

Social Media: The Surprising Mission Field

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We have been trained in the western 21st-century mindset to think of a mission field in the context of countries. But I propose we need to broaden the definition. A mission field is where people exist who are in need of the truth of Jesus Christ. A mission field is where people gather. So why not social media?

In the same way that missionaries assigned to countries approach their mission field, those who wish to engage the social media audience too must have a plan. Those who want to influence a certain market must have a budget, strategy, a network, and an understanding of the culture.

To reach a specific culture, traditional missionaries engage with the "target" culture, listen to the culture, live among the culture and they respond to the culture with answers and resources. They show up where the culture is at. In a similar way, to be an effective influencer on social media you have to have a plan. You must have a commitment to go, a strategy for once you get there, and a love of the people who reside there.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight that the social media market is an *existing* mission field. And it desperately needs to be acknowledged and prioritized by the Christian community.

Social media and its online platforms are the cutting edge, current day opportunity for Christians to influence the world for Christ. So far, the Christian community, overall, has dismissed it in light of its true potential, lacking a vision for this market. I propose it is time for a remnant of individuals, leaders, ministries, organizations, and churches to change this: there is a hungry and hurting world in this market that is waiting for the hope we can provide. But we must be willing to go to them.

Social Media is Where People Live

The simple and basic definition of a "mission field" is where people gather. More specifically, they would be people who have yet to recognize the need for the salvation of Jesus Christ. And, social media is where people gather to be social. It is a gathering place of people. **And where people are, there are needs (and opportunities!).**

MarketingProfs provides [this powerful infographic](#) of social media statistics for 2017. They note,

"Nearly 2.8 billion people around the world (37% of the entire population) now use social media at least once a month. More than 91% of them do so via mobile devices."

This means just under 3 billion people - moms, dads, teenagers, business leaders, those in poverty and those as CEOs, pastors, professors, criminals, victims, athletes, champions, just to name a few - are on some form of social media at least once a month.

[Consider these facts.](#) “Users access Facebook an average of eight times per day” and “100 million hours of video content are watched on Facebook daily”. This means any user has the possibility to be reached a significant amount of times daily with the message of your truth. **If the Church (or your ministry, organization, or cause) will not reach them, someone else will.**

Brandwatch, in this [powerful](#) piece, “Marketing: 105 Amazing Social Media Statistics and Facts” notes the following:

- There is a new social media user every 15 seconds
- The average customer has over 7 social media profiles
- 79% of all US adults use Facebook
- 300 hours of video are posted to YouTube every minute
- 78% of people that complain to a brand using Twitter expect a response in an hour
- Read [more powerful numbers here](#)

[This article](#) notes that, “North America has the highest social media penetration rate in the world.” They go on to say that as of 2016 there were about 206 million social media users in the USA and, “It is forecasted by 2021 that it will increase to about 218 million.”

This means, social media plays a significant role in our lives, our culture and - it is not going away. But instead we can expect it to increase in size, scope, and reach. The question is not whether they should be there but instead are we as the Church doing everything we can to present the truth, and engage with the lost and dying in a meaningful and personal way?

To personify it more, let’s get more specific about who may actually be using social media and therefore identify some of the people we can reach for Christ. Social media is made up of:

- The single dads who are juggling career, and trying to be a good parent
- The lonely teenager who is in the awkward stage of life, and feels they will never fit in
- The unfulfilled businessman who at this part of his career, thought he should be more fulfilled
- The devoted wife and mom who is slightly overwhelmed juggling a dozen balls and wants to keep life in perspective
- The teacher who wishes she had a prayer support team to cover her as she goes into the war zone called her local school
- The police officer who loves her job, but is weary of the world being against her industry
- The returning veteran who needs to be reminded that all he did overseas for our nation was worth the risk
- The mother rocking her colicky baby at night, and could use a source of encouragement
- The grandparent who feels so alone and needs an opportunity to give to others
- The husband who wants to know how to be a better life partner to his wife and needs ideas

The list goes on and on and on. The opportunity for ministry is endless. They are killing time waiting to pick up their children at school, standing in line at the grocery store, or waiting on their finger nails to dry. Every moment that someone is “on social media” is a moment that they are taking in information. And it is an opportunity that we can give them resources, encouragement, hope, and truth.

