

Spreading the Word

A beginner's guide to marketing for UK Retreat Houses



Association
for Promoting
Retreats

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Foreword by the Rt Revd John Stroyan, President of APR



+ John

Before Abraham inadvertently entertains three angels (Genesis 18) he is sitting at the door of his tent, poised to welcome any passing guest. Those who have spent time in the region will know this will have partly been a practical consideration: resting by the tent door may have allowed Abraham the opportunity to catch an occasional breeze. Other commentators, however, have noted that Abraham's action in positioning himself visibly ready to welcome visitors was the step needed to prompt the celestial visitation.

If it ever was, it is certainly no longer feasible for most retreat houses to simply exist, and wait for people to find you. Some form of outreach is necessary – in an ever noisier world – to ensure you are ‘on the radar’.

The Anglican-based Association for Promoting Retreats (APR) in association with the ecumenically-based Retreat Association (RA) seek to do what we can at a national level to promote retreat-going, and of course many clergy and lay leaders play a huge role in encouraging fellow Christians (and non-Christians) to take some form of retreat. However, it is the quality of invitation, welcome and retreat experience offered by retreat houses themselves that will ultimately sustain the current network of such centres into the future.

Nurturing that family of retreat houses lies at the heart of the APR's charitable purposes, and it is with our compliments that we offer this guide as a way to further encourage and stimulate your efforts to spread the word about the transforming value of retreat. It is aimed particularly at those with little or no experience in ‘marketing’, and only a small budget, though there may be a few tips of interest to larger houses with more resources.

We hope this guide will offer both encouragement and practical advice to all those involved in this vital endeavour.

With prayers,

+John

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Introduction: thinking like a newcomer

One of the biggest challenges when we consider how to ‘market retreats’ is that the vast majority of people have had no prior experience of retreat going. Too often, all of us within what is loosely termed as the ‘retreat movement’ forget this. The problem facing us is not just that we need to make our own house stand out, and let people know about our programme, but also that we need to convince them of the value of retreat in the first place.

Anyone who has ever started at a new place of work will know the feeling. Bombarded by strange acronyms and jargon, we nod and smile our way through the first few days, frantically making notes of things we need to look up later to avoid being made to look silly. Should I bring my own mug in from home? How does the milk rota work? How do I start and sign off my emails? Every workplace has a set of often unspoken rules, and a culture that is rarely written down for newcomers to digest. This may be how newcomers feel on the first few days of their retreat.

Reducing barriers

While of course there should be an element of challenge in retreat going, and retreat houses are not a form of hotel, those of us keen to help more people grow closer to God through retreat need to be conscious of the barriers we inadvertently erect.

What is an IGR? What about Ignatian Spiritual Exercises? Will the whole time be spent in silence? Do I have to be a regular church goer and am I going to be quizzed on my beliefs? Is there free parking close by? Will they cater for special diets?

All these questions and fears – and many more besides – are likely to be whizzing through the minds of anyone thinking of going on retreat for the first time. Those of us fortunate enough to have benefited from the value of retreats for some years will naturally have forgotten any inhibitions we may have felt when we arrived at a retreat house for the first time.

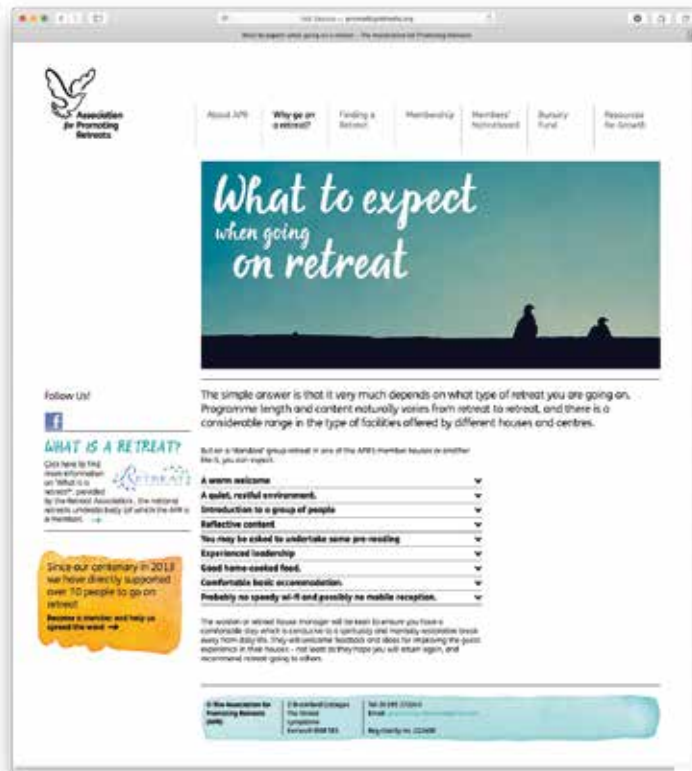
The first step to marketing your retreat house is to try and remember that time. If we really want to reach people who have probably not gone on retreat before, we have to answer the questions people are likely to have, without them needing to ask.

