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Communications: Vitamins or Dessert?

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Sister Mary Ann Walsh, a giant in the world of church communications (she was even mentioned by name in at least one edition of the Associated Press's style guide), had lots of memorable lines about the church and its tenuous approach to communications. Bishops and pastors think about communications as a mother would dessert, she'd say. If there was money left over in the budget, or if there was a special event, we could have dessert or spend money on communications. Otherwise, let's focus on the meat and potatoes of ministry.

She thought that was a terrible way to look at communications. I would agree. Instead of considering communications a nonessential frill, I suggest that parishes (and dioceses) should think of communications as being as essential an element to the church's ministry as vitamins are to a healthy person's daily diet. Without communications, our parish body becomes weak, susceptible to outside diseases, malnourished. Furthermore, the best way to communicate is when it is so integrated into daily programming and processes that it becomes easily consumed and a delight to receive—just as the best way to get one's vitamins is in well-prepared, natural food that tastes delicious.

So how does a parish go about integrating communications into its daily routine? In the parlance of professionals in the field, it's called a *communications strategy*. An effective communications strategy includes at least three elements: (1) a clear vision, (2) specific audiences, and (3) quality content and channels. Another way of describing this is to use the five Ws of storytelling: *what* and *why* (vision) do you communicate,

how (content), to *whom* and *when* (audiences). This chapter considers each of those three elements, and then provides some tactical means to implement a communications strategy.

A Clear Vision

A parish recently spent a good deal of money to have a big, lighted marquee placed on its parish property. This beautiful marker provides a way for the parish to communicate what is important to all who drive by on a busy highway. Sometimes it includes a message about an upcoming event. Sometimes there is a greeting such as “Happy Easter!” But always there are the words, “To rent our parish hall, please call 555-1212.” The message is definitely loud and clear: we want your money! Oh, and by the way, here’s something that might be meaningful to everyone else. Although that parish expended considerable resources to communicate, it may not have taken the time to be strategic about using that marquee. “What” and “why” were they trying to communicate with that signage?

A vision of communications has to begin with the pastor. You have your own *style* of communication. You may be an introvert or an extrovert. You may be a great preacher or prefer to meet with people one-on-one. You don’t need to be all things to all people. But you do need to have a vision for what you want people to think about your parish, how they describe the parish, what its reputation is.

Our Catholic Church has been doing “visioning” from its very beginning. Who decided that we would call ourselves Christians and Jesus the Christ? The word “Christ” can be translated as “the Anointed One.” From the birth of the church, then, our faith ancestors envisioned themselves as “anointed.” Perhaps we shouldn’t be surprised that the Roman Empire considered them dangerous.

And over the centuries, the church has used symbols—including words—to indicate what it is and what it means to be a member of this church. Fire, for example, is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. Making the sign of the cross marks us. The words “one,” “holy,” “catholic,” and “apostolic” encapsulate the core values of our organization. Companies have become expert at this practice. They call it trademarking or branding. You need to determine the vision, or the “brand,” of your parish—its defining “mark.” Is it welcoming? multicultural? impressive? beautiful? serving? spiritual?

Some may want to claim all of those as the parish's vision or brand. While you can certainly make that claim, what happens in reality is either the parish is mediocre in all aspects, or one of these rises to the top in a somewhat organic manner. In other words, the pastor didn't expend enough time and energy to really understand his vision or the lived faith of the parish. Consider your parish's mission statement for clues about what parishioners and the former pastor think its brand should be. Talk with your staff and the parish council. Would they agree with you on the brand, or the defining mark, of the parish?

Once you've settled on your parish's brand or trademark, be sure that your staff, pastoral council, and finance council know it and that all of you are working together to strengthen that brand. If your staff and key leadership don't buy into your concept, if they don't "get" the vision, no one else will either.

