Your online image: what it is, why it matters

THERE IS A HOUSE IN MY NEIGHBORHOOD that never fails to captivate me. During my walks, I can't wait to get to that block. As I approach, I can already see the flag *du jour* waving in the breeze. The patch of earth in front is covered with a menagerie of plants—it's wild and inviting. The bird feeders are overflowing with sunflower seeds. The porch and fence walls have beautiful artwork of clay, metal, and wood, featuring images of the sun, moon, and stars. As I come upon the house, I look up the path to the door. Always the light is on, at the ready to receive a visitor. The stained-glass window in the transom reads, "Peace to all who enter."

I want to meet the people in this house. I want to know who tends so lovingly to the flora and fauna, who has such creativity and artistic flair. Who is it that gives even the simple passerby a moment of solace and beauty? Who is it that seems to invite me in?

The image we present to others can be powerful just as the image I have of the inhabitants of this house. In fact it's something we tend to every day! We do this when we choose to comb our disheveled hair, and when we chose to wear business attire instead of pajamas to work. Our choices communicate something of who we are and how we want others to experience us.

BY SISTER JULIE VIEIRA, I.H.M.

Sister Julie Vieira, I.H.M. belongs to the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary of Monroe, Michigan. She is the program director of the IHM Spirituality Centers. She has served for many years in online engagement, blogging, and podcasting.

Your online image matters

Religious communities have an image too that needs care and tending so that the public can know who we are and what our mission is. Because the Internet is a major way that the public gets information about us, our online image—that is, how we present ourselves on the Internet—matters.

1. YOUR ONLINE IMAGE ALREADY EXISTS

Your religious community already has an online image. Even if you do not have a website or a Facebook account or any content whatsoever on the internet, your community's online image is defined by its absence. This online image can indicate, for example, that the community is not relevant to today's world or that it does not care to engage with people.

2. YOUR ONLINE IMAGE IS SUBSTANTIVE

Sometimes online image is seen as superficial. It is considered a mere external that reflects little or nothing of what is real. But online image has a lot more depth than this. While it certainly has the capacity, like everything else in life, to be used poorly or inauthentically, online image also has the capacity to communicate substance. It can be used to extend our presence, our charism, our hospitality, and who we are as a community to new and larger audiences.

3. YOUR ONLINE IMAGE IS OFTEN THE FIRST POINT OF CONTACT FOR POTENTIAL NEW MEMBERS

Encountering a community's online image is particularly important for potential new members exploring religious communities and their calling. Many rely on the Internet to meet a community for the first time. They search our community websites and social media platforms for information, to get a feel for the community, to see what ways they can connect with the community—mass time, day of retreat, vocation director's email, volunteer help, a collaborative social justice project. Because they are discerning religious life, they are also assessing the community's online image to see if their own personal image of themselves connects with the community's life, spirituality, and ministry.

4. YOUR ONLINE IMAGE IS A CRUCIAL PART OF YOUR MARKETING PLAN

There it is. The "M" word. Most of us do not think of our vocations work as being part of a marketing plan; the corporate term seems so out of place with the spirituality of calling. Yet, we can learn some valuable tips to complement our vocation promotion efforts and align our online image with our desire for new members. Online image should be considered in the various aspects of a marketing plan such as the following:

What is our community's vocation or membership situation right now? Who is our target audience? What are our short-term and long-term goals? What strategies and actions will we take to meet our goals? What resources will we need in terms of time, treasure, and talent? These considerations can help not only our online vocation plan, but our vocation plan in general.

5. IT TAKES LESS THAN A SECOND TO MAKE A GOOD FIRST IMPRESSION

Whenever people are online, they are barraged with all kinds of information. They have to make quick decisions as to what data they are going to take in. They scan websites, articles, and photos and mentally filter the content to see if what they want is there. How does our online image measure up to all the other content? What is distinctive about it that can give visitors pause? What captivates their attention and draws them in?

What is your online image?

Your online image is comprised of all the places that your community is publicly present online. This is primarily the community's website, social media platforms, and email communication (e.g., newsletters). These are the most significant because they are your home base, they are the place where you are saying in your own voice who you are as a community. Depending on the community, there may be other significant public places such as a blog, podcast, or app.

There are likely other places where your community is online such as in advertisements, on sponsored institutions' web pages, on individual community members' websites or social platforms, in directories, on Wikipedia, and so on. It is helpful to periodically do an inventory of your community's digital footprint and to track where the community might be mentioned by individuals or the media.

In each of these online places, your image is given shape by every piece of content, the visual design, and the functionality, all of which are interrelated. As you assess your community's online image, consider each of these areas and how it can positively or negatively impact a discerner's experience.

