

HORIZON



JOURNAL OF THE NATIONAL RELIGIOUS VOCATION CONFERENCE

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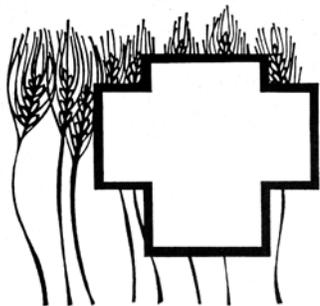
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HORIZON

HORIZON began as a vocation journal in 1975. Today, as a quarterly publication, it serves a readership of more than 2000 in the U.S. and other English-speaking countries.

HORIZON serves as a resource:

- To assist vocation directors in their professional and personal growth as ministers;
- To educate and engage educators, directors of retreat centers, formation personnel, community leadership, bishops, campus ministers, librarians, priests, religious, laity, and anyone interested in vocations and their role in vocation ministry.

HORIZON has a threefold purpose:

- To provide timely and contemporary articles relative to vocation ministry;
- To provide an opportunity for the exchange of ideas on pertinent issues in the field of vocations;
- To highlight some of the current resources available.

National Religious Vocation Conference

HORIZON is published by the National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC). The NRVC is an organization of men and women committed to the fostering and discernment of vocations. It provides services for professional vocation directors and others who are interested and involved in vocation ministry. It proclaims the viability of religious life and serves as a prophetic, creative, life-giving force in today's church.

To accomplish this, NRVC provides opportunities for professional growth and personal support of vocation ministers; facilitates regional, area and national meetings for its members; sponsors workshops, seminars, conferences and days of prayer; publishes materials related to vocations for a wide variety of audiences; engages in research, study and exchange on issues of current concern; publishes a quarterly professional journal, *HORIZON*; maintains a Web site; and cooperates with other national groups essential to the fostering of vocations. For further information, contact: NRVC, 5401 S. Cornell Ave., Suite 207, Chicago, IL. 60615-5698. E-mail: nrvc@nrvc.net. Web: www.nrvc.net.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Truth in packaging counts, especially with religious life

Gift baskets can be maddeningly deceptive. Beautiful packaging, once it's disassembled, can reveal cheap and meager goods within. Have you ever received a cardboard extravaganza with artfully arranged, Spam-like sausage nestled next to slippery dairy products masquerading as cheese? Or how about a mug filled with candy--except that when you dig down for more, you hit a wall of Styrofoam slyly holding the candy aloft. Now that's a disappointment.

When it comes to "packaging" your community and "marketing" it for public consumption, you don't want to be the Hickory Farms Gift Box of religious communities. You want authenticity. You know that fakery has no place in a community that seeks the Truth. Because you know a thing or two about integrity, you may even be a little skeptical about modern forms of communication: the Web sites, the enhanced e-mails, the cell phones, the text messages, the bells, the whistles. If we are really who we say we are, people will sense our vitality and goodness and will be attracted to this life. Right?

Yet people cannot choose what they do not know. Most Catholic young adults know very little about religious life. Therefore, part of the job of a vocation minister is to make his or her community known, particularly in circles that include generous, faith-filled young adults. If communities follow the principle of

"truth in advertising," they'll produce communications that are honest about who they are. They'll use the full power of the Internet to communicate who they are, not puffing themselves up with overstated claims on holiness, but not avoiding attention either, out of misguided humility. Let your light shine that all may see, Jesus told us. That's the maxim that fits our particular moment in the long history of religious life.

I would be remiss to not mention my gratitude to the National Communicators Network for Women Religious (NCNWR), whose members were instrumental in producing this edition of HORIZON. See the NCNWR ad on the back cover, and check out www.ncnwr.org to learn more about this professional association of communicators, which includes vocation ministers among its members.

As you read these pages, I encourage you to put your quest for truth and authenticity at the center of your vocation communications. With artifice from marketers, employers, politicians and, yes, even churches, streaming into their lives all day long, young adults crave contact with people who are honest and wise. You probably know lots of people like that, right in your own community. Go ahead and tell the world about them; just leave out the styrofoam and cardboard.

—Carol Schuck Scheiber, editor
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Vocation ministers can stretch their communications dollars and get more impact out of their efforts when they team up with a communications professional.

Go pro: work effectively with a communications staff

BY JEAN DENNISON

A very important but often overlooked resource for vocation directors is their congregation's professional communicator. Depending on the extent to which the communicator is involved in the congregation's strategic planning process, the professional expertise that resides with the communicator all too often goes untapped. If you ask most communicators, they will tell you that they are a jack-of-all-trades operation: writer, editor, copy shop, greeting card design department, newsletter publisher, special event planner, photo studio and on and on. We enjoy doing these sorts of things, but we believe we are called to do more—to plan and coordinate at a strategic, congregational level.

The National Communicators Network for Women Religious (NCNWR) was founded in 1994 by a small group of sisters who were working in the communications field and looking for support in their work. In the 10 years during which I have been a member, there has been a noticeable shift in the education, experience and expertise level of the membership. In the early days, it was not uncommon for a sister who had experience as an English teacher to be

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thrust into the position of communications director for her congregation. Today, it is more likely that the communications director, whether a vowed religious or a layperson, has an advanced degree in journalism and communications, marketing or public relations and many years of experience. This change, in part, is due to the growing awareness by congregational leadership that communications is a valuable tool, not only for attracting vocations, but for educating the public about their mission and helping the community to better respond to the needs of the times.

My position description states that I am primarily responsible for managing the development, implementation and coordination of internal/external public relations and communications strategies with the goal of promoting the mission of the Sisters of Divine Providence of Marie de la Roche Province. Another important aspect of my position is to promote a positive image of women religious in general. Both responsibilities fit hand-in-glove with my vocation director's work to invite those who might be called to religious life.

To promote a positive image of religious communities is to shine a light in all the spaces that ministry and mission take place, many times unbeknownst to the public. By telling the stories of real-life sisters, brothers or priests who live out your congregation's charism every day, communicators are your partners in ministry. These stories, great and small, are the living illustration of your mission and where your congregation chooses to spend its resources, both human and financial. When vocation directors and communicators collaborate to identify these stories and share them through your newsletter or Web site, an advertising campaign, or through print materials, the result can raise awareness of your congregation and its lived mission. This, in turn, will attract people who are searching for the charism that fits best their call to religious life.

Write a vocation marketing plan

That being said, what are some practical ways in which your congregation's communications staff can help you promote vocations? How can communications and vocations staff work together effectively? My working relationship with our membership director began shortly after I was hired. She and I worked on several small projects: a flier for a Come and See weekend, a program brochure and some local advertisements. As I watched her try to juggle all of the responsibilities involved with vocation ministry, it occurred to me that she could benefit from a simple marketing plan for vocations to help her identify priorities and focus her energies appropriately. When I suggested that we meet to develop a six-month plan, she was enthusiastic and open to the concept.

Developing a marketing plan for vocations was a good experience for both of us. In our discussions, we discovered many areas in which our ministries already intersected and other areas in which they should. Creating a plan compelled us to focus on priorities and clarify objectives.

Writing a vocation marketing plan can do the same for any vocation director. The steps are fairly simple, although following them will require some effort. First, write a brief introduction stating the facts of the current vocation marketing reality for your congregation. Next, identify your target audience—who is it you wish to reach through your marketing efforts? There can be many different audiences. Though the primary audience is people discerning their call to religious life, others might be enlisted along the way in some of the initiatives you develop. It is important to include all audiences in the plan.

A Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats analysis (or SWOT analysis)—is critical to identify areas that need to be addressed or resources that are in place to help you reach

your goals. (See a sample vocation marketing plan with a SWOT analysis on page 8.)

Keep in mind that often a perceived threat can also be an opportunity. For instance, recently restructured congregations with locations throughout the country or world might view the geographic disparity as both threat and opportunity. While this reality might make communication a bit more of a challenge, it also adds richness through diversity that would otherwise be unavailable. Once the SWOT analysis is complete, the plan should include any proposed research that needs to be undertaken before proceeding. For instance if you have identified an aging population of vowed religious as a weakness, you need the statistics to back up your claim and how those statistics relate to your congregation. If you state that your Web site is an opportunity, your research should corroborate it as such, i.e., how many hits does your vocation page register, or how are other congregations using their Web sites as a vocation tool?

Perhaps the most challenging part of developing your plan will be defining the goals and associated objectives. During this process, be sure to stay focused, as it is easy to veer off course and confuse your goals and objectives with the action steps needed to achieve them. Keep your ideas simple, and be sure that the action steps associated with each objective are concise and measurable.

After your goals and objectives are developed and the associated action steps have been identified, create a simple time line and plug in your action items, giving each a target date. Refer to the time line weekly so you stay on course. You

By telling the stories of real-life sisters, brothers or priests who live out your congregation's charism every day, communicators are your partners in ministry.

might have to adjust target dates as you move through the plan.

The final step in creating your marketing plan is to decide how you will evaluate its success. The evaluation

When people visit your Web site, pick up your newsletter or come across one of your ads, they should immediately recognize it as belonging to your congregation. Communications professionals can help you attain a unified look.

should relate to the plan's goals and tell you if your goals were met. It should consist of quantifiable ways in which to gauge the outcome. The evaluation could be something as simple as counting the number of vocation inquiries you receive or the number of women who attend a Come and See event. Or you might want to capture the number of visitors to your Web site membership pages. However you evaluate your vocation marketing plan, this step is important, as it

will guide you in creating subsequent plans.

Mission, mission and more mission

The foundation of all communication and vocation collaboration should be the mission of your congregation. A seasoned communicator should act as “traffic controller” for your congregation, ensuring that all communications reflect the mission, be they sponsored ministry materials or congregation vocation materials. When people visit your Web site, pick up your newsletter or come across one of your ads in a program book, they should immediately recognize it as belonging to your congregation. Many well-meaning but overworked vocation directors, under deadline to create a flier or a brochure for an upcoming program, choose to go it alone. They believe that meeting with the communications staff will use up valuable time, but by not working together and seeking the expertise that is readily available to them, they can miss vital elements needed to communicate effectively—a visual tie-in or a mission element that binds them to the congregation. Cohesiveness is especially important in vocation ministry, as those called to religious life are seeking the congregation whose mission resonates with them. If your community's messages about mission are scattered,

contradictory or vague, discerners won't be able to get a clear picture of who you are, and they will move on in their search.

To assist with a unified message about who your community is, communications professionals can work with vocation ministers to create a unified “look” for vocation pieces. A cohesive look can be promoted through a logo, graphic symbol, a specific color, or a tagline that will be included on all vocation publications. Communications professionals can help manage multiple logos (ministry/congregation) and ensure that the congregation's message is not diluted by too much information or missed because of too little information. They can guide you through a productive process when developing advertising campaigns. Communication professionals will know which photographs to use to visually depict your message. Communicators can be a guide for you on the path toward producing an effective publication or designing a successful advertisement.

Guiding a project

Recently our membership team met without me and developed an advertisement for one of the larger vocation publications. They put considerable effort into the concept. When they were done, they presented me with the final text and several suggestions for the layout and photos. The team had chosen words from the congregation's mission statement as the focal point of the ad. If they had consulted with me, I would have suggested that the formal language of a mission statement does not necessarily translate well when the target audience is young, discerning women who have been raised in the mass communications age. In my professional opinion, describing a Woman of Providence as one who is “impelled by Jesus Christ,” while certainly an apt description, would not be appealing to the young women we wanted to reach.