Specific Audiences

The second part of a communications strategy is understanding your key communities. Businesses use the phrases "target audiences" or "key stakeholders" to describe this component. I prefer the word "communities" instead of "audiences" since it suggests a back-and-forth type of communications, rather than a one-way street. Dialogue and listening are key attributes of a successful communicator. In his 2014 World Communications Day message, Pope Francis wrote, "The walls which divide us can be broken down only if we are prepared to listen and learn from one another. . . . A culture of encounter demands that we be ready not only to give, but also to receive."¹

If you are trying to communicate your vision to everyone the same way, you're not going to be successful. You need to know your communities and what makes each one a community. Some examples could be parents of children in the religious education program and the parish school, liturgical ministers, parish and finance councils, lay organizations, daily Mass attendees, or catechists. In some parishes these are all the same people, but in larger parishes they may have different members.

Consider their unique needs and interests. Do any of them feel ostracized or distanced from the parish leadership, or from one another? Are your parish's parents who work multiple jobs, or its single parents, stretched for time? Or do you have a large number of mothers

or fathers who stay home with their children? It is necessary for you to understand the potential barriers preventing these communities from receiving your parish's communications. You also need to know what in their lives would resonate with the vision that you have for the parish. For example, if you want your parish to be known as a welcoming parish and you have many single parents, what would help them appreciate that vision? Perhaps providing child care for every event, and communicating that information in a way that encourages parents to utilize the service.

The "when" part of a communications strategy is also about the "who." A good joke is not the only communication that benefits from good timing. Many parishes are learning that emails sent on Saturday mornings are opened more often than emails sent on Friday afternoons. Pulpit announcements made at the end of Mass aren't heard by those who leave after Communion. Putting websites (URL links) in printed bulletins requires extra effort from those who may be only mildly interested in reading about an advocacy effort.

While the pastor has to take ownership of setting the vision—the "what" and the "why" of a communications strategy—you'll most likely find there are parishioners who can take the lead in defining the "who" and the "when." Savvy business owners, marketing or fund-raising professionals, or people with experience in sales typically do this work for a living. Your diocesan communications, development or stewardship staff might also be able to help.

While reaching out to your diocese, also ask if it has any communications policies. Most have published, at the very least, basic communications procedures regarding safe environment policies and issues. As you are building your parish communications strategy and training your staff and volunteers, be sure that everything is consistent with diocesan policies.

To reiterate, it's important that your staff and key parish leadership know your parish's audiences, what their needs are, and the barriers to effectively communicating with them.

Quality Content and Channels

The "how" of a communications strategy tends to get the most attention since it's identified by content and the channels of distribution. In other words, the bulletin, the emails, the website, the signage.

Sometimes this is where a pastor or parish staff want to start when they consider communications. Avoid that temptation. Remember Sr. Mary Ann's analogy? If you aren't providing a healthy vision or considering the needs of your communities, no fancy digital app or shining marquee is going to fix anything.

Content should be well written, with high-quality images and well-crafted visual design. The Gospel message deserves our very best work. One way to ensure that is to set up work flows, or processes, that allow people with the appropriate skills and authority to make the right decisions. The pastor may have the deepest theological training, but he may write the deadliest run-on sentences ever seen. Let a competent English teacher, journalist, or editor form those sentences into something worthy of Hemingway. They can't alter the theological underpinnings, but they can make it easier for your parishioners to understand what you're trying to communicate.

Deadlines should be realistic and logical. And remember, no matter where you are in the sequencing, if someone misses a deadline, there are consequences down the chain. If you just can't get your column to the bulletin editor until Friday morning, don't be surprised if there are errors in it on Sunday morning.

Honor the medium. Marshall McLuhan famously said, "The medium is the message." There's a lot packed into that phrase, including the notion that you have to consider the attributes of the media you intend to use when creating content. For instance, a video longer than two minutes is deadly on the web. A beautiful liturgy becomes tedious and tiring when one experiences it on a tiny screen (unless you happen to be the presider's mother). A blog works well on a website, but you may want to include only a sentence or two and a link if you're going to post it on the parish's Facebook page. There are also practical considerations for specific communication channels, which we'll consider below.

Signage and Directions

Is it clear to the uninitiated? A parish we attended always welcomed newcomers to coffee in the St. Francis room. But in all the years I heard that announcement or read it in the bulletin, I never learned where the St. Francis room was. Consider what is most important to people who are trying to navigate your campus for the first time.