There is no mistake that social media is where people gather for hours of time every day.

Christians want Jesus' truths to permeate every sector of society. Thus, begs the question: how are we, when it comes to showing up in an effective and strategic way, building relationships on the social media platform?

Social Media Users - Are People

Business leader and social media expert [Sandi Krakowski](#) opened my eyes to see the *people* aspect and opportunity of social media. She highlights that every comment, like, share on Facebook has a person behind it. It sounds simple - yet it is something overlooked and in need of extra attention.

Every person behind the comment, like, retweet, and share has a story, a spirit, and a soul. They have hopes, joys, griefs, trials, and triumphs. Instead of looking at a Facebook post with 700 likes as a great numerical achievement, consider instead that it is 700 people full of potential and value in the Kingdom of God. (And every 700 "response" represents 700 families, communities, households and units of other individuals who also need encouragement.)

Social media users need hope, motivation, wisdom and courage. They are hurting and in need of prayer and fellowship. They are living life in a "real world," yet when they are online some people are able to more transparently share a peek into their souls. Doubt me? Why do you see people vent online? It is a place where they feel they can authentically rant, communicate, and release steam. Or, why, in the face of tragedies, do you see people respond with emotion and powerful unifying sentiments on social media platforms? Those removed from the tragedy can offer their own moral and emotional support to the victims. Social media allows for certain measures of emotional exchange and community engagement.

Social media is the proverbial water cooler, counseling chair (scary, I know) and bulletin board crying for help. It is the 21st century dining room table for some, the go-to source of information, a place to garner support and prayers, and a place to inform others. For some it is *the* place they feel they have the most support.

Many of us, by no fault of our own, have never known healthy human interaction. On the other hand many of us have found healthy interaction and still enjoy the pleasantries and opportunities that social media brings for connecting with others. Exchanges with others through social media platforms, smartphone apps and computers can never take the place of looking someone in the eye. On the other hand to a world that is devoid of healthy family structures and places of communication, it has been a godsend, *and is a place to start*.

By people becoming transparent, even online, they give others a chance to weigh in. They crack the door for someone - if they are there and listening - to give them the truth. In some cases, those hiding behind the screen in social media are desperate to be seen the most. Can you imagine the potential if you - a big church, organization, or ministry - take a moment to interact with them? Encourage them? Remind them - that even as they hide behind their screens - *they are not alone*?

It is also appearing that the “trends” of the culture of social media are hungry and looking for purpose. [This article from Agility PR](#) says, “Audiences are becoming more and more drawn to purpose, clear identity and ‘do good, feel good.’” If the Church (and its organizations, ministries, etc.) which have access to the best Purpose, and clarification of identity, is not present offering a solution, what other purpose will they capture and run with?

Many who spend time on social media are attempting to fill a void. When people have nowhere else to turn, they run to the biggest light that is available. For some it may be the affirming boyfriend or girlfriend, and for others the radical rebellious groups where they can feel loved and accepted. What Christians should be endeavoring to do is to show up anywhere and everywhere humans exist *because we have access to the Only Solution that will fill that void.*

In a way, the social media and online presence is the last line of defense. People have had broken human face to face interactions. But we as humans have been created for fellowship and "help" outside our own selves. On the online platform, it is one more stop before we simply give up on humanity. Christians have the opportunity to meet that need.

The Church and its Role

The Christian community at large has fallen short in the online presence. All you need to do is take a moment and start looking online. How many churches even have a profile on social media? How many organizations are actively growing their numbers? How many ministries are showing up in the Facebook groups’ conversations or in Twitter chats with resources and solutions? How many Christian leaders are producing content with a strong message that would draw people to listen to you? What “story” are Christians conveying?

Gone are the days when Christians can expect maximum impact with sub-par standards. It is no longer enough that we just “show up” if we wish to influence our target audience. Now is the day when Christians have the opportunity, and the need, to go the extra mile and shine with excellence. Social Media could provide us with that opportunity.

