

Tip Sheet #35—Big Data and the Church: Your church as a platform

By Eric Swanson and Matt Engel

"We need data that tells us 'Who in the city needs a ride and where are they?'"ⁱ

Uber

Churches today have three primary methodologies to connect with and grow their congregants. First, churches today, by default, employ a "pipeline" strategy as their methodology to grow congregants into disciples. So, what is a pipeline? For our answer we turn to the world of business. "[A] pipeline is a business that employs a step-by-step arrangement for creating and transferring value, with the producers on one end and consumers at the other."ⁱⁱ Pipelines are designed for one-directional flow of product, service or information—from producer to consumer. So, the pastor studies the Bible for 5 to 20 hours a week, crafts a message and "delivers" the message to (hopefully) eager ears at the end of the pipeline on the weekend or through the Web. Authors, speakers, educators and content creators all produce something at one end of the pipe hoping to deliver it to hungry consumers at the other end of the pipeline. But pipelines aren't particularly effective in producing life change. Pipelines are good for "transfer of information" but not necessarily for transformation.

The church as a portal

Churches have a second delivery system commonly understood as a "portal." In the Internet world a portal is a Web site that acts as the entry point for browsing or searching the Web. Think of your last Ministry Fair or Missions Fair you hosted in your fellowship hall. "Success" was probably measured by the number of ministry partners who showed up and the number of congregants who walked through the exhibits. Your church bulletin and weekly announcements also serve as a portal. The phrase, "We trust that you'll find your place of service" or "We encourage all the men to be there" are characteristics of portal thinking. Like pipes, portals don't usually bring about action or life change.

Could your church be a platform?

What if there were insights we could gain by looking past pipelines and portals to platforms. Platforms could very well be the most revolutionary business model the world has ever seen and it is platforms that are breaking the traditional rules of how value is created and how customers are being served. For the first time in history value is detached from ownership. Think about [this](#): "The world's largest taxi company, [Uber](#), owns no vehicles. The world's largest accommodation provider, [Airbnb](#), owns no real estate. The world's most popular media owner, Facebook, creates no content. The most valuable retailer, [Alibaba](#) (the Amazon.com of China) has no inventory."ⁱⁱⁱ Each of these enterprises has discovered the power of platforms.

So, what exactly is a platform?

Platform guru [Sangeet Paul Choudary](#) tells us, “A platform acts as *the infrastructure* that enables users to interact with each other and *exchange some type of value* with greater efficiency *than users trying to interact on their own.*”^{iv} A platform has three entities:

- Producers
- Consumers
- The platform infrastructure

It is the platform infrastructure, like your local Farmer’s Market, that links producers with consumers, buyers with sellers, etc. to produce value for all.

Platform Design 101

There are four design principles that all successful platforms are anchored around.

1. What wants to happen
2. The “Core Interaction”
3. Scaling
4. Tools

Let’s unpack these design principles one at a time.

1. **What wants to happen.** Platforms help that which “wants to happen,” turning passive longing into active energy. Whoever thought:
 - 3 million people wanted to use their own vehicle to be taxi drivers for Uber?
 - 650,000 people would want to rent rooms in their home to strangers through Airbnb?
 - 2.5b people would want to be content creators on Facebook?
 - 2.1 million photos would be shared each minute on Snapchat?
 - 300 hours of video would be loaded up each minute on YouTube?
 - 95 million photos / videos would be shared every day on Instagram?
 - People would create 500 million Tweets every day?

Each of these enterprises has discovered what people *have wanted to do all along* and then enabled them to do that very thing. Platforms don’t *make* things happen...they *help* things happen...that *want* to happen.^v

So, what *wants to happen* in your church? Hint: Parachurch organizations and nonprofits have been able to capture what “wants to happen” in your church with great regularity. Think of Compassion Int’l child-sponsorship, Cru missionaries, Charity Water, etc. Every person has a desire to be a contributor and make a difference. It is part of their Ephesians 2:10 calling. Everybody wants to make a difference. They want to contribute. They’d rather be in the game helping to redeem something that is broken than on the bench longing to play. It is contribution more than consumption that is most fulfilling. No matter how great your weekend service is, eventually it loses its zing as the law of diminishing returns sets in and less value is accrued through each consumptive act (chocolate cake to a world-class worship experience). How can you capture that energy turning passive longing of wanting to change the world into active doing?

2. **The Core Interaction.** Every successful platform is built around *one value-creating core interaction* between participants. A core interaction is defined as “a set of actions that producers and consumers on your platform perform repeatedly to gain value out of the platform.”^{vi} Every successful platform eventually is able to identify their one core interaction that creates value. So for instance...

