How to take your web site
from **afterthought** to ministry **tool**

Nick Grosso, Web Designer
Calvary Chapel Fort Lauderdale

Calvary Chapel Ft. Lauderdale excels not only at teaching the Word in their church, but also at using technology to take it outside their walls through the internet. Calvary's website (www.calvaryftl.org) gets some 5,000,000 (yes-that is 5 MILLION) hits and over 120,000 unique visitors every month! "When we started this thing," says Nick Grosso, the Web Designer at Calvary Chapel, "we really wanted it to be at the forefront. We wanted something that represented the quality of a lot of secular sites."

With Calvary Chapel's priority on teaching the Word, they have dedicated a lot of server space for visitors to watch or listen to Pastor Bob Coy's sermons. Several churches provide the most current message, but Calvary Chapel has an archive of all of Bob's Sunday and Wednesday messages dating back to 1991. "This ability lets you find content pertaining to your situation," Nick says. With this archive of over 1,000 sermons, a person can go in and find a sermon that applies to almost anything they're dealing with. This archive is set up in a searchable database that one can search by message title, date it was presented (or even a range of dates), key words, book of the Bible, lesson topic, or speaker – including a number of well-known guests such as Franklin Graham, Joni Eareckson Tada and Kirk Cameron. Calvary Chapel has clearly turned its website into a powerful and effective tool for their ministry.

Whether a church is going to design and maintain its own website or hire a consultant to design and host the site – or even go for a "templating" approach – Nick shares some things to keep in mind.

Functionality and appearance

Functionality is very important, yet everyone loves a sharp-looking website. A church's website should use clean graphics and be well designed. However, there are too many examples of a 'good looking' website that is simply 'too cool.' "Don't focus on glitz," says Nick. "Too much glamour is a distraction." You must make sure your site is functional. "You do not want to put such a focus on graphics that you neglect the functionality," says Nick, "Think from the end-user standpoint." When you go to a web site, you want it to look attractive but still be usable.

Ease of use on a web site is paramount. "Build a process that, if you were a person who just got a computer, you could get to what you are looking for," says Nick. In order to achieve this precarious balance between a slick look and ease of use, get plenty of other people's feedback, from both other web designers and "non-techies." Listen to the feedback you get, and be willing to make changes to make the site better.

Who visits your site?

During the planning stages of a design, focus on the "target audience" of the website. Who will be using the website? For starters, churches have two major groups of people their website needs to address: 1) Unchurched people who are curious about the church, and 2) church members who want to get an update, check on their kids at camp, or, in Calvary Chapel's case, access one of Bob's messages. "Always think, 'target audience,'" says Nick. Not every church will appeal to every person. What kind of people do you normally draw? After defining your target audiences, make sure your homepage has information that would appeal to them.

Once you are online, you will want to find out specifics about the people visiting your site. A great way to do this is through tracking. Calvary, for instance, knows that a lot of their visitors are married women with children. Since they know this, they are careful not to make their look "too masculine." "If you are going to spend money on anything," says Nick, "spend it on tracking." A great thing about the internet is that you can learn things just by people logging onto your site. You know if people are logging on from another country. You can find out where people are coming from, whether it is a search engine or a link from another
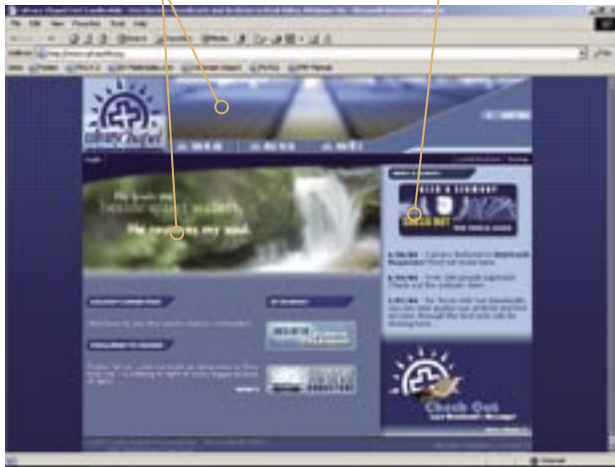
Calvary Chapel Fort Lauderdale's home page (www.calvaryftl.org) is sharp and uncluttered, giving it a welcoming look.

site. Also, pay attention to what areas of your site are used the most, and which areas are used the least.

Spell it out!