This 21st century American culture craves authenticity, integrity, and human connection. Everything has become so fast paced, the ability to capture attention with quality content is imperative. This task should be easy to do as the authenticity that this culture craves is best described through the people who have experienced the authentic reformation of a rebirth in Christ.

It should be the Christians who are doing social media so well and with such excellence that even the top CEOs of the industry are turning to us for solutions and ideas. When we, as followers of Christ, have access to The One Who Knows All, we should be the ones using social media in the best way possible. When the Church is not showing up *in* the conversations (online), building relationships *with* their target audience on social media platforms, *appearing* in the social media feeds, those seeking will find answers elsewhere. Our opportunity for influence is lost.

When the market of social media “started” years ago you could rely on organic reach (i.e. posting something on your social media platform, confident that your “Friends” on that platform would see it). But now, not only do you need to have a spot of the real estate, you need to have a strategy for

implementation, clarity on your call to action, money behind ads and posts, quality content that will give people reason to engage, and “relationship service team members” who are building conversations and connecting people into the dialogues. Teams must be dedicated to this endeavor, not just one volunteer intern.

Even in light of the recent Facebook algorithm changes I think that God is opening the door for more of His body to connect. As you examine the algorithm changes, you can see that God is opening the door for more conversations and connecting of His own body. No longer is there room for businesses and organizations to talk *at* an audience but instead Facebook is searching and seeking to help people connect with one another in meaningful conversations. ([Click here to learn more](#))

If missionaries never went to the people who needed Christ, but waited for them to come to them, the expansion of Christ and His truth of freedom would not be as far advanced as it is now. When Jesus said “go into all the world and preach the gospel” (Mark 16:15), He did not have social media. But I do think He welcomes us to use our current day tools to reach those who still need truth.

People are made for purpose and community. They need and want to be part of something bigger than themselves. They will join causes, leaders, etc., whether the Church shows up or not. But if we have the better answer, why wouldn't we bring our A game to this market?

An ideal world, according to our Christian standards, says a hurting soul would walk into a church. But that is the old wineskin way of looking at things. Instead, the church is already in the hands and at the fingertips of those who are hurting (majority of people use social media through their mobile devices). The question is will we go above and beyond to connect with those who need the truth.

We are falling short. Consider the following:

- **How many individual Christians use social media in an effective, and impressive way?** They are conveying a message, encouraging conversation with class, and actually reaching and engaging the audience? (Note: posting something on social media vs. posting and being seen are two different things.)
- **Are ministries growing their numbers on their social media pages?** What about engagement? Reach? Following? Do their posts get 2 likes or 2,000?
- **Are organizations growing their community** both in numbers but also in quality of community participation? Are they answering questions that are asked? Thanking people for being part of their community? Asking questions in return to encourage dialogue?
- **What Christian thought leaders are engaging with followers in valuable dialogue?** Are they getting others even those of non-faith to ask genuine questions?
- **How many large churches, organizations, and ministries are engaging with their audience on social media?** I.e., are they making themselves available for online support, speaking prophetically into people, suggesting resources, sharing scriptural encouragement, offering prayers and simple assurances that “you are not alone”?
- **How many churches are using social media as a resource** to reach people, and invite people to their community on Sundays - *effectively*?
- **How many ministries and organizations view social media as a task** on a checklist vs an opportunity for relationships?

Social media is a market full of potential that the Christian community would be wise to stop ignoring and dismissing.

The Road Blocks

Before being sold on a vision of social media, many still need convincing it is worth the investment. To many, social media is a waste of time, not worth the investment or distraction, and “something that will go by the wayside - eventually.” These same people are probably those who would not have crossed the ocean to start a new world in America, or they would not have made the dangerous trek over the Rocky Mountains to discover the western frontier. These same people would have been satisfied with horses over cars, candles instead of lightbulbs, and outhouses instead of inside bathrooms. Perhaps a harsh realization but that’s okay: it is time for the Church to fully confront truth. As we acknowledge our weaknesses, we have the opportunity to let God fill it with His strength.

