

Facebook Masterclass

The goal: increase church attendance by teaching as many people as possible to understand and harness the power of Facebook advertising. How did this experiment work? Who were the involved parties? Are we seeing results? Continue reading for the full story.

TryTank: An Experimental Laboratory

TryTank: An Experimental Laboratory for Church Growth and Innovation is a joint project of the [Virginia Theological Seminary](#) and the [General Theological Seminary](#).

The Episcopal think tank is the brainchild of the Very Rev. Ian Marham, Dean and President of VTS, the Very Rev. Kurt Dunkle, Dean and President of GTS, and the Rev. Lorenzo Lebrija, then a priest in the diocese of Los Angeles.

The small TryTank team finds inspiration and motivation in the Gospel of John. In Chapter 21, Jesus, after his resurrection, finds his former apostles desperately fishing on the sea near Tiberius. The apostles' fishing efforts fail until Jesus recommends that they throw the net on the other side of the boat, where they hadn't tried before. Heeding the advice of Jesus, the apostles catch 153 fish and their hunger is cured.

"That's where I see TryTank," comments Father Lorenzo. "We're trying to do things differently, to find a different place to throw the net. We're trying to discern where the spirit of God is moving in the world today."

The think tank has a total of 34 experiments so far. The experiments range from [Interactive Sunday](#), a technology designed to provide interactive sermons, to [Alexa Skill](#), a "skill" or app on the Amazon Echo that makes a prayer partner out of Amazon's virtual assistant, Alexa.

Some experiments have succeeded and some have failed. Other experiments are still in development.

Father Lorenzo knows not to expect success in every experiment. "Being able to find God in the world by trying different things, that's my privilege," acknowledges Father Lorenzo. "If and when it works, that's awesome, and when it fails, that's awesome too."

TryTank is, in many ways, exploring uncharted terrain. Few guidelines exist that provide an outline for experiments that test different ideas and technologies within the context of the church.

Compared to the church, technology is still relatively new and it seems that, besides TryTank, the potential of technology to increase church attendance is largely ignored.

“For so long, the church has been doing things in one way and we get set in those ways,” observed Father Lorenzo, “and we forget that God might always be calling us to new and different ways as well.”

Preparation for the Facebook Masterclass

Preparation for the Facebook Masterclass, TryTank’s 11th experiment, began in March. TryTank advertised the masterclass exclusively in their newsletter, inviting participants to attend the Facebook Masterclass at the Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, VA on May 31, 2019.

The intention of the Facebook Masterclass was to teach Facebook advertising tools and best practices to people seeking to advertise their church. The experiment featured the Facebook Masterclass itself, an intensive 8-hour in-person workshop, and a 12-week follow up course conducted on Zoom, an online video conference service.

The masterclass would be taught by Jonathan Vantassel, a digital media marketing professional who works at a large agency in New York. “It’s like Mad Men, but for the digital world,” reflected Vantassel. “Any ad you see online, whether it’s on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or another website, that’s what I do.”

Vantassel would be the perfect fit, especially considering his link to the church. “Lorenzo and my husband actually went to the same seminary,” stated Vantassel, “When Lorenzo found out that my expertise was in digital marketing, including helping religious nonprofits utilize digital tools, he thought it fit really well with the masterclass idea.”

In preparation for the masterclass, Vantassel spent months compacting his years of expertise into a comprehensive 8 hour class. “I wanted to teach industry best practices, marketing strategy, and digital media strategy in one single masterclass. The challenge was to distill all the must-know information out of my many years in the industry, and to make that information accessible for the participants.”

Twenty-two participants signed up to attend the masterclass. Some participants drove in from areas nearby the Virginia Theological Seminary and others flew in from across the country.

The Facebook Masterclass

The intensive 8-hour Facebook Masterclass was broken down into 8 different sessions that focused on the following: key advertising terms, setting goals and strategizing, setting Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), ad platform mechanics, types of audiences, structuring campaigns to align with the target audience, developing copy, and reporting and optimizations.

Following the 8 sessions of the masterclass, participants would be better equipped to advertise their church on Facebook. They would learn the same tools that big agency experts use in their professional work.

While big agency tools might not seem to directly apply to the practices used for church advertising, Vantassel insists that the difference isn't great: "The basic tenets are all the same among all types of digital marketing. The most important part, whether you're a big brand or a church, is authenticity, and I really wanted to get that point across."

The masterclass was technical in nature. Although Vantassel did his best to make the information accessible, certain key details like vocabulary terms, Facebook tools, and industry concepts could not be muddled down for absolute beginners.



Some participants were able to absorb the information better than others. Trish Stukbauer, the communications director at The Episcopal Church of the Holy Comforter in Charlotte, NC, found the class content useful and relevant. “The course material was at the right level for me and exactly what I needed. I’ve used material I learned from the class on different campaigns and posts,” commented Stukbauer.

Others were clearly in over their heads. Melien Lavoie of the Trinity Church in Tariffville, Connecticut, “It was an unbelievably intense workshop. I felt that Jonathan Vantassel did a good job of breaking up a complex issue into digestible pieces, but by noon, I felt a bit overwhelmed by the amount of material.”

