



How Google Helps People Join Us at Church | An Interview with Paul McHardy

July 20, 2024

Kurt Francom:

Okay, so you're here for some great church leadership content. The podcast is great, but there's also another piece of content you need to be enjoying each week. It is the Leading Saints email newsletter. Now I get it. Email newsletters feel so 2006, you know? But it isn't as old-fashioned as you might think, it's actually one of the most popular pieces of content that Leading Saints produces. Each week I share a unique leadership thought that can only be found in the newsletter. I keep it short and sweet, most can read it in less than 5 minutes, and then we share with you recent content you might have missed, throwback episodes, and Leading Saints events that happen more often than you might anticipate. If you want to make sure you are on the email list, simply visit [leadingsaints.org slash 14](https://leadingsaints.org/14). That's [leadingsaints.org slash one four](https://leadingsaints.org/14). That will also get you 14 days access to our full library of content not available to the general public. So look for Leading Saints in your inbox by going to [leadingsaints.org slash 14](https://leadingsaints.org/14) or click the link in the show notes. Before we jump into the content of this episode, I kind of feel it's important that I introduce myself. Now, many of you have been around a long time. You're well familiar with my voice and with Leading Saints as an organization. But if you're not, well, my name is Kurt Francom and I am the executive director of Leading Saints and the podcast host. Now, Leading Saints is a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping Latter-day Saints be better prepared to lead. And we do that through, well, content creation like this podcast and many other resources at leadingsaints.org. And we don't act like we have all the answers or know exactly what a leader should do or not do. But we like to explore the concepts of leadership, the science of leadership, what people are researching about leadership and see how we can apply them to a Latter-day Saint world. So here we go. Hey everyone, welcome back to another episode of the

Leading Saints podcast. And this is going to be a different topic, one that may be on the surface doesn't seem that interesting, but as we get talking, you'll find that it's quite intriguing. The communications department at The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was kind enough to send Paul McHardy my way to talk about all things SEO. with related to the church. Now what's SEO? It's search engine optimization. And so we talked generally at the beginning about the church, how they're ranking in search engines, how they're getting positive, accurate information out about maybe tough questions or just our theology in general. And then even talking about the word Mormon and how that has impacted the church's communications department in getting our message out there. And then we do sort of a deep dive on the, as far as local listings of your chapel, my chapel, 19,000 chapels across the world, and on different platforms for everywhere from Google to Apple to Yelp, and making sure that if someone wakes up in the morning and feels a desire to connect with a local church, Will they find our church or how can we improve the likelihood of that result being found and them walking into our chapels? And even recently, if you've maybe noticed, the church chapels have shifted from being an angel Moroni icon to just a cross icon. We talk about why that was and why that that's needed. So a fantastic conversation with me and Paul McHardy and one that I think you'll find quite intriguing. So here's my interview with Paul McHardy. Today, I'm welcoming Paul McHardy from the church. I just generally from the church. You work for the church, right? Yes, I do. Nice. I'm in the church communication department. Awesome. And you are like the SEO guy. Is that fair to say?

Paul McHardy:

Yeah, I call myself the head of global SEO.

Paul McHardy:

It's not my official title, but an SEO is search engine optimization. So all things and they go into like when somebody Google something or goes to a search engine of some type. Hopefully they see what we would want them to see, right? Correct. And how would you how do you describe like your general scope of what you do or what you're trying to accomplish,

Paul McHardy:

Yeah. So, I mean, I it's a daunting task, but I generally I'm kind of like an insert internal consultant where there's lots of departments within the church that are creating content that would like their content to be found when people search for it. So I come in with an expertise of what are the basics that you do to have things show up in search? and then give them some recommendations, do some research for them. We also will come in with ideas for content to be created. So if there's content, a space where we're not appearing where we should, we'll go to a department and say, hey, there's an opportunity here if we created some content about this topic and did it in this way, then we could be in the conversation about that thing, like baptism, for example. Like maybe we aren't appearing in the first couple of results for that topic. Well, we could influence or create some content about that generalized topic so that we do show up and

people can then be exposed to the church's doctrines and beliefs where maybe we weren't visible before. Yeah.

Kurt Francom:

So someone may think, you know, I wonder, am I supposed to be baptized? And we'll go to Google and they'll say, should I be baptized? And our hope is that not obviously not all faith denominations or faiths in general believe in baptism, but maybe ours will pop up there and they'll at least understand that, yeah, we believe you should be baptized, right?

Paul McHardy:

Exactly. I mean, most everybody's familiar with Doctrine and Covenants 132. And, you know, people are searching for truth. About polygamy, right? Yes, exactly. But you know it's a whole new world than it was in the 1800s when that was revealed and literally like try not to take too much of the weight but like this is how people are searching and I feel a very strong desire to help fulfill that, to help people who are searching for truth find it.

Kurt Francom:

Do you feel like a lot of your work is sort of in that on the defense side of like, because there's so much information, so much misinformation about our beliefs or our history. Do you feel like a lot of your time is spent making sure, you know, the accurate information showing up There?

Paul McHardy:

Yeah, we watch that stuff. So my direct report boss is the director of reputation management. And so we keep a pulse on, you know, what are people talking about? What are the questions that are out there? And how can we positively influence places where there's maybe some more controversy or whatever it might be? You know, there's limitations to what we as an organization are willing to discuss on the church's official website, but we also will partner with other organizations and say, hey, you know, maybe there's a platform or a topic that we aren't in a position to address right now. or the brethren have instructed us through revelation that this is not something we're going to do. And so we'll go to partners and say, maybe here's some things we're concerned about. Can you help for a positive influence in that space?