Change happens. My concern is, *will I be open to God for how He wants to use me in the current day society to reach people - in their language, where they reside - with His truth?* I do not want to reach Heaven and find out that there were ways I could have engaged with the culture - only I was not willing because “it was new, ridiculous to me and, as only a fad, it won’t be around for long.”

Social media is not going anywhere. It is growing. And it is full of people starving for truth.

Many will argue, “the money is not in our budget to do what needs to be done”. Have you considered raising money for it? The people in Africa (or similar country) were worthy of your time consuming labor of preparations both financially, spiritually, mentally, and physically. Are those on social media of less value?

The roadblock to preaching that potential is that we need leaders in these markets to recognize the importance of this tool and to start to train their people behind the screen on how to engage effectively. We need people to build community on these platforms, extend relationship, meet needs where people are willing to show up. We need organizations and teams that are responding to questions, pointing to resources, and suggesting solutions.

We also need people behind the logos of organizations, and ministries pointing people - to people.

In no way should the human-connection you benefit from in person be replaced by online experience. One on one, in-person communication is beyond valuable and can never - and should never - be replaced, diminished, or ignored. But for the people that cannot get themselves to “come to the human one on one contact” yet, or who are not able to do so for different reasons, why can’t we love them where they are?

One of the common answers I use as I receive different prayer requests, or counseling inquiries online to the client’s profile is this: *We encourage you to connect with a local church community. Or, Is there a local church, or pastor, or prayer group that can offer support to you? Do not go this road alone.*

Social media cannot be effectively maximized without a strategy, a team dedicated to its use, science, strategy, effective marketing, and deep “culture diving.” If you went to Africa to minister the Gospel, you would most likely not haphazardly head to the airport without knowing anything about the culture. In the same way you have to treat this as a mission. Approach it with wisdom, be committed to its success, and be determined to value and cherish people no matter what.

The fundamental issue is that the Christian community has not yet caught a glimpse of a vision for how social media can be used, and it has as a whole *not imagined* how God might want to show up on this platform. We just need people who will step up, be frontiersmen and advance this great “unknown”, even with a cost!

Imagine the Potential

Whether you and your church, cause, organization or ministry do anything further with social media will not influence whether others *use* the platform. Users are not looking to you for approval on if they get on the platform, sign up for an account, or what they look at or read. They are already showing up. And to pass up the opportunity to reach them with a satisfactory message is like having a full stadium of people in a third world country who are interested to hear about this Man called Jesus - and you and your team turn away. If you stayed and spoke to them, prayed with them, and ministered to them it is highly likely you would have hundreds of new converts. People in this country would finally have what they have been craving for decades.

With social media you have the ability to get in front of thousands of people, at once, and in a timely fashion. With mega data, you can target specific individuals, with strategic information. (Some will say, we should not have access to “mega data” but that is a conversation for later. Do not let this be your excuse for not showing up on social media in an effective way.)

For example, if your organization has a ministry for men dealing with the pornography addiction, don't you want to get their information to as many struggling men as possible? Through use of social media, you have the ability to micro-target. You can choose men of a certain age group in a certain region with certain specific interests or habits or characteristics, and land your resource directly in front of them. Through the use of social media, an effective paid ad, and some strategic targeting, you have the potential to get that man the resource he's been praying for.

Imagine these additional scenarios:

- Marriage counseling ministries can “show up” directly in a person's social media feed that may be interested in a divorce; the tools you have may save a family unit from demise.
- Adoption agencies can show up in front of teenage girls, who might be pregnant or have a friend considering an abortion. This alternative “idea”, through winsome and effective marketing and ad placement, could save portions of a generation.
- Ministry and church events can be advertised to people in your region who would like to join in your community.
- Vacation Bible Schools for young children can be made available to single moms and dads who might need a break.

- Ministry and Churches can place ads for their overflowing food banks, in front of specific people online who might be desperate for food for their tables.
- Senior Citizens (yes, an older generation is using Facebook now) can be informed of opportunities where they are needed in their community.