Rather than criticize their effort, I suggested that perhaps we could meet to revisit the concept with some input from me. They agreed. In the meantime I found a back issue of the magazine in which we were going to place the ad, copied a dozen ads from other congregations and sent a packet to each committee member, requesting that they look over the ads and note what they found appealing or what they disliked. When the committee met, they shared their comments. Through this exercise and the ensuing discussion, the group was able to focus on what made an advertisement successful to them.

We then turned our attention to our own ad concept. With concrete examples before us, and a bit of persuasion on my part, we clearly defined the goal and target audience. The

ad was aimed at women ages 18 to 40 who were discerning their religious vocation, and it was to be a snapshot of what it means to be a woman of Providence in the areas of spirituality, community and ministry. A brainstorming session followed to come up with short phrases that related to each area. The discussion was lively, and lists were made. The group then revisited each list with the goal of reaching consensus on the phrases. As a result, the ad text moved from “impelled by Jesus Christ” to a more contemporary image of Women of Providence as those who discover God in everything, matter to each other and live the Gospel. Simple and direct, these few words accomplished the goal of the advertisement to the satisfaction of the group. If the group had been disinclined to revisit the concept, the advertisement would have been ineffectual and the ad dollars wasted. On the other hand, if the communications staff had been consulted initially, considerable time and effort could have been saved.

All projects that involve communicating, internally or externally, will benefit from an initial meeting of all parties. When your communications professional is included in the planning stage of a project, he or she can guide the discussion into areas that might not have been considered. Because communications people often work in some capacity with

every department in the congregation, they have a unique perspective in terms of integrating the messages. Ideally your communications personnel are the gatekeepers of the mission as it pertains to any print or electronic materials. As such, they will be in tune with how well a particular piece reflects the mission. At a practical level, they will know, for instance, whether a brochure is the best way to reach your target. If so, what is the most economical way to produce it to ensure maximum impact? What about using the Web site? What about a flier or an e-mail blast? Is it an in-house job, or would it be more economical to outsource it? It is the job of communications professionals to bring all the loose ends of a project together and to suggest the most efficient and effective ways to reach the goal.

Spirituality of communications

As I stated at the beginning of this article, communicators for religious congregations of men and women feel called to do more than mere technical tasks. We approach our work at a strategic level and we see our work as a ministry. Proof of that is the popularity of the “Spirituality of Communications” workshop at the annual conference of the National Communicators Network for Women Religious (NCNWR). Whether we communicators are writing a news release, designing an advertisement, or updating the congregation’s Web site, we do it with the mission of our congregation at the heart of our work. I would venture to say that the mission of each individual communications office coincides with the mission of NCNWR: enhancing the image and advancing the mission of religious communities through the ministry of communications.

Your professional communicator can help with the practical task of getting your message out and determining if it has been received. He or she is also a rich resource when it comes to communicating not only facts but also your congregation’s mission and vision. Schedule a 30-minute meeting with your communicator and talk about your needs. I have no doubt it will be an enlightening and enriching half hour for both of you. Hopefully you will both come away filled with ideas about how vocations and communications can work together for the greater good. ■

Quick communications tips

Check out the National Communicators Network for Women Religious: <http://www.ncnwr.org/>

No communications department? Try consulting with the communications department for one of your congregation’s ministries. The staff may be able to do some pro bono work, and they already are familiar with your community.

Pain-free actions you can take today: Send the main media outlet in your town a notice about an upcoming event. Make an appointment to meet with a professional communicator. Add a “signature” to your e-mail so recipients associate you with your congregation. Ask discerners to evaluate your communications materials.

Sample membership marketing plan

June 1 - December 31

Problem statement

Religious life is experiencing a decline in the number of vowed members. Increased membership is vital in order to carry out the mission of the congregation. Increasing membership is also critical to the financial well-being of the congregation. Fewer younger sisters with earning potential equates to less financial stability. In addition media stereotypes make it difficult to promote religious life as a viable lifestyle in the secular world.

Target audience

The target audiences for this plan include:

- Women discerning a call to religious life
- Leadership, vowed members, associates of the congregation
- Those involved with sponsored ministries
- Friends and benefactors of the congregation

Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats

STRENGTHS

- Adequate financial assets to carry out ministry
- Sisters willing to actively support membership goals
- Larger base of vowed members and associates; larger pool of talent and resources
- Established sponsored ministries
- Vowed members and associates who project a positive image
- Communications professional staff including a part-time webmaster
- Web site and newsletters (external and internal) already in place

WEAKNESSES

- Four diverse geographic areas as a result of restructuring
- Inability to be in four places at one time
- Aging population within community
- Limited opportunity to connect with young women
- Reluctance on part of sisters to actively recruit for membership

OPPORTUNITIES

- Marketing plan to identify process
- Demonstrated media interest in promoting positive image of women religious
- Expanded newsletter/mailling list provides expanded opportunity to promote membership/charism
- Four geographic areas as a result of restructuring
- Web site

THREATS

- Persistent media promotion of stereotypes of women religious
- Increase in number of retired sisters, resulting in fewer opportunities to invite prospective members

PROPOSED RESEARCH

- Gather statistical information related to vowed members in congregation at present.
- Research other congregational Web sites to learn how others use their site to promote vocations.
- Research area vocation programs to compare content and to assure that our program dates do not conflict.
- Contact other congregations with vocational advisory committees for input about their work.

Goal, objectives, action steps

GOAL: INCREASE VOWED MEMBERSHIP

Objective: Personally contact 75 women by December 31.

Action steps

1. Increase opportunities for contact through programming.
2. Attend Serra retreats in tri-state area.

Objective: Increase publicity aimed at achieving an increase in contacts

Action steps

1. Develop advertising strategy with Kingston and St. Louis, including when and where to place ads.
2. Distribute vocation ministry program brochure.
3. Stay current with responses to inquiries.
4. Revise mailing list database.
5. Build upon Summer Ministry Outreach, Volunteer Weekend and Alternative Spring Break lists.

Objective: Organize an advisory committee on vocations composed primarily of sisters and associates

Action steps

1. Select six to eight potential members and contact them personally.
2. Develop a mission statement and goals for committee
3. Meet at regular intervals.

Objective: Participate in meetings with membership personnel from around the province to discuss roles and responsibilities

Action step

1. Schedule first meeting by August 1.

Objective: Organize an advisory committee on image composed primarily of people from the business and media community

Action steps

1. Conduct a focus group to ascertain image of women religious held by “outsiders.”
2. Meet on an as-needed basis.

GOAL: INCREASE COMMUNICATION RELATING TO MEMBERSHIP EFFORT

Objective: Use vehicles in place (newsletter/Web site) to promote membership effort

Action steps

1. Initiate 250-word sidebar entitled “What Does It Mean to be a Woman of Providence?” in quarterly external newsletter to inform about vocation ministry programs.
2. Contribute articles to bi-monthly internal province newsletter to sisters and associates, informing them of programming and encouraging them to take an active part in the membership effort.

Objective: Make effective use of Web site

Action steps

1. Update membership pages monthly.
2. Collect and post vocation stories written by vowed members.
3. Explore possibility of chat room software.
4. Create online registration for vocation programs.

Objective: Increase media coverage

Action steps

1. Work with communications staff to pitch stories to media.
2. Place one vocation-related story by December 31.

TIMELINE and EVALUATION *This plan would also include a simple timeline for all action items and their due dates. Vocation and communications staff would refer to these weekly to keep the plan on target. The plan would also explain how its success would be evaluated. It is good to have one or two specific ways to measure success quantitatively, i.e., ten inquiries or two new discerners, etc. ■*

A strong Web site with fresh, ever-changing content is essential in vocation ministry. Careful planning, good design and vigorous marketing are among the secrets to success.

Tap your Web site's potential

BY ANNE BOYLE

Communicating with potential candidates via the Web may feel cold and impersonal, especially when the work you do as vocation ministers is so very closely connected to the heart and spirit. But electronic communications have become such a part of how young people relate to each other and the world around them that if you are not a part of it, you will not be a part of their lives.

As a 31 year-old Catholic woman I can tell you that people my age and younger are commitment-phobic because we have so many options. When first considering something, young adults would much rather go to a Web site for information than pick up the phone to talk to someone—or, heaven forbid, go somewhere and meet a real, live person. This type of personal interaction comes later when they've gathered enough information to make an assessment of whether something is worth their time.

Conversely young people today are barraged with information, so if something doesn't immediately speak to them as interesting or relevant, it will be deleted or go unnoticed. This means your Web site needs to be well-designed, readable, relevant, engaging, dynamic and interesting.

A Web site can never replace the personal encounters young women and men have with you, but it is an important

Anne Boyle is the director of communications for the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, where she works closely on vocation promotion with the new membership office. Anne oversaw the revamping of www.sistersofmercy.org last year and has been part of Web site planning for several nonprofit organizations.



investment in your community's future. Depending on your goals, a good, well-marketed Web site can: let potential candidates know that religious life is a viable option today, possibly help potential candidates realize that the tugging they feel in their heart is a call, and introduce potential candidates to your community.

While an invaluable tool, a Web site alone will not amount to more vocations. Only you and other members of your congregation can truly attract a person to your life. Of course, a call from God plays an important part!

CHECKLIST FOR WEB SITE SUCCESS

Delving into the world of Web sites can be overwhelming, especially since there are so many steps and options. The following checklist and the list of 14 ways to market your site are by no means comprehensive, but hopefully they'll give you a better understanding of what goes into Web site development so you know what questions to ask as you travel this journey.

✓ Start with a good foundation

Before doing anything else, you need to clearly articulate two things: the audience for your Web site and the goal of your Web site.

If I had a dollar for every time someone told me they want a communications vehicle to appeal to everyone, I would be rich. My response is always the same: by speaking to everyone, you reach no one. In order to capture attention and engage interest, you need to think long and hard about who you can best reach via your Web site.

Don't just pick an age group and call it a day. Paint a vivid picture of your audience and think of that "composite" audience member through every step of the process. What is she like? What does she like to do? Where does she spend her time? What is her cultural, educational and economic background? Who influences her decisions? Where does she get her information? Is she already familiar with your congregation? Your Web site's design, messaging and features will be different depending on the answers to these questions.

Remember, *you are not the target audience!* Neither are other members of your order. Yes, your Web site needs to be true to your community's identity, but it also needs to be relevant to your audience.

Once you've determined who you want to reach, figure out what you want them to do as a result of visiting your site. Letting people know about your community is not a good communication goal. Sure, your site will serve an information function, but a good Web site should motivate visitors to take some action. So maybe your Web site goal is that visitors forward your Web address, or URL, to friends or family who may be interested in religious life. Or, perhaps your goal is for them to complete a contact form or engage in some other activity that will begin a relationship. Whatever it is, your goal should be specific and measurable. You'll want to ask your Web technician about what sorts of information can be captured about your site's usage, such as the number of people who visit, where they are from, etc.

Once you've set a goal for your site and a way to measure your progress in reaching that goal, determine what features on the site best enable you to reach your goals. Ask some members of your audience what they would like to see on a vocation Web site. Talk to your newer members about what is most appealing to them and how they explored their call. If possible

get a group of audience members together to brainstorm site features and content.

✓ Get some help

You don't need to know everything about Web sites to oversee development of a good vocation site, but you do need to develop some strong relationships.

If your community has them, become friendly with your order's communication and information technology (IT) staff. Communicators can help you determine what is possible and navigate the process. In some cases, the IT staff may have the capability to build your site or modify an existing site.

If your congregation already has a Web site, meet with those who developed and maintain that site. Find out what is already in place and what the possibilities are for customization of the vocation section or, if appropriate, development of a "satellite" vocation site.

If your community does not have a site, you will likely need to contract with a Web site consultant to develop one. Finding a good consultant requires some research. Start by looking at Web sites that have the features you want and find out who designed or developed these sites. Also ask friends and colleagues if they have any experience with a good firm.