Bulletins

These are among the most time-consuming chores for parish staffs, yet most bulletins don't show it. They tend to be a hodgepodge of events and listings of phone numbers. Fortunate are those parishioners who can actually find some *formation* along with *information* inside their parish's bulletin.

In 2012, a study by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) found that the parish bulletin was by far the most frequently used channel of communication by Catholics to get information about their parish or the church—even among millennials.² If less than half of all Catholics read the bulletin, it's still considerably more than the number who access parish websites. So, try to find ways to tell those bulletin readers about the core mission of your parish. Some pastors publish highlights from their homily or their weekly blog posts in the bulletin. Others use content based on the Sunday Scripture that is available from other sources, including the weekly service myUSCCB from the US Conference of Catholic Bishops. It's also possible to provide short news stories about a service project, include some catechesis in the announcement about the upcoming confirmations, or provide a "teaser" to entice people to go to your website or to read a really interesting article in the diocesan newspaper.

But what about all those event announcements that someone (often the parish secretary) says absolutely must be included? That information must get out to parishioners, but taking up valuable "real estate" inside a parish bulletin may not be the best way to reach people. Consider emailing those announcements to parishioners so that everyone, regardless of whether they attend Sunday Mass, receives the information. In that way the bulletin—replete with more *formation* content—becomes a valid communications channel that enhances the experience of those who have attended Mass.

Email

Marketers tell us that we've come full circle in the world of digital marketing. After trying out advertising on websites, then Facebook, Pinterest, YouTube, and other social media channels, they're discovering that emails are the most effective way to reach people.

Parishes are no different. One pastor told me his staff reports an 80–90 percent open rate on the emails sent to parishioners. “Open rate” tells us how many emails were actually clicked on and “opened” by recipients. Most software programs that provide email management can give you this kind of information. Using email management software also ensures that your emails aren’t being blocked by spam filters and that you can monitor “bounce-backs.” Some companies that offer website solutions or data management solutions also provide email management. It’s worth the investment.

Websites

Many websites have the same feel as parish bulletins: they look like someone opened a box of trinkets and scattered them around. So many shiny jewels, it’s hard to decide which one to select. Others require you to click not once, not twice, but maybe three or four times before you find out the Mass schedule or where the parish is located.

A service such as Google Analytics can help you discover *how* people use your website. As a general rule, though, it should serve two purposes:

First, it should be a digital “welcoming kit” for people interested in what your parish provides, such as the sacraments and a sense of community. Typically, the first place people go when searching for anything is the internet. The Barna Group, which does research for churches, nonprofits, and businesses, found in a 2013 study on practicing millennials (18- to 30-year-olds) that 56 percent check out a parish’s website before visiting the church.

Be sure your site is built in a way that search engines can find it. If you don’t know what that means, find a company that does and pay them to host the site and provide you with a content management system that allows your staff to update content on a regular basis. Don’t let your website grow into a monstrosity of pages and broken links. If you want to archive the content, create a separate digital space. And it should be the job of someone other than the pastor to maintain editorial and operational oversight of that content. It could be a parish staff member or an experienced volunteer or team.

Second, consider the website a source of *great* content about the parish. Post photo galleries and short stories or blogs. Then repurpose that content by sharing it on the parish’s social media. Again, think about those “seekers” who are looking on the internet for a faith home.

What aspect of your parish's vision would entice them to come to Mass this Sunday?

If your parish is large, or has good funding, consider software that allows integration of email management with a website system. Software that accomplishes this is often known as membership or association management systems. There are even companies that market systems specifically to Catholic parishes, but many parishes use membership management systems that service not only churches but also universities, professional organizations, and fraternal organizations. These systems can also record and accept donations as well as registrations and payments for religious education and other programming.

Social Media

Social media is a source of great angst and consternation for most pastors. Anecdotally, I see less hand-wringing as a younger generation of digitally savvy men move into rectories, but there are still parishes with policies that do not allow staff or priests to post anything about the parish on social media. This is unfortunate since these restrictive parishes are making themselves invisible to a growing number of young Catholics. They are isolating their community from a world that is embracing new technology.

