

stuff you wish they taught in seminary



7 Ways

SMARTPHONES HAVE CHANGED PEOPLE AT YOUR CHURCH (AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT!)

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Do you remember the world before the smartphones came and invaded all our spaces?

I have a hard time recalling how we got along before these little rectangles of glass, metal and plastic lodged themselves firmly into our everyday lives.

These devices have had simultaneously a profound and subtle impact on our people. Analogous to shifting sands under our feet, although the change is very minimal and hardly evident at the beginning but over time it becomes increasingly obvious.

I'm not adopting a "technology is bad" point of view in this article. In fact, I'm not taking a "technology is good" point of view either. Rather than debate the value of the smartphone in our people's lives I'm asking us to consider the impacts these instruments are already having today on our people and suggest ways in which our churches need to respond.

Here are seven ways in which smartphones have already changed your people and what you can do about it.

Hundreds of Friends Within Reach at a Moment's Notice

The development of smartphones has been equally matched with the rise of a rewiring

of the very social fabric of humanity. I know that may sound overly dramatic but it's simply the truth! We take for granted that people are able to instantly like, share and comment with their friends both near and far. This hyper-connectivity is redefining friendship and changing the way that we interact with people.

One doesn't need to search long for examples of how this new level of interconnected relationships have impacted the world around us.

- Remember the 2014 social craze "the ice bucket challenge"? Only made possible with the ubiquity of smartphones and pervasive social networks. In the end the challenge raised \$220 million towards A.L.S. research that is continually making new discoveries! [\[ref\]](#)
- During the next natural disaster watch closely how the people on these social networks care for each other in amazing innovative ways. This was evidenced after Hurricane Irma decimated parts of Florida; it was heartwarming to see people turn to their phones to help others and offer comfort. [\[ref\]](#)

Ultimately, when you combine smartphones and social networks together you have people more connected with the fringes of their social circles. Today **we're more aware**

of what is happening in the lives of people who we are loosely connected with compared to a generation ago. This is a great opportunity for your church because it's these loose connections that drive the growth and development of your church. Here are some examples of how to leverage these opportunities for your church:

- **Develop sharable social content... that people want to share!** // Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snap Chat and other online social networks that might be developed in the future aren't designed as another place for you to share announcements about your church. These networks are essentially driven by people sharing content that is humorous, intriguing and thought-provoking, so you need to release content which the people are encouraged to share online. The primary goal is to create sharable content while the secondary goal is to drive results for your church.
- **Encourage your people to develop content.** // The ice bucket challenge is the high water mark for seeing masses of people develop content that spreads to their friends thereby driving an organization's outcomes. How can you encourage your people to check-in, take photos, film videos and generally generate their own content about their connection to your church? Ask them to take out their phones during your services and go online to tell their friends they are with you or share a quote from the message. Find the people in your church that are the most active online and take them out for a coffee to pick their brains on how you can encourage more people to share and like the church-oriented messages online.

Rewiring Our Minds from Knowing Answers to Knowing How to Find Answers

Preach the word of God. Be prepared, whether the time is favorable or not. Patiently correct, rebuke, and encourage your people with good teaching.
- 2 Timothy 4:2

When I was a student I read 2 Timothy 4:2 and to me, it meant that I needed to have ready answers for a wide variety of issues that might come up as I interacted with

people about faith. I remember memorizing lots of scripture and studying apologetics widely to prepare answers, which I could use at a moment's notice to defend the faith.

What difference does ubiquitous access to virtually the entire breadth of human information in everyone's pocket make to this aspect of the Christian life? To me, it is as profound as the access of the printing press was to the faith. **In several ways, the Protestant reformation and explosion of knowledge about the faith owe a huge debt to the access to information that the printing press afforded.** We're still on the front end of understanding how all this access to information will shape and form our faith today.



What is abundantly clear is that this access to information is changing the way we think. Constant access to databases and search engines have altered the way our memory works. **Instead of remembering information, we now remember how to find that information.** [ref] This presents a profound shift in our relationship with information as the smartphone transform into an extension of our memory and mind in a very real way because we rely on it to store and access the expansive information we need in our everyday living.

This shift in our relationship with information implies that we need to change how we manage the information we "dispense" from our churches. A few shifts that your church should consider:

- **"So What?" Preaching** // People are overwhelmed with the amount of information they can access and hence need communicators to help them make sense of what to do next with the

available information. More than ever, today we need teaching that creates simple and obvious next steps for our community. Preaching that lands with “there’s some information you need to know” won’t move anyone anymore. The drive of preaching has always been towards helping people take action on what they know but in an information saturate climate this drive is not operative.

