

4 Ways You Can Use Social Media for Good

Despite the potential for bad, there are lots of positives for your small-group ministry.

Brandon Cox

No one can deny the popularity of social networking. It's everywhere. It's the cloud we breathe all the time without even thinking about it. If you're like most people, you get anxious when you're more than eight steps from your phone, and you think you feel it buzzing in your pocket even when it's quietly lying on the table. But is social media useful for small groups?

I believe you can't have a healthy small group without being about social media. Apps, gadgets, and social networking websites are optional, but *social media* is a phrase that captures the very reason why small-group ministry exists. Let me explain.

Media simply means information or data. Media is content—the message. *Social* is merely a word we use to describe the *way* media travels: from person to person, relationally. Small groups are all about people getting together in relationships around a message. So social media is the very DNA of small-group ministry, with or without the Internet.

If you believe that both content and relationships are at the core of any great small-group ministry, you're already well on your way to using social media more effectively for ministry. We just need to establish a good philosophy of how technology relates to ministry.

I believe that modern social networking tools have the power to unite us around causes, connect us with new people, and extend the reach of important messages people need to hear—including the gospel. And I'm convinced that social media has tremendous potential to improve group life and small-group ministry. Here's how:

Connect with the Disconnected

When my wife, Angie, and I started planting Grace Hills Church, we decided that we would share the gospel in highly relational ways from the start. While there's nothing wrong with reaching masses of people with the gospel, we knew that what would work better for us was starting with a few families and praying for the good news to go viral. So we spent a couple hundred bucks on Facebook advertising.

At our first public information meeting, we met about 30 new people with whom we had connected on Facebook. When 6 months had gone by, we had a core of about 75

people who took on the work of spreading the word of our launch. There were 176 for our grand opening service in a local movie theater. We've grown steadily since that day, a few people and a few families at a time. We now have close to 20 small groups and 80 percent of the people in them were initially made aware of our church through social media.

How do you reach the disconnected with social media? Challenge people to tell their life change stories in creative ways online, with special emphasis given to the meaningful experiences they've had with their small group. Befriend those on the fringe, people who may not look or talk quite like the average church member. Be willing to engage in conversation with people who come from a completely different worldview without getting angry. And invite people into your small-group community just as you would in your typical offline relationships.

Creating Virtual Spaces for Actual Community

We live in a highly connected age, right? Sort of. We're connected in a general sense—we get news faster, and we're more aware of what's happening around the world. On the other hand, we're less aware of what's happening next door. We lack intimate friendships, and we tend to wonder if deep friendship is even possible.

We need to take our offline relationships online so that we stay in touch more often. As we see their posts on our feed, we're reminded of the people in our small groups, and we build relationships that extend beyond our weekly meetings.

Online social networks such as Facebook come pre-built for community, which can be quite helpful to small groups. At Grace Hills, almost every small group sets up a closed Facebook group to stay in touch between meetings. There are some good companies who have developed software that effectively provides this online connectivity, but we've found the participation rate to be highest when we allow groups to use the cloud they're already breathing daily.

A small group's Facebook group serves several rather important functions:

- Church-wide announcements are reinforced by hosts and group leaders.
- Prayer requests are shared and contained within the micro-community best equipped to provide pastoral care.
- Encouragement happens as people talk about things they're dealing with in the moment.

- Leaders are developed and volunteers are recruited as people are tapped on the shoulder through a personal message to participate on a ministry team.
- Links and helpful resources that aid and supplement the group's normal study content can be posted and discussed.

In addition to the closed groups set up for each small group, we also use separate closed groups for all small-group leaders and hosts. These groups help us communicate with leaders and equip them for their roles. While coaching still happens best face to face, we can check in on how things are going and see what concerns exist with a quick message posted to our group for leaders.

Leadership Development

One thing that really helps leaders grow is exposure to challenging ideas. Anytime we live inside a bubble, we wind up maintaining the status quo and doing things the way we've always done them. But when we venture out, we learn what's going on in the world, what God is blessing, and what is working for other leaders.

Small-group leaders and coaches should be encouraged to use social networking for research and development. It's helpful when church leaders pass along a list of the top five to ten blogs and newsletters about ministry, leadership, and small groups. (You can subscribe to a free newsletter from SmallGroups.com [here](#).) You can also provide a list of thought leaders to follow on Twitter and Facebook. There is a veritable firehose of fresh knowledge being created and curated online each day, which places an ever-evolving library of free resources at the fingertips of developing leaders.

Online Ministry

When I was on staff at Saddleback Church in southern California, I was in a meeting with a half dozen other staffers trying to tackle the issues surrounding launching an online campus. The usual questions that come up relate to online worship, giving, and membership. But David Chrzan, Saddleback's Chief of Staff, asked a different question that has stimulated my thinking ever since: *How do we give a cup of cold water in Jesus' name online?*

In other words, how do we truly serve people in hands-on ways when we aren't sharing the same physical space? The answer has to do with the encouragement vacuum that exists in our culture. Because the Internet has turned us all into publishers, harsh opinions and cynical thoughts dominate social networks. But God's people, changed by the radical grace of Jesus, get to enter that void with genuine love and encouragement.

Small-group pastors can encourage leaders, and leaders can encourage their group members. But we can also teach all our group members to use social media for encouragement—no matter what they're posting. There's enough criticism out there, and God's people can point to a better way. We have the opportunity to use social media to acknowledge and affirm people right in the middle of their pain and their mess. And nobody should do that better than the communities we call small groups.

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