Kurt Francom:

Yeah. So I have a confession, I guess, and maybe this is shows the good work you're doing, because whenever I want to search something on churchofjesuschrist.org, I just go to Google and type LDS with the search term. And I usually find it on Church of Jesus Christ because the I don't know, do you hear that a lot? Is the search function kind of limited? And I get it because on Leading Saints, if people want to find content about Leading Saints, our search function is just kind of limited too. And I tell people, just go to Google, type in Leading Saints and then a topic.

Paul McHardy:

Yeah, it's it's tough. So I work very closely with the product manager of the internal search product. We've made several changes over the course of so I've been employed at the church for three years, a little over that. And so we've gone from different search engines to different products. We're looking at an AI product potentially, to try to improve that experience. We also have multiple domains that results will come up for like BYU speeches, for example, you can find those when you search internally. So there's different challenges, but the principles are the same. What you described is called a branded search because you typed in LDS. Right. Generally, we do fine in Google if you type LDS or, you know, any other Latter-day Saint or anything like that. That's when you get in the more generalized space that we aren't as prominent in a lot of spaces. But yeah. It's not uncommon, but it is a known thing and we are constantly trying to improve that, trying to influence. Maybe there's a talk from 1972 that's about a topic that President Nelson just spoke about, but because it's been on the website for so many years, it's what shows up first both in Google and on the church website. And so we're, you know, we're making efforts to try to improve that again with some limitations because we're reliant on other products and their algorithms and all that stuff to serve up, you know, we can't just say show this first, show this second, show this third. But there's other things we can do and we're constantly trying to improve that.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah. Now, I don't know if I'm summarizing these in the correct buckets here, but it seems like, like I mentioned, sort of that apologetic or keeping tabs on like misinformation that's out there. And hopefully we're creating content that'll give the correct information. And then there's the like a missionary component of like, yeah, if somebody Googles baptism, like we want to be in the listing and share message. Are there any other buckets you'd say as far as SEO goes or?

Paul McHardy:

So there's, you know, there's just broad Christianity as a whole, you know, the principles of Christ's teachings. There's lots of sites that talk about the teachings of the Bible, the teachings of Christ. And there are some spaces where we do rank well for certain topics. Our scriptures, for example, there's a lot of highly searched scriptures in Psalms or Proverbs or the New Testament. And some of those we rank for and some of those we don't. So we could do a little bit.

Kurt Francom:

So someone's just looking for a Bible reference and they'll come to our gospel library.

Paul McHardy:

And we look at it as a marketer, search engine optimization being a marketing function generally outside of our organization, is to expose your organization to someone who's unfamiliar with you so that they can look to you as an authority and someone they can trust. And so as somebody finds our scriptures or finds our website through a search, whatever it might be about us specifically or about Christianity or just about God, and they come to our website, read, feel the

spirit, you know, they then will potentially look to us again when they have more questions and hopefully will be led down a path where they can find the gospel truths. Yeah.

Kurt Francom:

And this is interesting, like, because I think of like Bible Hub, right? That'll come up a lot for a scripture if you just do a generic Bible reference. But does like the Catholic Church have a department like, like we do? Or, I don't know that, you know, the some evangelical churches have this?

Paul McHardy:

I mean, I can't speak to everybody. There's a few faiths that do have a more organized approach. But the interesting thing and the unique thing for the church is that we are an organized, centralized global organization, we have the prophet, the apostles, and we have basically a unified message, whereas a lot of other faiths are under a denomination, but it's different congregations and they're not connected necessarily. So the church's website is actually extremely authoritative. There are certain tools that we look at that talk about your domain authority, like Google being the number one domain authority site because people go there all the time. And then, you know, different news sites or Wikipedia. Wikipedia is actually the site we compete with the most in search, where there'll be a topic about the church or a topic we are connected to. And it's Wikipedia, then us and then other stuff.

Kurt Francom:

That's what you lose sleep over, right?

Paul McHardy:

Yes, it's difficult. But, you know, so long story short, the church's website is really authoritative because of a large demographic that's going to one website that goes there consistently and returns there a lot. And so that's not really how we view it. We don't like to view it that way anyway. Like in a typical marketing sense, those are your competitors. We don't see it that way. But we do want to make sure that the message that we have to share is out there. And, you know, we actually tend to rank for things that we have no business ranking for. because we haven't really implemented good SEO practices, but because the church's website is so authoritative, we do show up.

Kurt Francom:

So what's an example of something we don't want to rank for?

Paul McHardy:

Oh, I mean, we show up for like children's coloring pages or just OK, or or pictures of a grassy field and some image that's on our website will show up. I mean, it's not bad to show up for that

stuff, but, you know, it's not necessarily something we're looking to show up for. The church's website literally ranks for millions of keywords just in English in the United States alone. So, yeah, I mean, we're not always on the first page. But again, because of that authority, we tend to show up in a lot of places. Yeah.

Kurt Francom:

Just from that general SEO and the work you do, like if you're speaking to a room full of church leaders, like what do they need to know about that dynamic or like, because there's members in their ward that are maybe searching there and you know, that obviously maybe they're worried if you go to Google and just search, like, don't do that. When in reality, maybe you'll find some good content that way. I mean, any general advice as far as the SEO goes that you'd give to church leaders?