Use the audience profile and goal you developed to write a request for proposal (RFP). Talk through any technical requirements with your communications and IT staff and include these in the RFP. When selecting a consultant, try to find one who can manage the design and development/

Remember, you are not the target audience! Neither are other members of your order. Yes, your Web site needs to be true to your community's identity, but it also needs to be relevant to your audience.

programming of the site. The firm does not necessarily need to have all of the capabilities in house, but it should be able to coordinate the people who do to save you time and unnecessary headaches.

Be prepared: good Web sites are not cheap. While price will likely be one of the criteria for selection of a vendor, don't make it the most important one. Be sure to interview and check references of the top two or three firms on your list. And, of course, look at their past work.

✓ Navigate your way to success

Once you know who you are trying to reach and what you want them to do as a result of visiting your site, you need to draw the plans to get them there. Take the time early on to

Designing for the Web is very different than designing for print, so finding someone who knows how to design for the Web is crucial.

develop a clear site architecture which shows how visitors will navigate the site.

You may find it helpful to look at the architecture as an outline that shows relationships within the site. First list all of the possible site pages; then

put each page name on a sticky note and group them into categories. Eliminate extraneous pages. (Hint: if a page doesn't fit easily into a category, it probably doesn't belong). This can help you determine what your main content categories are and how many levels of navigation are needed. Two or three levels are more than enough, as too many will only confuse your visitors.

Next record your sticky-note outline onto a flow chart, then add brief descriptions of all components on the pages. From here indicate relationships between pages and where content will be linked. This will serve as your guide through the rest of the process.

✓ Design with your audience in mind

Design is highly subjective and this is where many well-planned Web sites go astray. If your site is not attractive to your audience, your audience will close the site before even getting beyond the home page.

Designing for the Web is very different than designing for print, so finding someone who knows how to design for

the Web is crucial. People read and process Web site content differently than print material. Also, a poorly designed site can ruin your chances of getting picked up by search engines. Answers to the following questions can assist your designer in developing concepts:

- What are some favorite Web sites of audience members?
- What do they like/dislike about these sites?
- What image are you trying to project?
- What three-to-five principles are you trying to communicate?
- What are some words that describe the tone the Web site should have?
- Are there any elements that must be included such as a logo or certain colors?

Consider the following when reviewing Web site design concepts:

- Be sure the site is readable. Pay special attention to the contrast of background images and colors. Unless you have a really good reason, stick to using dark text on a light background.
- Keep the look and feel consistent throughout the site. Your designer should develop a simple color palette for use across the site and typefaces should remain consistent. You don't want visitors wondering if they've left your Web site.
- Templates should be used to enforce a uniform page structure. These should be designed per level of navigation.

Again, keep your audience in mind and have some audience members review designs at the conceptual stage if possible.

✓ Keep content simple

Assuming you have developed a well-designed, easy-to-navigate site, you need to give your audience a reason to stay for a while. Keep your goal in mind and write content that will both appeal to your audience and motivate them to act.

Just like designing for the Web, writing for the Web is different than writing for print. Web readers scan, so copy needs to be as short and concise as possible. Bulleted items

Web words

SEARCH ENGINE A program that searches documents for specified keywords and returns a list of the documents where the keywords were found. Examples are Google and Alta Vista. Typically a search engine works by sending out a spider to fetch as many documents as possible. Another program, called an indexer, then reads these documents and creates an index based on the words contained in each document. Each search engine uses a proprietary algorithm to create its indices such that, ideally, only meaningful results are returned for each query.

SEARCH ENGINE RANKING A measure of the online promotional success of a Web page or Web site. It determines where your Web page or site appears on a list of search results.

FLASH ANIMATION An animated film or simple series of graphics strung together which is created using Adobe Flash animation software.

BLOG Short for Web log, a blog is a Web page that serves as a publicly accessible journal for an individual or organization. Typically updated daily, readers can comment on submissions.

DOMAIN NAME A name that identifies one or more IP addresses (an identifier for a computer on a network). Domain names are used in URLs to identify particular Web pages. For example, in the URL www.sistersofmercy.org/vocations, the domain name is [sistersofmercy.org](http://www.sistersofmercy.org).

WEB SITE HOSTING A Web site hosting company will provide the domain registration, the hardware (Web server platform) and space to store the content of your Web site (Web pages, scripts, images, video, etc.). A site's Internet connectivity is also provided by the host. Web site hosting can be done in-house, but requires the site owner to implement, secure and maintain the Internet connection, hardware, software and Web content of the site.

—Definitions adapted from www.Webopedia.com.

and short lists are preferred over long paragraphs. Ideally, Web content should contain about half the word count as print text, so eliminate unnecessary words and sentences.

Think of the inverted pyramid when writing: start with the conclusion or the most important information you want to convey. This will not only help the reader, but will also increase your search engine ranking on those keywords which are part of your core message.

Also important is using the language of your audience, so they know you are talking to them. Be careful about using jargon, and if you do, explain the meaning behind the words that are unique to religious life.

Finally keep the content fresh and interesting. The only thing worse than not having a Web site at all is having a bad, out-of-date site. Give your audience a reason to keep coming back by constantly updating and adding content that is meaningful and relevant to them.

✓ Explore your options

Every day something innovative seems to be happening on Web sites. The possibilities appear endless, but there are a few basic features most visitors appreciate:

- **SEARCHABILITY** A robust search feature will help users find what they need quickly.
- **A SITE MAP** This provides a snapshot of what content is where on your site.
- **A HOME PAGE LINK ON EVERY PAGE AND “BREAD CRUMBS”** A home page link enables users to quickly get back to the beginning of your site and bread crumbs indicate the path they have taken.
- **SOME WAY TO INTERACT, COMMENT OR CONTACT** This is obviously very important on a vocation Web site. A contact form is advisable as it will help hide your e-mail from spam spiders and allows you to control how contacts are handled.

The rest should be determined by your audience, goals and budget. Consider graphic features such as flash animation, a photo gallery and video streaming, but be sure your developer addresses any speed issues that may arise from use of these features. You may also decide to invite users to interact with you and others on the site via a blog (Web log), a discussion, chat board, webcasts or podcasts. (See “Present your community to the world with Internet video and

audio” on page 31.) If you go the interactive route, be sure that someone can post fresh items every day and respond to comments, as well as monitor content.

There are various options for the “back end” of your site as well. One of the most important things to consider

Keep the content fresh and interesting. The only thing worse than not having a Web site at all is having a bad, out-of-date site. Give your audience a reason to keep coming back.

is how your site will be maintained. Until relatively recently, updating Web sites meant filtering all content through a webmaster or vendor proficient in HTML, ASP, JAVA or a host of other Web languages. This is still an option, but you may want to consider a site with a content management system (CMS) which provides for content updates in a

program similar to a word processing program. Ask your Web developers about CMS options; they may cost more up-front, but they save money in the long run since you will not have to pay someone with technical skills to update your site.

✓ Keep the site up and running

It can be easy to get caught up in the navigation, design and content while forgetting that your Web site needs be placed on the world wide Web. If you are working with a consultant, that person will advise you on your options. A few basics:

- Select an address, or domain name, for your site. If you don't already own your desired domain name, you can check to see if it is available for purchase by visiting www.godaddy.com or www.networksolutions.com/whois.
- Be sure to determine how the site will be hosted—do you plan to maintain the server in-house or with a hosting company?
- What kind of technical support will you need? Unless you have a webmaster on staff, you will likely need some technical support from time to time, even if your site has a content management system. Determine how this will be handled from the start and ask your Web developer to make recommendations.

✓ Test the site before you commit

So many organizations are so anxious to get their Web site up and running that they don't test the site with any of their potential users. This can be disastrous. It is much better to learn of problems while they are fixable than to learn about them when the site is live, and you've already invested significant time and money in development.

Ideally you should have as many potential audience members involved at each step of the process as possible. However, reality and budgets don't always allow for this. Something as simple as forming a review group of six to ten potential audience members at the beginning of the project can contribute greatly to the success of your site. Have this group review architecture, design concepts, copy, features—whatever you think makes sense.

Before the site goes live, have this group and other individuals who were not involved in development do user testing. Do they enjoy visiting your site? Do they understand the purpose of the site? Were they motivated to act? Is there an incentive for them to return to the site?

It is also important to make sure the site is usable. Is the navigation system clear and simple? Can users articulate where they are, where they have been and where they can go? Is the navigation consistent throughout the site? Is the content clear and simple? Do users reach any error pages or get lost on the site?

Finally be sure that your site works well at various screen resolutions and on a number of different Internet browsers (e.g., Internet Explorer and Mozilla Firefox). Pay special attention to whether the most important content is visible when the page loads and that all of your text and graphics display correctly.

✓ Update, update, update!

You may be tempted to sit back and relax once your site is built. Hopefully you'll enjoy good feedback and many visitors to your site in those initial weeks post-launch, but if you don't keep the site fresh, they won't come back, and they won't encourage others to visit. Every Web site has some static content, but those which keep users coming back offer something new every day. Whether it is through a blog, chat board, news release or interesting story, you need to keep your users engaged to show the vibrancy and appeal of your community. Regular, fresh, quality content can also increase your site's search engine rankings.

You also need to remain vigilant about maintaining the site. Check it often for outdated information and broken links, and update them right away. Make sure any technical problems are resolved quickly.

Determine early on how often your site will be updated, who will do the updating and how it will get done.

Developing and maintaining a good Web site takes time, commitment and money, but a good Web site is a tool no vocation minister can live without.

DRIVE TRAFFIC TO YOUR WEB SITE

Building and maintaining a Web site is hard work, so it's not a surprise that many well-meaning organizations build fantastic sites, but are left wondering why few people visit. A Web site is a long-term commitment, and part of that commitment is driving traffic to your site through marketing.

To determine how to market your Web site, you need to consider the various ways a visitor can end up on your site. She or he can:

- Go directly to your Web site by typing the URL in an Internet browser address bar,
- Click through to your Web site from a search engine results page,
- Click through to your Web site from another Web site or advertisement on another Web site, or
- Follow a link in an e-mail, blog, discussion board or online chat.

Effective marketing of your Web site means getting your site featured prominently in each of these places. Large corporations use Web site marketing firms to do this work for them, but most religious orders do not have the budget to do the same. The good news is that time and research is most of what you need to begin marketing your Web site. The following is an overview of possibilities for attracting visitors to your site and hopefully, increasing interest in vocations.

The obvious

It amazes me how many opportunities to drive traffic to Web sites are missed by neglecting to include a Web address on every piece of communication. Make it easy for people to connect with you by directing people to your Web site as

much as possible. Put your Web address on *everything*, from your e-mail signature to your giveaways at college fairs. Here are some suggested communication vehicles on which your Web site should be prominently featured: stationery (including business cards), e-mail signatures, brochures or handouts, giveaways, signs or banners, pins, buttons or stickers, advertisements, press releases or articles you submit for publication.

In addition to prominent placement on external communications, it is good to place your Web address on internal communications; it never hurts to remind members of your congregation about your Web site.

Another obvious but often overlooked way to keep visitors coming back to your site is asking them to bookmark your site or add it to their favorites.

Most people only view the first or second page of results when using a search engine, so if your site does not appear here, your audience is not likely to find its way to your site.

Search engine optimization

“Google” became a verb for a reason. One of the great appeals of the Internet is its effectiveness as a resource for doing research, exploring topics of interest and connecting with others. People rely on the Internet to help them find information quickly and easily.