It is important for a website to have simple verbiage. "Spell things out," says Nick. "Don't assume people are going to click somewhere if it is not spelled out for them." People are not going to search around your website for something they do not know exists. Make the categories on your navigation menu simple and insightful, while remaining concise.

Consistency

Consistency is very important in a website. A big part of consistency is sustaining a theme from page to page within your website. People do not want to feel like they are leaving your website to get information once they are on it. "Sometimes people get scared to leave the website that they are on," says Nick, so it's important to keep familiarity throughout the sections of your site. An easy way to build consistency is to have a navigation template on every page, which will take you to whatever area of the website you want to go.

Keep it interesting

No one wants to log on to your site if it's boring. A critical part of maintaining interest is to update your website regularly. This is an area in which churches are often guilty. Have you ever had a blurb on your website announcing an event… long after that event has passed? When you start a design, make sure you can change different elements that

will change the 'feel' of the site. For instance, Calvary Chapel has prominent graphics on their home page that they swap out periodically to give their site a new look. "Think ahead, in terms of content," says Nick. "Think about what you will be doing with your website in the future, and design your site to be able to do it."

Spread the word

Spread the word about your website. Put your website address on anything and everything. Business cards, signage, bulletins, mail pieces, the side of your building… everything down to the pens in the back of the seats are potential places to print your web address. Mention the website from the stage as a resource for the congregation.

Good web design

Designing your own website gives you the ability to make it look *exactly* how you want it, put *exactly* what you want on it, and be able to change it *exactly* when you want to. What is a good web design? How does one find it? You can go to different web design studios, see what they are doing, and grab ideas from the best in the market. "Look outside the Christian sites," suggests Nick. "Go for the secular design sites who are at the top of their game." One place Nick recommends for ideas is www.2advancedstudios.com.

"Flash is a wonderful tool for a website," says Nick. With Flash animations, you can do many things you can't do with HTML that look very good – if done well. Flash, however, is complicated and can be difficult to learn. People make careers out of using it to help others design websites. If your church attempts to tackle Flash, realize it will take some time to learn. "One place that is a great resource is www.flashkit.com," says Nick. "This place has a lot of what you need to know, from beginners to intermediate to very advanced."

Churches that are going to design their own site should keep a few things in mind. "Don't try to make a programmer out of a graphics guy," says Nick. Let people do what they do best. Web designers should also think in terms of someone else trying to change their website in the future. "When you are designing a web site, think that you are not going to always be the web guy," says Nick.

Web templates

Web templates are another option for churches to get a great design in less time for a lower cost. Starting with a prefabricated shell, you can customize the content to match the web goals for your church. The danger here is in the prefabrication. A lot of software comes with web templates, but they are often aiming at too broad of a market. As a result, the template choices can be boring or even cheesy.

Calvary Chapel Fort Lauderdale's web visitors can join in their worship services via live broadcasts.

There are companies that have a more dynamic approach to "templating". A good web-based template company is more equipped to stay up to date in terms of design than the church secretary. Many website-based companies let you customize your site with easy interfaces and without much cost. These are great options for smaller churches who cannot afford a web team, but still want a nice site.

Outsourcing

Hiring someone to build a site for you is another possibility. "If you are going to go the outsourcing route, figure out who your target audience is, what kind of services you want to provide, and storyboard the necessary elements, so you don't spend a whole bunch of time and a whole bunch of money letting them deliberate what they want for your website," suggests Nick. Again, make sure you choose a company that takes the time to understand your church.

Costs

Costs of operating a website in-house depend on the website itself. There are usually costs for manpower to design and launch the site. Maintenance and hosting costs also come into play. Some churches have even brought on a full time Webmaster. Something like Calvary Chapel's archive is much more expensive than a simple site because database structure can be very expensive.

Template costs vary depending on the source. With software templates, you're looking at the cost of the software and the separate cost of hosting and maintaining the site. Some web-based companies combine design, hosting and maintaining for a one-time cost up front and a flat monthly fee thereafter.

Outsourcing costs can vary widely, depending on the experience and range of services of the company doing the work. The key with outsourcing is to communicate what you want clearly. They often charge extra for changes made after a certain point. Make sure you know how all of their charges work, not just the up-front costs.

An attractive, helpful website is a tremendous asset to a church. It allows people to find out things about your church in a non-threatening way. "That's the friendliness of the internet," says Nick "They can surf and ask theological questions in their underwear!" ▼