Answering questions

Spell out acronyms clearly. Unless your retreat is really only aimed at a certain type of clergy, any theological terms need also to be explained in simple language. Above all, make it crystal clear what proportion of their retreat is likely to be held in silence – this is often one of the biggest misconceptions about retreat, and arriving with the wrong idea (in either direction) may seriously affect how beneficial a retreatant finds their time.

Answers to some of the simple questions can be included in your standard posters or leaflets (e.g. “We have a number of fully accessible rooms, and our chef enjoys catering for specialist diets”), but you can go into far more detail on your website pages. The APR has an example of this on its website at <http://www.promotingretreats.org/why-go-on-a-retreat/what-to-expect-when-going-on-a-retreat/> – but your own retreat house could develop this, setting out what a first time retreatant can expect from a stay at your house. You might also provide the answers to frequently asked questions (FAQs) in any email you send to confirm a booking.

Some of the things that first-time retreatants have told us they'd have liked reassurance about before their stay include the following:



- Will it be completely silent?
- Will there be someone I can talk to in confidence?
- Will I be expected to share my thoughts and feelings with others?
- Will there be worship? What will it be like? Will it be awkward if I don't want to participate?
- What will the food be like? Will they cater for my special diet?
- Will there be alcohol?
- Do I need to bring cash for small purchases?
- Will there be shared bathrooms? Do I have to take towels? What toiletries will be provided?
- Will there be Wi-Fi?
- Will I be allowed to use my mobile phone, and if so, what is the signal like?

'Conversion' to commendation

By making the answer to these questions readily available, you take a huge step forward in what marketers call 'converting' the enquirer into someone ready to book a place on retreat. A more Scriptural inspiration might be the "unusual kindness" Paul received on the island of Malta when he was welcomed by the native population (Acts 28), or in the apostles' regular encouragement to extend generous hospitality to strangers. As a retreat house warden you

don't need to provide five-star service and facilities; instead try to help retreatants feel properly prepared to meet with the Lord through their retreat experience.

Having practical concerns can get in the way of this, and may prevent newcomers from taking the leap of faith in signing up for a retreat in the first place. Think like a newcomer, and soon your newcomers will not only be regulars, but also recommending retreats to their family and friends!

What's special, and what's in it for me?

A further step in making your retreat programme attractive to both newcomers and those with experience of retreats is to consider whether you are being clear enough about (a) what is special about this event, marking it out from similar retreats or quiet days; and (b) what the person reading the marketing will gain from joining the event. Marketing professionals talk about these as the "USP" (Unique Selling Point) and the "PSP" (Personal Selling Point). While we might shy away from this language, practical experience tells us that making an effort to include both these 'selling points' will make a real difference to your booking numbers. Consider the two fictional examples shown on the right:

Which would you be more likely to enquire about? Being clear about what is distinctive about your event, and what the retreatant may receive from it, does not require any form of dishonesty or exaggeration, and you should not be afraid of extolling the virtues of a stay at your centre!

SPRING QUIET DAY AT ST BALTHAZAR'S

St Balthazar's is holding a day of prayer and reflection as we celebrate the longer days, and God's creation reawakening. We have beautiful grounds, suitable for bird watching.