Most people are familiar with search engines—Web sites such as Google.com and Yahoo.com that have a feature that quickly combs through the Internet and delivers sites relevant to the keywords you provide. Search engines enable much of the research magic to happen, so learning how to optimize your site to appeal to search engines is vital to driving traffic to your site. Most people only view the first or second page of search results when using a search engine, so if your site does not appear here for the keywords that are important to you, your audience is not likely to find its way to your site.

Keywords Keywords are exactly what they sound like—key words with which you would like your Web site identified. They are one thing search engines use to rank Web pages. More importantly, they can drive traffic to your site.

Catholic orders of women and men religious tend to have

fairly unique names, so often the name of the order ranks first when performing a search (e.g., go to Google.com and search “Sisters of Mercy” or try your congregation’s name and see where you rank). Don’t be satisfied with this—it should

Keep the content fresh and interesting. The only thing worse than not having a Web site at all is having a bad, out-of-date site. Give your audience a reason to keep coming back.

be a bare minimum. To play the keyword game, you need to get inside the mind of your audience and understand how they use search engines. Odds are that someone at the initial stages of exploring a vocation will not search for a specific congregation by name. Instead, she or he might search with keywords such as “vocation,” “Catholic sisters/priests/brothers” “volunteer opportunities,”

“spiritual calling,” etc. How does your congregation rank on these words?

To determine which keywords are important to your congregation and to your audience, start with a list of terms by which your congregation wants to be identified. What words describe your mission, charism and overall identity? To what issues would you like to be connected? Then, think about what terms someone in your audience group might use when exploring a call. Ask newer members or ask a few members of your audience what words they used or would use when exploring a vocation.

Develop a comprehensive list, including related words or phrases. Then, try to prioritize which are most important to you and most likely to be searched by your audience. Some online tools tell what words and phrases are searched and how often they are searched. A few worth trying are:

- Free Search Term Suggestion Tool by KeywordDiscovery.com - www.keyworddiscovery.com/search.html
- Google AdWords Keyword Suggestions - adwords.google.com/select/KeywordToolExternal
- WordTracker - <http://www.wordtracker.com/>

Content As I mentioned earlier in “Checklist for Web success,” writing for the Web is different than writing for

print. One reason is the need to incorporate search keywords (see “Web words” on page 13) into content. Search engine “spiders” will read your copy to determine what your pages are about, so the copy must be written with references to the keywords and phrases you want hit.

In addition to making sure the right keywords are in your copy, you should place the most important content high on the page—think of a newspaper and what is “above the fold.” Search engines expect that your first paragraph will contain the important keywords for the document. Also, avoid using text inside images when possible, as it will be invisible to search engine spiders.

Most search engines crawl the Web constantly and rank sites with newer content higher in their search engine results, so it is important to add content on a regular, consistent basis. The bottom line is that the more often you add quality content, the higher your site will rank on search engines.

Get referred! Search engines also crawl the Web looking for links to new sites. “Link popularity” is an important part of the ranking process for search engines, and the more incoming links you have from other sites, the higher your site will rank in search engine results. Obviously links to your site from others—especially those of interest to your audience—also increase the chance your audience members will find your site.

So how do you get other sites to link to yours? First, be sure that your Web site is linked from your sponsored ministry Web sites. If it isn’t, call the ministries and request that your Web address be prominently featured. Next, ask other organizations with which you work or partner to link to your site.

Ideally, your site should be linked from sites of interest to your audience. Since you might not have relationships with the organizations that run these sites, you may consider requesting reciprocal links.

Of course, you will want to be sure the sites to which you refer users are ones your congregation can support, so spend some time on the sites first. It is also a good idea to include a disclaimer about not being responsible for content on another site since it is impossible to constantly monitor content on other organization’s Web sites.

META Tags META tags are descriptions of content written into the code of a Web page. META tags used to be more important than they are now, but they are still used, and adding them increases the chance of being found on the Web.

Ask your webmaster or vendor about how to add META tags to each page. Generally, you'll need to provide a sentence or two describing the content of each Web page, using the main keywords and key phrases on the page.

Submit your site

Search engines are not the only way people search for information on the Web. Two other popular places for finding information are directories and wikis.

Directories Unlike search engines, Web directories are most often maintained by human editors and rely on individuals and organizations to submit content. They are essentially the Web's version of the yellow pages, but instead of phone numbers and addresses, they provide links to Web pages which have been submitted to the directory.

Submitting to key directories can both help your search engine ranking (namely because of the incoming link) and drive traffic to your Web site. Some popular directories are:

- Free Open Directory Project—www.dmoz.com
- Yahoo! Directory—dir.yahoo.com
- About.com—www.about.com
- Uncover the Net—www.uncoverthenet.com

Wikis In essence, a wiki is a collaborative Web site that allows anyone to edit, delete or modify content. A wiki can take many forms, but some of the most popular are similar to online encyclopedias, ranging from broad to specific content areas. Submitting information (including your Web site address, of course!) about your order, founder, vocation program, etc. on a wiki is a useful way to drive traffic to your site. Some to try include:

- www.wikipedia.com
- www.thecatholicwiki.com
- <http://www.catecheticsonline.com/wiki/>

Advertising

Banner ads When audience members have many dozens of choices—or when you are trying to reach an audience on information overload—search engine optimization isn't always enough. For some keywords, you'll never get that number one

slot on page one, but paid advertisements are another way to offer audience members opportunities to find your site.

If you have a good idea of what Web sites are frequented by your audience, purchasing banner ads can be an excellent way to meet your audience where they are. Banner ads are graphic advertisements on a Web site which is linked to the advertiser's own Web site—Web banner ads tend to be much less expensive than print ads and, for younger audiences, are often much more effective.

Not all Web sites accept advertising, but those that do usually have a section called “advertisers” or “advertising opportunities” which details rates and specifications for ads. If you can't find this information, contact the site webmaster.

Remember to advertise where your audience is likely to be. For example, if your audience is younger, Catholic newspaper Web sites are likely to be a waste of money, but Facebook, MySpace and volunteer matches may be worthwhile.

If you have a good idea of which Web sites are frequented by your audience, purchasing banner ads can be an excellent way to meet your audience where they are.

Text ads Another option for very focused advertising is text ads in e-mail newsletters targeted at audiences likely to be interested in vocations. Many small Web publishers offer attractive rates, so text ads can often be a bargain.

The best way to find out which e-newsletters to research is to ask your audience. Again, ask candidates and newer members or a small segment of your audience which e-mail newsletters they receive. Then join those mailing lists and contact the publisher to learn more about ad possibilities.

Pay per click ads If you can't get your Web site to rank high in search engine results for certain keywords despite your best efforts, pay per click (PPC) advertising may be for you. Here, you only pay for qualifying clicks through to your Web site based on a per-click rate which you determine. The ads appear as featured links to the right of search engine results for your keywords.

The ability to control the cost per click can make PPC ads a very cost-effective way to get traffic to your site since

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Most major search engines now offer PPC advertising campaigns with sophisticated tracking programs which allow you to manage multiple campaigns and track your progress over time. A few to try include Google AdWords (adwords.google.com), Yahoo! Search Marketing (searchmarketing.yahoo.com) and Keyword Advertising MSN (adCenter.microsoft.com).

Depending on the keyword, you may have to compete for the top spot, which you can do by setting a maximum cost per click for a particular search word. You can start and stop most PPC ad programs at any time, allowing you to experiment without making a major investment.

Viral or buzz marketing

Viral or buzz marketing may sound unpleasant, but it is essentially word-of-mouth marketing on the Web. It uses the pre-existing social networks and communities of the Web to

encourage people to voluntarily pass along information.

Information can spread very quickly on the Web (thus the term viral) and placing your vocation message and/or Web site address in the places your audience frequents can be a very effective promotional tool. Using the knowledge you've gained of your audience, submit articles to blogs, e-newsletters and Web sites they are likely to visit.

You can also promote your Web site in online forums, chatrooms and groups. Use Google Groups (groups.google.com) or Yahoo! Groups (groups.yahoo.com) to find appropriate groups, join the discussion, and be sure to include your Web site in your "signature." Not only will you drive traffic to your site, you'll also get to know your audience better—and give them a chance to get to know you—by participating in the discussion.

Track your progress

One of the beautiful things about the Web is that everything is instant, trackable and easily changeable. There are several tools available to help you track your promotional efforts so you can determine what's working and what's not.

The best free tool I've encountered is Google Analytics at www.google.com/analytics. It provides a wealth of information, including how many hits each page of your Web site gets per day; where those visitors come from, including referring sites; and how long visitors stay on your site.

Whatever tool you use, tracking your progress is essential to determining whether the tactics you are using are worth your valuable time and resources. Pay particular attention to spikes in traffic over time. Do they correspond with significant moments in your congregation's life? When referral sources change, can this be tied to a new partnership or efforts to get reciprocal links?

All of these tactics are important to driving traffic to your Web site. However, they are all time consuming, so start by selecting two or three to try for a while, then add on as time allows. Consider getting an intern to help with these efforts—many high school and college students are incredibly adept at working on the Web and can likely do many of the tasks outlined in this article.

Whatever you do, continue to invest in marketing your Web site to make it work for you. ■

Connect better and communicate better with these tips from a presentation expert.

Four secrets to great presentations

BY STEVE HEGELE

When people are asked to state their biggest fear in life, one answer continues to be the heavy favorite after years at the top of the list. The number one fear is public speaking. The fear of public speaking continues to be a more significant fear than that of our own death (approximately number six on the list) and even more scary than the fear of the death of a loved one (number four). Based on these numbers Jerry Seinfeld has said that at a funeral “with odds like that, you’re better off in the box than you are doing the eulogy.”

The ability to share information, influence thoughts and actions and address concerns and questions have always been keys to success to any enterprise, whether running a business or promoting vocations. Today, sharing, influencing and responding is not good enough. Communication needs to be energizing, relevant and engaging. Energizing to the extent that audience members don’t just hear your message, but they feel the impact of your thoughts, ideas and suggestions. Relevant to the extent that audience members feel compelled to listen because they feel as if you are speaking about them or about circumstances identical to their own. And engaging to the extent that the presentation is not flat and boring.

Four secrets will help you connect with your audience while making a vocation presentation. They are: clarity, conciseness, dynamism and candidness. Although these may seem like obvious objectives to many people, plenty of evidence suggests that we are not delivering on these key communication competencies. A survey

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of 200 large company vice presidents reveals that 84 percent of the presentations they hear they would categorize as “boring” or “sleepy.” This group of executives found only 3 percent of the presentations they heard to be “stimulating.” If we also consider the fact that most of the people doing the presenting have college degrees, which include classes in communication, as well as the benefit of corporate training programs on communications, selling and “high impact presentations,” we can see that the art and science of communication has plenty of room for improvement!

In my experience the problem is not that people do not know how to construct a thorough message and presentation. The problem occurs when the speaker stands before the listener(s) and proceeds to teach or lecture rather than engage, inform, inspire and sometimes entertain.

What needs to be in place in order for today’s presentations to be enthusiastically received and be energizing, relevant and engaging?

First and foremost: know your audience. You need to know, why did they show up to listen to you? There are at least three types of people that show up at any given presentation. The first group is known as the “Learners.” This group represents the members of your audience who are there to soak up all of the ideas and insights, perspectives and information that you can provide them. The second group of audience members is known as the “Vacationers.” These people should be someplace other than sitting in your audience. They have other obligations, tasks or activities that they should be doing, but your presentation has provided them a little vacation from all of those priorities. In other words, they are there to hear you because they do not want to be someplace else. The third group of your audience can only be referred to as “Hostages.” They do not want to be anywhere near you or your presentation. Someone has required or strongly encouraged them to attend. The great thing about hostages is that they provide an energy in the room that,

when leveraged properly, can keep everyone—especially you—engaged in the presentation. Hostages are also capable of spontaneous conversions and insights.