Paul McHardy:

Yeah, that's tough because I mean, it's not necessarily something they can always influence, right? So, I think the same counsel that would go into any time you're exposed to any information you look at it with a discerning eye, and especially with the spirit. So, a lot of times... So, here's a good example. Amazon Alexa. Your kid's sitting at home and they want to play some music. And they'll say, hey, play me songs about the Book of Mormon. And Alexa says, okay, Book of Mormon musical. And then it starts playing songs in the Book of Mormon musical, probably not what you would want your kids to be listening to. But, you know, that may be what comes up. So, especially with assistance and AI, you know, people will look at that as like, or just ask a general question. Hey, Alexa, what do Mormons believe? I'm probably setting off people's Alexas at home, so sorry. you know, what do Mormons believe? And then it'll give the answer and they're like, Oh, okay, that's the definitive. This is what Mormons believe. So that's really challenging. And that's honestly the most difficult space to influence because, you know, like in that example, that's usually the Wikipedia answer. And Wikipedia is a whole different ballgame that we aren't even really touching currently. because it is just so big. I once crawled Wikipedia trying to find all the stuff about the church and I couldn't finish the crawl. It was just millions and millions of Wikipedia articles. So, yeah, just, you know, people tend to look at the answers they get from especially smart assistants. But when they go to Google and that result that they see or that little featured snippet that shows up first with a little paragraph answering the question as the authoritative answer. And, you know, Google is has some self-interest in giving a good experience and trying to be reliable. But in reality, Google is interested in making money. And so, they will do what they need to do and to accomplish that mission. And it's not always, truth isn't always the best option for them. Or fully representing accuracy when somebody asks something about us, letting us answer as opposed to someone else giving their opinion.

Kurt Francom:

And a lot of people may not really, I mean, we think Google, cause it's just such the behemoth, but I mean, you've got in your chair, you got to worry about, you know, the like YouTube, which

is owned by Google, but it's the second largest search engine. Right. And, and things are going to, going to show up differently there. And then obviously Yahoo and Bing and all those ask Jeeves. I don't know. But, uh, But, you know, there's just all sorts of, you know, trip advisors and things like that. So before we move on from the general topic, I'm curious, like, how do you sense the admonition from President Nelson to avoid using the term Mormon, you know, describing us and things like that? That's made your job a little complicated, to say the least?

Paul McHardy:

gratefully came in after that because I can't imagine the stress I would have been under and those who preceded me, the stress that they were under considering that as comforting as it would be to have the prophet saying this is something the Lord wants us to do. It's still difficult to say, man, how do we do this? We worked with a fairly large experienced agency who very strongly recommended not to do this. which is what President Nelson was referring to. And after this, several years after, we actually asked them to go back and evaluate that and say, hey, how are we doing? And what we found through the analysis is that Google figured it out, right? Like we leaned in and removed those references and used the language that that President Nelson asked us to use and found that Google now knows that Mormon and LDS and Latter-day Saint and Church of Jesus Christ, those are the same terms. And when you Google one of them, we will show up. Now, whether or not we fully, you know, specifically about the search term Mormon, whether or not we fully are as present, like maybe we showed up four times in the results and now we only show up once, we're looking to dig in deeper on that. But generally speaking, the aftermath is that Google figured it out and the church's domain now is, I actually did specifically look at this, the authority of the site and the how well are we ranking and the overall technical health. of the site as a whole is better off, which after we finished that, it was, it actually was very faith promoting for me being able to take my profession and apply it to my faith and have a confirmation of the prophetic leadership of the brethren through my job. So it was really cool. That's awesome.

Kurt Francom:

So the typical scenario, let's say, is or hypothetical is someone wakes up and they're just, you know, it's Sunday morning. They feel lost in life, a little depressed. They think, I think I need church in life. So they go, they pull out their phone and say, church is near me. Now, we hope and we have chapels everywhere. It seems like I think you mentioned before, like 19,000 chapels, 19,000 chapels across the world. We would hope that we would be in there in their results so they could buzz down the street and join us for sacrament meeting. So maybe start unpacking this as far as like maps and navigation and having people walk in and read that, you know, visitors welcome and say, this is it. I'm going in because I'm welcome here. Like, where do we start with that discussion?

Paul McHardy:

Yeah. So, I mean, you, you, you described it really well. That is very much the, one of the two main focuses of this effort that we have been undertaking. It's called, this is called local search.

It's a practice within SEO or local search optimization. where we're focused on listing services and map services and navigation services. And there are some unique principles in that field of how to rank well within one of those. And yeah, that exact scenario. And honestly, I even look at it as more of like, maybe it's a Tuesday, and they had a bad experience last Sunday, or they had something happen to them during the week. And, you know, they're planning for their weekend and say, Hey, this weekend, I got to get I got to get to church. So yeah, we just want to give the best opportunity for people in that boat as well as our members, right? Not everybody necessarily always goes to the church's website, to the Meeting House Locator tool, which is a great tool, but you know, there's more barriers to get to the tool than just a Google search. Like you described earlier, like I just go and click, you know, search on Google and then it gives me the result. So we're just trying to reinforce that experience as well as reach a broader audience. So as people make those searches, again, if they search for us specifically, we generally show up. Now, whether or not the information on those listings has always been the most accurate information, not just the location, but maybe there's a phone number or When are we open? That type of stuff. So Google will just create a listing. Anybody out there can go to Google and say, hey, this is where my favorite chicken place is and it's not listed so I'm going to suggest to create this business here. So anybody can do that and lots of the listings that have been out there historically for the church are exactly that. you know, a good but small percentage of locations were maybe a local clerk or a state president or somebody like that said, hey, we got to make sure our building's visible. And so, they manage it locally, but the rest are just essentially an unmanaged listing. So, you know, whether or not people are getting the best experience when they find us, when they look for us specifically, was kind of up in the air. But also when they're not looking for us specifically, when they're looking for faith or God or Christianity or whatever, we would like to be in the conversation and be a consideration for them. So we've approached this local search effort more with the latter in mind of the exactly what you described. I just I want to go to church on Sunday and tried to approach our local search optimization to that broader audience so that we show up with the other potentially many other options for church. So almost 100% of all searches end with a click on one of the first 10 results that they get. 65 plus percent end with one of the top three. So if you're not in the top 10, it doesn't matter. If you're not in the top three, you're fighting for peanuts, right? And so we really need to show up as high as we can And, you know, these searches for a location, it's using all sorts of data to try to give you the best option. So if you say near me, it's literally going to look like within a mile unless it has to look further to find more options for you. And so there's a lot of complicated things that go into appearing. You could do a search from where you're sitting and go outside across the street and do another search and potentially get totally different results. But we're just trying to do the best we can to make sure all of our buildings are visible, are findable, the information is accurate, and that if somebody makes a more generic search that we will have more potential to show up when they do that.