WELCOMING SPRING AT ST BALTHAZAR'S

Join with others for a day of peaceful prayer as we welcome the longer days, and God's creation reawakening. Spend the day in our beautiful gardens, including our cosy bird hide – binoculars included!





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Online and social media

We thought we'd start with the stuff most retreat house staff may be concerned about! That's not least because it is likely that most people weighing up different retreat options will use your online presence to help make their final decision.

It would make this guide prohibitively long to try and offer a step-by-step guide to actually building a website – and there are plenty of free resources and tutorials online, particularly those associated with free website design platforms such as [Wix](#) and [Webnode](#). However, we thought we would offer a brief guide to website administration for beginners, and some pointers on common areas for development, to assist those who already have a basic website but are considering how to improve their online presence.

We then move on to look at how retreat houses might use social media to encourage people to make a physical visit, and the pros and cons of different forms of engagement. By the end of this chapter we hope to have provided you with some inspiration, and hopefully have demystified a few common myths about building a digital profile.

Getting online: the basics

It is helpful to remember that there are three distinct parts of getting a website online. While some providers do all three, you can mix and match however you decide – and often save a lot of money in the process.

The three aspects are:

- The web address, also known as a domain name. A huge number of conceivable web addresses have already been procured by someone, who in turn will lease the address to you and ensure it points to your web content, usually for an annual subscription. Simply searching for your desired web address will most likely reveal who currently owns it, or suggestions of similar available domains. Alternatively, any of the web design companies mentioned below can help with domain registration (for about £10 a year).
- The server, where your content sits. The internet works by linked computers requesting information from each other. The code that makes up your website will either reside in a physical hard drive (usually mass storage facilities, in secure locations) or 'in the cloud' (an entirely web-based system).
- You will need to pay to effectively hire the storage space for your material, in order that it can be found by others on the web. As long as your website is relatively small, these days it is possible to avoid paying anything for server space if you are happy to use a standard web template via a platform like [Wix](#), [Webstarts](#), [Jimdo](#) or [Webnode](#). However you procure your server space, you will need to ensure your chosen domain name links to the material sitting there, which involves some technical knowledge.
- The content itself, much of which is typically accessible through a content management system (regularly shortened to CMS) like [Wordpress](#) or [Squarespace](#), that arranges material into your chosen design framework. You would typically pay a one-off fee for a web designer to produce the overall framework, and then some kind of subscription for the CMS and related security and technical updates. However, it is possible to use entirely 'off the peg' templates such as those mentioned above, which come with integrated CMS systems and cost nothing.

A metaphor would be sending something through Royal Mail. The web address or domain name would be our postal addresses – while they relate to a specific property, they only do so because we have agreed what number our property will be known as, and we can always call our property something else. The server would be the paper and ink you use to convey your message – it is where the content resides, and how the recipient accesses your message. The web template (or if building from scratch, your coding) and the content it contains are the actual words in your letter.

Web designers can help with any mix of the three elements above, and there are a number of companies which specialise in church-related sites. Church123.com, ukchurches.co.uk and churchedit.co.uk are just a few examples – it is worth shopping around and carefully comparing deals, looking particularly at ongoing subscription costs. If you already have a site and want to invest in refreshing the design, these companies can transfer your domain name to point it to your new site with minimum hassle, as long as you have the records for how you acquired your domain name.

Developing your website

It is arguably not the best use of retreat centres' limited time and money to devote huge amounts of either on developing websites. A simple, clean design which explains in simple language what services you offer, clearly displays an up-to-date programme, shows some images of what people should expect, and provides location and contact details will suffice for the vast majority of centres.

You may wish to supplement this with information about the history and organisation of your house, a bit about the skills and experience of your team, and news about future plans. But ultimately – rather like a shop window – your website should help prospective retreatants decide whether they want to visit, and if so, how they can make the necessary arrangements.

