

Is your church website embarrassing?



# Get UnEmbarrassed

## 10 SECRETS TO EFFECTIVE CHURCH WEBSITES

Terrell Sanders



# Introduction

I founded Main Street Enterprises in 1998 to build websites for small businesses and non-profits. Since then we have built a lot of church websites. Everything from mega-churches in Houston and Los Angeles, to a small church on the beach in San Diego and another in the Florida panhandle. Regardless of location, denomination or size, there is a common thread; they often described their old site as embarrassing.

Usually when I'm talking to a new prospect I'll ask for the address to their current site so I can see what they have now. Often I hear the same response "Uh, don't look at our current site; it's embarrassing. Right now we don't even tell people we have a site."

If you feel that way about your current website, this ebook is for you. In it, I've tried to summarize some of the design and management secrets we've learned to make your site effective, and not embarrassing.

Whether you are using volunteers to fix up your existing site, or starting from scratch with an outside vendor, these tips will help get you started in the right direction.

I'd love to hear your feedback.

In Him,

Terrell Sanders  
President  
Main Street Enterprises  
tsanders@MainStreetOpen.com



---

**Use a simple, classic design**

---



# Use a simple, classic design

The only industry that changes faster than the internet is women's fashion. But regardless of what the trend is this season, experts always recommend women own one nice black dress. It never goes out of style, it's flexible and can coordinate with anything, and it almost always works when you don't know what to wear.

Similarly, a simple, classic design will never let you down on a church website. Cool, trendy designs will go out of style. Fancy, complex designs will limit your options for expansion, but simple designs always look good and offer the most flexibility as your site grows and needs to change.

Look at Apple's website. This is a company that can afford to spend a fortune on their site design and is followed by creative designer types all over the world. Their site is light gray, white, dark gray. They use a simple design because their site is about their products, not about wowing you with their website creativity.

If your web designer is trying to create a complicated, graphically intense experience for your website, ask yourself why your site needs to be more complicated than the most hi-tech, profitable and designer friendly company in the world?

Go with the black dress. It will look great and it will go with whatever changes you need to make in the future.



**Design for content**



# Design for content

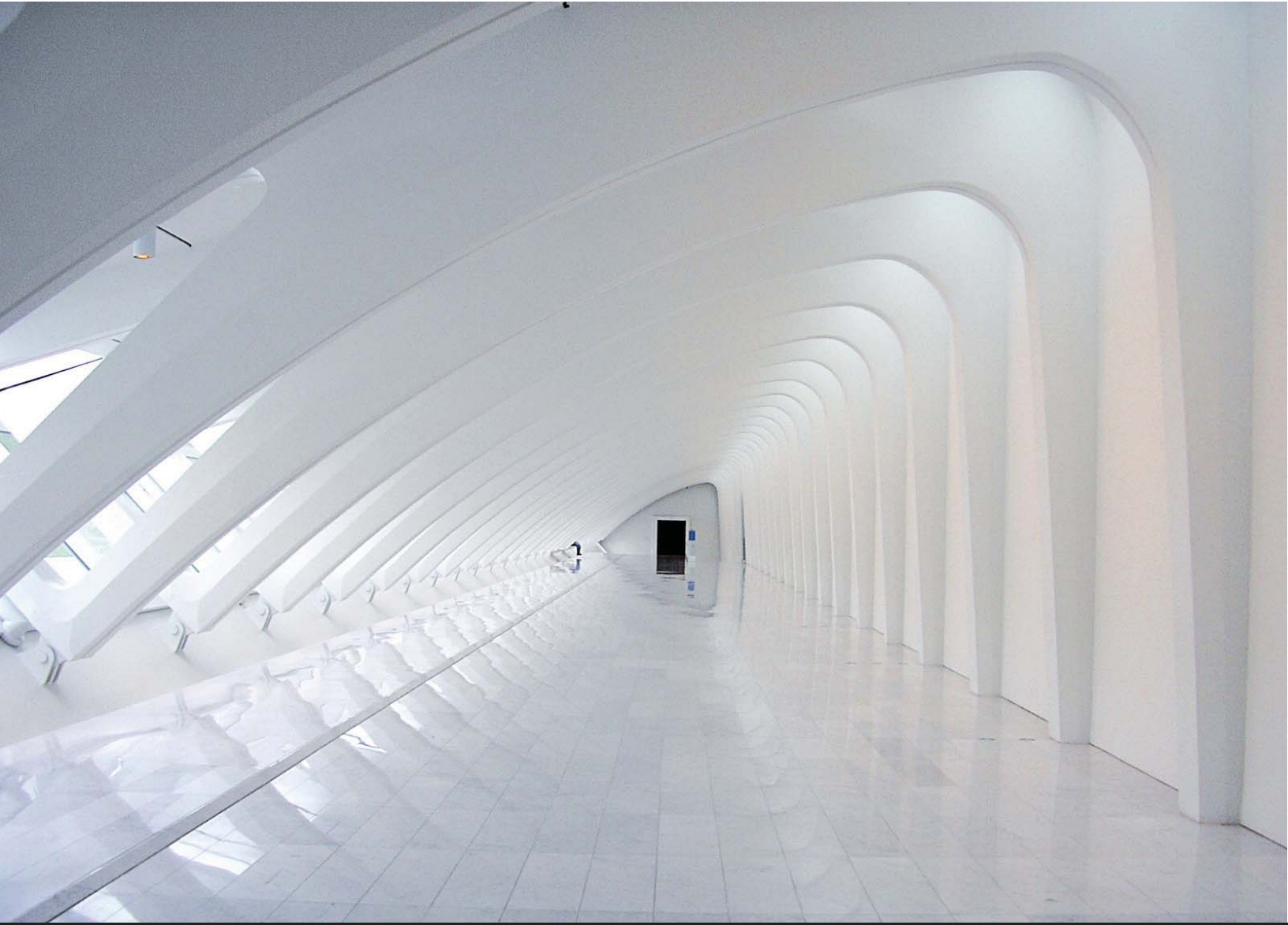
Here is a super secret that even a lot of web designers don't get: people come to your website for content. They are looking for information, times, locations, phone numbers, stories or photos. People almost never get bored and think "let's go cruise the web for some great graphic-design-oriented church websites." I've been in this business since the internet started, and I've never heard anyone say that.