How do you get to know your audience? How do you learn their priorities and interests and what brings them to your presentation? Ask them! Once you do your opening and

There is a lingo to religious life that the outside world doesn't understand. You'll probably want to either choose common everyday words or define terms.

provide an outline of what you will be speaking about, ask them what brought them to your presentation and what they hope to gain and what objectives they would like to see fulfilled by the end of your time together. If there is not an immediate answer from the audience to your inquiry, ask them again and phrase the question in a slightly different way. Use any

silence that may occur to capture their attention and let them know that this presentation is a dialogue. In other words, you are there to speak with them, not at them. By engaging your listeners immediately you will increase their attention in what you have to say, while at the same time it will take some of the pressure and anxiety off you.

Secret #1 Attend to how you speak: be clear

It doesn't matter what you say, it matters what they hear.

When it comes to communicating, we could ask anyone, and most would say, it is essential to be clear. Yet clarity continues to be a challenge. It is my personal and professional opinion that as the speaker or presenter, we need to take 100 percent responsibility when it comes to being clear and understood and making sure our audience understands the message we are attempting to share.

What does it take to be clear? First and foremost there needs to be a common language, including terms that are understandable to both speaker and listener. Clarity is that wonderful moment where everyone in the same air space feels secure in the fact that they are understanding and being understood at the same time. Many people in vocations and religious life have an exceptionally high level of understanding clarity because their lives have been, and

continue to be, directed by clarity of a calling by a source that is not of this world. However, there is a lingo to religious life that the outside world doesn't understand. You'll probably want to either choose common everyday words or define terms such as calling, charisma, vocation, congregation, province, motherhouse, formation.

It continues to amaze and frustrate me as a business owner, professional speaker, communications expert, spouse and father, at how difficult it is to even agree on what common terms mean to all parties involved in the process of communication. If we cannot agree on the meaning of simple terms, we are most certainly going to have a major misfire when it comes to understanding the overall message.

Secret #2 Brevity is blessed: be concise

If you can say it in a sentence, don't use a paragraph.

If you can say it in a bullet point, don't use a sentence. If you can say it in a single word....

Consider the average text message from young person to young person: there are no vowels. There is only a string of letters that represent common phrases. Consider the TV and radio news that many adults get from day to day. It is not so much made up of news stories as "sound bites." This is not to say that stories are not important; they are more critical than ever.

However, we need to capture the attention of others with a sound bite or "startling statement" so that they become interested in learning more about the situation or our opinions and insights. Consider many of the most well-known biblical stories. The richness of the stories can only be appreciated when one has a genuine interest in hearing the entire story. We all develop an interest in hearing the story by hearing the key points or getting a preview of the more provocative story lines. You will know you have been successfully brief when someone responds by asking you to "tell me more about...."

As a side note, when I am working with corporate professionals at all levels in business and they ask my assistance on "the big presentation" for which they are using a PowerPoint program as part of their delivery, I ask them to do one thing before I sit down with them face-to-face or look at their slides for the first time. I ask them to eliminate at least 6 out of every 10 slides, and, if possible, I ask them to make it 7 out of 10. To a person everyone has immediately responded with something along the lines of, "That is impossible," or "I

won't have any presentation left," or "I need the slides to share data or present some detailed facts."

With all due respect, they are wrong. People want to hear from you! People have very little interest in watching another power point program that looks almost identical to every other presentation they have seen on a variety of other topics and subjects.

Secret #3 Let the audience feel your message: be dynamic

Being dynamic is in the delivery.

Consider research done by Dr. Albert Mehrabian from the University of California, Los Angeles, who conducted a 10-year study on nonverbal communication. The results are profound. When communicating formally or informally, the person receiving our message gets only 7 percent of our message from the words we use. Only 7 percent! The receiver gets another 38 percent of the message from the tone or quality of our voice. The bulk of the message, 55 percent, is received not by what they hear. It is received by what they see.

What does this mean to you as a vocation speaker? Are you visually engaging? Do you use hand gestures, eye contact, and body movements to bring your message to life? Picture this, a very stoic priest with no smile on his face, no song in his voice, staring at the floor, who says to the group, "Religious life has been a fulfilling, life-giving choice for me."

Contrast that with: a young woman six months into her professed religious life, who stands before a group of young people, with a twinkle in her eye and an enthusiastic tone in her voice saying, "This is the *best* decision I have ever made." The first situation is an example of what I call "incongruence," a term that reflects that those listening to us are understanding something completely different from what we say with our words.

We all have those moments where a person we are talking to just seems to "check out" on us. Or sometimes we have a sixth sense that the other person is not buying into what we are saying. The problem may be that there is a misunderstanding about *what* we are saying, and that can be easily corrected by asking them if we are making sense or if they have any questions. What I find most often in working with individuals and groups is that it has less to do with *what* is being said, and more to do with *how* it is said.

Secret #4 If you care, be candid

It takes courage to be candid.

In reading the Bible over and over and over, I continue to be wonderfully amazed and awed at how effective Jesus was at being candid. He spoke candidly and lovingly as well as sternly. Jesus many times said the things that others were thinking and wanted to say but did not have the courage or clout to say. At the heart of candor is truth. Sometimes the truth is a fact that is irrefutable. Sometimes truth is more "squishy," like someone's feelings or personal opinions. Many times people are called by God to be candid. We will receive the gift of perspective, the words to speak and even the moment itself to deliver the truth about a difficult situation or a delicate subject. However, do not deliver a message based on the fear of how others will feel about you or your message. Especially in the field of vocations, a person needs to be passionately, lovingly and firmly candid with self and others.

According to research, only 7 percent of a message is delivered by the words we use.

Are there going to be moments when we believe we are called to be candid and to say what we believe needs to be said, and we are wrong? You bet! Our candor in these situations allows God to be candid with us.

The truth has been and always will be the truth. It has been my experience that in the current political, social, spiritual and economic environment, it has become increasingly difficult to speak the real truth and to be candid without someone taking unintended offense or targeting us as the messenger. As Mark Twain said, "Always speak the truth; that way you don't have to remember what you said."

As you prepare your next presentation, remember these final tips. Be articulate and ask for understanding from those with whom you are speaking to be sure that there is agreement on the content of your message. Prepare ahead of time, so that you will speak with succinct and precise language and words. Identify and develop your own signature style of communication so that people feel the impact of your dynamic ideas and suggestions. Finally, care more than others think is wise, and speak the truth by being courageous enough to be candid. ■

Your community is doing good things, and you want the public to know. Here are valuable tips for working with the media to get positive stories circulating.

Help the media to help you

BY KAREN KATAFIASZ

In April, the Sisters of St. Benedict of Ferdinand, IN will offer their 15th annual workshop for religious communities on revitalizing vocation programs. For the last seven years, that workshop has included a breakout session that I facilitate on working with the media. The following points are guidelines, suggestions and observations that I've put together to address some common questions and concerns that past participants have brought with them.

Whether your community has a communications staff or not—if it does, you'll still have a significant role in media relations—I hope you find these tips helpful for carrying out one more important aspect of your multi-faceted ministry.

Understand why it's vital to tell your community's story to the public.

This may seem obvious, yet it's good for all of us to remind ourselves why we're doing what we do. You need to tell your story because you want your community to be visible; you want the public to have a clear and accurate image of your community; and you want to determine and shape that image as much as that's possible.

Forty or so years ago, women and men religious—especially women religious—were very visible. The numbers were larger, the habits were obvious, and every Catholic school had religious on staff. Today we know that's not the

case. Some young Catholics grow up without any contact with religious at all. And older Catholics, who knew religious in the past, wonder where they've all gone. They start believing that religious communities are all dead or dying. Or, as someone wryly remarked, "Like the Shakers, only without the furniture."

Remember the powerful image that Jesus gives us in Matthew's Gospel: "You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket; it is set on a lamp stand, where it gives light to all in the house. Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father."

Believe there are persons who would thrive in your community, persons for whom being part of your community would be the best way for them to seek and know God and to live out their life, persons who would enrich and strengthen your community by their presence. But if your light isn't shining brightly, if it's being hidden under that bushel, how will they ever find you?

Have a clear sense of your community's identity.

You need to be able to communicate and explain the mission, character and ministries of your community to the media and, through them, ultimately to the public. Companies talk about identifying their niche, positioning themselves in the market, or creating their brand. They find out why customers choose their company or product instead of others. And they use this information in their marketing to expand their business. They focus on what they uniquely offer the public.

As a religious community, you can ask yourself: What

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makes your community distinct? What makes you unique? What differentiates you from other communities? What difference does your community make? What can someone who's outside your community find meaningful and relevant and recognize as something they value too?

To effectively articulate your community's identity, you can begin by examining your mission statement. Determine the key words in the mission statement that represent your community, and then formulate those words into statements that are clear and concise and directed to your publics. You can then use these statements as part of the information you regularly provide the media—for example, as part of a fact sheet or in a descriptive paragraph you place at the end of each press release.

Respect individuals in the media as professionals.

Some members of religious communities have told me that in recent years they've become wary of reporters because of the negative coverage that has surrounded the sexual abuse cases. They fear that reporters will be looking for more scandals to expose, will distort the facts and will misquote or sensationalize their words. If you harbor this kind of distrust, your attitude can shape your interaction with the media in harmful ways.

Assume that a reporter has professional integrity, unless you have evidence to the contrary. Become familiar with the work that the reporter has done, so you have some sense of what to expect. The great majority of people working in the media are good, ethical individuals who want to provide their readers, viewers and listeners with accurate information. Be hospitable and friendly and treat media representatives as you

would invited guests.

Nearly always they'll respond accordingly. Our communications staff has observed many reporters grow in their respect, support and affection for the sisters as they've covered the community over the years.

You're providing a service to the media by giving them content, just as they're providing a service to you by sharing your stories with the public. Be proactive in suggesting coverage.

View your work with the media as a collaboration that is mutually beneficial.

You're providing a service to the media by giving them content, just as they're providing a service to you by sharing your stories with the public. Be proactive in suggesting coverage (called "pitching a story") to the media. To be most effective in doing so, develop a keen sense of what's newsworthy. Think like a reporter.

Here are criteria that journalists customarily use to determine newsworthiness. Possessing one or two qualities, of course, doesn't necessarily make a story newsworthy. What matters is the mix of qualities and the degree to which the story possesses them.

- Immediacy—Is your story timely?
- Proximity—Do the people involved live or work in the geographic area covered by the media outlet, or does an event take place in that area?
- Consequence—Does the situation or event have a significant impact on many people?
- Conflict—Is there the drama of protagonists and antagonists or of good versus evil?

Sample story ideas

IMMEDIACY At the start of Advent, some members of your community have just released a CD of Christmas music.

PROXIMITY A member of your community making final vows is from the diocese or area that the media outlets serve.

CONSEQUENCE Your community is planning significant construction projects that will affect the area.

CONFLICT Your community is holding a prayer service and rally against capital punishment the evening before a prisoner is scheduled to be executed in your state.

PROMINENCE A celebrity who was taught by members of your community is the special guest at a fundraising event. An example from the Ferdinand Benedictines: Austrian Archduke Markus S. Habsburg, great-great-grandnephew of Emperor Ferdinand of Austria, visits the monastery in the town named after his ancestor.

UNIQUENESS One of your sisters is a pilot (or a veterinarian or in another non-traditional profession). An example from the Ferdinand Benedictines: A sister who is nearly 104 reflects on her life, including appearing as a grandmother in a Wendy's commercial.

- Prominence—Are well-known people part of the story?
- Uniqueness—Is something about the story unusual or special? Does it have a certain level of human interest?