A great number of larger retreat houses now have extensive websites with helpful content from which other houses could take inspiration, and naturally smaller houses will not be able to spend the same amount on the initial design and framework. Two examples of large APR member houses (all examples in this document are confined to APR member houses) include:

The Royal Society of St Katharine:

<https://rfsk.org.uk/>

St Columba's House, Woking:

<https://www.stcolumbashouse.org.uk/>

Smaller houses can also offer clear and accessible sites:

Treargel, Portlloe:

<https://www.treargel.com/>

Llangasty Retreat House, Brecon:

<https://www.llangasty.com/>



A common challenge for retreat house wardens is how to make their websites compatible with smartphones and smaller tablets. Most organisations are now finding that up to a third of their web traffic comes from people using these devices as opposed to desktop devices. Mobile compatibility ensures that the user sees your website clearly, by rescaling content and ‘stacking’ it rather than involving scrolling from left to right. All modern website templates will have this functionality built-in, but if you set up your website before about 2012, it is less likely to be automatically included. You can check quite easily by trying out your website on a phone. If content looks ‘scrambled’ and involves lots of scrolling up and down and left and right, you may wish to consider whether it is time for a more comprehensive rebuild of your website using a more modern system.

It is nothing to fear – and is an opportunity to review and reframe what you are offering, and how you talk about it. As discussed above, you will be able to point your existing web address to your new site, so there is no need to worry about losing traffic from people who have saved your address.

If you use a web company which offers pre-designed templates, much of the work is done for you, and you simply have to think about

your menu and how to populate each section with text and images. You are unlikely to meet with anyone from the company, as you will do most of the work yourself through a web interface, and you will be in complete control of when your website ‘goes live’.

If you are working from scratch with your own web designer or developer, have a good look around other websites that you like and find easy to navigate. Your web designer will ask you for an idea of the content you want and how it will be arranged, and you should aim to provide a full map of the menus and sub-menus you want to include. You should aim to meet with them to discuss the look and feel of the site, and they should then produce two or three design options for you to choose from. They will then start to build the site based on that design, using the content you provide.

If you do decide to use the services of a web designer or enthusiastic volunteer with coding skills, do make sure they hand over all the details you need for the long term, to ensure that if you lose contact you are not stuck with a ‘dead’ website. This may seem unlikely, but there are examples of organisations having to start from scratch after being unable to access the ‘back end’ of their own website.

As a checklist, for your safety ensure you have a proper record of the following shared with at least two staff members or trustees:

- Domain name registration details, including renewal date and cost, and any log-in details for online services;
- Server space details, including renewal date and cost, and any log-in details for online services;
- A copy of the website source files, and note of the framework and languages used, to be delivered when you sign-off the website for public launch (this will enable another designer to take over at a later date if need be, rather than have to start from scratch);
- Log-in details for your CMS or other content updating system;
- A schedule of security and technical updates, and associated costs, as agreed with your developer where relevant.

Website design and content – dos and don'ts..

Do focus some attention on getting your navigation (i.e. the main menu) right, and think carefully about what sort of words or phrases visitors are likely to be looking for. 'Staying with us' is probably more helpful than 'Room information'; 'Retreats and Quiet Days' is clearer than 'Our ministry'.

Don't cram all your content onto one or two pages – people dislike scrolling, particularly on mobile phones and tablets, and will often just give up. This is particularly important on your home page – avoid the urge to mention everything on your welcome page! Use your menu, and sub-menu where necessary, to separate content coherently across your site.

Do remember to mention the potential availability of bursaries to help with the cost of retreats and quiet days, where appropriate. APR member houses can apply to our bursary scheme on behalf of any potential retreatant: the individual does not have to be member themselves.

Don't use block capitals: they are particularly hard to read, even as headings, on a screen.

Do run an accessibility check on your website, to check that those with disabilities can access your content properly. We think the simplest is <http://wave.webaim.org/>, which enables you to enter your web address and immediately receive a free diagnosis of issues such as broken links, poor contrast on the page, and images without alternative text descriptions.

GOING DEEPER: MORE ADVANCED TIPS

Helping people find your website

However widely you share your website address and promote it through the various methods mentioned in this guide and beyond, the vast majority of your visitors will still come to you via search engines. Most of those will come via Google. The art of getting your retreat house high up in a Google search – particularly the all-important first page of search results – can sometimes be seen as some kind of mystery. In fact, it is as pretty much as simple as using clear headings, and building high quality original content.

