

Each year, we give you a list of the trends we think churches should explore over the coming 12 months. This January, we're starting in a slightly different place than previous years. The pandemic has meant that the digital transformation of churches has accelerated over the past nine months.

You might be entering 2021 tired – you've moved many of your services online, your social media engagement has increased as people in your community are spending more time at home and the leaders of your church are wanting to try new things.

After the challenges of 2020, I think we're all ready for a change. We have some new ideas that we think churches could harness to increase reach online – and ultimately seek to bring more people into our worshipping communities, whatever shape those communities are taking at the moment. However, some of the trends we've identified were mentioned last year, and will probably be mentioned in the years ahead too!

Take a look at what trends you're already trying out, and what you might look to tackle in the coming weeks. When you do, remember to tag us on social media so we can see!



Videos

I told you not everything would be new! Chances are, 2020 saw your video output increase hugely – or perhaps even start! The numbers don't lie on the importance of videos online, and this is a trend you can expect to see listed each year for quite a while.

When thinking about content to share on websites and especially social media, a good question to ask yourself is: are our followers likely to share this? More than 70% of consumers say they shared a brand's video last year. Having followers share your video gets your name and your message in front of a new audience – all of those that follow them.

More than half of consumers say watching videos about certain products makes them confident in their online decisions. What can the Church learn from this? I think there are a number of things we could consider.

- Could short, online reflections encourage people to find out more about faith?
- Could a Morning Prayer Facebook Live be the first time someone prays themselves?
- Could a short video explaining a life event and how to find out more encourage people to get in touch?

How could an online service be a part of the journey that leads people to attend your onsite service post-pandemic?

Interactive content

While many of our services and events are not taking place and congregations across the Church of England remain largely at home, interactive content is a good way of ensuring your followers feel like a part of the community still.

Being able to like and comment on a post is one thing, being able to shape the course of a prayer meeting or a sermon series puts the social back into social media – helping those who have attended your church for years or have only joined online meetings in the last few months to feel connected.

If you're uploading your service as a Facebook Premiere, did you know you can add a [poll to the video](#)? Twitter allows you to share [polls](#) – you could ask people what hymns they'd like to hear, what topic the sermon should be on or what their favourite reading is from a selection of your choice. Instagram Stories has a question feature – could you ask for prayer requests that you go through on Sunday during your service?

If you have the right gear and know-how, you could also consider 360-video and augmented reality. Tag us on social media if you're able to try this out!

Insights

Have you run any [surveys](#) recently or asked your community what resources they are finding useful during this challenging time?

Insights help you develop your online content and engage and serve those in your community. You can read more about [audiences](#) in this blog.

Not only can you learn from surveys, you can also find out more from seeing which type of Facebook posts get the most engagement, when your Facebook Lives have the most viewers, whether more people answer your polls on Instagram or Twitter.

Find out more about insights [here](#).

Online events

Many of you have had to move services and events online during 2020, but what's your plan for the coming year?

Secular organisations have realised that online events – conferences, training and even meetings – have an impressive return on investment and have increased the accessibility of their event for many people.

Online events are therefore here to stay. This won't be instead of your in-person offering in most cases, but it's important to consider how you will continue to engage with those who have tried church for the first time since you started streaming or pre-recording services.

What events did you move online in 2020 that could continue to be streamed or recorded to upload at a later date, even when restrictions lift?

Hyper personalisation

The Church can use personalisation to show how our community matters, even if we're only engaging online at the moment.

If you're sending out an email newsletter, are you making sure you're including the recipients' names? If you're using WhatsApp to invite people to events, are you tailoring this message by asking how their week has been or adding a detail you learnt from a previous message? Remember, people are craving connection during this period of isolation.

Personalisation can extend to only showing relevant content to an audience. If you have time, you could produce a few versions of the same newsletter or list of upcoming services – perhaps one for young people and those without children, one for families and one for older people.

Stories

Once again, this trend is nothing new. You might have tried these on your personal social media accounts – or perhaps just watched them – but 2021 is the time your church should explore Stories across Facebook and Instagram particularly.

You can find out more about stories [here](#).

Remember, these only hang around for a set period of time, so you can have some fun. Features on Instagram Stories include filters, location tags, polls, question and answer stickers and the chance to go live.

You could ask your followers to ask you anything about prayer, worship or being a Christian, and have your vicar answer these. You could do a day in the life of your children and/or youth worker. How about a poll asking what hymn's they'd like at Sunday's service or what topic you could cover in the sermon?

Engagement with followers will not only give you a boost on the algorithm and ensure more users will see your content when they're searching Instagram, it will also make people feel a part of your church – especially during these times of isolation.

Still not convinced? Remember Stories are free, will reach younger audiences, allow you to show people what really goes on in the life of your church each day and allows you to tag other local organisations, churches or charities you may be working alongside.

User-generated content

We've said it before and we're saying it again: [user-generated content](#) is a way to gather good content that you can use across your social media accounts for free, to show followers content that they can trust.

What is it? These are the photos and videos that your community share from your services, events and building or projects. If you are tagged in these, you can share them on your own social media accounts by tagging whoever shared the content originally.

One survey found that 90 per cent of shoppers reported that user-generated content influenced their decision to purchase more than any other kind of marketing. In fact, 97 per cent of 18-29 year olds were extremely influenced by pictures, reviews and comments left by others. What can this mean for the Church?

Perhaps a follower shared a pictured from their living room watching your online service, or you've been tagged in a post thanking you for your Christmas family activities. Sharing this will show others in your community that people like them are involved in your churches and there's a place for them there, too.

Read more on user-generated content[here](#).

Web security

In the last few years, web security has changed from a nice-to-have to something you must invest in if you're running a website.

Many web users are now comfortable with working out whether a website is safe in seconds. Google is even better at determining this. Not a secure site? Those searching for you will find it hard to find you when using a search engine and your site will be down-weighted in the results.

Read more about this [here](#).

The good news is A Church Near You covers this security for all its pages, meaning you can have a free church website forever. Find out more about that [here](#).

Transparency

With the era of "fake news" and misinformation, it's important churches show transparency and openness online. We can do this by showing behind the scenes chat and information on Stories, explaining why decisions are taken – such as to close or open you building – and being friendly and open to those who engage with you on social media.

Which of these trends will your church be engaging with in 2021?

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