Kurt Francom:

And other than Google Maps, I mean, because there's even like TripAdvisor and some of these that are more geographically focused, like search engines, right? Who are the big players that you're...

Paul McHardy:

Yeah. So Google, obviously Waze uses Google's data, Apple Maps, which is Apple Google's data or they have their own. And so we, you know, we, we have to look at them too. You know, you, you described some of the other big players. Facebook is actually the third biggest, where not a lot of people necessarily think if I'm going to map something, we go to Facebook, but having a presence there sort of reinforces the building's location, the information about it. Facebook's product has changed a lot over the years as to what they call it and how they treat it. But it's essentially a store location is what they call it. And so just having the same address and phone number and hours information there as well is another key one.

Kurt Francom:

Now, when we think about Facebook, like many leaders may be listening like, Oh, I got to make sure my chapels list on Facebook. Like, are you handling all that? So it's not like local wards need to go through the list and make sure they're listed.

Paul McHardy:

Yeah. So we're utilizing a platform that allows us to manage the data in one place. for building. And then depending on the geographical location, this tool is connected to over 190 different listing services everywhere from the Googles all the way down to the something you've never heard of, the yellow pages, all those different services. And so they're all getting the same data and you're not having to go to every single one of those to update it every time. you know, much, much more efficient. So yeah, we definitely don't need that. The other thing I would say about Facebook specifically is that even as we do this, we're not looking for this to be a social community type of listing. It's just an information page. So if anybody does come across one of these Facebook listings, there's not a lot of them out yet for that phone number reason, which we can talk about a little bit, but you know, it'll just be the information about the building and then basically the Facebook feed of the church's official account.

Kurt Francom:

Now, recently, there's been a, we used to have a, an Angel Moroni type of logo for the map listing, but that shifted to a more generalized Christian cross logo, right? What's the background there? Anything to say There?

Paul McHardy:

Yeah. So this is specific to Google. This wasn't found anywhere else. But yeah, especially along the Wasatch Front, it was a significant shift. So we get we would get a lot of questions globally about this, where people are like, nobody knows what this thing is. Can you just change it? The answer at the time was no. We don't even know why. Like, literally, we don't know why.

Kurt Francom:

Like at some point, did someone from the church like send this logo to Google and like use that? Or did They?

Paul McHardy:

No idea. Google, if you're listening. Please, if you have information as to why this ever happened. So I was very curious about this. Working with this software platform, our representatives there, we asked, we said, hey, do you have any idea why this is the case? They didn't know. You know, it's not like you Google McDonald's and there's an M over there. All the restaurants, all fast food restaurants generally have the same pin. You can actually pay. You can add now and pay like Walgreens will have that. But But yeah, so I just said, I'm going to figure this out. OK, so and I went into it just trying to a figure out why. And then the other thought that came to me was, is there an effect? We know there's an anecdotal effect that especially outside of the United States, They don't know what this means. And so if we did come up in a search for a Christian church, they see this person holding, I don't know what, this silhouette and like, I don't know what that is. I'm not going to go there. Again, another barrier we would like to remove to be in consideration. So I actually did an analysis of all the categories for Google Maps. I found a list. This is probably changed since then. It was over five, six hundred different categories you could pick from, like every type of restaurant, food, Thai food, Chinese food, Mexican food, all that stuff.

Kurt Francom:

And they all had their own like on or not necessarily.

Paul McHardy:

But these are these are a category that you can select. So if you own a business, you go to set up your location on Google Maps and you say, I'm a Mexican food restaurant. You can select Mexican food restaurant, but then you'll just get the restaurant logo. Right. So, I found all the religious ones, I then narrowed it down to all the Christian religion ones, and then I went and googled every single one of those to see what would show up on their pin. So there are 51 at the time, 51 Christian denomination categories. 50 of them have a cross and one of them had a unique logo. Some Angel Moroni character. Yeah. So as I saw this, I thought, well, OK, you know, we are a peculiar people. We're different. We feel like we have a unique message and a unique thing to bring to the world. So maybe that's good. But the other thought that came to me, and I felt that this was a prompting personally, was not only do people not know what this is, but maybe there's an actual data effect of having this difference. And so, with approval of the leadership, we selected a small group of locations that we switched from the category that has Moroni is Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. and we switched about 250 buildings from that to Christian church as the category, which as a result, changed those to the cross. Again, that's not why the cross is not why we picked it. It's just Christian church category. And what we found was about a 25% increase in visibility to those locations after about three months. for generalized Christian search terms. So from that, my analysis was that we are being hindered being visible in that category for whatever reason, because of that. And because we

now have, through this effort that we're doing, all of our buildings, instead of Magna V Ward or, you know, Phoenix IV Ward or whatever, The pins now say The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and often in language, wherever it may be, we felt okay saying, okay, well, we don't need the category to say that again. So we can have the name of the church, select this other category that increases our visibility and move forward. And so with that, we went back to leadership and said, hey, we feel like this is a good opportunity for us to increase the exposure and findability of our chapels. And we were approved to change all buildings to that, which we did about a year and a half ago. to switch some of them back. So if you went and looked for LDS churches, you know, in a high concentrated area of buildings, you may still find Moroni out there somewhere. And temples and a lot of other locations, church office buildings, things like that still have Moroni, but a lot of them are shifting, even seminaries and institutes. will no longer have Moroni. They've selected a religious school as their category, for example. I mean, as we expand the management of those listings, that'll change as well.