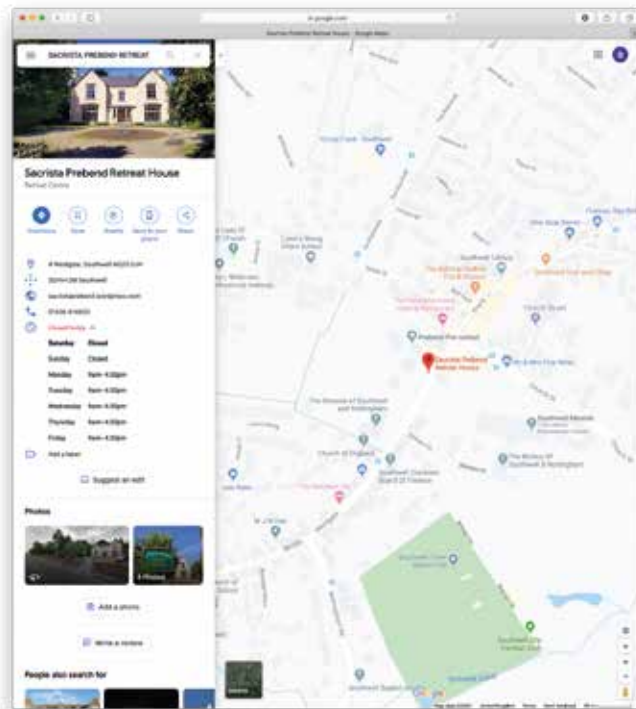
Some tips for boosting your search ranking

- Make sure you use Title Tags, which should be labelled as such, 'page description', or something similar in your content management system. These provide a short summary of the content users can expect to read on that page. This description – which should be less than 70 characters – will be displayed in the browser title bar and as the main link on the Google search result.
- Writing original content, with at least 100 words on each page, and ensuring regular use of keywords that people may search for – such as 'retreat' and 'quiet day'. However, don't overdo it by laboured overuse of such keywords – Google is wise to this and downgrades sites that try and trick it.
- If your website content management system allows for it (and does not automatically ascribe new pages with addresses using random numbers in them), then try and use logical keywords in your URLs (page addresses). For instance, www.stbalthazarsretreat.com/2019-retreat-programme will be looked upon more favourably by Google than something like www.stbalthazarsretreat.com/?-655491.asp.
- When linking to other pages or resources on your site, explain them fully in the hyperlinked text (i.e. the underlined bit) – so use "See our 2019 retreat programme here" rather than "Click here".
- Ask your diocese and local parishes for a hyperlink to your site from theirs. The more 'backlinks' you can build from other sites, the more useful and authoritative Google assumes your content is.
- Register your house on the two websites below – these high-quality profiles will automatically boost your ranking on Google search.

Other websites

In addition to the various retreat organisations (see “National promotion” below), you can also replicate some of your content on other popular websites to help raise your profile. While it may seem like a big step to branch out onto these platforms, the increased reach they offer could impact significantly on the number of people who stumble across details of your house – and they are completely free.

The most useful is Google My Business, which enables you to take ownership of your house’s profile as it displays on Google searches and Google Maps. The service is free, and extremely powerful in ensuring Google users see accurate contact and location information for your house. Visit <https://www.google.com/business/> to register your details – you will need a Google account to set up your ‘business’, but you can use your personal account for this if easier. When prompted, you should select ‘Storefront business’ (as opposed to ‘service area’) and as a ‘local’ page (rather than ‘brand’ page). You will then be asked for various details about your ‘business’, including your standard opening hours and website address.



Once your listing is verified, you will receive emails to your chosen Google email account when visitors leave reviews. Potential visitors increasingly look at reviews, and the average star rating given by visitors, when making decisions. It is therefore important to read and respond constructively and positively to any detailed reviews – particularly if the visitor notes areas for improvement.

