

THE POWER OF POSITIONING

By Peggy Matthews Rose

Go to the hottest search engines on the Web-Google, Yahoo, AOL, whichever you prefer. Type in "God." I found I could have an interview with God, play games with God or do a study on His name in a Catholic encyclopedia. I also was referred to a heavy metal band in Virginia named Lamb of God. Next, type in "Jesus." The third site on my search engine took me to the official website of the Mormon church. Now, type in "church." At the top of my list? The Mormons again.

So, what's the point? Well, the point is that not one of these word searches leads to a Southern Baptist church or ministry. Instead, it seems that while more than half of the prime Web real estate about the spiritual is used by evangelical Christians, other websites that don't point to the true meaning of these key search words are taking up valuable space in an area (the top 10 results) where Southern Baptist churches and ministries aren't even mentioned.

WWW-maximizing your church's outreach

Evangelism for the on mission Christian almost always will involve one-on-one contact, up close and personal. The Internet has simply presented us with another open door. Sixty-four percent of online Americans use the Internet for faith-related reasons. That's nearly 82 million Americans. Almost any church can easily incorporate online tools into its ministry. A church website with current, relevant information is a great tool for conveying key messages. It also can help attract visitors. Studies show more people seeking a church home will use the Internet before opening the yellow pages. Email will help church members stay in touch with key staff and provides a personal way for visitors to contact the church. An e-newsletter is an inexpensive and efficient tool for ministry groups to share information directly with people involved in the ministry. Churches have a powerful tool to reach their communities. They just have to tap into it.

By now, we all know that having a presence on the Web is as expected as having a mailing address and a telephone number. But it's not quite that simple. And that's why companies are springing up to help churches and ministries navigate the murky waters of establishing effective websites. Some of these companies are ministries themselves-with a heart for the Great Commission. One in particular proves daily that the secret to meeting today's seekers in their place of greatest need is found in the power of search engine positioning.

Born from the desire of a handful of Saddleback Church members in Lake Forest, California, to see evidence for Christ better represented on the Internet, All About GOD Ministries was launched with a cluster of 50 independent websites. "As we saw the fruit pouring in, we were amazed to discover that

we had a powerful tool for evangelism," says Executive Director Greg Outlaw.

They grew rapidly by trusting God for direction and learning all they could about search engine positioning. Today AllAboutGOD.com hosts nearly 300 websites (about one-fourth of their ultimate vision). Based in Colorado Springs, Colorado, their monthly average is one million "hits" welcoming 125,000 to 150,000 unique visitors. Most important, every month at least 500 visitors to their sites make a first-time commitment or a recommitment to Christ-a greater reach than that of most megachurches and crusades. Still operated by a small staff, All About GOD's success is evidence that the Internet offers a potential paradigm shift in the way we reach people for Christ.

"We live in a skeptical society," Greg says. "People don't believe what they hear and are not even likely to ask their friends for answers. But they do tend to believe what they read. They'll type anything, anytime, into a search engine. People who won't stroll into a church will ask questions online in the privacy of their homes.

"Churches have a global responsibility to share the gospel message, as well as a local purpose within their communities. Understanding Internet technology gives us the opportunity to build a bridge of truth on the Web. By saying to seekers, 'We're relevant to you. We can reach you, and you can reach us,' we can bear fruit we wouldn't think of."

More than 500 million searches are done each day by the one billion people who are on the Internet. If you're not in the search engines, people won't find you. Considering the fact that people search on topics they want information about, these are not like "cold calls"they're more like "hot leads." If, by chance, a person searching a topic comes to your website and lives close enough to visit your church, you may be able to invite him or her to your services.

ON MISSION ASKED GREG OUTLAW HOW CHURCHES CAN BENEFIT FROM HARNESSING THE TECHNOLOGY OF SEARCH ENGINE POSITIONING.

ON MISSION: What is search engine positioning and why is it important in today's e-marketplace?

GREG OUTLAW: Search Engine Positioning, or Search Engine Optimization, is about writing and creating websites so they will rank higher on lists supplied by search engines such as Google and Yahoo. In other words, your sites are optimized for search engines as well as people. A search engine like Google ranks websites based on more than 100 components in a mathematical algorithm. The percentage of importance they put on particular components determines a website's ranking. Search Engine Optimization (SEO) involves making every component that a search engine uses to calculate positions at 100 percent optimized. The best thing you can do to optimize search engines is to write good, compelling content and ask other websites to link to yours.