Kurt Francom:

So, yeah. And then, so with temples though, I mean, I guess this comes down to, it'll give you, like if someone found a temple or they even see the temple, like, oh, that's a religious building. I'm going there on Sunday. Like, How do you handle that?

Paul McHardy:

Yeah, I mean, that's always kind of been a little bit of an issue, right? Like people not understanding the difference between our chapels and our temples. And so it's just you can put in the description that, you know, visit the website. You know, we say, hey, visit the website to find out more about this rather than say come. Whereas on the chapels, the description on the listing does say come join us for worship.

Kurt Francom:

So this isn't some like, we're going to start seeing crosses on our buildings or anything. It's just, that's a data point of like, let's make a tweak There.

Paul McHardy:

We are a Christian faith, all other Christian faiths, regardless, you know, you could go select Seventh-day Adventist or Methodist or Wesleyan or whatever. And they all just by picking that category have the cross.

Kurt Francom:

And even sometimes we get grouped in with like Jehovah's Witnesses sort of like us, but they get across too. So, you know, we're, we're just in the same tent. Right. And I'm good with it. So nice. What about just like, so we talk about, you know, I remember in the nineties, I could pick up my phone, I could dial a number and the clerk's office would ring and I could talk with the clerk if he happened to be in there. Right. And I remember as a bishop, you know, I was a

bishop in 2011 to 2016 and we had a phone in the clerk's office and every once in a while it would ring and be like, hello, like, you know, like who's there. So, but now, I mean, has the, cause that phone, are the phone numbers listed on, if somebody finds a church, I want to go there Sunday, I'm going to call this number.

Paul McHardy:

Yeah, so that's been a bit of a challenge, right? Because what you just described, the church recognized years ago that these phones are underutilized people, you know, in the advent of the cell phone. Everybody's got a phone in their pocket. And especially if somebody were to call a number, they now expect you to answer or, well, probably text you or a voicemail or something. Right. And, and, you know, I remember as a kid sitting in the hall, right. And the hall phone rings and you kind of look around like, are you going to get it? I'm not going to get it. Like, and they'll just ring into oblivion. So the church actually, at least in North America, for sure. And as it's, as I've talked with, you know, the department that manages those, they've sort of sunset at all internal phones for the most part, at least, especially the hall phones. A phone number is a vital piece of your visibility in local search. Not only just, hey, you know, we want to be able to contact someone, but it is a ranking factor. So if you don't have a phone number, that hurts the weight Google or other search engines will give you. In fact, some won't even let you list. Apple will not let us do manage listings without a phone number on the listing. So, you know, if we don't have a phone number for building, we don't have a managed Apple listing for that yet. So with all those numbers now having been removed, even if we were to put a number back, it would need to be some sort of a solution that goes to a phone that somebody is going to actually.

Kurt Francom:

I mean, could you do a generalized number that goes to the church office building or something?

Paul McHardy:

We have explored a lot of options. I'll put it that way. Yeah. So, this whole process of this local search effort, we actually, we went through a three and a half, four year pilot. And we started with 1200 locations. And by the end of the pilot, we had 3500. And we did it across, you know, all over the United States in other English speaking areas, just pilots tend, we tend to default to the English just to test it out. and then translate beyond that. But all over the world, the Pacific, Europe, places where we could in Africa, and a couple of other places where we had these buildings that we had in the pilot. At the time, we used the missionaries' phone numbers. So, the missionaries that were assigned to that building Now that's a whole, you know, every mission now manages phones a little bit differently. So there's no like set in stone guarantee that the number is going to stay in that area, for example, as opposed to when I served my mission, and I won't say when, you know, it was just, it was our apartment phone number that never left. And so it's a little bit easier then, but things are different now. So, and as we expanded, just generally because of that complication, there wasn't a full comfort with just blasting all the missionary phone numbers out on these listings. And so we had we've had to find another solution. So in

some places, the phone number on a listing that you find may go to the missionaries. In some cases, we have now essentially this project is a it's not a calling, but it is a responsibility that has been added to existing callings, usually a state communications specialist where those exist. That's not everywhere in the world or somebody else, preferably at the state level. who is kind of helping us with this because this is a local effort and we need somebody local who knows stuff about each building. So where a phone number exists, it may go to them, it may go to the missionaries. Some other regions of the world are utilizing maybe an area office or a meeting house facilities representative or something like that. But there are plenty of listings that don't have a phone number right now and we're actively seeking a long-term solution.

Kurt Francom:

Because on some platforms, you need a phone number in order to show up.

