the people. While Web 1.0 was all about passive surfing, Web 2.0 is about letting everyone contribute—whether that contribution is written opinion (blogs), feedback (comments), video (YouTube), photos (Flickr), connection and community building (MySpace/Facebook/LinkedIn), or knowledge (Wikipedia).

"More than technology or community, Web 2.0 is about a new frame of mind," Hendrick's explains. "Less is more; design matters; it's OK to start small; mistakes happen; do it cheap; anyone can do it; and share. Web 2.0 is about decentralizing power and information and putting it in the hands of amateurs. And it's OK if they get something wrong or it's not as good as professionals would do it, simply because the sheer volume of information available makes up for a few deficiencies."⁹

Web 2.0 and NetCasting

Evangelism on the Web occurs as a result of relationships, and relationships online happen in large measure as a result of Web 2.0—this second generation of Web-based communities and hosted services, including social networking sites, and wikis (collaborative information

sharing sites) that are intended to allow collaboration, syndication, communication, and sharing between users.¹⁰

So what does the emergence of these global online conversations mean for evangelism on the Web? In a word: everything.

Jesse Carey, managing editor of RelevantMagazine.com, explains the importance of Web 2.0 in building relationships online and how someone can take these concepts and incorporate them into a strategy for Web evangelism. “We always want the readers to engage with the content. With some traditional forms of media, whether it’s print, radio, or television, it’s on the terms of the media outlet. You have to tune in at a certain time. You have to have the right channel. You have to subscribe to the magazine. It’s all on the outlet’s terms. The Web 2.0 thing started with putting media in the user’s terms. They can take the podcast with them wherever they go. It’s the same with Web sites.

“The outgrowth is people taking ownership of the content. And that’s when you start seeing user submitted content and people being able to interact with it. So in terms of using that for evangelism, on a basic level, it enables users to comment and contact other users, or to contact the author with more questions. And if that’s not practical, if there are too many users, have a comment area where they can have a small community forum to discuss the ideas. If they have questions, or if they have comments, or ideas that they want to put into the conversation, enable that.

“That helps them, not only to engage and take ownership of the content, but from an evangelism perspective to get any answers that they’re looking for and kind of dig deeper with the issues.”

So in light of this Web 2.0 revolution, it’s a mistake to create an evangelistic Web site with the idea that it will be merely “tracts on a screen.” Such an approach is simply not in keeping with what the Internet has become. Instead, we must understand the Web’s nature as a communication medium, recognizing that people viewing the information placed on the Internet—whether it be text, audio, video, graphics, or photos—beg to have conversations about it.

Once we see the Internet as a modern-day forum for ideas and relationships, then we must learn how to work with its inherent strengths

and either avoid or understand and use its weaknesses. When we do this, we will begin to harness and use the staggering opportunities that await the NetCaster online.

Interactive and Two-way

Tony Whittaker explains that one of the greatest attractions of Web 2.0 is this interactivity. “The user controls completely what Web pages appear on his or her monitor. Each person will have a unique route of personal choice through any Web site, and across billions of Web pages around the world. The two-way nature of the Web means that the user is no longer a passive recipient. When you listen to radio, the experience is one-way—unless you can phone in or write a letter. But the Web makes it easy for users to express opinions and interact with Webmasters by e-mail or instant messenger, and discuss a site with other users by bulletin board, blog response form, or chat room. At last, “my opinion counts.”

“People want to be players, not just spectators, part of the action, not on the sidelines,” writes Charles Leadbeater in his book *We-Think*.¹¹ Just as a newspaper aims to build loyalty among its readers, a Web site can generate a sense of community—the feeling that users can identify with the site. Successful sites understand how to create welcoming interactivity.

Relationship and connection are at the heart of the Internet—and of Internet evangelism. “Before the Web, a person’s circle of relationships was usually initiated by face-to-face contact, and then sustained by personal meetings, letters, or phone,” Tony Whittaker explains. “Naturally, there tended to be a geographic limitation to a circle of relationships. But with the Web, relationships can be initiated and maintained online, and physical location is no longer an issue. Using the Web, people can also maintain, at least at a limited level, a much wider range of relationships.

