

How Mormons Use The Internet To Spread The Good Word



By Joshua Steimle

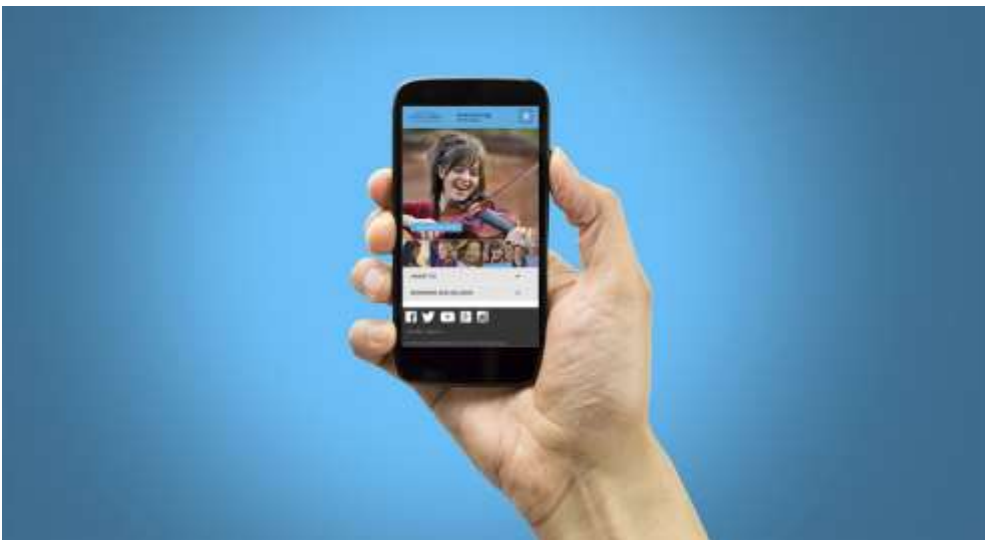
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We tend to think of religions as being conservative, stodgy, or lagging when it comes to anything that has to do with technology, and especially online technology. Therefore it may come as a bit of a surprise to find out that at least one religion, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, whose members are commonly known by the abbreviation “LDS” or the nickname “Mormons,” is one of the most advanced large organizations in the world when it comes to SEO, content marketing, and the use of social media [*Full disclosure, I am an active member of the LDS Church*]. As a member of this religious community and someone who makes his living from consulting with businesses regarding digital marketing, I have been more than curious to learn from the campaigns the LDS Church has engaged in to get their message out. Here are some of the lessons entrepreneurs and businesses can take from the Mormon way of doing digital marketing.

Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

SEO, which stands for search engine optimization, includes all activities that influence the ranking of a website on a search engine for a given keyword search. The higher a website’s rankings, the more traffic it gets. Digital marketing



consultant [Justin Briggs](#) analyzed the SEO efforts of the LDS Church in 2010 while working for SEO consultancy Distilled and published his results in [a well-read blog post](#). Given the time that has passed, I decided to revisit a few of Briggs' findings when it came to the LDS Church's SEO tactics and results.

First, I looked at rankings for non-branded, generic keywords. Although exact results may differ from one person's computer to another, when I used the SEO software tool [SEMRush](#) to analyze Google rankings for the following keywords for desktop users in the United States, I found LDS.org rankings in the top five results for these searches:

- bible
- bible dictionary
- christ
- church music
- holy bible
- holy ghost
- jesus christ
- king james bible
- new testament
- old testament
- scriptures

It is not easy to rank for these keywords. Using SEMRush's competitive analysis tool, the only website that outperformed LDS.org on these searches was Wikipedia, and this doesn't take into account the fact that LDS.org is only one of the more than 100 websites the LDS Church maintains. Others include [Mormon.org](#), [ProvidentLiving.org](#), and [OvercomingPornography.org](#).

But the name of the game isn't just to rank for highly competitive, simple keywords like those above, but to also target a large number of [long tail searches](#), or keyword phrases that are more specific. The number of searches for "holy bible" is certain to outnumber those for "isaiah let us reason together," (LDS.org ranks fifth on Google for this search) but when you add up the aggregate visitors from millions of specific searches they outweigh the visitors searching for a handful of generic terms. The LDS Church appears to have mastered both. Perhaps this shouldn't be too surprising coming from a religion that has [an](#)

official statement on SEO, in which it says “We view SEO as a method to spread the gospel online...”

Internally, the LDS Church has taken steps to use best SEO practices on all its websites, making sure each page loads quickly, has a search engine friendly URL, uses easily readable HTML text in place of graphics where possible, and uses title, H1, and other tags properly. Its websites are an excellent case study in how to implement Moz’s oft-referenced Beginner’s Guide to SEO.

But one of the greatest assets the LDS Church has when it comes to SEO is its more than 15 million members around the world. Church members have long been encouraged to master technology and use it to spread the gospel message, and they have responded in recent years by setting up personal websites and blogs, many of which link liberally to LDS Church web properties. Inbound links like these are a key factor in how Google determines the credibility or importance of a website and its rankings.

Following in Briggs’ footsteps once again, I compared the number of inbound links for LDS.org to those on The Moz Top 500 (last updated January, 2014) and found that the 8.8 million incoming links LDS.org has would put it in 204th place, just ahead of websites like GoDaddy.com and TechCrunch, and slightly behind Weather.com, Slashdot, and Forbes.