People come to your site for the content. The "graphic design" - the background colors, textures, graphics, wrappers, etc. are just a fancy frame for your content. You can spend a lot of time agonizing over width of the navigation bars or the darkness of the drop shadows, but most visitors are just looking for your service times and your address the first time they visit your site.

Design your site to make it easy to present content. Generally very light backgrounds and very dark text are the easiest to read. If your design doesn't have a white or light background behind the main copy area, you may be letting the picture frame overwhelm the picture.

Look at the designs for Google and Youtube. Both these organizations understand their value is the data they present. People don't go to Youtube to see the site design, they go to watch videos. Does the ultra simple design make the site boring? No, it just guarantees that the site design won't interfere with the content.

The job of the picture frame is to spotlight the picture, not to take attention away from it.



**Consistent style does not mean boring**

# Consistent style does not mean boring

Good design isn't boring. It doesn't need variety to perk it up. Some good intentioned folks try to add variety to the website by changing the layout on every page and using multiple fonts and colors to make things stand out. The result is a circus of colors and fonts and no predictability as people try to move through the site.

Continuity is good. It helps new people use your site better. Keeping the same layout between pages makes it easier to navigate the site, and get back to prior pages. Consistent fonts and colors keep the layout clean and cool, not jarring the reader on every story with a new font and color.

Your website is not like a magazine ad that has to grab attention; people are already giving you attention by coming to your site. Think about your site more like a newspaper and less like a full page ad.





---

**Start small, design to grow**

---

# Start small, design to grow

Pages labeled “Under Construction” are proof of a planning failure. If the page isn’t ready, it shouldn’t be on the website. Many a great website has been delayed for months waiting for obscure content to be finalized and posted.

Many organizations try to start with too much on their website. They design large sites with huge amounts of content, and then get delayed for months while they try to create the content. The thought is that it takes so much time and money to launch a new site, they want to make sure it includes everything they need, or might need in the future. The problem is this makes it almost impossible to finish the site and launch it.

It’s much better to start with a small site map and design it to grow. It’s easy to project where growth will occur and leave room for it, but not include those pages on the site map or navigation until they are ready. This will let you launch quickly then add new content as it becomes available.

No “Under Construction” pages.



# Design for guests

# Design for guests

Have you ever noticed it's almost impossible to get lost in an airport? They are designed for first time visitors: the signage is always excellent, and they have standard names and icons for everything - baggage claim, ground transportation, restrooms. You never see airports get creative and give baggage claim a fancy name. They don't worry about frequent travelers getting bored, they worry about first time guests getting to their destination. Your website should be designed the same way.

Think of guests first when designing your site. Your members know where to go for more information, but your website may be the only resource available to someone considering a first time visit.

First, make sure everything the first-time guest needs is easily accessible from the home page.