- **People (still) don’t care what it says in the Greek.** // I’m not sure when people were impressed with what the text said in its original language but there are communications that talk about the original text like it’s wildly impressive. It isn’t. People need a synthesis of understanding the text and how the original hearers of it would have applied it to their lives as essentially a bridge to understand how we should apply it to our lives. Pronunciation of the words aren’t necessary and can come off as random trivial facts in a constantly connected world.
- **Intellectually Honest.** // There are several schools of thought within the body of Christianity. We’ve been emphasising on various aspects of scripture over others for hundreds of years. There might have been a time when we could have convinced our people that we simply “preach the word!” However, today our people can literally find other interpretations of the texts underpinning our sermon or message, from their seats on their phones during the interaction. Our teaching needs to acknowledge the spectrum of thought and still help people navigate the frameworks to the people where they understand why we’ve landed where they’ve landed as well. Dave Bowman from New Horizon Church in North Carolina [did this recently in a message when he referenced a spectrum of thoughts around science, evolution and the evidence of God](#) and it’s worth listening in to. The Meeting House in Toronto did this superbly a number of years ago by taking a summer to hear from [teachers from a wide variety of background](#) on their convictions around Christ.

Driving Us to Get More Done

Smartphones are helping people get more done. These devices are propelling our productivity and helping us draw more out of every day. In fact, a recent study showed that smartphones save people 22 days per year over our 1990s selves! [\[ref\]](#) That’s almost an extra month’s time every year to invest in the rest of our lives. All those emails you’re responding to from bed or texts that you send from the bathroom are actually driving you to accomplish more.



But more importantly, they are shifting all of us towards a state where we are looking to accomplish more with our time. Today, we’re more time aware than we’ve ever been owing to these devices in our pockets, which are structuring our time more than ever. This implies that our churches need to be even more effective in how we invest our people’s time when they are with us in a variety of ways:

- **Don’t Waste People’s Time** // Time is a precious commodity and our guests are looking for high-value experiences when they are with us. If people perceive this to be a low-value experience they will simply check out mentally and start accessing their emails or flipping through Facebook on their phones. We need to drive compelling and relevant experiences that are more enticing than what people can access on their phones.
- **Set Clear Expectations (& Then Exceed Them!)** // With people developing a sense of high value for their time, they ensure that their expectations are properly gauged for every engagement with your church. If

people clearly understand how long the event is and what they'll get out of it they are willing to invest time but if these aspects are unclear they will opt out. Be clear on what they should expect and then overdeliver.

- **Teach on Time Stewardship** // Most churches talk about financial stewardship but people are increasingly interested in leveraging their time to honor God with their life. Show them how balanced and healthy rhythms of work and rest are a part of what God desires for His people. Help your community deal with the pressures of increased productivity and live a life honoring God in how they spend all their time!

We're Not Bored Anymore

When was the last time you were really bored? I mean... really bored. Absolutely nothing to do and nothing to think about. At their core, these smartphones have removed boredom from our lives by constantly stimulating us and seeking our attention. Studies have shown that the **boredom actually has value for us when we are looking to do or are doing some of our most meaningful or deepest works:**

- U.K. psychologist, Sandi Mann, found that when subjects do something really boring and then try a creative task they come up with their most novel and innovative solutions. [ref]
- Watch the following video done by WNYC that counts the number of people just walking down the street who are on their phones. It's a vivid illustration of how dependent we've become on these devices to fill our quiet moments. Watch here: [How Many People Can't Walk Without Their Smartphone?](#)
- An app named [Moment](#) tracks the total amount of "phone time" that a user spends every day as well as the total number of times people check their phone during the day. Most users are shocked with the stats they learn from the app ... go ahead and try it. ;)

What implications does all this activity that continuously engages our minds to have on our spiritual development? **Brother Lawrence was a monk who (famously) found great spiritual enrichment from doing the dishes and using that time to pray and connect with God.** It would seem that if Brother Lawrence was around today he'd find himself listening to podcasts or checking in on the news in between the piles of dishes.

What if we declared boredom as a spiritual discipline? **What if we challenged our people to just unplug and do nothing for a day?** (Or even an hour?)



Maybe we could build a week-long challenge that would help people unplug from technology and plug into the things of God. Each day would up the ante and be more "disconnecting" to create space for the things of God. It could follow a pattern that may be something like this:

- **Day One** // On the train, bus, sidewalk, or passenger seat, keep your phone in your pocket and notice people around you that you could pray for.
- **Day Two** // We take 10 billion (yes, that's a "b") photos per month, mostly on our phones. Today, don't take a single photo with your phone and just attempt to notice the things that you want to store an image in your phone. Maintain a journal of what you notice about that pattern.
- **Day Three** // Your instruction for today: Delete one app. (Double dare you to delete two.) Take time to read an extra chapter of scripture today.