Study the media that you want to cover your community. Learn what kinds of stories they use, what information they like, when their deadlines are and how you can send them photos. Choose the right media for your story in terms of

what they do best and what your story offers. For example, television news excels at telling a story visually, so if you're seeking TV coverage, be sure your story has a strong visual element. A milestone anniversary of your community's founding has more chance of making the TV news if your community is reenacting a colorful part of its history.

Choose media also by which audiences they reach. We know that young adults seem to be using less and less traditional media to get their news, so it's important to have a strong Web presence and to explore newer technology such as podcasts, blogs and online video. But don't ignore other media. Diocesan newspapers, for instance, especially if they have youth sections, can reach young people who are active in their parishes. And don't forget other audiences. Parents and grandparents can play important roles in influencing vocation decisions. Raising the general public awareness about your community can help your vocation efforts in ways you can't always foresee.

Help the media produce the best story possible.

Be as accommodating as you can to reporters' requests for information and interviews, and be flexible in meeting their time demands. When reporters call a few minutes before their deadline with questions—and they will!—work to get them what they need. The payback might just be free, credible publicity.

Do the research and fact-checking for news releases; be accurate and thorough. For media interviews and visits, provide reporters with a fact sheet about the community, especially if this is their first visit, plus a list of names and titles of the people being interviewed, as well as other relevant data on the topic.

For instance, if a media outlet is doing a story about a peace prayer service sponsored by your community, you want to include a copy of any official community statements, as well as perhaps a brief history outlining past positions your community has taken on peace issues. If a reporter is writing a profile of one of your members, compile some basic biographical data, such as dates that person entered your community and made first and final vows and a list of past and present ministry assignments and the years served. Information you can provide in print will have a greater chance of being used correctly.

If you let the media know that they can consistently

depend on you for accuracy, assistance and cooperation, they'll turn to you again and again. If you make it easier for them to do their job well, you will nurture a valuable relationship that helps both you and the reporters you assist.

Establish an ongoing relationship of honesty and trust with the media.

Never lie. And avoid saying “no comment.” (One reporter we've worked with for many years once told me: “If you answer a tough question, I'm probably going to do a story about it. But if you say ‘no comment,’ that may be the start of an entire series of stories.”) When you really can't discuss something, be direct. You can say: “I'm sorry but those are internal, confidential matters that we're unable to talk about publicly....” Be forthright. Don't be elusive, and don't be defensive.

If you don't know an answer or feel you can't answer at the moment, tell the reporter that you'd like to get back later with your response, if time allows. Listen carefully to the questions. If they contain suppositions that you don't agree with, you can point that out to the reporter and—politely, straightforwardly—challenge him or her. How can you get reporters to ask the right questions? You can't. But what you can do is give the right answers.

Prepare community members for media visits and interviews.

Inform your leadership when media will be visiting and discuss with them which members should be interviewed if there's not an obvious choice given the interview topic. Community leaders may have information you lack when you're looking for someone to talk to the media. Not only can they recommend someone who would be able to speak authoritatively, but they can also steer you away from anyone who might be experiencing some personal challenges that could hinder a good interview. As a courtesy, inform other community members of upcoming media visits when that's appropriate. Our communications office, for example, puts a notice on the monastery message board when TV cameras will be in church during prayer or Mass.

Prepare your people for their interviews. Review with them questions they can expect and key messages they want to communicate. Discuss ways to deal with difficult questions. Reassure them if they need a confidence

boost. Advise them on having an open, positive attitude. Suggest what they can—or shouldn't—wear, especially for TV appearances (e.g., avoid white, narrow stripes, or loud patterns and glasses with lenses that darken under bright lights). And, of course, if you're the interview subject, do all of the above for yourself!

Media outlets tend to present situations in black and white rather than subtle shades of gray. And when they do offer nuance, much of their audience won't see it. That's why it's a good rule to keep your messages as simple and as clear as possible

Someone from our communications staff generally is present during media interviews. (There are exceptions, such as when an interview takes place some distance from the monastery or when a sister is being interviewed in her ministry role, such as principal or pastoral associate.) When you, or a communications person, is present, it's important to stay in the background and not intrude on the question-and-answer process. What you can do is provide visible moral support to the person being interviewed and offer to check facts or clarify any unresolved matters for the reporter.

When reporters call a few minutes before their deadline with questions—and they will!—work to get them what they need. The payback might just be free, credible publicity.

Realize that reporters, even though they may strive to be objective, will still see life through their own lens.

Know that they will make assumptions based on their own experiences, and they may be as influenced by stereotypes of religious as much as anyone else. Work with reporters to correct their misconceptions.

Offer to answer further questions, review quotes and check facts. But don't ask to read a story before it's published. This may sound as if you want to approve the piece. A few writers have surprised us by asking us to “check” an article before publication. What we discovered is that they corrected factual errors but usually retained their own interpretations and analysis even when we pointed out how they were not quite on the mark.

Expect reporters to get Catholic tenets and terminology

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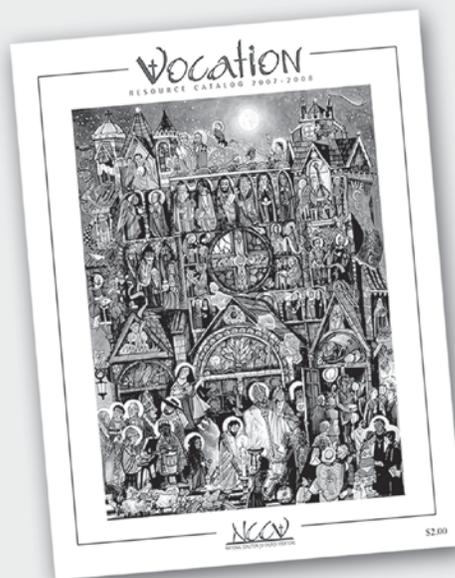
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wrong, even if they are or have been Catholic. Try to anticipate their confusion. They may misunderstand and misuse such terms as religious, clergy, brothers, priests, vows, celibacy, convent, monastery. When you provide the media with background material, you can include definitions of terms that are relevant to the topic. For example, if your members are being interviewed at various stages of formation, explain words like postulant, novice and temporary professed.

Adjust your expectations

Despite all your best efforts, the results may not be what you had wanted or hoped for. But the results can still be positive and valuable. Reporters and editors will have their own perspectives and will shape the story their own way. Readers, viewers and listeners will have reactions and interpretations that you don't expect. Do all you can, then let go of the outcome. Express your thanks to the reporter for the coverage. If there's a significant inaccuracy or error, you can request a correction, but don't dwell on most mistakes.

A great majority of people will take away from the piece only a very general understanding, and errors won't get in the way. Several years ago, a travel writer wrote about our monastery in a Chicago newspaper. The article, although it contained a number of inaccuracies that would have been significant if in a book, was quite affirming, and that's what readers remembered. Several couples told us they traveled six hours to visit here because of that article, and they have since continued their relationship with our community.

Working with the media can be filled with challenges, but know that the effort is worthwhile. It is deeply gratifying to see the public learn the good news about your religious community—and to realize, as well, that you may have enriched a reporter's perspective along the way. And as you work with the media, don't be dismayed if you stumble at times and make mistakes. Take heart with this advice from an author unknown: "Good judgment comes from experience, and a lot of that experience first came from bad judgment." ■

Anatomy of a news release

BY CAROL SCHUCK SCHEIBER

Use your letterhead to establish who is sending the news release.

✠ Sisters of Eternal Fame ✠
333 Holy Water Way, Anytown, USA
(555) 123-4567 www.sistersofeternalfame.org

Get the release out about 10 days before the event.

Make it easy for reporters to get in touch.

Contact: Sister Jane Smith, SEF
(555) 321-34332 work
(555) 321-3433 home
(555) 321-4378 cell

February 5, 2008
For immediate release

The headline should tell the essentials.

Local nun to address zoning law impact on homeless

The first sentence should tell who, what, when and where.

Sister Kathy Brown will discuss the impact on homeless people of a proposed Anytown zoning ordinance on WKXB, 1275 AM, Friday, February 15, at 10 a.m.

Publicizing your media exposure gives you extra coverage. In this case, it also establishes a community member as an expert to whom the media can turn in the future.

Brown, a licensed social worker, member of the Sisters of Eternal Fame and director of Emmaus House Shelter, has worked with homeless families for 20 years. "The law that city council is considering could wipe out a third of our city's low-income housing. It will put men, women and children on the street and cause untold suffering," says Brown.

Talk to your newsworthy community member and include a comment from him or her.

The radio show will feature Brown debating the issues with Councilman Ron Fink, sponsor of the zoning ordinance.

###

The news industry thrives on conflict, and a debate encapsulates it.

The Sisters of Eternal Fame are a community of women who live and pray in common and dedicate themselves to the ending poverty.

Use an ID line at the end of every news release.

Instant messaging can be an ideal tool for communicating with discerners. In spite of its name, it actually allows for deliberate, un-hurried, thoughtful dialogue.

How instant messaging enhances my ministry

ANDREA WESTKAMP, SMIC

In my journey as a vocation minister I feel challenged to pinpoint what really works in reaching out and keeping in touch with prospective candidates. How computer savvy do I have to be? How creative do I have to be? How much time am I supposed to spend on computer communication every day? I find some comfort in the words of Timothy Radcliffe, OP in his book, *Sing A New Song: The Christian Vocation*: “We religious are called to be signs of God’s unspeakable novelty, his unutterable creativity.” I am not sure if he was thinking about how we interact with discerners on the Internet, but then, maybe he was!

Here is my reality: I am spending at least two hours a day corresponding with discerners. And here is more about my reality: Not everything I do works with each person the same way. Hence, I am taking to heart what I learned at NRVC’s workshop, “Orientation for New Vocation Ministers,” which was to follow the inquirers’ lead. If they contact you via e-mail (and that’s most of them), I respond in the same way. If they call, I pick up the phone. If they use snail mail, I write a letter.

Following their lead in the very beginning stage is easy. But how do I keep it up? Is this where novelty and creativity come in? Maybe. Here’s how I began using instant messaging, which I’ve found to be a useful medium for many young people in discernment.

One day I received a message from a woman that I had

been in contact with for only a couple of weeks. The message read, “Grace has invited you to Instant Messenger.” I was invited, but I have to admit that I was not sure what to do! Was this a hoax? But I also was curious, and I thought: “If this is how Grace wants to interact with me right now, I will check it out.”

There was a link in the e-mail, and so I clicked on it. I was walked through a process of signing up for this particular instant messaging program, one that is connected to my Internet service provider. It took about two minutes to connect with Grace via instant messenger in beautiful and infamous cyberspace!

Her first message to me that afternoon was, “I have a question for you and just wanted to get some input.” As it turned out, she had an experience in nature that had her in awe, and she wondered, “Could this be a God-experience?” So we engaged in a 15-minute, instant-message (IM) dialogue about her nature experience, which opened the door for Grace to understand some of the pattern of how God was interacting with her.

At the end of our dialogue I was the one in awe—about the depth of the sharing. Would we have had that same kind of sharing if we had phoned or e-mailed? Maybe yes, maybe no. The important thing was that she had chosen instant messaging as her way of interacting with me. And it worked.

How instant messaging works

Let me explain briefly how instant messaging works. In a nutshell, it is like regular e-mailing without the usual sending and receiving protocol; it happens in real time. An instant messaging program can be installed free of charge. Some common ones are Google Chat, MSN Messenger, MySpace

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Instant Messenger, Yahoo Messenger and AIM (America Online's product). When you open the instant message software, you will see two areas on your screen: Area 1 is your ongoing conversation with another person. This part of the screen you share with the discerner. Area 2 is your own composition area that only you can see.

