Effective Evangelism: **JAE331**

EVANGELISM 2.0:
THE INTERNET MISSION FIELD

by Randall Niles

The universe of digital information created, captured, or reproduced in 2007 was 281 exabytes. This includes every Web site, e-mail, document, image, video, phone call, surveillance photo, banking transaction, store scan, and any other digital record you can imagine. By 2011, this annual figure will be nearly 1,800 exabytes, representing a sixty percent compound annual growth rate.[1]

For those of us who missed this class, an exabyte is a billion gigabytes, a gigabyte is a billion bytes, and a byte is comprised of eight bits of binary code (each bit being a one or a zero). A byte represents the typical letter, number, symbol, or character you are reading in this article. The bits would be analogous to the digital atoms underlying the molecular structure of the byte.

If we look ahead to the digital universe of 2011, we can visualize (but probably not comprehend) 1,800 exabytes as 14,400,000,000,000,000,000,000 "atoms" of digital information competing for our attention in digital space![2]

Are you overwhelmed yet?[3]

Information Explosion. During the Industrial Age (nineteenth to mid-twentieth century), information was relatively scarce, expensive, produced by institutions, and developed for consumption. Now, in the midst of the Information Age, information is virtually everywhere, usually free, created by individuals, and designed for interaction. We now produce more unique information each year than the total volume of information generated during the 5,000 years preceding it!

Not only is this new information produced and stored everywhere, we now have the technology to push fourteen trillion bits of information per second down a single strand of fiber optics. This means that information can ultimately reach anyone, anywhere, at any time. How did this happen? For those of us still using rotary phones and eight-track tapes, they call it *The Internet*.

The Internet Revolution. Nearly 1.6 billion people are now on the Internet. This worldwide figure is up from 360.9 million in 2000, representing a 342 percent growth rate between 2000 and 2008.[4] In the U.S. alone, the Internet population grew to 190.7 million visitors by the end of 2008.[5]

According to the Pew Research Center, forty-six percent of U.S. adults were on the Internet and fifty percent owned a cell phone in 2000. Only five percent had broadband in the home and nobody had a wireless connection to the Web. By 2008, seventy-four percent of U.S. adults were on the Internet and eighty-two percent owned a cell phone. In addition, fifty-eight percent had broadband in the home and sixty-two percent had a wireless connection to the Web.[6]

In 2008, U.S. Internet users performed nearly 137 billion searches across Google, Yahoo, MSN, Ask, and AOL, representing a twenty-one percent increase over 2007. Google generated nearly eighty-five billion of these U.S. searches, accounting for nearly ninety percent of search query growth in 2008.[7] In April 2009, Google continued its dominance of the U.S. search engine space with 64.2 percent of total

search volume, followed by Yahoo (20.4 percent), MSN (8.2 percent), Ask (3.8 percent), and AOL (3.4 percent).[8]

The percent of time people spend communicating online has increased eighteen percent since 2006, while time spent on traditional entertainment declined twenty-nine percent during the same period.[9] As I presented in a previous Viewpoint article,[10] communication and entertainment is shifting to online tools such as social networks, blogs, microblogs, video channels, photo sharing, and other Web 2.0 media. According to a Harris Interactive Poll in April 2009, forty-eight percent of U.S. adults now have a page on Facebook or MySpace.[11]

So what? Aren't Google, YouTube, and Facebook just delivering a bunch of irrelevant information, meaningless media, and narcissistic noise? As I indicated in my *Viewpoint* column, the Internet indeed has issues. However, it's also the primary way that many people inform, investigate, and interact on the "big questions of life." Ready or not, the Internet now plays a huge role in the delivery of spiritual information. If we're not strategically engaged in the online marketplace of spiritual ideas (yes, including crazy worlds such as Google, YouTube, and Facebook) we will miss one of the greatest opportunities for the Great Commission in history.

Internet Evangelism. Now that we understand the dramatic scope of the Internet mission field, how do we get strategic with our Internet evangelism? If 1.6 billion people are using search engines such as Google, Yahoo, and MSN as their primary sources for online information—including "spiritual and religious" information—how can we ensure that truth is available to our target audience?

Keyword Research. Keyword research is the key. In traditional marketing, it's simply discovering what a potential customer is typing into a search engine that could lead to a potential "conversion" (sale of a product, registration for a service). Keyword research for successful Internet evangelism is no different.

For example, if a seeker named Jennifer wants basic information about Jesus, she goes to Google, Yahoo, or MSN and types, "Who is Jesus?" The search results can lead Jennifer to the gospel, or lead her astray. In marketing lingo, Jennifer is a "hot lead," not a "cold call." We can assume that Jennifer is spiritually interested in the message of Jesus Christ because she "pre-qualified" herself by the nature of her search query.

When it comes to Internet evangelism, the primary question is, "What do all the 'Jennifers' on the Internet type into search engines that would cause them to land on sound, biblical presentations of the gospel?" The number one rule of marketing is: Know your market. Rule number two is: Effectively target your known market. Using a free resource such as the Google Keyword Tool, anyone can get a meaningful snapshot of the spiritual questions and real-life concerns showing up in the search engines. Get creative! You might be surprised to discover how many thousands of hurting people type phrases like "God help me," "I hate my life," and "Why me, God?" into Google each month.