“Relationships are, of course, a key to evangelism. Very few people become Christians merely by hearing or reading a proclamation of the gospel. Analyze a range of testimonies, including Web-mediated stories,

and in almost every case, you find that an ongoing relationship with a praying Christian played a key role.

“So effective online evangelism needs to be relational.”¹²

Johnnie Gnanamanickam is the Manager of Internet Development in the Digital Media Department at the Christian Broadcasting Network. Commenting on the monumental changes occurring on the Internet today as a result of the Web 2.0 revolution, he observes, “I think God had this planned all the way—because if you look at what’s happening on the Internet with Web 2.0 and social networking, basically, it now becomes possible to replicate kingdom work on the Internet. We used to have it where we could push content to people on the Internet, which was great. You were preaching a message and getting it out there. But when you get to discipleship, it has to be relationships. It has to be two-way communication. You cannot have a one-way communication going on to make disciples.

“You cannot have a machine relating to someone and making a disciple. You have to have relationships built over time. Web 2.0 and social networking make that possible. You have the opportunity now to actually build a church on the Internet because these are real people talking to one another,” Gnanamanickam explains. “You have real relationships that can be built over time and taken from one stage to another. You can actually really talk a person through to salvation.”

The Web 2.0 transition from content to community is a vitally important shift for those involved in Internet evangelism, says writer and NetCaster Jim Watkins. “I think at first we were just slapping content up there without any real idea of creating community or creating relationships. With books and magazines you don’t have a lot of back and forth. Now there is interaction. In my e-mail newsletter I’m trying to build up that relationship. So I think it’s gone more from content to community.”

Internet evangelists now recognize that conversations lead to relationships and relationships lead to conversions. It’s no longer enough to simply post content on a Web site and hope people will find it, read it, and come to Christ. With the advent of Web 2.0, Internet evangelists are now fostering communication through rich, interactive Web sites

that utilize various types of content to attract and inform the user, then encourage them to enter into conversations with other seekers, and with other believers, with the goal of praying a prayer of salvation.

The Future of the Media and Internet Evangelism

As interactivity explodes with the growth of Web 2.0 evangelistic sites, Walt Wilson of Global Media Outreach believes the need will be for shorter content online with sixty-second audio and sixty-second video cuts being the norm. While ministries should stay current on technology, Christians need to do a better job leveraging the technology that is already available because, “we haven’t really even started using the full potential of the Internet for effective gospel presentation.”

Wilson made the following recommendations for individuals and ministries interested in evangelism online:

- Focus on things that think, such as mobile digital devices and cell phones.
- Become an expert on search and search engines for search engine optimization.
- Become familiar with convergence among different forms of technology and communication.
- Stay in the mainstream. Ministry can’t lag behind technologically as it has in the past.
- Learn how to tell the story of Christ in sixty seconds.
- Become an expert in podcasting.¹³

The Internet is constantly changing, and NetCasters need to keep up with these developments if they are to be effective. If you’re on a social network, what new applications are rolling out? What opportunities are there to use them to evangelize? What new technologies and software applications are around the bend that will make it possible for me to more effectively reach people with the gospel?

A review and understanding of some of these major trends can help the NetCaster anticipate and prepare for shifts in the Internet audience, and then position their ministry to take advantage of those trends. Digital

media blogger Haydn Shaughnessy provides a foreshadowing of what he sees as the direction of the media and Internet in the coming years:

- personal syndication of content
- IPTV: television over Internet networks
- personal television and citizen television
- citizen media, online newspapers, and magazines from user content
- user referrals of articles from other sources
- social bookmarking to save and categorize a personal collection of bookmarks and share them with others
- corporate and political television: running a television channel is going to become a must-do for those types of organizations
- new search engines: strong on content that evolves when people codiscover and recommend audiovisual content
- live performance
- wikis: a Web site that allows users to add and edit content collectively
- games and virtuality: massively multiplayer online games
- classifieds: Craigslist has demonstrated the appeal and effectiveness of online classifieds
- online movies: both professional and amateur
- portals: a site that the owner positions as an entrance to other sites on the Internet, typically with search engines, free e-mail, chat rooms, and other services
- online magazines: CBN.com and ChristianityToday.com are examples of strong online magazines in the Christian space
- mixed media: using a print, photography, video mélange to create a new way of telling stories¹²

All of these innovations—and more—are making the Internet a very inviting place to be today. And the democratic marketplace of the Internet will determine what will be the next Facebook, MySpace, or YouTube. The wise Web evangelist will do well to stay in touch with these changing trends and design his or her outreach accordingly.