You and your discerner need to be online at the same time. After you write a message that you're ready to send, you press the "enter" button on your keyboard. Your message will come up instantly on the shared area of your ongoing conversation. Your correspondence partner will read it and respond. As he or she responds, his or her message will appear on the screen as well. As messages are composed and posted, there is time to read over the whole conversation repeatedly and let it resonate with you.

With Grace, the instant messaging gave her time to ponder my responses and to process her own thoughts better as she was writing. Both of us could ask for more elaboration on something directly.

This brings me to another point: Instant Messaging can allow a nice chat at incredible speed, connecting you with friends anyplace on the planet. When I use it in my ministry, however, speed is less important. My vocation IMs are more about being in a dialogue with each other at the same time. It can happen that my conversation partner writes, "Give me a couple of minutes to reflect on this." Maybe this is not the way the creators of instant messaging planned their programs to be used. But the beauty of the Internet is that we can use what is already there according to our needs.

Use instant messaging effectively

Here are some tips that I have found help me to use this

technology effectively in my ministry.

Follow the lead of the discerners. If people in discernment invite you to instant messaging, take them up on it! You can let them know it's an option for you.

Be aware of who among your contacts could benefit from instant messaging. For me this is usually a person who is sending e-mails with questions about religious life and whom I feel needs more understanding. It might also be a discerner who is reflecting on an article or some material I've sent and who is ready to engage in a discussion.

Let the person know that you prefer to IM at an agreed-upon time, not on the spur of the moment. This policy helps to keep professional boundaries, even online.

Ask what the topic or question will be if the discerner initiates the instant messaging. This will help her or him plan the theme or focus, and it helps you to prepare. Likewise, if you initiate the conversation, name the focus. (It is helpful to send this information in an e-mail the day before.)

It's OK to rule out frivolous conversations. Be honest with the inquirer: if you have the impression that the person is using the conversation with you simply to pass the time, let the inquirer know that you do not want to engage in this.

Make sure that the person understands that IMing is not

Instant messaging gave the discerner time to ponder my responses and to process her own thoughts better as she was writing. Both of us could ask for more elaboration.



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counseling and that the topics discussed will revolve around discernment, which is your area of expertise.

If you plan to do an online retreat process with a discerner, consider using instant messaging as one way of conducting sharing and dialogue. It allows a thorough, meditative, personal discussion on spiritual topics.

Ensure that your conversation partner understands confidentiality. It's helpful to mention early on that your dialogue is private and should not be copied and pasted to a blog, Facebook site or other site without your permission. This is also true for photos. In some instant messaging programs, people can share photos. You can look at your conversation partner's picture while writing. If you choose to add your own photo, make sure it will not be distributed on the Web without your permission. Again, observe ethics and professional boundaries in how you conduct IMs.

What I find very helpful is that whole IM conversations can be saved and re-read if needed. In the ongoing

discernment process with Grace, I was able to review previous instant messaging dialogues. With her and other women, this return to our conversations helped me to connect some dots for them and me.

As some writers in previous *HORIZON* editions have voiced already, we can't kid ourselves: the online correspondence, no matter what program we use, will never replace a personal visit. Use the Web as your access to those who want to discern; but then don't just stay in cyberspace. Move out into what is called "the real world." Instant messaging is helpful; it is an aid in a process; it is a tool if the discerner lives too far away to visit regularly, but nothing can make up for a real personal encounter.

When I finally went on a seven-hour drive to meet with Grace over lunch, I had to admit that through our online correspondence I had gotten to know and appreciate a deeply spiritual person who loves to reflect and ponder. In the personal meeting, Grace was also fun and had a good sense of humor. Without meeting her, I would not have experienced this. I continue to be grateful to Grace for introducing me not only to herself but to the useful tool of instant messaging. ■

With podcasting, religious communities have a vast and low-cost resource for sharing their good news.

Present your community to the world with Internet video and audio

By JUDY ZIELINSKI, OSF

What's a podcast? Why all the buzz about it? And what does it mean for vocation ministers?

Podcasts are video and/or audio files distributed over the Internet. They have everything to do with media freedom—and the ability of the “little person” to speak and find an audience. No longer are broadcasting and world media distribution the exclusive domain of NBC or CNN or United Artists; anyone with a computer can now be part of the media. You and I can make a speech, screen a homemade film, conduct an interview, vocalize an opinion, sing a song, tell a story—perhaps a vocation story—and be heard by hundreds...thousands...possibly millions.

This new communications reality holds the potential for vocation ministers to reach out in a new way to young adults. Podcasts are cost-effective, and audio and video messages can carry great emotional punch.

It helps to understand the history and context of podcasting. Most vocation ministers grew up with a communication model that unified and in many ways, shaped our society. We had three national TV networks: ABC, NBC and CBS. We gathered at 6 p.m. for the “evening news” and

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depended on these outlets—as well as our daily newspapers—for summaries and analysis of national and world events.

As for entertainment, we knew on which nights and times our favorite shows aired. They were broadcast to the entire country at 9 p.m. eastern/ 8 p.m. central, and again, we either saw them or missed them. This was our media universe until fairly recently. The advent of CNN and various cable news outlets within the last 25 years or so revolutionized news delivery, allowing us news on demand 24/7 and the experience of events happening halfway around the world almost instantly. Still, it took a simple musical application to blow the “media slavery” chains away.

In the ‘90s, as the Internet and digital revolution gained traction, a file named the “MP3” was invented. It allowed any audio event—a song, a speech, a radio interview—to be digitally compressed, e-mailed, filed, copied and played on a computer—over and over again without any loss of pure digital quality. This was a media quantum leap akin to the scene from the film *2001: A Space Odyssey* where a bone thrown upwards by an ape morphs to a spaceship.

The MP3 format allowed ordinary consumers unparalleled musical freedom and threatened the economics of the music industry. Suddenly kids all over the country—via musical “file-sharing” programs like Napster—were “ripping” (choosing) and “burning” (copying) individual songs from CDs and “mixing” their own collections of favorites, leaving behind whatever songs didn’t measure up. CD sales plummeted as kids took to file-sharing. Why buy the whole CD when you could get the best songs free from your friends around the corner or around the world? (This dilemma resulted in years of litigation between the music industry—claiming copyright infringement and theft of intellectual property—and the owners and users of various file-sharing

Web sites and programs. Today, the ability to purchase most individual songs for 99 cents each has largely quelled the hostility on both sides.)

Then along came the iPod, a sleek, compact, intuitively-easy-to-use MP3 device that allowed owners to download thousands of songs and listen to them via earbuds. The iPod spawned a host of MP3 competitors, but remains the Cadillac of the crowd. Over the last several years, various iPods have

Not only can people listen to thousands of songs on a portable device, but they can download TV programs, radio broadcasts, interviews, and film clips from the Internet and listen at any place, any time.

appeared; the latest models can playback not only MP3 audio files but video files as well (in MP4 and other video formats.)

Now one can not only listen to thousands of songs on a portable device, but can download TV programs, radio broadcasts, interviews, and film clips from the Internet and listen at any place, any time.

This, in short, is what we call a podcast: someone is “casting content” to your iPod! (The “pod” prefix

was awarded as a nod to the overwhelming popularity of the iPod over all other MP3 devices.)

If this short history has seemed technical and “so-what” so far, it may help to make it personal. I own an MP3 player (though not an iPod), so I am able to download audio files only. I’m an avid fan of “This American Life,” a first-person collection of themed stories and interviews aired on public radio. However, my local station plays the show on Saturdays from 4-5 p.m., a time slot during which I never seem to be in the vicinity of a radio. This frustration drove me to tackle podcasting. I simply went to the Web site for “This American Life” and followed the directions to subscribe to the free podcast. Every week the program automatically downloads to the audio library on my computer. I then transfer it to my MP3 player and listen to it at my leisure

Podcasts can also include video. Without getting too technical, video files are not the same as MP3s, but they are related. Both MP3 and MP4 files are able to “compress” the huge size that sound and picture files demand and squeeze that into manageable “data packets” which then appear on your device’s small screen. The video files (MP4 for iPods—Flash and MPEG and others) can be downloaded

and saved. I have not been able to download TV episodes to my device since I have no way of playing them back, but I can and do watch them on my computer. This is technically not a podcast, but what is called “streaming video.” Here’s another real life application: I am a “Lostie”—an adherent of the popular ABC series, *Lost*. When ABC decided to make available the full episodes of all of its major TV programs free from its Web site last year, I was thrilled. I could catch the programs I had missed or just wanted to watch again. If I couldn’t be in front of a TV on Wednesday nights at 9 p.m. to see *Lost*, I could watch the episodes on my own computer in my own time. (No, it isn’t as comfortable as the living room, but I can still follow the action.) If and when I ever come into possession of an iPod with audio/video capabilities, I could download the episodes and watch them anywhere—on an airplane, in the back seat of a van, a hotel room, the back yard, etc.

There are literally thousands of pieces of media available for downloading. The overwhelming majority are free, paid for by advertising on the Web site or sometimes by ads embedded at the beginning or even throughout the content.

Podcasting meets vocation ministry

This technology, in its many creative forms, has multiple applications in vocation ministry. For instance, some bloggers (self-appointed writers who post their commentary on the Internet) make an audio recording of their written work and post it with the blog. Their blogs can be downloaded and listened to by people on their way to or from work and school, on their lunch hour, late at night, etc. Vocation-related blogs offer another way of talking about religious life. A quick potential menu might include:

- **The Way We Were (and Are)** Mini-meditation recordings about the charism of your congregation; stories of your members, their heroism and generosity in answering the call to serve.
- **Weekly or monthly letter from the missions** by which one of your members might give a progress report on a building project; improvements to a clinic; volunteers coming to visit and help, etc.
- **Notes From the Novitiate** Your novice(s) talk about their adjustment to community, what they miss, the questions they are struggling with as they walk their journey, etc.

Podcasting terms

MP3 A digital file (.mp3) that stores audio material just as a .doc file stores text.

MP3 PLAYER A portable device used for listening to MP3 files anywhere. iPods are the most popular type. Players come with different memory sizes. A small 1GB player can hold about 250 3-minute songs; the latest iPods have 80-160 GB of memory, enough to hold thousands of songs. A full-length movie needs about 1GB of memory.

STREAMING MEDIA Any media (audio/ video/ film) continuously received by, and displayed to the user while it is being delivered by the provider. The name refers to the delivery method and is usually applied to media distributed over the Internet.

STREAMING The means by which streaming media is delivered to the end-user. Some of the more popular technologies include: Adobe Flash, Microsoft Windows Media, QuickTime, ReelTime.com, RealNetworks, RealPlayer and Winamp.

LIVE VS. ON DEMAND A media stream can be on-demand or live. On-demand streams are stored on a server for a long period of time, and are available to be transmitted at a user's request. Live streams are only available at one particular time, as in a video stream of a live sporting event. Podcasts are generally on-demand streams.

AUDIO PODCAST Podcasts are radio-style shows delivered over the Internet to your computer, letting you control how and when you listen. Technically, podcasts are audio broadcasts converted to an MP3 file format and distributed over the Internet to be played back in a digital MP3 player or downloaded onto a computer.

VIDEO PODCAST These include both visuals and sound. A video podcast requires a device with video playback capability, but a streaming video can be watched and heard while on the Internet.

- **I Need Help** Your community members reflect on where they live and how they minister (direct service in an inner city; rural health care; parish administration), challenging listeners to consider that particular ministry as part of their own call.

- **The Long View** An elderly brother, priest or sister reflects on his or her life, vocation and ministry and invites the listener to consider such a commitment.