Similarly, registering your retreat house on Trip Advisor is a good way of encouraging visitors, particularly if you offer a bed and breakfast type service aimed at non-retreatants. Trip Advisor has a huge number of users, who will regularly check ratings and reviews posted by other users before making a decision on where to stay in an area. Again, registering as the owner of a place to stay is free, and easy to do by following the instructions via <https://www.tripadvisor.co.uk/TripAdvisorInsights/w855>. When you initially search for your house via the site, you may find it already listed – typically because one of your guests has already left a review. As with your Google business profile, it is important to check for reviews occasionally, and log in to the site to respond where visitors leave comments.

Social media channels

It is tempting to feel that the only way to communicate with people under the age of 50 these days is to use social media. Well-meaning friends or trustees may keep needling you to “get on Facebook” as a way of raising your profile. But we know the reality is that setting up your own account and posting content can seem daunting and not without risk, and as a result many houses avoid the trouble all together. Others seek to take a principled stand against adding to social media ‘noise’. The truth is, some form of social media presence is certainly helpful in raising awareness of your centre, but you need to make a realistic assessment of the time you have available to manage any form of account you open. It is certainly worse to have a patchy or dormant account with the most recent update from nine months ago, than not to have one at all. A related consideration is that the key to gaining any traction on social media is that you need to spend time engaging and responding to other people’s posts and comments, rather than just broadcasting your own material. (Hence the name “social” media.)

For all of the different channels below, we would recommend that you try and post at the very least one piece of content a week, and be prepared to spend additional time – perhaps a couple of times a week – checking for any direct responses and replying to other uses where appropriate. Time estimates are difficult and vary by channel, but realistically – once you take into account the need to find images or take video to accompany your post – you should probably assume that each channel will consume around one to two hours per week, if you are posting a couple of times each week.

We do not have the space here to provide an exhaustive guide to the various (and ever growing) list of social media channels, or to provide details on precisely how each one works. Free and helpful guides to each channel are readily available by searching online, and most are very intuitive to use in any event.

To the right, we profile the three dominant channels currently reaching a wide general audience, and which are each predicted to continue to hold high user rates for some time. We have also highlighted examples of retreat houses using each channel, from which you might gain some inspiration.

GOING DEEPER: MORE ADVANCED TIPS

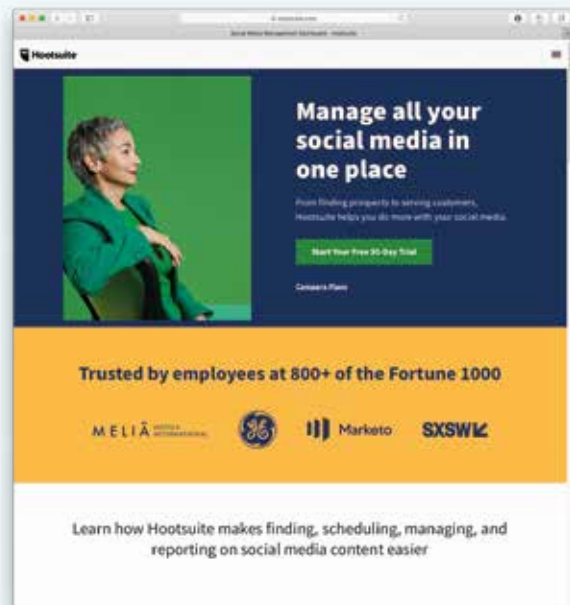
Finding content

The most popular content on social media is images and video, and you should aim for every post to be accompanied by an image, whether moving or not. Smartphones make this easily possible, and you can generate great results by a well-composed picture of your gardens in spring or a cake bake spread in autumn. A quote from the Bible or other Christian resources (NB you will need to seek permission for published sources) can be integrated into a beautiful image through various graphic design resources (such as [Canva](#), or [Adobe Spark](#)). A filmed ‘thought for the day’ of around 60 seconds from your warden or chaplain may also prove effective. Of course, if your main aim is to encourage people to visit for retreat, then an attractive photo of a poster promoting your forthcoming programme could be just the prompt someone needs to take the plunge and decide to join you.

You do not have to post in ‘real time’: there are free scheduling services available (such as [Hootsuite](#) or [Buffer](#)) that enable you to pre-publish your content for a specific date and time. This can be great if you are planning a series of related posts, for instance reflections on Bible readings or posts linked to the Church year.

