

January 15, 2009

## Ministries ditching radio to go global on the Internet

By Michele Donohue

Desiring God, the ministry of John Piper based in Minneapolis, decided to pull the plug on its radio broadcast to more than 160 radio outlets across the country in September 2006. "For us, in this day and age, especially with emerging technologies and how they affected peoples' listening habits, it just made it so much more difficult to gain traction in radio," said Matt Perman, director of strategy at Desiring God. The ministry decided to redirect its time, energy and resources to online audio broadcasting. It was a sensible switch, according to Perman, "because those are the people who were responding and interested."



The Internet and innovative technological advances are rapidly changing how people consume media. With radio, people will either hear the broadcast or not. Online audio gives the users the power to access programs whenever it's convenient for them and ministries are tapping in.

Before Desiring God decided to go exclusively online, ministry officials took a look at their listeners and found that between 85 and 90 percent of their responders to the program listened online. The ministry saw a surge in new online listeners compared to the trickle from radio, even though it was costing upwards of \$80,000 a year to broadcast on some radio stations, with radio donations not coming close to covering the airtime buy.

"As an organization, we weren't passionate about [radio]. What we were passionate about was the Web," said Perman, who was the director for both the Internet and radio departments during the transition. So the ministry integrated more than 26 years of Piper's sermons and broadcasts for free on the site, which was already going through a redesign for optimum usability, and in four months saw site visits increase 99 percent and page views skyrocket by 356 percent, while donations continued to grow.

"We realize that people will self-select how they want to get their information and their media and we just need to make sure that we are there, ready and waiting, for them," said Chris Larson, executive vice president of Orlando, Fla.-based Ligonier Ministries, which produces theologian Dr. R.C. Sproul's Renewing Your Mind broadcasts. Larson said that radio broadcasts pull in more than 2 million listeners through its more than 235 radio outlets, but the ministry's more than 20,000 daily podcast subscription is growing and skewing to a younger demographic.

Living on the Edge (LOTE) in Swanee, Ga., a teaching ministry with Chip Ingram, started streaming audio online in September 2007 and is also seeing a younger audience listening online. LOTE's average radio listener is 44, compared to online listener age averaging 38, according to Andrew Accardy, the ministry's chief operating officer. Nearly 20 percent of LOTE's active audience, who are defined as people who have given their contact information, listen online or via podcast. Online listeners represent 10 percent of the donor group, a percentage that has doubled during the past year. More than 30,000 people have joined LOTE's free online community to use other free online materials.

Ministries seeking to expand audience, and donations, can take advantage of what they already have an abundance of -- content. Sermons, teachings and talks can be recorded and posted to a ministry's Web site. Web tools and sites are making it easier for ministries to manage their materials at a fraction of what it would cost for a radio broadcast. The Internet allows even small ministries to reach international audiences.

Steven Lee, founder of SermonAudio.com, came up with his idea for the free mp3 download site in 2000 when he and other members of his church wanted to expand its influence beyond the physical location. "We don't have a very large church, but we have really good preaching going on in our church, and the frustration was you would really wish more people could hear what we were hearing on Sundays," said Lee.

Now the site has reached nearly 42 million downloads of more than 218,000 mp3 from different ministries, which can broadcast and have full membership benefits for \$29.95 a month. "There is basically no reason at all why a church cannot or should not be putting their sermons out on the Web. It's really just a new channel. There's no reason why a church could not do this right now," he said. Lee explained that now the church receives messages from an international audience. "It's just a technology to reach people -- that's all that is."

Online audio broadcasting just doesn't reach new, expanded audiences. Information about online users can help segment users for richer messages if ministries take the time to examine the information on the backend. "Sending fewer messages to highly targeted groups, whether that's in the mail or email, keeps people more engaged," said Matt McCabe, vice president of community for Dallas-based MPower. He explained that ministries should analyze online tracking information based on their business cycles and pay attention to which messages resonate with listeners the most.

"I think what we've seen across the larger media marketplace is a huge amount of specialization," said McCabe, who offered that ministries should outline a few targeted segments and make messages as relevant to the listener as possible. "Even if you are not in a position to message them uniquely, at least begin collecting the data on what topics people are interested in so you can get to a place where you have collected that data," he explained, which will allow ministries to tailor product offers, emails, appeals and newsletters to specific audiences.

"The days of mass marketing are over," said Accardy, who emphasized that online tracking can help ministries learn more about their listeners. He also explained that ministries that aren't where their listeners are going will get left behind.

"You need to follow the behavior of the person you are trying to reach," said Accardy. "And often times you get stuck on 'this is the way we do something -- we are going to do radio,' when the reality is you really need to be thinking about how we can leverage all communication channels as effectively as possible that work within your financial model. People want to listen when they want to listen. The issue with radio, specifically terrestrial radio, is that it's on and then it's off. If people miss it, they miss it. Building a platform where people know I can always get the content, to us, is just critical."

Truth for Life ministries broadcasts by senior pastor Alistair Begg in Cleveland, Ohio, has a large radio audience in more than 1,100 radio outlets in the United States. It is seeing an average increase of 300 to 400 podcast subscribers each month. "We jumped into it not knowing who our audience was really and not knowing if our audience would adopt it," said Jennifer Fraher, who runs Internet services for the ministry and now says online donations are on the high end of average gifts. "I think it's reflective of the culture at large that downloads and digital media have become such a popular and normal part of everyday life."

Some 19 percent of all Internet users say they have downloaded a podcast so they can listen to it or view it later, up from 12 percent in August 2006 and 7 percent from an earlier 2006 survey, according to a August 2008 survey by Pew Internet & American Life Project. And, 17 percent said they downloaded a podcast in a typical day. And some ministries expect those numbers only to increase as more people use broadband Internet, download more mp3s and buy mobile devices with increased online capabilities.

"I think the opportunities continue to grow. The different possibilities electronically continue to show themselves. I don't think we even know at this point what the potential is. But we are excited and we want to explore any and every possibility we can to extend the message," said Bob Butts, director of Truth for Life. "The opportunity is there and people are using it. People continue to grow more comfortable with the technology, and frankly, the convenience of it is significant because they can listen when they want, where they want. Several people have told us that they download the podcasts for the week, and then they listen to all of the podcasts on the weekend when they have time."

Some ministries that are already posting audio online are planning to expand to stay on par with technology trends. Nearly 6.9 million iPhones were sold during the last financial quarter, compared to 1.1 million just a year ago, which has more ministries targeting mobile technology. "We're developing an online process for our listeners to 'go deeper' in their experience with us, instead of just listening to radio. We've diversified our broadcasting portfolio in the last year from just radio, to radio, TV, online -- and late in 2009 we'll launch LOTE Mobile for wireless devices and phones. Our effort is to continue to reach a younger and younger audience," said Accardy.

"We are trying to embrace the new generation of digital devices - iPods, iPhones. However people want to get their media, we're trying to make it as accessible as possible," said Larson, who explained the 37-year-old Ligonier ministry was just trying to keep up with the times.

Larson recommended organizations take a look at Web site and other online components as much as possible to stay up-to-date. "Technology is like a river -- if you step your foot into it, it's never the same twice. So, we can't stand still. A lot of folks think of the Web site as a project that we work on and then finish," he said. "Web sites can't be approached like that. They are organisms that need to be continually nurtured and fed. Web site development is a project that just matures over time -- it's never a project that's finished." **NPT**