Of the 22 masterclass participants, 3 left before the last session finished. The learning curve was too large, and the participants wished they were better prepared. While Vantassel’s expertise was clear to every person who attended the class, many people wished that a pre-class was offered to help them overcome the learning curve.

Masterclass Follow Up

Jonathan Vantassel knew that the technical nature of the masterclass would challenge its participants. The information was too dense and compact to lead to immediate results. “Even those who were prepped and ready for the masterclass could not retain everything in a single day,” observed Vantassel.

Considering the difficulty of the class, Vantassel and Father Lorenzo planned 12 follow up classes on Zoom where participants of the Facebook Masterclass could ask clarifying questions.

For 12 weeks, each week, for an hour, Vantassel provided a space for attendees to ask questions about specific aspects of the class. “The follow up classes served as a great way to reinforce the points I made in the masterclass,” remarked Vantassel, “and to encourage participants to take the information they learned and to begin ad campaigns.”

Of the 22 people who attended the class, only 8 joined the follow-up classes on Zoom. Even fewer people attended all 12 sessions. Those who did attend were interested in the information and creating a Facebook advertisement campaign.

Vantassel recorded every follow-up Zoom class and made the information available for masterclass participants who could not attend the sessions. The participants were able to listen to the recordings and email questions directly to Vantassel.

A few participants began Facebook advertising campaigns. Others did not, either because of a lack of interest in Facebook advertising or the absence of advertising money in the budget.

Results of the Experiment

The 19 people who stayed throughout the entire Facebook Masterclass were asked to take a follow-up survey asking a single question: “How likely is that you would recommend this class to a friend or colleague?” 10 participants answered that they would recommend the class to others; 4 participants gave a neutral response; and 5 participants said that they would not recommend the class to others.

The 19 responses were used to calculate the resulting Net Promoter Score, a measurement of customer satisfaction, of +27, a generally “good” score. By TryTank’s measurements, the initial masterclass was a success.

Not every participant was able to absorb the information, but those who did found value that positively influenced their church communications.

Hallerin Hill of the Church of St. Paul's, K Street of Washington, D.C, found significant value in the masterclass: “Since the class, I’ve been trying to make sure that my ad boosts are targeted appropriately and run long enough. I also try to use language that will capture people's attention and to use more visual images.”

Although only 8 people participated in the follow-up classes on Zoom, they were engaged and focused on their church’s advertising campaign.

Regarding the experiment and its goals, Vantassel stated: “I think the experiment was successful in its goal to increase church advertising on Facebook and preparing participants with masterclass-level information. We didn’t do that for everybody in that room, but it certainly worked for quite a few participants.”

Room for Improvement

While both Father Lorenzo and Jonathan Vantassel consider the Facebook Masterclass to be a success, there were a couple elements that could have been improved upon. The most obvious misstep was directly jumping in to an expert-level masterclass. While most participants learned something valuable from the class, others were left confused.

“There was definitely a group of people in that room who were not ready for the Facebook Masterclass,” admitted Vantassel. “They needed the more elementary information first, and in hindsight I wish we had done a beginner-level class first for the people who weren’t ready for the masterclass.”

There were also issues with unclear logistics.

“On the day of the class, somebody reached out to me over the internet and asked when the class was going to start,” Father Lorenzo began. “He told me that he was joining us through Zoom. Right then and there, I realized I had made a mistake. They thought that the class was via Zoom because it had to do with technology, and I never created a space for potential participants to ask clarifying questions.”

This alludes to an even larger hiccup. The TryTank team and Vantassel had focused on the elements of the masterclass in such great detail that they didn’t realize the flaw in the name of the experiment.

“During one of the breaks, somebody in the class who had flown in from the west coast came up to me and said ‘this is a Facebook *advertising* masterclass,’” remembered Father Lorenzo. “I can only imagine what my face looked like in that moment. I realized that many of the people attending the masterclass thought we were teaching about facebook posts, not advertising, and I never clarified the intention in the title.”

For Father Lorenzo, mishaps and missteps are not seen as failures, but rather areas to improve upon.

While the lack of information negatively affected the Facebook Masterclass, it encouraged Father Lorenzo to better design future experiments. “I realized that I needed to be as clear as I could possibly be. Now I share information with everybody involved in the experiments and ask if people have any questions about the experiments.”

As a whole, the experiment was successful. At the same time, it’s clear that Facebook advertising is not a skill that can be learned in a single day.

“The key takeaway for me,” observed Father Lorenzo, “is that Facebook advertising is too high of an expertise that most people in churches do not have. And you can’t learn everything in 8 hours. To his credit, Jonathan is an expert, but it’s impossible to impart so much information in so little time. It is often cheaper and better to outsource Facebook advertising to an expert who knows exactly what they’re doing.”

For TryTank, success and failure are both welcome. They each lead to new lessons, experiments, and ideas; and they are part of the journey that God created for the Episcopal think tank that tries.

The Facebook Masterclass did not create 22 Facebook advertising experts. What it did, though, was stress the importance of Facebook advertising, increase knowledge in participants already somewhat adept in the field, and teach TryTank the importance of communication.