EVANGELICAL MISSION AGENCIES AND SOCIAL MEDIA: MARCH 2021

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The choice of platforms used by agencies shows that (whether intentionally or not) their social media output is biased towards an older audience and hence to maintaining their supporter base, rather than attracting new people.

Category: Observations

This report is a follow up to a more detailed investigation from November 2019, which is available for downloadÂ here (payment required).

The social media profiles of a sample of mission agencies (133 in total) was established by visiting the home page of each agency website and recording which social media platforms were linked to. Some agencies donâ€™t mention their social media outlets on their home page, which does interfere with this sampling methodology. However, given the impracticalities of searching four different media platforms for each one of 148 agencies (complicated by the fact that agency account names are not always obvious), this approach was deemed accurate enough for the purposes of this research. It is also suggested that if agencies are keen to encourage people to engage with their social media presence, they will facilitate this by linking to their profiles.

From this sample, 72% linked to one or more social media platforms, this was broken down as follows.

Platform	Percentage of Total	Percentage of those with social media links
Facebook	71%	98%
Twitter	62%	85%
Instagram	46%	64%
YouTube	35%	49%
Vimeo	7%	9%
Flikr	1%	1%
Soundcloud	2%	3%

A small number of agencies also linked to LinkedIn. As far as could be observed, none of the agencies had links to TikTok or Snapchat accounts.

It is interesting to compare these early 2021 results with the data from late 2019. In the initial study, only the four most popular platforms were included.

Platform	2019		2021	
	% of Total	% of those with Social Media	% of Total	% of those with Social Media
Facebook	69%	99%	71%	98%

Twitter	57%	83%	62%	85%
Instagram	32%	46%	46%	64%
YouTube	32%	48%	35%	49%

The small difference year on year for Facebook, Twitter and YouTube can largely be accounted for by the slightly different samples used in each study. However, it does seem to be the case that there has been a significant increase in the use of Instagram by mission agencies over the last sixteen months.

Despite this increased use of Instagram, the four social media platforms are ranked Facebook first, with Twitter, YouTube and Instagram in decreasing order of appearance.

It is instructive to compare these figures with the way in which social media are used by different age groups.

Social Media Use by Age.

	13-17	18-29	30-49	50-64	65+
Facebook	51%	81%	78%	65%	41%
Instagram	72%	64%	40%	21%	10%
Twitter	32%	40%	27%	19%	18%

The most popular social media platform overall is Facebook and it is understandable that more agencies should use Facebook than any other medium. However, it is the use of Instagram that is the most interesting. Among the under 18s, Instagram is the most popular platform and with all age groups apart from the over 65s, it is more popular than Twitter.

Broadly speaking, mission agency publicity (of which social media is a subset) aims at two goals; maintaining links with their existing constituency (who will tend to be older) and building connections with potential new supporters (who will tend to be younger). The choice of platforms used by agencies shows that (whether intentionally or not) their social media output is biased towards an older audience and hence to maintaining their supporter base, rather than attracting new people. This impression is reinforced by the fact that none of the agencies appear to use Snapchat or TikTok, platforms which have a predominantly young supporter base.

Agencies who are serious about using social media to expand their supporter base would do well to reconsider their social media profiles.

A little further research was carried out into agency twitter accounts. 75% of agencies with twitter accounts were tweeting regularly, 15% had not tweeted since 2020 and 10% had not tweeted since at least 2019. 53% of agencies with Twitter accounts have less than 1,000% followers. On this basis, it seems wise to consider whether all of these agencies should continue their Twitter accounts. In many cases the impact is low, only reaching tens or a few hundred followers. There seems to be little point in an agencyâ€™s webpage linking to a Twitter account which has been inactive for months or years. This is counterproductive, giving the impression of an organisation which is disorganised or ineffective. If you canâ€™t keep your Twitter feed up to date, how can I trust you to do something useful with my hard earned cash?

A dimension which has not been considered in this study is the theological one. This is multidimensional and needs more unpacking than I have space for here. However, I would argue that social media, by providing genuine opportunities for two-way communication has strengths in a Christian context that traditional media do not have. However, this presupposes that agencies use social media as a two-way vehicle and not as a broadcast medium (see the discussion in my 2019 paper). Not all agencies have the capacity to assign staff to replying to comments on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The increasingly confrontational nature of some social media platforms means that agencies will need to be prepared to deal with negative and hostile comments.

There is a limit to what can be discerned from a purely numerical overview such as this. If any individual agencies wish to have a more thorough analysis of the content and reach of their social media and/or a comparison of the way in which similar organisations are performing, please contact me.Â Â

If you want to download this report as a pdf file, it is available here.

Figures for YouTube use are not available. The information is drawn from https://sproutsocial.com/insights/new-social-media-demographics/ Although these statistics refer to the United States, it is assumed that they are generally true of the United Kingdom, too.