- **Day Four** // Craft an inbox away-message and put it up for an hour, an afternoon, or the whole day. Reach out to friends you haven't connected with for a while and ask them how you can pray for them.
- **Day Five** // Put away the phone. Get out a large pot of water and boil it... stare at it. (A watched pot does eventually boil!) Once it's boiled, take time to journal what you've learned about yourself this week and share it with your small group.

It's Impossible to Get Lost Now

Sometimes the changes are so profound and yet so subtle that it is hard to perceive their implications in our lives. The ubiquitous maps and GPS features on our phones means that no one is ever lost. We're just on the front end of the implications of this innovation.

Arguably the megachurch movement is a logical extension of the ubiquitous access to the car. It took about 50 years for the innovation to exert a profound impact on the local church. However, **once people got used to driving to access services they sought and wanted; it was only logical that they drive past their local "parish" and go to a church on the edge of town offering all the services they wanted.** This innovation drove churches to locate themselves close to major highways and introduce lots of parking spaces to accommodate all those people in cars. Consider, what impact will the universal access to directions have on our ability to reach people?

- **SEO Matters** // People being able to find you online is arguably as important as a simple location to drive to. If people can't find you on Google they are going to have a hard time punching in their address on their phones.
- **Location... Matters Less** // Drive time will probably emerge as a bigger issue in comparison to the ease of finding locations. There is evidence that people are driving less than they did a generation ago. [ref] Usage patterns show that people just look at how long the drive will take when entered in the maps app rather than considering the complexity of the drive.

- **Retail Opportunities** // We gather people together to "do" church on a regular basis. There has always been a "retail" aspect to our ministry. With online shopping continuing to kill traditional brick and mortar shopping, the available spaces will open up new spots for churches looking for advantageous locations. (The [Movement Church in Ohio](#) already has two similar locations!) These spots have the benefit of legacy planning that put them in great community location and have lots of parking, which is normally needed for churches.

Constant Availability is Expected

There was a time when businesses could afford to say "the check in the mail" and that would buy a few extra days for them to do what they needed to get done. Those days are long gone! Consumer standards have risen to the point where instantaneous communication is expected. Always on and available constitute the new standards of communication. Smartphones have freed us up to deposit our own checks, self-service trips around the world and generally stay connected at all times.

Our churches, today, cannot just provide "services" on Sunday but need to be available to help and assist people throughout the week. We need to tune and align our communications to respond rapidly to guests and church members when they reach out to us. Although, this becomes increasingly difficult to do as a church scales up with a rise in the number of contacts and complexity of the issues at a seemingly increasing exponential rate. Therefore, thoughtful and considerate leadership is needed to increase responsiveness and conduct communication in a way that provides instant excellent care.

Here are some potential online tools and systems that might help your church provide "ridiculously responsive" service to your community:

- [OLARK Live Chat](#) // Add a new feature on your website for visitors to be able to chat with a member of your team. This service provides a simple Wordpress plug and team interface to make the implementation quick and easy to use.

- [Bonjoro Video Emails](#) // An incredibly simple tool for sending quick video emails to people... a perfect “onboarding” application for your new guest process!
- [BOND Notes Service](#) // Handwritten notes that you can submit from your phone on the go... wowers! It’s magical.
- [Freshdesk Ticket System](#) // A service for dealing with all the inbound email your church receives. Tackle it as a team to move it along quickly to ensure people get the answers they are looking for.

(speed + personalization) x surprise = delighted guests

Leverage technology to respond to people quickly with a personal help and they will be delighted for a long time to come. Find tools that build into your systems and enhance the features to help delight your guests!

Access to Robust Content Providers

Smartphones are providing unprecedented access to thought leaders through a mixture of podcasts, social connections, blogs and more. Beyond just providing a tool for connecting with ideas or concepts these platforms are now building personal connections at a large scale. The personal nature of the smartphone accords that people sense a deep personal connection to these thoughts leaders. There’s something deeply personal about listening to someone speaking in your ear through earphones and seeing what they are having for dinner on Instagram that drives a close connection.



Church leaders need to leverage all of these tools in combination to build a personal robust platform in order to connect with their people. These tools come together to help extend their ministry beyond just the weekend and into the rest of the week. Rather than shying away from the combination of content and personal connections we should be aligning these to develop even deeper personal connections with our people. With these initiatives, we do not aspire to become a larger than life “personal brand” that extends beyond our local church. Contrarily, we undertake these steps because we want to help minister to the people in our church using the channels through which they are being inspired and lead already by leaders outside of our community.

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