I have the privilege of serving many different ministries, leaders, organizations etc now, and in the past on social media. Working on a client recently I had this "slap me on the forehead realization." *Should we have something on this Facebook page that explains salvation? Is there a place on the website we can send people to - to explain salvation and how to obtain it?* I felt silly because - how had I not implemented that before?

We must always be mindful that new people are finding us online, and visiting our social media page even by "happenstance". Friends of the page are sharing our posts with their non-believer friends. As much as we are inundated in our Christian-ese, to many we are still a foreign concept. We should be clearly communicating on every platform, our cultural terms, sharing invitations that are clear to understand to be part of this adventure we call Christianity. We must stop assuming that people understand our lingo, and that they will "Find us." We must be showing up where they are, easy to understand, and easy to discover.

Imagine doing a Facebook Live live with friends and have a prayer gathering from where you are, inviting others to join in. Share scriptures of encouragement on your facebook post and tag others you know need to hear the message. While your big event is going on, have a team in place to pray for miracles via livestream encounters with those who cannot come.

One of the clients I have assisted with social media does massive gatherings; they have embraced doing Facebook Live Streaming. A few months ago, as I was on the ground with them at the event, I was capturing videos and images of the gathering to go on the social media page. But I was also engaging with all those thousands and thousands of viewers from around the world who were watching online via our livestream feed. Those watching did not know it was "me" but instead "the brand" of the organization (i.e. I was the ghost writer behind the logo).

Facebook Live (or Live Streaming) is fast moving, and those who engage are very active. As I interacted (as the brand) on the Livestream feed, to see prayer requests from people coming in from another country, or to share in the prayers with a woman who was watching in her living room, or to offer blessings and encouragement to the heavy hearted participants - *as the organization* was powerful. It opened my eyes to see that if we serve a God who never changes, who makes the blind see, and the deaf hear and the lame man walk again, why can we not see miracles happen through the online stream?

Why do Mary, Bob, or Sarah have to be *in person at this event to experience and receive from God?* God and His Spirit transcend time and space. How many people do you know that have found God, or received a word of encouragement through the tv screen through the ministry of Christian Broadcast Network (CBN), or Kenneth Copeland or Joel Osteen. If God can reach people through a tv screen, can He not also do it through Facebook? Twitter? Snapchat?

I am amazed at the messages my clients receive in their inboxes from people with prayer requests from around the world. People are so hungry, so desperate, so in need of hope and engagement that they will even reach out to pastors or leaders or believers through a Facebook inbox!

The opportunities are endless. We crave for people to come to us - but when will we start going to them?

An Opportunity - and Responsibility

God has created us to be people of communication. And when we are hurting, we turn to whomever is available to express ourselves. Social media is a tool used by God to let people express and connect. The occasional misuse of this tool is a possibility, as is anything involving humans. Outside of Heaven, we will always be encountering imperfections. But this resource is part of God's way to help people cry for help. Will we be there, willing to answer?

I think for too long American Christians have grown complacent when it comes to outreach, sharing the gospel, and just spreading the love of Jesus. The Gospel of Salvation, and loving people is not hard work or complicated. But it does require that we show up. We expect others to come to us, instead of us going to them.

To not engage to the maximum potential with those on social media is like begging your Dad for a puppy when, if you would look down at your feet, you would see a dozen puppies staring back up at you waiting for you to "pick me!" I believe that the Creator God who formed the stars, sun, and waters is the same God today. He wants to be actively engaged in our lives. **Social media does not limit God. If we use it right, it will actually help us reach more people for Him.**

My "next step" recommendation is simple. Print this article, share it with a friend, or your church leadership and ask them to consider the idea of using social media as a mission field no longer just a task. As you hit the print button give yourself a deadline. Two weeks from now a decision should be made: *Is this something you, your ministry and organization can commit to or is this a mission field you are not called to and if that is the case, that is OK.* Time is of the essence. Over 2 billion people are interacting online, many of whom are desperately in need of truth.

Either engage with social media well, with excellence, and where people are at - or stop expecting people to come to you. The world is ready and eager for the love of Jesus, the solutions, and the friendship we can give them. But first, we must make this arena of social media a priority; on this mission field is a world waiting and ready to know Him.

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