The encouragement is that Web tools are reasonably priced and access to your target market is nearly unlimited. The real question today for ministries and individual evangelists is not whether you have a Web presence, but how much of a Web presence do you need to be as effective as possible?

Building Your NetCaster Ministry

So once you know how the Internet works, you can begin to design and build your Web outreach.

“Start with what you think you want to try to accomplish and then pick the tools,” Web designer and marketer Alex Demeshkin advises. “Don’t start by saying, ‘Everybody’s doing mobile, or video, or whatever.’ Don’t start with technology. The Internet is just a tool. It’s the basic human nature and principles of connecting with people, being relevant, knowing who you are talking to—who they are, what their background is, what their cultural frame of reference is—that is what matters. Then you use the tools to accomplish this.”

When building a Web site for an existing ministry, you need to know the goal and objectives of that organization. Is it an existing brick-and-mortar church with a large congregation and you want to develop a strong Internet presence? What kind of Web outreach you build depends on your vision and available resources.

“Building an effective Web outreach is very time-intensive,” Demeshkin explains. “There is a lot of trial and error. There is a lot of experimenting and saying, ‘OK, this didn’t work. Let’s try something else.’”

“But when you know what you want to do, and you say, ‘This is who I am trying to reach, and this is what I’m trying to do,’ then you look at bringing in a person that is familiar with that technology.”

Demeshkin explains that the biggest problem in designing an effective Web site of any kind is an intersection of marketing and technology. “That is a hard combination that makes it really difficult to nail down. Sit down and put a few heads together and look at the toolbox that you have—e-mail marketing, video, mobile, Web site, flash video, cat text

messaging, databases—then you pick the tools that are appropriate for what you’re trying to do.”

The basic technological investment a beginning Internet evangelist needs to start entirely depends on what he’s trying to accomplish. Someone can set up a blog using a system such as Blogger in about a minute. Other content management system (CMS) tools can help the NetCaster build Web sites or church sites without any technical ability, though a solid understanding how Web sites work is required.

Google, Yahoo, Network Solutions, and many others, offer free Web sites. Web service providers such as 1and1.com offer a CMS design system, inexpensive domain registration, and hosting for minimal cost.

Some of the things to consider when designing your Web outreach include:

- What is God calling you to do?
- What are your resources (money, talent, technology, time, helpers/volunteers, etc.)?
- How much server space do you have—and what methods can you use with the amount of server space available to you?
- Who is your target audience? What are their cultural, religious, political, socioeconomic, age, and gender distinctives?
- How does your calling match the needs of your target audience?
- What tools/methods will work to reach your target audience online?
- What platform or platforms will you employ to cast your net?

Once you have answered these questions, you can begin to design your outreach through your Web site, Facebook, MySpace, mobile phone, YouTube, Second Life, My.CBN.com, Tangle, MyPraise, MeetFish, or whatever avenue the Lord directs you to use.

Within these various types of Web sites and digital platforms, you will need to also decide what types of content and tools you will offer, including:

- text articles
- short video clips, or clips linked from YouTube or Tangle
- chat or instant messaging
- message boards and forums
- social networking functionality—being an incarnational presence on the Web
- e-mail
- photo sharing
- blogs and vlogs (video blogs)
- news and current events
- in-depth discipleship training materials
- cultural commentary
- testimony creation and syndication
- children and adult animation
- church-related tools and functionality
- online mentoring
- classified ads
- online dating service (like eHarmony)
- Skype (Internet telephone and video)
- online radio

Or you could use the tools already available through Facebook, Second Life, MySpace, My.CBN.com, or another social networking site. These are only some of the leading tools used by NetCasters around the world. The list of possible content choices and methods for evangelism is as endless as your creativity, energy, and resources can stretch.