Second, get some outside help eliminating "church" words and internal shortcuts from your navigation and page names. It's fine to call your Student ministry by a catchy brand name, but the button on your front page navigation needs to say "Students" or "High School". It needs to be easily understandable by someone who doesn't know your ministries.

When creating page names on your menu bar and dropdowns, think "what would an airport call this?"



**A picture is worth 1000 words**

# A picture is worth 1000 words

People are less interested in reading than ever before. The internet has created an audience with a low tolerance for long text and expectation of frequent photos. The good news is that photos don't cost any extra on the internet and they can help replace paragraphs of words.

Pictures can also help present information that would be complicated or awkward to type out. Think about writing copy to describe your church service to someone who has never attended. It's awkward to try to describe the customary dress code, and the age, gender, race breakdown of your services. But a couple photos of the service tell all that and much more.

**Bonus point:** while we are discussing photography, let me say this clearly, NO CLIP ART on your website. Clip art was great in its day, but that day has passed. There is no reason to use clip art on your website. You don't need it and if you do use it, you are telling the world you missed the memo when clip art went out of style 25 years ago.



**Your webmaster should be a writer**

# Your webmaster should be a writer

Good, healthy websites offer a constant stream of new content. And this content almost always starts with writing — what we call “copy” in the business.

Every month we work with businesses and non-profits who invest in shiny new websites. After the site launches, they commit to find someone to maintain it. Inevitably, this person is called the “webmaster”. When the organization goes shopping for a “webmaster” they almost always look for someone with design, programming and Photoshop skills. Usually this is the beginning of a death spiral of increasing website costs and decreasing value.

Good websites need content — copy, writing, news, articles, blog posts, success stories — whatever you call it. Yes, good design and graphics makes it more enjoyable, but even if you hire Michelangelo to do your design and Albert Einstein to do the programming, without content the site is just a pretty picture frame with no picture.

Good content brings back return visitors. Good content gets great search engine rankings. Good content is created by writers not webmasters. If you want someone to make your website successful, find a writer, preferably with a Journalism background, to be your webmaster.





**Publish frequently, in bite size pieces**

# Publish frequently, in bite size pieces

Electronic media changed everything in publishing. In the old print world, printing and postage were major costs. Color and photography blew out budgets, and the only way to keep unit costs down was to print and ship in bulk.

Now with electronic publishing there is no unit cost of email, a website view, or a PDF of a newsletter. Color is free, photography is free, extra pages and oversize pages are free. You don't have to batch up a week or month of news to get production costs down.

Meanwhile our audience is more impatient than ever. They don't want to read a 20 page newsletter once a month. They would rather receive 2 or 3 news stories several times a week when the news is fresh.

Good websites publish news as it comes out. They add new stories several times a week rather than holding everything and posting a huge batch online at the same time. It's easier on the communications staff, it's easier on the readers, and it even helps your search engine placement.



---

**Don't get locked into proprietary systems**

---

# Don't get locked into proprietary systems

In the old days, photographers owned the negatives of your portraits. Even if you paid for the photo shoot, they still owned the negatives and you had to come back to them and pay for additional prints. Forever.

Some web developers work the same way. They have their own CMS (the software that creates the website) and they build your site on their system. It works, you pay, and life is good -- but they own everything, the site, the design, your content. If you decide to leave that vendor you can't take anything with you. You have to pay someone else to start from scratch, and he may end up owning the new site.

A few years ago a new type of CMS came out that is called Open Source. This software is free. You can copy it, modify it, do anything you want with it. But most importantly, if you build your website on Open Source software you can change vendors, change hosts, change designers and take your existing work with you. You can actually own all your own data and creative. Additionally, these Open Source packages have huge libraries of free and paid add-ons which means you rarely get "our system can't do that" from your developer.

Build your next site on Open Source software and you can control the negatives. You may still choose to redesign from scratch, but at least you will have the option.



**Keep it fresh**

---

# Keep it fresh

Nothing ruins a website's first impression faster than finding the main front page story is promoting registration for a children's program from six years ago. If the cover story hasn't been updated in six years, what can you expect from the rest of the content?

Make sure the news areas on your site are easy to maintain and get new updates frequently.

There is nothing wrong with having a few "filler" stories available to post on the front page when you don't have a current story ready. Create a few timeless stories - welcome to visitors, spotlight a volunteer, or even a reminder to help with ministries that always need help. One of these stories can be quickly dropped onto the site next time a ministry misses a promotion deadline and you have nothing new to post on the site.

Keep it fresh, because ultimately it's all about the content.



web development | consulting | support

Main Street Enterprises

P.O. Box 2921

Edmond, OK 73083

405-330-0800

Copyright © 2012 All Rights Reserved