Search Engines. Once we know our "market" through keyword research, we can produce compelling content (text, audio, video, and images) to target that market through the search engines. Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is a method of designing, writing, coding, and structuring links to our Web content to improve the likelihood that it will appear near the top of the search results.

Once again, the heart of SEO is keyword research. A targeted keyword phrase (for instance, "God help me") must appear frequently and prominently on the related Web page. Optimization also involves allowing search engines easy access to keyword-rich content through search engine-friendly formats and multiple text links. The goal of SEO is a high position in the natural search results. Since very few users ever go past page two of their search results, the importance of SEO for Internet Evangelism is obvious.

Social Media. In recent years, hundreds of millions of Internet seekers have added interactive, relational components to their information gathering by immersing themselves in Web 2.0 tools such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter. Similar to SEO, Social Media Optimization (SMO) is a way to structure content so it can be woven into these community-based Web sites and social media networks. Examples of SMO

include social bookmarking, "share" buttons, networked blogs, RSS feeds, video embeds from YouTube, and slideshows from Flickr.

As we watch Google acquire Web sites like YouTube (social video site) and Blogger (social blog engine), and Yahoo acquire Web sites like Flickr (social photo hub) and De.licio.us (social bookmarking site), it's clear that the search engine landscape is now fully leveraging social media. Therefore, the more we link, loop, and leverage our content among various Web sites, network profiles, and social media tools, the more opportunities we will have for effective Internet evangelism.[12]

Engagement. I encourage the Body of Christ to engage the huge number of spiritual seekers on the Internet. You don't have to establish a ministry or develop a Web site; just use the tools that already exist and join the communities that resonate with your interests. People still have spiritual questions. It's just that most of them aren't strolling into local churches to seek their answers anymore. The research shows that an increasing number of people are seeking their answers on the Internet. As I've outlined, the key to Internet evangelism is to understand the online culture and meet spiritual seekers right where they are.

If "Jennifer" types a spiritually related question into Google or shares a sincere need on her Facebook page, we need to be there with heartfelt truth at the top of her list. Like face-to-face evangelism, our initial goal should be establishing credibility and authenticity in her natural environment. Then, we can build on that relational foundation to share Christ's truth, love, and forgiveness. —*Randall Niles*

Randall Niles is an attorney and educator who spends most of his time on the Internet, serving as a director at www.AllAboutGod.com and www.GotQuestions.org.

_____

NOTES

1   *The Diverse and Exploding Digital Universe: An Updated Forecast of Worldwide Information Growth through 2011*, IDC White Paper, J. F. Gantz, Project Director, March 2008. http://www.emc.com/collateral/analyst-reports/diverse-exploding-digital-universe.pdf, retrieved May 14, 2009.
2   John Knuth, a mathematics instructor, calculated this figure for me. He's probably the only person I know who can visualize and comprehend such a figure.
3   If you're not overwhelmed yet, watch the video, "Did You Know 3.0." This is the latest remix from Karl Fisch and his team of researchers, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jpEnFwiqdx8 (available as of May 14, 2009).
4   *Internet World Stats*, compiled by Miniwatts Marketing Group using data from Nielsen Online, International Telecommunications Union, GfK, and other sources. http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm, retrieved May 14, 2009.
5   *The comScore 2008 Digital Year in Review*, January 2009, comScore, Inc., 6 (http:// www.comscore.com/downloads/2008-digital-year-in-review.pdf, retrieved May 14, 2009).
6   "The New News Media-Scape," presentation to public broadcasters by Lee Rainie, director, The Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project, February 17, 2009, http://www.pewinternet.org/Presentations/2009/The-New-News-Mediascape.aspx, retrieved May 14, 2009.
7   *The comScore 2008 Digital Year in Review*, 8.
8   *comScore Press Release*, "comScore Releases April 2009 U.S. Search Engine Rankings," May 18, 2009, http://www.comscore.com/Press_Events/Press_Releases/2009/5/comScore_Releases_April_2009_U.S._Search_Engine_Rankings , retrieved May 27, 2009.
9   *Research Brief*, Center for Media Research, March 9, 2009, discussing a Netpop Research Report, "Media Shifts to Social," http://www.mediapost.com/publications/index.cfm?fa=Articles.showArticle&art_aid=101755, retrieved May 14, 2009.
10 Randall Niles, "Web 2.0," *Christian Research Journal* 32, 3 (2009): 59.
11 *Research Brief*, Center for Media Research, May 6, 2009, discussing an Online Harris Poll conducted between March 31 and April 1, 2009, http://www.mediapost.com/publications/?fa=Articles.showArticle&art_aid=105274, retrieved May 14, 2009.
12 Special thanks to Greg Outlaw (AllAboutGOD.com) and Shea Houdmann (GotQuestions.org) for sharing some SEO/SMO expertise for this article.