

Digital Evangelism

An introduction from *Internet Evangelism Day*

What is Internet Evangelism Day?

... two inter-related resources:

- a year-round online resource guide explaining all aspects of digital evangelism.
- a focus day for churches and other groups, held on the last Sunday of April each year. Ready-made free downloads (PowerPoint, video clips, drama scripts and music) enable any church to create a short program to explain the Internet's potential, on that day, or indeed at any time.

It's an initiative of the *Internet Evangelism Coalition*, a group of major international ministries involved in the Web. The first *IE Day* was held in 2005.

Were you born there?

The Web became a mainstream medium around 1996. Those aged under about 25, who grew up with computers and mobile phones, were 'born' into this digital world. Those of us in older age groups are 'immigrants' to this new world, perhaps even only occasional and confused 'tourists'!

How many billion?

There are about 1.5 billion web users around the world. Even this number seems small when compared to the 3 billion mobile phone owners! Significantly, over half these people are in the non-western world, many in countries where it is difficult to share the Good News. Yet in some languages, there is little or no digital evangelism of any sort. Yet there are many open doors, as this *Lausanne World Pulse* article explains:

lausanneworldpulse.com/themedarticles.php/1087

Mobile phones and devices

Mobile phones provide growing opportunities for evangelism and ministry. Increasingly, people use their mobiles to access the Web, download MP3 files or videos, receive messages, or interact with social networking sites like Facebook. Short-range 'Bluetooth' broadcasts can be received by many mobiles. Bibles and books can be downloaded and read on a mobile.



Portable electronic book readers such as Amazon's 'Kindle' are enabling people to store a library of books to read anywhere. This creates the opportunity to distribute free Christian books, Bibles or interactive presentations.

InternetEvangelismDay.com/mobile

Not just for techies!

Many believe that technical ability must be needed to do web outreach. This is completely untrue! There are many ways that you can share your faith online, including:

- start a blog (a sort of online diary-style site) or small website, using a ready-made site creation system that needs little technical knowledge
- 'talk' to people in online 'chat rooms'
- volunteer (see below) as an email mentor for larger outreach ministries who need mature Christians to advise inquirers who have contacted them
- build relationships in social networking systems such as Facebook, discussion groups or bulletin boards, or online virtual reality and game environments such as Second Life.

The three web evangelists, whose stories appear later, are not computer experts!

Volunteering

Large online outreach ministries require teams of spare-time volunteers to mentor those who respond by email. The number of inquiries is too high for the full-time staff to handle. So they train

volunteers, who give a few hours a week giving email counsel and encouragement to website contacts. Some inquirers may be almost ready to make a commitment. Others have many questions they need answered, or may be struggling with serious life issues. "I'm blessed to be involved in this opportunity to serve," says Mary, a volunteer mentor with *TruthMedia.com*.

Some ministries need bilingual volunteers, both for mentoring in other languages and for translation. Opportunities for volunteer help are listed here:

InternetEvangelismDay.com/vacancies

A perfect mission field?

What would a perfect mission field look like? Mark Stephenson, in his book *Web-Empower Your Church*, suggests eight characteristics of a 'perfect mission field'. Then he shows how the Web fulfills each of them!

InternetEvangelismDay.com/missionfield

People relate differently online than they do in face-to-face interactions. Although online communication can be fleeting and ephemeral, people are often much less inhibited to share their inner feelings and needs in this relatively anonymous online environment. This has been called *The Online Disinhibition Effect* by John Buler in his book *The Psychology of Cyberspace*:

<http://tinyurl.com/disinhibit>

Web users may ask questions or discuss needs that they would never be comfortable to do face-to-face. For example, about 0.5 million people each month visit *TruthMedia.com*'s network of outreach websites and each day 500 people email for advice:

<http://truthmedia.com/sites>

Understand it to use it

It is vital to understand the nature of the Web as a communication medium, otherwise we can't use it effectively:



- The web is not a 'linear medium', offering a sequential block of information or entertainment in the way that novels, videos or tracts do. It is 'non-linear', containing multiple blocks of material not linked together in a fixed order.
- Neither is the Web a 'push medium'. Radio, TV, literature distribution or billboard advertising are largely 'push mediums' – that is, they send out a single indiscriminate broadcast message to anyone within range. The Web however is a 'pull medium'. People only visit a webpage if it draws them in because of something that interests them. The user is in complete control. A website therefore has no automatic audience. There is no magical 'trickle-down' effect whereby Christian websites will somehow be seen by non-Christians who have no wish to visit them.
- 'Broadcast media' (radio, TV, newspapers) are not really interactive, except perhaps for phone-ins or letters to the editor. The Web offers instant feedback, interaction and relationship-building. More than any other medium, it enables conversation, networking and relationships. Because the gospel flows most effectively through non-confrontational accepting relationships, two-way conversation and non-preachy open discussion, the Web fits very closely with evangelism.
- Do not think of the Web as 'tracts on a screen', or a static brochure. For many years, Christian radio suffered because it was often 'church services on the radio' – hymns, prayers and sermons. By trying to transfer one form of proclamation (a face-to-face Christian meeting) to the very different medium of radio, effectiveness and potential audience were reduced.
- It is also very important to understand the process by which people come to faith, online or offline:

InternetEvangelismDay.com/gray

"I am glad to commend Internet Evangelism Day" – John Stott

"The Internet is one of the most key tools that God has given us in the church today" – George Verwer, *Operation Mobilization*

Church websites – a missed opportunity

A church without a website is largely invisible to potential visitors, be they Christians moving into the area and needing a new fellowship, or outsiders in the community. And sadly, relatively few church websites are 'outsider-friendly' - they often use 'insider' jargon. A frequent problem is the tendency to present the fellowship as a building where meetings take place, rather than a relational family of people who are offering unconditional friendship for a journey.