Paul McHardy:

So Apple, Facebook, pretty much right now, the main platforms we are actively managing all of the locations is Google and Waze. Gotcha. Everybody else we're not currently opted into because we can't. And as we find solutions for phone numbers, we're seeking, you know, locally crowdsourced like Google Voice was an option, but there's many limitations to Google Voice. It's free, but there's caveats. for a lot of North American locations. San Francisco, for example, there are no more Google voice numbers. They've all been taken. Yeah, is what we didn't know and found out. So, so just not really a sustainable solution. The church does have a voice over IP product, but there's costs associated with that. And we're trying to figure out whether if that's a solution, is it a stake funded thing? Can we provide funding globally for this? You know, it's not crazy expensive, but every church leader knows that budgets can be tight. So asking just one more thing to be paid for out of that budget can be very difficult and we don't want to do that. But anyway, for now, we're just, we want so much for our buildings to be findable for those who are seeking that we're just, we don't have phone numbers. And eventually we will. What that will be is to be determined.

Kurt Francom:

So someone may notice like, oh, my chapel isn't showing up on Facebook. And that may just simply be because there's no phone number and they won't let us post the list chapel.

Paul McHardy:

Yeah. And Facebook's the same as anything else where somebody could have created a listing long, a long, long ago and has an old phone. And as we do this, we're trying to make efforts to find those preexisting listings, consolidate them to an authoritative listing. So there isn't conflicting data out There.

Kurt Francom:

So where's the intersection of lay leaders, members with the work you do? I mean, for example, I've heard, you know, we've had various people talk about the benefit of leaving a review on your chapel or when you go to the temple and things like that. I mean, do you like to see that happen from your point of view?

Paul McHardy:

Yeah, you know, we're not actively soliciting or creating campaigns to do this. You know, any review should be organic and any indication that it's not can actually be worse for any organization.

Kurt Francom:

So if you send a letter out and said, read this to your ward, everybody must leave a review and Google's like, What's going on here?

Paul McHardy:

There'd be some perception issues with that as well. But these services that accept reviews, if they can see that you're gaming the system, you go to Amazon and you're reading the reviews on a product and it's clear that a template has been used or was paid for this review, you don't value it as much. And so they don't really want that and you'll get dinged for that. So if people would like to leave a review, that does help search results and that's great. But ultimately, you know, we're not actively soliciting that. Now, that said, part of this effort, as we're integrating and working with these stake representatives and others, is that this platform we use, reviews from all these listing services come into this platform and can and will be responded to through the platform. So not only receiving reviews is good, but interacting with the reviews. Again, these listening services like to see that you're engaged with your audience. And so by responding, it shows that you care that somebody left a review, positive or negative. And so it's a great thing from a search engine optimization standpoint, as well as then, you know, if somebody has a legitimate concern, we would want to be able to address it. And, you know, maybe, maybe the sprinklers are getting left on and it's been raining for two weeks. Okay, great. You know, how else are we going to find that out without a phone number or whatever, but, but yeah, so, so there is an element there, but, but ultimately from the, you know, as we've been working, so I personally have been conducting trainings. We're fully trained and rolled out in the United States and Canada, in Asia, in Asia North, in the Pacific area, we're working with representatives in Europe and Africa and South and Central America at different levels of, you know, this rollout of training people how to use this system. But then we have, you know, somebody at the stake level, you know, some people may not be aware of this, you know, these levels above the stake. I didn't until fairly recently that there's a coordinating council that will meet with the area president and others. And then we have the actual area offices where there's people who are, you know, focused on communication, for example. And so there's a support system within there where we're training people at each level to know, you know, the best practices on how to do this, how to use the tool itself, how to respond to a review in an appropriate way, and then

just working together to, you know, get feedback from each other if there's a challenging review or, you know, whatever it might be.

Kurt Francom:

For a troll. I mean, trolls exist. For sure. They just put a negative one.

Paul McHardy:

I see all of those. Yeah, I get every single one in my email.

Kurt Francom:

So that's nice. Yeah. How does this. So when somebody searches and finds like my local building and there's I think there's four boards that meet my building, are they going to see every start time, whether it's eight thirty, nine, nine thirty or.

Paul McHardy:

Yeah, so the listing itself is focused on a physical location. So it's not focused on a congregation or congregations. Right. And each listing also now has an associated web page on the church's website where, you know, again, it's a part of the local search play is to have a page on your website that reinforces the data on the listing. But additionally, that page is where that data will potentially get housed. Now, again, it depends on whether or not we've trained and gotten somebody to update the data there and to make it accurate. But as we continue this process, which, you know, may take the rest of the year and maybe even into next year to do this, there'll be varying levels of completeness of the information. But yeah, so that's where that information will be. The hours on the listing itself are just like open close. It's not specific meeting times. Oh, OK. But yeah.

Kurt Francom:

But they can click on the website option, which will take them to this page. They'll have the name of the ward or the wards.

Paul McHardy:

Yeah. And, you know, even the even the Web pages themselves are positioned as more of a broader thing. So we're generally trying to use more common terminology, congregation, worship service. not Melchizedek Priesthood or Relief Society or whatever, just so people can relate. I managed the buildings in my stake as I was learning the tool and creating this training for these folks worldwide so that I could make sure I was being reasonable with what we were asking them to do and didn't want to overburden them. So for like for my buildings in Eagle Mountain, Utah, I put First Worship Service, parentheses, you know, the ward name because it's more relatable maybe in Utah and less foreign. But in other places we've said, hey, maybe that's not, you know, maybe that's a little more confusing. They won't understand what ward or branch

means. So just use more common language. So First Worship Service starts at 9, Second Worship Service starts at 1030, that type of thing. Yeah. So, yeah.

Kurt Francom:

And most Latter-day Saint members, I mean, they're trained to go to the meeting house, locate early. Would you recommend that people go there if they're just looking for a local ward?

