

**Church Websites: Application of Uncertainty
Reduction Theory to Minimizing Guest Anxiety**

Larry D. Witzel

School of Communication & the Arts, Liberty University

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Author Note

Larry D. Witzel  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7192-6191>

I have an ownership stake in a commercial enterprise that offers website design, hosting, and marketing services to churches.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Larry Witzel, SermonView Evangelism Marketing, 4221 NE St Johns Rd Ste F, Vancouver, WA 98661, United States. Email: lwitzel@gmail.com

Abstract

Uncertainty Reduction Theory suggests that first-time church guests will visit a church's website seeking information to decide whether to attend that church. This study of 116 churches in Southwest Washington and Western Oregon identified seven characteristics of church websites that appear to reduce guest uncertainty. Three of these—having a customized website, offering a dedicated page for guests with a prominent link on the home page, and providing an archive of videos of the church's worship services—correlated with faster church growth.

Keywords: uncertainty reduction theory, church websites, Seventh-day Adventist evangelism

Church Websites: Application of Uncertainty Reduction Theory to Minimize Guest Anxiety

New church guests must overcome internal anxiety created by the uncertainty of coming through the doors of an unknown environment and interacting with people they have never met. Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) suggests people are uncomfortable with uncertainty, particularly when engaged in new interpersonal encounters. Because most guests visit the church's website before their first in-person encounter, a church can use its website to intentionally communicate information that will reduce the guest's uncertainty, thus lowering anxiety and minimizing a potential mental barrier to visiting the church. By using the website to set expectations, a church can lower guest uncertainty, resulting in a better first-time guest experience that offers a better opportunity for long-term engagement with that church.

This research reviews the websites of Seventh-day Adventist churches in Western Oregon and Southwest Washington to determine what approach each takes to uncertainty reduction. The communication messaging of each church website was analyzed to determine which of this messaging appears to reduce the uncertainty of potential guests. Seven specific types of information were identified, and three of them were found to strongly correlate with church growth: having a customized website, having a dedicated guest-expectations page, and offering access to video archives of the worship service. Churches that had two or more of these were found to have grown 45% more over the previous five years than churches that had one or none of these.

Literature Review

Uncertainty reduction theory (URT) suggests people are uncomfortable with uncertainty, particularly when engaged in new interpersonal encounters (Littlejohn, et al., 2021, pp. 63-65).

Humans use several strategies for reducing this uncertainty, one of which is *extractive information seeking*, which is the label given by Ramirez et al. (2002) for using online resources such as Google or Facebook to research someone online. While URT was first articulated in 1975, there has been a recent resurgence of scholarly interest in the theory and its application in a wide variety of inquiry. For example, it has been applied to research on sales communication, (Wiener, et al., 2022), social media theory (Li & Kent, 2021), fashion ecommerce (Hwang & Youn, 2023), and corporate crisis communication (Grace & Tham, 2021), to name a few topics where this theory has been applied.

According to URT, the extractive information seeking behavior of uncertainty reduction suggests people will look at that church's website to learn more about it to help reduce their uncertainty about the upcoming encounter. And indeed, while a decade ago 46% of church attenders said the church's website was an important factor in deciding whether to attend or not (Clark, 2012), a recent survey found 59% of worshipers in the United States looked at the church's website prior to their first visit (Witzel, 2023). The importance of the information gleaned from a church's website was highlighted when, in that same study, 36% said they decided *not* to attend a worship service due to the information they found—or couldn't find—on the church's website (Witzel, 2023).

American consumers place considerable value on online information. A 2014 study found that 78% rely on online reviews to help make purchasing decisions (Gammon). A recent article applied URT to church websites (Witzel, 2022), suggesting practical ways a church can communicate to reduce guest uncertainty. This research looked at a selection of existing church websites to determine how current content relates to URT.

Research Method

The Oregon Conference of Seventh-day Adventists is the regional denominational body which encompasses Western Oregon and Southwest Washington of the United States (Oregon Conference, n.d.). The website for each of its 116 English-language churches was analyzed. The list of these churches and their websites was retrieved from the publicly available database at eAdventist.net. The researcher began coding the URT-related characteristics of these websites, continuing until saturation was reached. Each website was then evaluated based on the resulting codes, to determine which characteristics were found on each website.

To determine correlation of these characteristics with numerical church growth, new member accession data for five years, covering the 2018-2022 time period, was obtained from eAdventist.net. This data included baptisms and professions of faith, which were added together to get a single accessions number. This was then compared to the total church membership to determine a percentage growth rate.

Research Questions

The following research questions were considered:

1. What audiences appear to be targeted by the website, and which content speaks to which audience?
2. What are the characteristics of these church websites which appear to help reduce the uncertainty of potential guests?
3. What is the correlation between website URT content and church growth?