ON MISSION Based on your experience, what are the six most important things for churches to understand about effectively using this technology?

GREG OUTLAW: I'd say they are these:

Have a strategy. Know from the start what you want to accomplish. Do you want to create search engine-friendly sites, or do you just want a destination site? Search engine friendly websites are those specifically written and designed to rank high in the major searches. A destination site is what most people create. Destination sites are fine if you don't intend for people to find you by using search engines. For example, some sites require a user name and password to access. They are a virtual gathering place for those who already know about the organization and, thus, the website. If outreach is your goal, it needs to be done through search engine-friendly sites. Decide that first before you even create your website.

Look for key words. It's important to know what people are searching for on the Web. What key words are they typing in and in what order? By researching these questions, we've been able to learn how many are searching every month and what they're searching for. All our sites are positioning high on the top search engines; many of them on page one. There are a couple of great tools out there to help with this part of the puzzle: One of them is the free <http://inventory.overture.com> or there's the more reliable www.wordtracker.com. Either can help you determine how people are searching for information on the Web.

Craft your content carefully. How are you delivering your message? Your site might be ranked #1, but if your content isn't compelling, people will leave. You can help yourself create compelling content by taking the key words and turning them into questions. Expand them a little. For example, if your key words are "Jesus Christ," try including questions like "Do you believe in Jesus Christ?" or "Who do you think Jesus Christ is?"

Repeating key word phrases is also critical. By putting your key words closer to the front of your paragraphs, the search engines are more likely to recognize them as what your site is about. Also, search engines can't identify key words if they are embedded in a graphic. This means if your text is caught up in graphics, it's below an engine's radar.

Resist the temptation to be flashy.

Pizazz may be fun to look at, but search engines don't see graphics. They just see text. That's one reason it's important to know upfront what you want to accomplish with your website. Littering your website with lots of interactive features without the content to back it up will force your Web space to become a side show.

Write around a theme. Create your content in such a way that anyone can read it and see that it's all about the same thing. This aids in the search.

Understand linking. Reciprocal linking adds to what is called "link popularity." The more websites that link to your site, the more popular your site becomes. At AllAboutGOD.com we encourage websites to link to our sites and then we link back to their sites where appropriate. This practice

Spiritually-related online activities

The 2004 Internet study by the Pew Internet & American Life Project revealed some of the most popular and important spiritually-related online activities:

- 26% of the nation's 128 million Internet users have used the Internet to seek or exchange information about the religious faiths or traditions of others
- 21 % have sought information about how to celebrate religious holidays
- 17% have looked for information about where they could attend religious services
- 14% have used email to plan church meetings
- 7 % have made donations to religious organizations or charities

Source: *Facts and Trends*, July/August 2004

strengthens our link popularity. For the average church website, encourage your members who have businesses to link from their site to yours. However, be sure to examine all websites that your site links to. Linking to questionable sites could present complicated issues that don't need to clutter your ministry.

ON MISSION: When it comes to being effective on the Internet, how can the little fish with little money hope to do battle in a world of big fish with big bucks?

GREG OUTLAW: You really don't need a lot of money to win in this field, just a good strategy. What's important is a website that clearly communicates your message and is easy to navigate. Choosing key words and using them strategically on your website is also important.

ON MISSION: What about Search Engine services? Are there any Christian organizations out there offering services to the church? Where can Christians go for help they can trust?

GREG OUTLAW: The best place to learn is from someone who knows the industry well, but you have to be very careful in hiring someone to do your work. Make sure they know what they're talking about. Christians who want to know more about this field may contact me anytime at Greg@AllAboutGOD.com.

ON MISSION: What made you willing to give up the comfort and security of the secular workplace to go into full-time ministry?

GREG OUTLAW: Five years ago, when I thought I was dying, God saved my life. What else could I do but give it back to Him? I knew search engine technology, so I offered my skills and He is blessing that desire.

ON MISSION: Why is it critical for the church today to understand Internet technology?

GREG OUTLAW- When you realize there are a billion people on the Internet, you begin to see this as the primary mission field of the 21st century. People searching for information on the Internet are asking questions they won't ask their friends. If you're not there to meet them, you're not fulfilling the Great Commission.

Peggy Matthews Rose is a writer living in Lake Forest, California.

Reprinted with permission of *On Mission*, flagship magazine of the North American Mission Board, SBC