After a while, you will get a feel for ‘what works’: the posts that get ‘liked’ or ‘shared’ more often, and the best time of day to post your content. Above all, do not

be afraid: the risks associated with engaging with social media are low (as long as you never post anything that you wouldn’t be willing to say to someone’s face!) if you are able and willing to dedicate some time to stewarding your accounts.





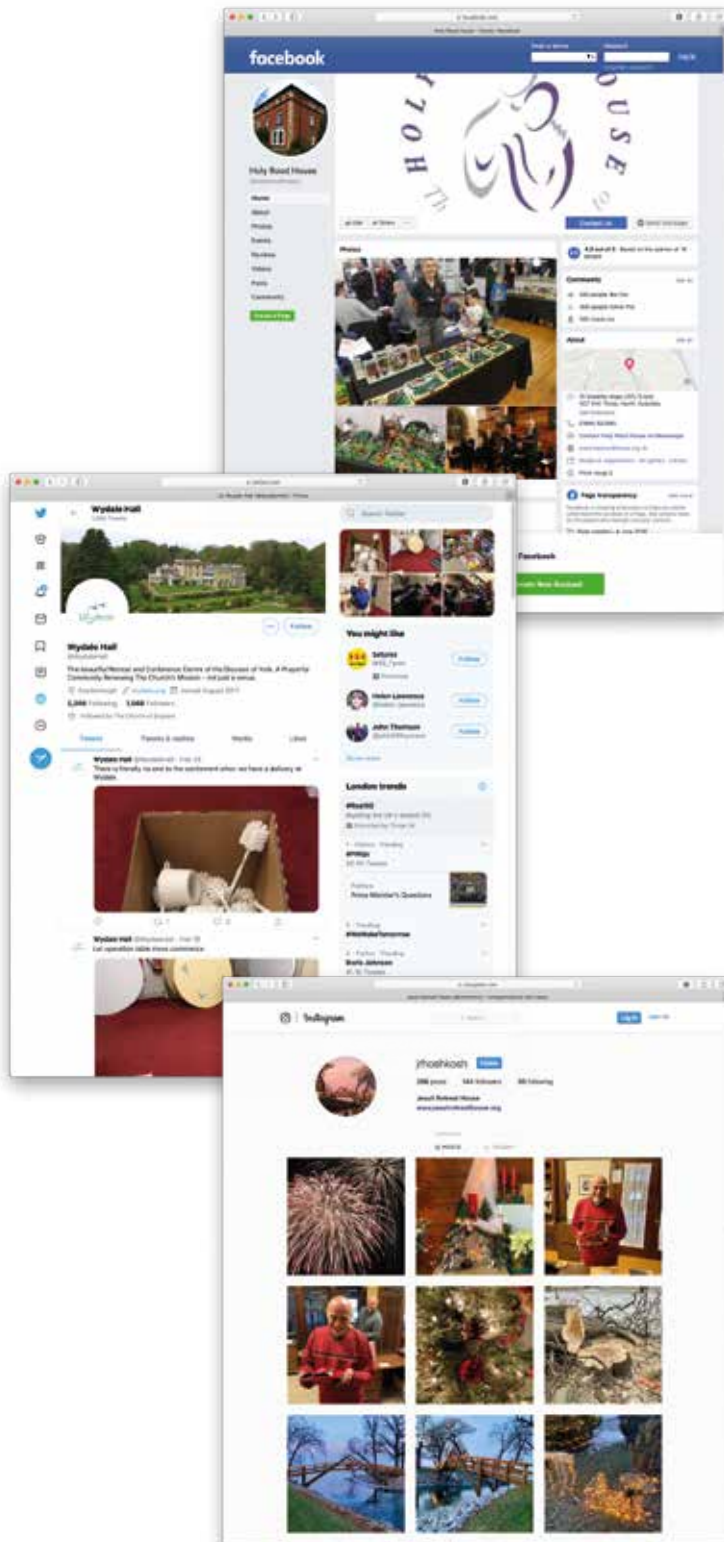
Facebook: Posts of text, images and video appear in the ‘timeline’ of users who have opted to receive your updates. Organisations can set up ‘pages’ and encourage users to ‘like’ the page, in the hope they accept so that they see your posts more often in future. Facebook allows you to pay to advertise to a broader audience in the hope of attracting more ‘likes’. Holy Road House in North Yorkshire posts regularly with a range of content: [facebook.com/pg/holyroadhouse](https://www.facebook.com/pg/holyroadhouse)