Entrepreneurs and businesses would do well to encourage their employees and customers to be active technology users, as the LDS Church encourages its membership. As important is sharing the vision and “why” behind the “how,” so that ability is complemented by motivation. This can lead to employees and customers creating their own resources to further motivate their peers, as LDS Church member Larry Richman has done with his blog LDS Media Talk and book 101 Ways to Hasten the Work Online.

Content Marketing

From its General Conference videos to music from the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, the LDS Church puts a massive amount of content online. Google has indexed 11.4 million web pages on LDS.org, not all too far behind the BBC which has 12.8 million indexed web pages. But the LDS Church has hundreds of other channels where it distributes content. One of these, the companion to Mormon.org on YouTube, dubbed the “[Mormon Channel](#),” features hundreds of professional quality videos and has 95,000 subscribers. One of the features of the channel is [approximately 100 videos detailing the life and ministry of Jesus Christ](#), which by themselves have been seen millions of times. Paul Fischer, a Salesforce consultant posting on LinkedIn’s Pulse network, [explains how the LDS Church used these Bible videos](#) integrated with long form content to produce [an Easter-themed webpage](#) entitled “Because He Lives” that is an excellent example of inbound marketing. Fischer points out this is no amateur effort. “Upon inspecting the elements of the Easter website I noticed that the page is using [Clicktale](#),” Fischer says. “Clicktale is a sophisticated software suite that tracks ‘mouse heatmaps.’ Some of their customers include Logitech, Lenovo, and Walmart.” Fischer goes on to explain how the Church effectively used calls to action to lead visitors down various paths, depending on the type of content and topics they were interested in.

But as with SEO, the LDS Church’s greatest successes in content marketing appear to originate not from headquarters, but from its members. At Mormon.org the LDS Church has one-page profiles for well known members like [José Silva](#), an actor from Brazil, [Elaine Bradley](#) of the Neon Trees, and [Brandon Flowers](#) of The Killers, but gives “normal” members [myself](#), [Jouni](#) from Finland, or [Eunice Eshun](#) from Ghana the ability to create similar profiles where we can share our beliefs and answer questions. Gathering content from members has helped boost the indexed pages for that website to 748,000, and also overlaps as an effective local SEO tactic since each profile is tied to a geographic area.

To take things a step further, perhaps even more is being done to promote awareness of the LDS Church and the beliefs of its members by members doing their own thing online, without any assistance whatsoever from the Church.

YouTube sensations like the [Shaytards](#), [The Piano Guys](#), [DevinSupertramp](#), and [Lindsay Sterling](#) have attracted billions of views to their videos, dwarfing the reach of official LDS Church channels.

Key takeaways for businesses? Produce lots of great content and market it well, but even better, inspire your employees and customers to create content for you—they'll have greater reach.

Social Media

Ambassador, a referral automation software firm, has compiled a list of 40 studies showing [word of mouth is the most effective form of marketing](#). LDS Church leaders have long understood that while professional marketing and PR may be helpful, and celebrity YouTubers can provide a big boost, the real power for communicating LDS beliefs lays in encouraging every Church member to be a missionary, and that's why social media has become a focal point in any discussion regarding the Church, missionary work, and technology.

“Social media channels are global tools that can personally and positively impact large numbers of individuals and families,” said Elder David A. Bednar, a top leader in the LDS Church, in a 2014 talk entitled *To Sweep the Earth as with a Flood*, delivered to students at LDS Church-owned Brigham Young University. He continued, “And I believe the time has come for us as disciples of Christ to use these inspired tools appropriately and more effectively to testify.”

Some of the LDS Church's more than 80,000 full time missionaries are spend time browsing social media sites looking to engage anyone willing to discuss topics related to the Church, even if “anyone” means [trolls](#). But it's normal members who are flooding walls, streams, and boards with gospel-related content. Some of it is initiated by the Church, such as when the use of specific hashtags is encouraged by Church media channels (see [#LDSconf](#)), but much of it is spontaneous. In his talk, Elder Bednar spoke of the Instagram account “[bofm365](#)” started by Ben and Chelsea Prince of Arizona. Each and every day, the Princes post a new image with a reading assignment in the Book of Mormon. The

account has attracted over 68,000 followers to date. The lesson for businesses and entrepreneurs here is not just to encourage employee and customer activity on social networks, but to teach consistency as a key success factor.

The Greatest Success Comes From Letting Go

Much more has been said (see [Are the Mormons Better Than YOU at Content Marketing?](#) by Taylor Stockwell) and could be said on what can be learned from the LDS Church when it comes to digital marketing. If there is any “one big thing” to learn, it’s to let go of control. What is clear from the success of the LDS Church with SEO, content marketing, and social media, is that the largest results have come from outside the Church organization. This couldn’t happen unless the Church took the risk of encouraging its members to use their best judgement, and get to work. Mark Zuckerberg might call this strategy “move fast and break things.” A 150 year old statement from Joseph Smith, the first President of the LDS Church, is just as apt; “I teach them correct principles, and they govern themselves.”

Have you found digital marketing lessons in unlikely places? Share with us in the comments below.

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