Pope Benedict was the first pope to encourage the church to move into this new world. In fact, he coined a phrase for it: *the digital continent*. In 2009, he wrote, "These technologies are truly a gift to humanity and we must endeavor to ensure that the benefits they offer are put at the service of all human individuals and communities, especially those who are most disadvantaged and vulnerable."³ To understand the philosophy of the Holy Father and the Holy See regarding the new media, take time to read the World Communications Day messages. These have been issued annually since 1967, but if you are pressed for time, start with the message for 2007.⁴ If you feel like a Luddite and are incapable of understanding young people and their odd jargon, these messages provide a strong pastoral rationale for why it's important for your parish to use such channels as Facebook and YouTube. Pope Francis summed up the Vatican's vision well: "The internet, in particular, offers immense possibilities for encounter and solidarity. This is something truly good, a gift from God."⁵

There are good reasons, of course, why parishes are leery of social media. It has a dark side and the medium is not for the uninitiated.

The US Conference of Catholic Bishops provides a set of guidelines that are extremely useful and necessary to read, even if your parish is already using social media. The guidelines provide definitions of terms, best practices, how to administer social media sets, how to use social networks with minors, what to say to staff about personal sites, and how to report and monitor.⁶

Video, Audio, and More

Some parishes maintain a much larger arsenal of communications channels: a televised Mass, for example, or a low-power AM station, or a bookstore. Each of these has attributes that should be leveraged as much as possible, but that's a conversation beyond the scope of this chapter. Suffice it to say that caution is warranted in each case: if the content doesn't serve the vision of the pastor or the needs of the community, there will not be sufficient return on investment.

Media Relations

This is another area pastors often wish would disappear. Indeed, when a reporter calls it's not usually because something marvelous just happened at the parish. The best advice here is to be sure that whoever answers the parish phone knows how to respond to a reporter's call, particularly who to hand it off to. This is an area in which you absolutely want to be sure you're in alignment with diocesan guidelines. Pastors and parish staff can take comfort in the fact the diocesan communications director usually prefers that he or she talk to the reporter, not you.

Crisis communication plans should be integrated into the parish's overall crisis plans. Don't wait for a natural disaster or a human tragedy to strike to begin finding essential phone numbers or figuring out how to send out email blasts. In these events, the secular media—especially radio, television, and social media—can be your best ally in getting the word out quickly.

Sometimes overlooked among the thicket of information outlets today is the diocesan communication channel. Your parishioners may already receive the diocesan newspaper. It's not unreasonable to conclude that its content, or content on the diocesan website and social media that aligns with your parishioners' needs or interests, could

supplement your parish's own content and be leveraged to bring people to your parish, either in person or via your communications channels. Theology on Tap, for instance, is a program geared toward young Catholics who may be seeking a parish home. Follow the diocesan social media channels that promote Theology on Tap events and then provide posts that inform young people about your parish's events that might be of interest to them.

As a final thought, the words "communications," "community," and "communion" share a common root. As Pope Francis wrote in the 2014 World Communications Day message, "Good communication helps us to grow closer, to know one another better, and ultimately, to grow in unity."

Our desire for communion should compel us to be not just good communicators, but *Gospel-good* communicators. Our community deserves nothing less.

Endnotes

1. Message of Pope Francis for the 48th World Communications Day, Communication at the Service of an Authentic Culture of Encounter, June 1, 2014, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/papa-francesco_20140124_messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html.

2. Mark Gray and Mary Gautier, *Catholic New Media Use in the United States*, 2012, CARA.

3. Message of Holy Father Benedict XVI for the 43rd World Communications Day, New Technologies, New Relationships: Promoting a Culture of Respect, Dialogue and Friendship, May 24, 2009, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20090124_43rd-world-communications-day.html.

4. Message of Benedict XVI for 41st World Communications Day, Children and the Media: A Challenge for Education, May 20, 2007, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20070124_41st-world-communications-day.html.

5. Message of Francis for 48th World Communications Day.

6. USCCB, Social Media Guidelines, <https://www.usccb.org/committees/communications/social-media-guidelines>.