- YouTube is a platform for the hosting (production) and viewing (consumption) of videos
- Airbnb is a platform for matching hosts with guests
- Facebook is a platform for the creation (production) and consumption of posts
- Uber is a platform for booking a car, leveraging information (car availability) to match producers (taxi drivers) with consumers (taxi seekers)^{vii}

Every platform business has a mission—some way they are trying to change the world. And every platform business knows what core interaction they must scale and multiply for their mission to be fulfilled. So, for instance Uber’s mission is: “Transportation as reliable as running water, everywhere for everyone.” They know that by continually scaling their core interaction of connecting drivers with riders, they will eventually fulfill their mission. For leaders in the church the most important question to answer is “*What is it you want your people to repeatedly do that if they did this repeatedly and at scale, you would fulfill your mission?*” Identifying your core interaction will determine what you measure and collect data around. Increasing the number of people who listen to your weekend message may be a good pipe action but not a good platform interaction.

The core interaction and conversion

Those who are steeped in the world of marketing, platforms and social media know the importance the word “conversion.” Conversion is defined as “the point at which a recipient of a marketing message performs a desired action.” In other words, conversion is simply getting someone to respond to your call-to-action.”^{viii} Isn’t that what all platforms seek to do? Airbnb doesn’t have “page-views” as their measure of success but rather “room nights rented.” They keep fine-tuning the platform to convert more and more of the lookie-loos into actual users. That is the core interaction they are scaling—from looking to booking. There is no scaling without conversion from hearing to doing. You, as a leader in your church are probably not trying to multiply hearers but doers. Platform design is about *turning passive hearers into active doers*. With this in mind let’s think about the possibilities of Jesus’ core interaction.

- Luke 6:46 “Why do you call me ‘Lord’ and don’t **do** what I say...”
- John 13:17 If you know these things, blessed are you if you **do** them

- Matthew 12:50 “For whoever **does** the will of My Father...is my brother and sister and mother.”
- Luke 10:37 “Go and **do** likewise.”
- Matthew 7:24 “Everyone who hears these words of mine and **puts them into practice...**”
- John 13:17 “Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you **do** them”

What is your core interaction you are trying to multiply and scale?

“Conversion” has many possibilities. Conversion from a non-believer to a Christ-follower; Conversion from a bystander to a volunteer; Conversion from a small group participant to a small group leader; Conversion from a non-giver to a regular donor; Conversion from a consumer to a contributor; Conversion from the crowd to the core; Conversion from a follower to a disciple. This is the most important action to define, without which there is no platform. This also opens the possibility that your church could actually be a “platform of platforms,” where the consistent core interaction is converting hearers into doers but the specifics of what “hearing to doing” looks like can be left to each department lead. So, each ministry would need to define what *one core interaction* they are trying to scale and multiply. You now know what it is you need to measure.

3. Scale

Platforms must be architected so that consumers can easily and with the least amount of friction, become producers. In platforms producers and consumers are not people but *roles*. And it is very easy to shift between the roles of consuming and producing. So those who ride with Uber can easily start driving for Uber; Those who rent a room through Airbnb can easily rent out a room through Airbnb. Those who read something on Facebook can effortlessly post something on Facebook. In your church, can those who received the gospel, easily share the gospel? Can those who are taught easily teach others? Can those who participate in service easily include others in service? Digital platforms like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, make it easy and likely for consumers to become producers through “co-creation.” Every time I hit the “Like” button on Facebook or write a comment I make the original post, picture, video or link a little more valuable and the “message” goes out to an increasingly wider audience (“Eric recently liked this”).

Platforms work because they are not hierarchical. Platforms democratize the opportunity for anyone to contribute and anyone to benefit. If the platform is well-architected, growth and change can be initiated and championed by anyone, in any place, at any time—through small groups, Sunday School, a conversation at the church’s Higher Grounds Café, etc. So, if the platform is architected correctly, anyone can champion the growth of another—at any place...at any time. This is a key to scaling. Is there something congregants could do to co-create, and spread to a wider audience what happens on a

weekend...through their Life Group...after a day of service, an action they took, etc.? How could other platforms like Twitter, Instagram or Facebook help you multiply and scale what you are doing and who you are reaching? What if all co-created social media was not built around the awesome preaching of the senior leader but what the church did to motivate, equip, inspire or celebrate my next steps in growth and impact? Churches divide around this question: “Are we here to get people to help us fulfill our mission as a church?” or “Are we here to help people discover and become effective in their God-given mission (Ephesians 2:10, Ephesians 4:11)?” What could you build into everything you do the opportunity to turn consumers into producers as quickly as possible?

A well-architected platform scales to benefit a greater number of people without significantly increasing marginalized costs to the platform. [Instagram](#) had a paltry 14 employees when it was bought by Facebook for \$1b. [WhatsApp](#) had a mere 40 employees but was growing at a million users a day when it was acquired by Facebook for \$19b. Is all of your growth a product of additional staffing or can you grow and scale because your consumers can easily become producers and help others become producers and consumers?

That brings us to...