CONTENT refers to all text and media on your web-

site or social platform. Media includes images (photos, graphics, animations), video, and audio. Content is the substance of your messaging. And as the saying goes, content is queen/king. Your community might have the latest and greatest web design, but if the content is of poor quality, dated, or unrelated, even the most expensive website won't be able to improve your online image to discerners!

VISUAL DESIGN refers to the overall look and feel of a website. (Note: There's less control over design and technology in social media, but they still benefit from these considerations.) It includes general principles such as balance, flow, consistency, as well as style elements such as color, shapes, and how visual content is presented.

FUNCTIONALITY is closely related to design but refers more to the technical design of the website, how the website actually works, and ultimately how well it facilitates the interactivity of the website with the user. It includes how easily (or not so easily) users can navigate the website, how fast or slow web pages load, how well video or audio players work, the nature of popup ads, etc.

Let's look at a few examples specific to how discerners might experience your community's online image.

• *The presence of vocation messaging in main, high-traffic areas such as the home page, headers and footers, and navigation.*
Keep it simple, direct, and in language that a discerner will recognize! "Become a ____ Brother" is easy to understand and invitational. If vocational messaging is lacking or too difficult to find, it may send the message that the religious community does not prioritize it or is not welcoming of new vocations.

• *Engaging content about your religious community that is relevant to discerners.*
Remember, your audience is discerners, not people who have been in religious life for a number of years! Find the points of connection between the story of your religious community and discerners.

Show the vitality! A story about how a sister discerned her vocation (even if it was 80 years ago!) can speak directly to a young person currently struggling to understand her or his calling. A history buff may adore the website's image gallery of founders and early community members, but a discerner might wonder why there are few recent images of what the

members are doing today in terms of ministry, prayer, or fun community events. She may be more interested in hearing about the story of the zeal and challenge of following God's invitation!

• *Images that are diverse and that show that you (the discerner) could belong.*
Even if your religious community is largely homogenous in terms of age, race, geography, type of ministry, it is important to find authentic ways to express diversity. Discerners want to see someone like themselves right alongside the other sisters and brothers—not just being ministered to!

• *Design that is fresh and modern.*
Design has a shelf life. It doesn't have to be a massive overhaul, but it does have to be fresh and modern. Even the classic iconic McDonald's branding has been updated! Old design can signal an online image that the religious community is old-fashioned. If their style is old-fashioned, could they be old-fashioned in other ways too? Do they really want someone from a younger generation?

Feeling overwhelmed? Fear not

If you're new to vocations ministry or working in the digital landscape, it can be tough trying to discern which need to meet first when there are so many, but the important thing is to take one step, even if it's small, toward assessing or improving your online image. Start with the platforms where your community is already present. Your website, Facebook, and email newsletters are good places to begin. Assess what your platforms are currently saying about your community, then develop a list of goals based on what you've discovered. For example, perhaps you decide that your Facebook cover photo will be a place to advertise Come and See events, or that your website will feature the latest news stories about your members. When you've come up with a solid plan for platforms that already exist, it will be much easier to allow yourself to explore new ways of developing your online image.

Be sure to collaborate with others! You'll find help in many places. Ask new members and young people for their thoughts on your online image. Check in with others who share responsibility for your online presence such as communications, development, and leadership.

HAVE A GENEROUS SPIRIT

Online image goes both ways. It's not just religious communities that tend to their online image. Potential discerners do too! It is always good practice to research the online image of potential candidates. But as vocation ministers, it is important we embrace a spirit of generosity and remember that the people submitting inquiries are in a vulnerable space in their life. They are feeling this crazy draw to God and religious life that is mystifying them. They likely are unfamiliar with the culture of religious life, vocation and calling, sometimes even of the Catholic faith. Additionally, their more casual approach mixed with nervousness about actually making contact with you may throw them off their game.

Always respond to them and give them a chance – a third, fourth, and fifth chance too. I have met discerners whose first impression was not stellar or whose framework was so different from my own that I could have misjudged them. Your response matters to them, and can be a great source of encouragement to them. Even if you know the person is not a good fit, respond to him or her and give encouragement, for this is a person on a journey of discernment, even if it is not to religious life.

And fear not. One of the best pieces of advice about online image I ever received was from one of my sisters. My co-host and I were nervously preparing for a live podcast. She took our hands and said very calmly, "Just be yourself." This is good advice for our religious communities too. While a lot of factors go into our online image, the most important is to just be ourselves and let the content and everything else flow from this.

Peace to all who enter

As we work on our online image, let us remember that being ourselves and communicating who we are includes who we are becoming—it includes that next generation of religious who are encountering us every day online. For their sake and for the sake of God's mission alive and well in our religious communities, let us be sure to keep the outside of our house warm and welcoming, attractive and inviting with the light always on. And let us be ready to open the door saying, "Peace to all who enter"! ■