- **My Own Prayer Journey** Personal reflections on styles of prayer, daily experiences, book suggestions and other aspects of prayer.

Should you choose to join the millions of bloggers in the world, you will want your blog and/or podcast to offer thoughtful, reflective, challenging, funny, moving material.

Clearly the list could go on, mining the rich veins of community life, spirituality and ministry. In fact, there are religious communities already making use of podcasting, using the Internet to meet potential members that they would never otherwise reach. If you think people are not downloading and listening, think again. There are a lot of those little earbuds out there, particularly among young adults.

So how does one podcast? First seek out a webmaster or a friend with technical skills. While not excessively difficult to do, podcasting does require the meeting of some technical protocols, especially if you decide to set up your own domain name ("BestVocationDirector.org," for instance) and podcast from your own server. However, many Web sites are eager to offer you a free podcast service—try for instance, www.mypodcast.com. In exchange for allowing free advertising on your podcast (note that you get to choose and approve all advertisers to insure appropriate material), the site will provide you with the software you need to start, tips and help in creating your content, publicity and bandwidth storage on the server that will "hold" your program. As far as equipment goes, a simple microphone and a computer with a sound card are all you'll need. These are almost universally included with any computer purchased fairly recently.

The other obvious opportunity is media streaming—

placing audio or video files on your Web site for people to experience as they visit. Users may not necessarily download these and carry them off on their iPods, but this technique presents another way for you to communicate. Once a video or audio recording is produced, it is a simple matter to save it in one of the popular streaming file-formats (Windows, Flash, RealPlayer, etc.) and upload it to your Web site. Whoever serves as your web master can easily handle this.

Video files can also be placed on popular video-sharing sites such as Vimeo.com or YouTube.com. When I conducted a search for “Catholic vocations” on YouTube, I found nearly 300 pages of offerings, many of them from religious communities. Clearly, some communities are already well plugged into this opportunity! Also, VISION vocation network offers advertisers free video posts of 1-minute, 45-seconds or less. (For details, contact executive editor Patrice Tuohy at 800-942-2811 or pjtouhy@truequest.biz.)

If you are in touch by e-mail with a man or woman

expressing interest in your community, it is an easy matter to steer them to your Web site and its specific links to a blog or podcast opportunity. Inquirers may not be able to download to an MP3 player, but they can always watch or listen from the Web site. And if you do offer a free podcast subscription, they can sign up and receive the episodes via e-mail.

The most challenging feature of podcasting, however, will remain the creative one: What do I want to say, and how can I say it creatively? The number of bloggers is estimated to be as high as 70 million worldwide. Should you choose to join this number, you want your blog or podcast to offer thoughtful, reflective, challenging, funny, moving material. A well-done blog and podcast is a powerful way to reach out and touch people all over the globe. If you offer it, someone will download it. But the challenge is much more than technical—it is the challenge of the heart to say deeply what technology can only multiply. ■

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— Vita Consecrata, 1996

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BOOK NOTES

Faith guidance from Hollywood?

By ROSE PACATTE, FSP

Although many conservative Christians see Hollywood as an enemy of the Gospel, Greg Garrett, the author of a recently released book, *The Gospel According to Hollywood* (Westminster-John Knox Press), sees just the opposite. A professor of English and an Episcopal seminary instructor, Garrett thinks that many Hollywood movies work to transform society according to Gospel teaching. His new book, *The Gospel according to Hollywood*, sets out to prove this premise and demonstrate that many mainstream films also credibly deal with elements of the creed and the Christian life. He concludes with a somewhat polemical chapter asking—and answering—how movies influence what it means to be a believer in contemporary America.

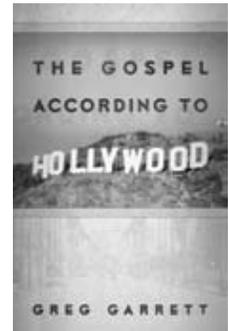
How Hollywood writes the Gospel

Seeing Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* in 1994 was a defining moment for author Greg Garrett. When Jules (Samuel L. Jackson) and Vincent (John Travolta) conversed about divine intervention, Garrett experienced a spiritual awakening. All in all, he saw the film seven times in theaters and believes that this film, like the many others he references, is "crammed full of these moments that illuminate Judeo-Christian teachings..." I must admit that *Pulp Fiction*, despite its "moments" didn't impress me the same way it did Garrett. (I have not yet been able to go back and watch it again.)

Rose Pacatte, FSP, is director of the Pauline Center for Media Studies in Culver City, CA. She is an award-winning author, speaker, and the film/TV columnist for St. Anthony Messenger.



Garrett's introduction is perhaps the most significant part of the book because it lays out the tome's thesis, incarnational theology, tone, and energy from the outset. The first five chapters don't follow the creed exactly (like other books, such as Bryan Stone's 2000 *Faith and Film: Theological Themes at the Cinema*) but are divided into creedal areas and ask the kinds of existential questions people ask today: "Faith and Belief: Does God Exist?" "The Trinity: If God Exists What Kind of God Is God?" "Sin and Death: If God is Good, Where Did Evil Come From?" "Grace and Redemption: If the World is Filled with Evil, How Do We Find Salvation?" and "Peace and Justice: How Do We Live a Righteous Life?"



Chapter 6, "The Church and the Christian," is an energetic homily on several themes: what makes a good story, what makes a good story about the Christian churches, and the need for Christians to appreciate and understand storytelling. Although this chapter is a bit cluttered, when Garrett quotes Margaret Atwood in *The Blind Assassin* he pulls focus, "In paradise there will be no stories because there are no journeys. It's loss, and regret and misery and yearning that drive the story forward, along its twisted road." Garrett likes movies about Catholics, from *The DaVinci Code* (noting that the film gave believers a great opportunity to ask and answer important questions about Christ), to *Romero*, *The Mission*, and *Dead Man Walking*.

Chapter 5, "Peace and Justice: How Do We Live a Righteous Life?" is my favorite chapter in *The Gospel According to Hollywood*. Perhaps because I live in Culver City, down the street from both Sony Studios and Culver Studios and within an hour's drive of Warner,

Disney, Paramount Studios, and others, and I am the film and television columnist for *St. Anthony Messenger* and see at least six films a month, I am aware of how many truly good films are being produced in our time about topics that matter. They matter because they deal with how we live together on this earth, and they invite thoughtful viewers to reflect theologically on what God is saying to us through cinema. These films invite viewers to respond to the question: what is God asking of me? Some of these films are *Blood Diamond*, *Tsotsi*, *Hotel Rwanda*, *God Sleeps in Rwanda*, *The Constant Gardener*, *Innocent Voices (Voces Inocentes)*, *The Price of Sugar*, *Trade*, *The Nativity Story*, *An Inconvenient Truth*, *Water*, *Erin Brockovich*, *A Mighty Heart*, *Arctic Tale*, *The Last King of Scotland*, *Glory Road*—to name a few. The principles of Catholic social teaching make a vibrant lens with which to see and talk about such movies. Although Garrett doesn't use Catholic terminology, he has the concepts down pat.

Garrett focuses on *Groundhog Day*, *The Shawshank Redemption* and *Batman Begins* in Chapter 5 and dips into the Hollywood vaults to remind us about films that emerged from and were about economic justice during the Great Depression. I think that Chapter 5 is Garrett's most theological chapter in the sense that he analyzes the films according to Gospel criteria and koinonia, that fellowship and communion of responsibility and love that characterized the early church.

This brings us to the Jewish idea of *tikkun olam*: working together to heal the world, a theme Garrett develops in his book. Movies can help with this healing of the world because they provide a space for dialogue between people. Dialogue implies respectful listening, reflection, decision and action.

Vocation directors and the movies

The great Indian Jesuit Anthony de Mello (1931-1987) once wrote, "You have yet to understand, my friends, that the shortest distance between a human being and truth is a story" (*One Minute Wisdom*, 1985). Greg Garrett gets this, and so do most young people today who flock to the movies each week, even if they don't always articulate it.

I was privileged to present a workshop at the NRVC convocation in Irvine, CA in 2006. The title of my workshop was "Meeting Jesus at the Movies." I always enjoy giving this particular workshop, but I had such a good time doing so during this conference because vocation directors "get it." They have met Jesus at the movies (and in many other places), and they understand story and journey and grace because this is at the heart of their vocational ministry.

How would a vocation director use a book like *The Gospel According to Hollywood*, especially if they already think the way the author does? Garrett offers a framework for how each of us can process and talk about the films we watch. He provides a point of departure for vocation ministers to take theological reflection from the creed and social action to vocational discernment. Finally, those vocation directors who dwell in story, journey and the desire to heal the world by following Jesus—and who love cinema—can write the next chapter. That's a book I'd like to read.

There wasn't much to criticize in Garrett's book because he speaks about the films in terms of a theology of incarnation that is deeply felt and lived. The author infuses this theology into his understanding and love for film as a medium for spiritual growth. I would like to meet Greg Garrett some day and listen to how he continues to integrate faith, film, and life. His theology is informed, open and welcoming; his voice optimistic and inviting. He is comfortable in his Christian skin. Although it seems that Garrett is non-Catholic, he reveres Catholic stories and meets Jesus in the films that have moved him—just like vocation directors do. ■

Further reading

The Gospel Reloaded: Exploring Spirituality and Faith in The Matrix, by Chris Seay and Greg Garrett, 2002

Holy Superheroes, by Greg Garrett, 2005

Reel Spirituality by Robert K. Johnston, 2000

Finding God in the Movies: 33 Films of Reel Faith, by Robert K. Johnston and Catherine M. Barsotti, 2004

Through a Catholic Lens: Religious Perspectives of 19 Film Directors From Around the World, edited by Peter Malone, 2007

Reframing Theology and Film: New Focus for an Emerging Discipline, edited by Robert K. Johnston, 2007

Finding God in the Dark: Taking the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius to the Movies, John J. Pungente, SJ and Monty Williams, SJ, 2004



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FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER; GOOD SHEPHERD SUNDAY; WORLD DAY OF PRAYER FOR VOCATIONS

OF SHEEP AND SHEPHERDS

The parable of the Good Shepherd is one of the most comforting in the Bible—God will find us when we're lost—and also one of the most challenging—God will not allow one of us to be lost. "To leave the 99 in favor of the one," writes Sister Helene Hayes on the Sisters of the Good Shepherd website, "is to understand our universal kinship with all human beings. It is to understand that our salvation and liberation are intertwined in a profound way with the salvation and liberation of the 'stray ones,' the poor, the ostracized." Listen to the Good Shepherd's voice and you will know unconditional love; follow in the Good Shepherd's footsteps and you will share that unconditional love with others. That is the vocation of every Christian: to listen and follow.

TODAY'S READINGS: *Acts of the Apostles 13:14, 43-52; Revelation 7:9, 14b-17; John 10:27-30*
"My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me."

MONDAY, APRIL 30 FEAST OF PIUS V, POPE

POOR IN SPIRIT

Even though the man who was to be Pope Pius V (1504-1572) would become a university professor, head of several houses of the Dominican order, a bishop and cardinal, a grand inquisitor, and eventually pope who had to implement the reforms of the Council of Trent, it seems he never forget where he came from. Born of impoverished Italian nobility, as a boy he worked as a shepherd. After becoming pope he lived a simple and prayerful lifestyle, built hospitals, and opened the papal treasury to care for the poor, with whom he was personally involved. He kept wearing his Dominican habit, establishing the custom of popes wearing white. Prayer and service, worship and works of mercy will keep you close to God and the gospel, whatever else you do.

TODAY'S READINGS: *Acts of the Apostles 11:1-18; John 10:1-10*
"The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us."

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