4. **Tools**

Tools are designed to *remove all friction from the core interaction* so that the core interaction is increasingly simple, repeatable and common. Ideally platforms don't do any “work” per se but *create tools* for people to do the great work themselves. The reason you have such an awesome Facebook page is not because you know HTML programming or design but because Facebook has created *tools* for you to easily write your thoughts, post a picture or video, link to a Website, like a post, comment on a post, create a group, etc. Platform value is created as the *users do the work*. Twitter and Facebook are worthless unless users are doing the work of posting. Perhaps these tech giants have taken a page from our playbook as they seem to be about “equipping their saints for the work” (Ephesians 4:12) by giving them awesome tools to do the work that bring about the core interaction which leads to mission fulfillment. How could you create a tool like the [ALS's Ice Bucket Challenge](#) (which 17m people participated in, 2.5 million people donated to and \$115m was raised for the ALS Association). That tool made the core interaction de-centralized, simple, repeatable and common.

I (Eric) served with Cru for 25 years. Cru's mission was: “*The Great Commission in this generation.*” The core interaction was clearly defined: “*To turn lost students into Christ-centered laborers.*” Cru then created “tools” to help make that core interaction, repeatable, simple and common. So, when I learned to use [the 4 Spiritual Laws](#), though I am not an evangelist, the tool multiplied *my willingness* to share my faith and lead people to Christ. The tool

was so powerful that, knowing very little Spanish, I was able to consistently lead people to Christ sharing my faith, using the Spanish 4-Laws in Latin America. After conversion, Cru had the [10 Basic Steps Toward Christian Maturity](#) along with their ten [Transferable Concepts](#) all geared to helping students become Christ-centered laborers. All retreats, conferences, Spring Break outreach and summer projects were “tools” in service to the core interaction of “turning lost students into Christ-centered laborers.”

What “tools” could you create that make it easy and likely for congregants to impact their neighbors and city...to bring about conversion....to live on mission? What if you saw your main job is not to do all the work but to create tools that make it *easy and likely* for people to missionally engage and have gospel conversations with those around them or move others along the growth journey? Remember, the world’s largest media company, Facebook produces no content. They simply think about creating the tools so others (like you) can easily and frequently produce great content. You’ve done this in the past. When you had your last Serve Day or ShareFest, that was a “tool” you created for people to do great work that converted listeners to doers. When you established your online giving, you implemented a technology that helped people do something they really wanted to do—to give regularly to your church.

Our friends Dave Runyon and Jay Pathak ([Art of Neighboring](#)) created a great refrigerator magnet (now posted on over 80,000 refrigerators) to help congregants identify the names of their closest eight neighbors to convert hearers into doers. What other “tools” can you and your team create that make it easy for them to accomplish your core interaction? Energy should not be put into hiring more staff but architecting the platform and creating the tools to maximize the creative and redemptive energy that is already present your church.

Role of the platform owner

What if you or someone in your church took on the role as Chief Platform Architect (CPA)? That person would become an expert in platform architecture, tools and rules. He or she would know everything there is to know about platforms and working with the best and brightest the church has to offer would be tasked with:

- Identifying the core interaction that if scaled and multiplied would fulfill the God-given mission of your church
- Help each department/ministry lead identify their core interaction as it is connected to the mission
- Determining what you measure and celebrate as it is tied to the core interaction
- Lead in the development of evolving tools that remove the friction and facilitate the reproduction and scaling of the core interaction at every level

- Insure that the core interaction is simple, likely, repeatable, scalable and common at every level

That's it. That's the call to action. It hasn't been done yet but you can do it. Someone will figure this out and will multiply their effectiveness for the kingdom. Why not you?

We want to acknowledge [Sangeet Paul Choudary's](#), whose thoughts and fingerprints all over this document. I believe he has the clearest understanding of the purpose, power and design of platforms. Check out his Website [here](#) and his first book [Platform Scale](#) and his latest Gem [Platform Revolution](#).

ⁱ <https://hbr.org/2016/11/you-dont-need-big-data-you-need-the-right-data>

ⁱⁱ Choudary, Sangeet Paul. Platform Revolution: How Networked Markets are Transforming the Economy and How to Them Work for You. Kindle edition (location 194)

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://techcrunch.com/2015/03/03/in-the-age-of-disintermediation-the-battle-is-all-for-the-customer-interface/>

^{iv} <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qIHRiB3eZhM>

^v All of the above examples are around the supply / production side. To work effectively, there also needs to be a commensurate side—people who want to ride in a private vehicle...people who want stay in a stranger's house...people who want to watch funny cat videos or read the latest tweets coming out of a sporting event. It is the platform that *connects* these two energies.

^{vi} <http://platformed.info/the-core-interaction-platform/>

^{vii} <http://platformed.info/the-three-design-elements-for-designing-platforms/>

^{viii} <https://sherpablog.marketingsherpa.com/marketing/conversion-defined/>

For further insight

[Platform Revolution](#)

[Platform Scale](#)

[Platform Thinking at MediaLab at MIT](#)

[The Shifts from Pipes to Platforms](#)