Paul McHardy:

Yeah, so the big thing about this particular project is in time, we hope to be able to create a data sync between these two systems so that there's consistency. There's some challenges that we ran into between the Meeting House Locator being a custom tool that we can hone to do what we want. And then there's these public listing services that have rules about addresses and all this other stuff. And when we tried to just feed the data out, they said, hey, you got a bunch of errors, like, you know, maybe you don't have the right data point in the right data field. And, you know, it's this validation process. So we've had to manually set all of this up within the software platform. But we hope to be able to feed meeting times to these web pages eventually so that as clerks make these updates in the church's database, it just triggers everything. So long term, we hope it'll be a lot more automated. And then those who are participating in the management of these listings can focus more on the human element of the responding to people as they contact us, responding to reviews and not have to deal with the data stuff. Yeah. But for now, it's a little bit manual. Yeah.

Kurt Francom:

And there may be some who think like, what's meeting house locator, but it's in the, it's in the tools app now, right? You got a link to it, or you can go to maps.churchofjesuschrist.org. Yeah.

Paul McHardy:

And they'll have, you know, if you're logged in, you can get the Bishop's phone number to call and I'm sure they love that.

Kurt Francom:

I want to know like who in the church is like, yeah, let's put the bishop's phone number on there. And every bishop's like, all right, give him a fake number. Or like, here's my Google voice number. I don't know. It seems like a million other people we could maybe list There.

Paul McHardy:

Yeah, I know. And specific to this, my piece of this project, we specifically do not want a bishop's phone number on here. They've got enough to do. Right. there may be calls that come that will be brought to a, you know, maybe an agent bishop, like a welfare assistance request or something like that. But we would prefer to have somebody else kind of running interference

there. I mean, anytime you put a phone number on publicly, you're going to get a lot of spam and solicitations and whatever. So, we definitely don't need that. But yeah, You know, even just in the past year on the church's homepage, there's a kind of a newer, more friend approached church finder experience that, again, kind of presents the same data as meeting house tools, but more for somebody who may not know what word they're in or care what word they're in, for example.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah. Yeah. And then as far as going back to times like typical business, you know, over open Monday through Saturday, nine to nine, whatever. I mean, because it doesn't just show that being open when church is happening. Right. So how does that work?

Paul McHardy:

Yeah. So on on the listings, we've opted to show open times as regular business hours, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. on all listings globally with variations on Sunday, more tailored towards the actual meeting times and then indicating on the listing that Monday through Saturday is by appointment only. So call us. OK. But that's another local, you know, kind of a local search optimization type of thing where if it's Tuesday at three o'clock in the afternoon and I'm, you know, considering, you know, finding Christ in my life and I go looking for a church, if we're not open, just like if you're going, if you're hungry and you want some tacos and the taco truck isn't open, Google's not going to serve up that listing if it says it's closed. So we're trying to not appear closed. But at the same time, indicating to people, like, don't just show up, right? Because nobody's probably there. So give us a call. And, you know, that one reason why we really have missionaries have really expressed who have been able to receive these calls. We love it because somebody will say, hey, I want to learn something about you guys. But it's Wednesday afternoon and they're like, great. I love that on my mission.

Kurt Francom:

Right.

Paul McHardy:

So. So, yeah, just trying to get them to make a call first.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah, because there's a lot I mean, a lot of general Christian traditional Christian churches that, you know, the pastor has his office there. It's his full time gig. And yeah, the door will probably be unlocked, right?

Paul McHardy:

Yeah. So we just want to help, again, especially the friends of the church or people who are trying to find their new faith. Give them an experience they're already familiar with. You know, we're again, peculiar people. We function differently. We're not we don't build a chapel and then go gather a flock. We gather a flock and then build a chapel. Right. So So, we kind of have to approach it a little bit different utilizing common principles of the way maybe a business might be run when we don't typically operate that way. Interesting.

Kurt Francom:

Any other questions, topics I should be asking but I'm not thinking of?

Paul McHardy:

I think the one thing I would just mention is, you know, as we kind of got approved to roll this out globally, this was late 2022. Amongst the many letters that church leaders get, we did send out a letter just saying, hey, this is coming in your area, you know, just be aware of this and support it. So, we've had and, you know, it got lost in the fray for a lot of folks. I even asked my own bishop if he saw it and he's like, I don't know what you're talking about. So, but we sent it to all ecclesiastical leadership so that they might be familiar with when some random person from the stake who's not a clerk comes and says, Hey, I need information about the building. When are your meeting time? Stuff like that. Or, you know, maybe it's January 15th and it still hasn't been updated and they're trying to figure out when the new meeting times are. just so that there's some awareness, but we recognize that maybe not everybody saw that. So, we've had the occasional area president who doesn't know what this is or a state president or whatever. They're just like, who are you? Especially to me when I randomly will contact them about something. Who are you and what do you want? But just know that this is an approved church program, project that we're working on, you know, was approved by the first presidency and they feel that it's a great opportunity to increase the findability of the restored gospel. And so, as best as you can and as you don't need to necessarily proactively go out there and seek out assisting a state communications specialist, for example, But, you know, as they come or as they attend your council meetings, just to be aware that it's going on and, and, you know, we have given them the ability to access data about the locations they're managing, or they could share reviews that they're seeing or different things like that. It would be a great opportunity for leadership to just kind of be more aware of some of the things that are going on as well as the many other things they're doing, but knowing that somebody else is handling the grunt work, but then they can potentially see some of the benefits of that. One of the things we found that's been maybe an unexpected outcome of this that we didn't think about at first, but it was kind of like, oh man, we really should have thought about this. Having our churches findable and a way to contact someone at the church has resulted in really wonderful opportunities for interactions with the community. So we've had other faiths putting together a barbecue, an interfaith barbecue, or there was a city in Alabama where they wanted to give the church an award for beautification of the community for the beautiful church grounds. How would they have gotten ahold of anybody before? They would have had to search and search and search and search. This particular building had a stake representative's phone number that they had sourced and put on there and they were able to respond and have a great experience. So there's a lot of