Internet Evangelism Day provides an online self-assessment questionnaire to help churches develop their websites to reach out into the community:

InternetEvangelismDay.com/design

Meet three web evangelists

Kelsey runs the *Holy Mama* blog: "I write from a Christian worldview, but my site isn't one of those geared for other Christians. Christ is in me, and is a large part of my life, and so there's plenty of 'God stuff' mentioned and implied in my writing – but it's not preachy, devotional, or inspirational in nature. It's really sort of silly, fun, and honest. It's just life as a Christian mom."



Nathalie supervises the online mentoring for *Top Chrétien's* outreach websites, based in Paris. "Even though I am not very skilled on the computer, I enjoy sharing online and reading many encouraging testimonies. My responsibility on the team is to supervise over 100 counselors in France, who follow up those needing help or asking questions about faith and God."



Rusty is a writer, evangelist and speaker who has used the Web to enhance his ministry. "At a convention in Amsterdam a few years ago, I saw a brochure that said, 'The Great Commission is

Going Digital; Are You Ready?' That piqued my interest. Maybe God wanted me to focus my energies on Internet Evangelism. I began to write for the Web and various articles appeared online. The simplicity and pervasive nature of the Internet was allowing people to find and use these articles in ways I had never imagined. I could sit with my laptop in my office, on an airplane or in a hotel room and



compose an article* that would tactfully nudge people toward Christ or biblical principles. Then, by pushing a button, I could send it to Internet publishers who would make it available to people around the globe. The important thing is to ask God what He would have you do. As Mary told the servants in John 2:5, 'Whatever He [Jesus] says to you, do it'."

*Rusty's 'skeptical-friendly' articles are available for syndication: ministeriosprobe.org/Rusty

Read more evangelists stories:

InternetEvangelismDay.com/evangelists

Finding God online

It is no exaggeration to say that millions of people have found God online in the last ten years. Meet four of them here. It is important to highlight that for most, there was a considerable time of mentoring and asking questions. Often the Web was just one part of a long process, one of several influences that God used to bring people to Himself – books, films, TV, the Bible, but above all relationships.

Christina

Christina was at a crisis in her life when she went to see *The Passion of the Christ* film. So she bought a Bible, and then found an outreach website. "I was browsing *TheLife.com*, a website designed around *The Passion* movie, and I read an article called 'Are you looking for forgiveness?' I certainly was looking for



forgiveness! I needed forgiveness from others and forgiveness from myself. Before I read this, I didn't believe that I could ever be forgiven. For so long I had thought that Christianity was a means of control, with lots of rules of what you can and can't do. Yet it turns out that by giving my life to Jesus, the opposite happened and I am finally free!

Kevin & Kathy

TV adverts for the outreach site *Power to Change.com* attracted Kevin and Kathy's attention, but they were at first skeptical. However, they went online to check it out. There they found a clear message of truth with the promise of help to change their ways.



Pornography, drinking and guilt dominated Kevin's life. He knew that he needed to change and prayed to receive Christ. He emailed the site about his decision and requested follow-up. The request was passed on to a church right in his community. Soon after, someone from the church called and was invited to come over with a *Power to Change* booklet and CD. They had a long discussion and that weekend Kevin and Kathy began attending the church.

Kevin remembers, "Five years ago, the most important things in my life were football, drinking, pornography – everything that I shouldn't do, pretty much... escaping reality in any way, shape or form... drugs too. And I was the big bad daddy at home. I ruled the house, instead of with a loving hand, with a bad hand. The thing that struck me the most was – it wasn't condemning, it wasn't pushy. It was just offering the truth. What I found was most intriguing was the offer of a relationship with Jesus Christ. I think the reason that it connected with us so quickly and intensely was that we were both at our wits end. We had no-one to turn to, nowhere to go; it offered so much hope. It offered something that no man could give." Kathy's journey took several more months before she too came to faith.

Kasia

Kasia from Poland began an internet discussion with a young believer in Florida. He encouraged her to visit several Internet sites including *IMB's VitaNovis*, which put her in touch with their Polish team. As a result, Kasia began to correspond with Artur, a young Polish man, who played a role in her coming to faith in Christ. "At the beginning I thought he was some fanatic and simply wanted to annoy me. But I was intrigued enough to continue talking to him longer and longer. He told me strange things, he showed me how believers see the world. He asked me questions I could not answer. And he told me that when I received Christ I would be saved.

But how can I receive Christ? I didn't understand that. Still I was very intrigued by it. Artur started to encourage me to look for believers somewhere closer to me. He sent me several webpages and I sent several emails to them asking for help. And that same day I received two answers, one from a believer in Warsaw and one from my present friend in Pielgrzymowice. That was incredible.

Day by day I was closer to the Lord; I asked questions, I read the Word, I prayed. And I was totally amazed by God's work in my life. One evening someone asked me if I wanted to give my life to the Lord, if I wanted to receive him as my Lord and Savior and I did that!"

More web-mediated testimonies, with video clips:

InternetEvangelismDay.com/results

How to write your own testimony to reach outsiders:

InternetEvangelismDay.com/testimony

Training

There is a wide range of training materials online to help you understand more about different areas of digital outreach. Indeed, the entire *IE Day* site is designed as a training manual. But also check this list of specific training ideas:

InternetEvangelismDay.com/training

IE Day's newsletters and blog may also help you:

InternetEvangelismDay.com/newsletter

InternetEvangelismDay.com/blog

Maybe God can use you online?

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