Some of the other practical considerations a NetCaster needs to be aware of when launching an outreach include:

- submitting yourself under the covering of a local church or mature Christian ministry;
- balancing family, work, ministry, and other commitments in life;
- counting the spiritual costs, including time in prayer, sacrifices of other things in life that you may want to do;

- developing a statement of faith and doctrine;
- assembling your prayer covering and scheduling regular times of prayer, both individually and as a team;
- learning apologetics and Web evangelism techniques and tools;
- creating an Internet evangelism strategy master plan;
- incorporating as a not-for-profit and tax-exempt ministry, or as a for-profit business entity;
- recruiting of volunteers or hiring a professional staff—including knowledge of labor laws, tax laws, and other human resource issues;
- budgetary considerations, sustainability issues, fund-raising, marketing, and promotional endeavors;
- training your fishermen—in ministry outreach, communication techniques, technological skills, financial accounting, marketing campaigns, and public relations.

In developing your ministry strategy, the wise NetCaster must also consider:

- How often will you update your site?
- Will you respond to e-mail personally?
- How will your message boards be designed and monitored?
- What Bible translations will be used and quoted from?
- How will you respond to emergency calls, instant messages, e-mails, etc.—especially if someone is threatening suicide?
- How many chat sessions will a volunteer or employee be responding to at one time?
- Since the Internet goes to the world, how will you respond to incoming messages in other languages? Or what languages will you translate your content into? Will you provide a translation tool?

Tony Whittaker has developed a self-assessment tool to help churches design their Web sites to reach out to seekers (www.internetevangelismday.com/church-site-design.php). While Whittaker

encourages Christians to be sharing their faith online, he cautions against becoming too religious in design and presentation.

“Sometimes, a site is so totally, irredeemably religious in style and appearance that I think I could not begin to try to comment, and that their Webmaster would not begin to comprehend what I was saying anyway. Such sites will, perhaps, succeed in ministering to very churchy people, and so fulfill some sort of role. But, oh dear . . .”

John Edmiston is quick to remind the NetCaster that much of the world outside of the United States and Europe is not on broadband, and so Web sites aimed at these groups need to be designed with this in mind. “If you want to reach the nations outside the U.S. and the megacities of the world, the best way to do Internet ministry right now is to set up a Web page with a clickable form at the end for responses. Design it in HTML to deal with low bandwidth. Where we are right now, still the bulk of the world is on dial-up.” But he points out that broadband is rapidly increasing.

The Internet represents a convergence of media in one delivery mechanism—including video, print, telephone, video games, e-mail, social networks, linear online television, audio, and video phone—the list of potential goes on and on. Internet evangelists must consider which of these tools to use, while at the same time harnessing the energy of exploding social networks to connect with searching souls all over the world.

Flipping the Switch

The future of Internet evangelism will be made possible by the building of relationships through ongoing conversations—as a result of the Web 2.0 phenomenon. This development is critical to the growth of online ministry.

Particularly in countries that have had state-controlled media monopolies, this democratic element of the Internet will be revolutionary—socially, politically, and religiously. The freedom of expression and thought made possible by the World Wide Web will give the Internet evangelist a tremendous opportunity to reach millions who were once

held in ideological and religious prison. The consequences of this new freedom of thought will most likely redraw the global map, religiously speaking, in this century—and it may redraw maps in ways we cannot predict.

With the emergence of the Web 2.0 phenomenon, people around the globe are connecting online and having conversations about life and its meaning. As the scope and application of Web 2.0 tools grow, only time will tell just how far the arm of the kingdom can reach.

“There are ways of doing church that no one has thought of yet,” says Pastor and NetCaster Mark Batterson of National Community Church in Washington, D.C. “That’s the thing that gets us up early and keeps us up late.”¹⁵

Wake up, fishermen; it’s time to cast your nets! In the next chapter we will examine some of the more fruitful methods being used by Web evangelists to reach the lost on the Internet today.