Results

During the initial coding, seven characteristics of church websites were identified that appeared valuable to reducing the uncertainty of guests. First, most websites listed on the

homepage the dates and times of the weekly meetings, such as Bible study classes and the worship service. This characteristic was found on 80% of the websites. Second, the address of the church could be found on the homepage of 85% of the websites. Third, a visual map of the church was visible on the homepage of 59% of the websites. Responsive web design, where the layout of a page is friendly for viewing on mobile devices and templates, was noted on 82% of the websites. Having a page speaking directly to guest expectations, with a highly-visible button or link on the homepage, was found on just 9% of the websites. About one-third of the websites, 34%, made videos of past worship services available on the website. And finally, the denomination has given every church in North America a website with some basic information on it, but 74% of the studied websites were customized in some way from these basic default versions. Table 1 shows each of these characteristics with the percentage of websites that share each one.

Table 1

URT Website Characteristics and Rates of Appearance

URT Characteristic	Rate of Appearance
1. Meeting dates and times on homepage	80%
2. Church address on homepage	85%
3. Map on homepage	59%
4. Responsive website	82%
5. Dedicated guest page with highly-visible link on homepage	9%
6. Worship service video archive	34%
7. Customized website	74%

Accession data for each church were then compared with each of these characteristics. Four of the characteristics had negative correlation with church growth rates and accessions. However, three of them showed positive correlation with both rates of church growth and total accessions. Churches with a dedicated guest page grew 21% faster, and those having a

customized website showed 6% higher growth. Churches with a video archive of previous worship services grew 41% faster than those that didn't. Churches with at least two of these characteristics grew 45% faster than churches with just one or none of these characteristics.

Table 2 shows the correlation between each characteristic and rates of church growth.

Table 2

Correlation between URT Website Characteristics and Growth Rates

URT Characteristic	Growth Rate with Characteristic	Growth Rate without Characteristic	Excess Growth Rate with Characteristic
1. Meeting dates and times on homepage	9.3%	9.8%	-4.8%
2. Church address on homepage	9.3%	10.0%	-7.0%
3. Map on homepage	8.8%	10.3%	-14.2%
4. Responsive website	9.3%	10.1%	-8.5%
5. Dedicated guest page with highly-visible link on homepage	11.2%	9.3%	20.7%
6. Worship service video archive	11.7%	8.3%	41.3%
7. Customized website	9.6%	9.0%	6.1%
Two or more of 5, 6, and 7	11.7%	8.1%	44.5%

More startling was the rates of raw baptisms and professions of faith for each of the three positively-correlated URT website characteristics. For all three, churches whose websites had the characteristic had about three times the total accessions of those that didn't. And churches with websites that had all three characteristics had six times the total accessions of those that didn't have any of the three characteristics. Table 3 shows the correlation between each characteristic and total member accessions.

Table 3*Correlation between URT Website Characteristics and Total Member Accessions*

URT Characteristic	Average Accessions with Characteristic	Average Accessions without Characteristic	Excess Average Accessions with Characteristic
1. Meeting dates and times on homepage	17.9	17.3	3.8%
2. Church address on homepage	18.7	12.4	50.9%
3. Map on homepage	13.8	23.6	-41.7%
4. Responsive website	17.1	20.7	-17.0%
5. Dedicated guest page with highly-visible link on homepage	44.9	15.2	195.2%
6. Worship service video archive	31.1	11.0	183.2%
7. Customized website	21.6	7.0	206.9%
All three of 5, 6, and 7 versus none	42.9	7.0	509%
Two of 5, 6, and 7 versus none	30.3	7.0	331%
One of 5, 6, and 7 versus none	11.0	7.0	57%

Discussion

Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) suggests that first-time church guests will seek information about the church and their anticipated experience by visiting the church's website. The seven characteristics identified by this research each offer information a guest can use to reduce uncertainty, thereby reducing anxiety about walking through the doors of a new space and interacting with unknown people.

The administrative unit of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America has established a website for every church in the territory, using data it has collected including the church address, service times, and name(s) of the pastor(s). These websites are designed responsively, making them mobile-friendly, which means that they have all of the first four characteristics identified in this study. Churches with such websites have not put any effort into their online presence, which might imply that they generally put less effort into external communication and may be less friendly to guests. This would explain why the first four characteristics actually have a negative correlation to church growth. This is supported by the

fact that churches who have a customized website grew 6% faster than those with one of these default websites.

The two rarest characteristics were having a page dedicated to guests with prominent links on the home page, which only 9% of the websites had, and having an archive of worship service videos, found on 34% of the websites. These were also the two characteristics found in websites of churches with the most elevated rates of church growth. While the qualitative study suggested these as URT-related characteristics which would increase the likely of guests visiting the church and thereby more likely to choose to become members, it is likely that these more rare characteristics are the result of an outward focus by the church as a whole which manifests itself on the church's website through these features.

This study only identified correlation, not necessarily causation. There are many other factors that influence a guest's decision to become a member of the church through baptism or profession of faith. It is likely that an overall culture of evangelism in the church led the communication team to add these uncertainty-reducing features to the website. Nonetheless, this study has identified a strong correlation between these website characteristics and church growth that should be considered by church communication leaders.

Conclusion

Uncertainty Reduction Theory suggests that first-time church guests will visit a church's website seeking information to decide whether to attend that church. This study of 116 churches in Southwest Washington and Western Oregon identified seven characteristics of church websites that appear to reduce guest uncertainty. Three of these—having a customized website, offering a dedicated page for guests with a prominent link on the home page, and providing an archive of videos of the church's worship services—correlated with faster church growth.

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