opportunity that exists. beyond what we might obviously think about through all of this, to just be more a part of the community that, especially for people searching for faith, but also for others, they don't necessarily care that we're a global church. People who attend a church in their community are looking for exactly that, a community of those who share common principles and values and beliefs, and great, we're a global church, but I care about where I'm going to go, where I'm going to take my family and knowing that those are people that I can connect with. And that's how they feel the spirit in their lives. And so being more visible to those people through natural ways of how all of us go throughout our everyday life, just looking up somewhere to go for whatever, the more we can kind of meet them where they're at, the better. And this is a really great opportunity to do that.

Kurt Francom:

And so, it's not necessarily like I'm just seeing leaders wondering, well, am I getting in compliance? Did I miss that letter? Was there something my clerk was supposed to do? Like, there's nothing like that.

Paul McHardy:

This is just an awareness letter. Okay. And it was kind of indicated as that. So, like, it wasn't like a go and do. We did get those who were really proactive and were like, great, let's do it. And at the time, we actually weren't quite ready. Like, we were like, hey, this is coming. So, we're grateful for those as well. But This was just a, hey, at some point in the near future, this is an effort we're going to undertake. So as much as you can, whenever necessary, just support those who are helping us with this.

Kurt Francom:

Yeah. Or if they notice there's no phone number, they don't need to figure out a way to get a phone number. Right. And really, you know, you talk about interfaith, just recognizing you're on the map and try and build interfaith bridges elsewhere or have the community know that you exist other ways. Right. But let's not just put all our chips on Google searches or things like that. But there's many ways that we can just create awareness of our chapels and that, yeah.

Paul McHardy:

Yeah, I mean, 19,000 buildings globally, that's a monumental footprint. And it's not insignificant. It'd be great to be able to, for people to know that it's there. Nice.

Kurt Francom:

Very cool. Well, we'll have a little bit more appreciation when we're searching on Google and something pops up and like, ah, Paul did it.

Paul McHardy:

Something's wrong. You know, another guy. So let me know

Kurt Francom:

Exactly. Well, the last question I have for you, just as you, you know, you've been in this role for what, two years?

Paul McHardy:

A little over three.

Kurt Francom:

Three years. Okay. you know, working day to day, you know, for the church and something this feels maybe on the surface seems so minute or early, you know, but can be so important in the long run. Like, what is this experience working for the church done for your faith and as a disciple of Jesus Christ?

Paul McHardy:

I've had job offers at the church come my way over the years through friends or just, you know, other colleagues I've had in the past and it wasn't the right time for me. It was a big decision for me to choose to combine my profession with my faith and could I handle that? I mean, the organization of the church is, it's like a business. It runs and it's a very slow moving business. You know, by design are very deliberate about decisions that are made. A lot of considerations are made. A lot of people couldn't work in an environment like that. You know, some people have equated it to government, though I don't like, I don't like the association. But in reality, I mean, it's, you know, decisions are made by committees. They go through several committees, things like that. So, and I knew some of this going in and learned way, way more than I ever thought I would. So I was concerned about how could it possibly affect my faith, you know, having to kind of tie these two worlds together. But the reality is, is that it has been an amazing, amazing opportunity to, you know, some days I'll go in and it's just like I'm going to work like I've always done for, you know, however many years I've been working. And then other days, I feel the Spirit throughout the day. You know, it's not just like, let's start the meeting with a prayer. But it's literally like, you know, I feel like I'm being guided. And I recognize that I'm being, I'm connecting something that I have found a passion in with helping the Savior reach people. And I try not to treat my job like a calling because it's not. It's a job. But it's really cool and has really helped me grow. And I definitely feel that my faith has expanded and what you put in affects how you're able to affect people as you put yourself out there. I felt more connected, not just with my faith, but more inspired to fulfill my calling, to recognize that the value of all of God's children, as I've had wonderful opportunities to meet with people literally all over the world, which I've never done before. The gospel is the same and it's true everywhere, no matter what your culture, no matter what your background, no matter what you've believed before, that it affects all of us the same way because God speaks to the soul.

Kurt Francom:

Hey, you made it to the end of the episode. Wasn't that so good? You know, I tend to pinch myself that this is what I get to do. I get to sit down with some remarkable people across the world, experts, everyday leaders, PhDs, therapists, whatever it be, and have such an impactful conversation. I hope you'll share it, drop it into text message and email and share it to someone who maybe came to mind during this episode. And if you go to the show notes and scroll to the bottom, there's actually a list of some of our most popular episodes. So don't stop with this episode. I mean, you're not done with the dishes or mowing the lawn or working out, so you might as well keep it going at the bottom of those show notes and make sure you listen to each one, maybe a couple of times on a few of them. And remember to get on the email newsletter list, simply go to leading saints dot org slash 14.

President Gordon B. Hinckley:

It came as a result of the position of leadership which was imposed upon us by the God of heaven who brought forth a restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ. When the declaration was made concerning the only true and living church upon the face of the earth, We were immediately put in a position of loneliness—a loneliness of leadership from which we cannot shrink nor run away and to which we must face up with boldness and courage and ability.