Twitter: Brief posts (originally of only up to 140 characters, now 280 characters). Users ‘follow’ other accounts to see posts in their own ‘feed’, and can ‘like’, ‘retweet’ (share with their own followers) or comment on each post. Users typically include other users in posts by using the @ symbol followed by that Twitter user’s account name (‘handle’). Wydale Hall, also in North Yorkshire, runs a lively feed at twitter.com/wydalehall



Instagram: Each post is an image or video, with accompanying text captions. Users ‘follow’ accounts in order to see posts in their own ‘feed’, and can ‘like’ or comment on each post. It is not part of Instagram’s functionality to re-post or share another user’s post. Hashtags (#) are used a lot in the captions to help users find content of interest to them. A huge proportion of content on this channel consists of ‘selfies’, but there are also some incredibly beautiful images. The app includes tools to ‘filter’ your image to make it look more arresting. While relatively few retreat houses currently run Instagram accounts, the popularity of this channel is growing hugely at the moment, particularly with under-40s. One example from is [Instagram.com/jrhoshkosh](https://www.instagram.com/jrhoshkosh), a Jesuit retreat house in Wisconsin.





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Email and postal promotion

One of the things that retreat houses could learn from some of the more proactive parish ministries is the value of stewarding contact details. To marketers, the email addresses of ‘warm’ customers – people who have previously expressed an interest in a product or service – are like gold dust.

There are many studies showing how much more it costs to attract and acquire new visitors than it does to encourage someone back. Consider how many people pass through your doors each year, whose email or postal address you could collect – and what might happen if you dropped them an occasional email (in compliance with the law: see below) or even sent them a Christmas card in the post with details of your New Year retreats?

Collecting details

Publicity around the recent General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) has understandably worried a lot of small charities. The GDPR is not something to worry about, and certainly not a reason to destroy your guests’ details where they have given permission for you to contact them in future. The main thing you need to make sure of is that you have explicit permission from the person to store their details, and to use them for future contact. You also need to give them a clear opportunity to withdraw their consent and for you to remove their details from your system whenever you contact them.

The easiest option is to have a contact card that guests fill in as part of the checking-in process. You will have probably found that many hotels (and even visitor attractions and museums) now do this as standard practice. The card could request information from guests such as their email and postal address; you might already do this as part of your check-in process. To be GDPR compliant, the card must include a tick box to opt-in to communications (rather than to opt out). You might use wording such as: “I would like to be kept up-to-date with occasional news and details of events and retreats at St Balthazar’s Retreat House. I am happy to be contacted by email [tick box] and post [tick box]. I understand that I can opt out of contact at any time, and that this will be made clear on any communication I receive.”

Store the details securely. For those with the resources to do so, it would be considered good practice to review your list occasionally and remove people who have not visited for, say, five years. You might of course want to send them an email or postcard before you do so, saying that you’d love to stay in touch and that all they have to do to remain on your list is to send a brief reply confirming so.

Please note that APR cannot offer legal advice and this guidance is offered only as a practical guide. Your diocese will probably have been in touch with more detailed guidance, and you can see the national Church of England advice at <https://www.parishresources.org.uk/gdpr/>.

Using details

Using the post can be expensive. APR finds that the vast majority of our members now also prefer contact by email – although well-timed mailings with relevant content about forthcoming retreats or quiet days can still be effective. Anecdotally, post is opened with greater interest if the address is hand written (rather than using mailing labels).

Email is cheap (practically free) and much quicker. One option is to use a commercial product (such as **Mailchimp**, which is free for up to 2,000 addresses, or **SendPulse**, which allows up to 500 for free), which allow you to create professional looking emails with relative ease. You can also track the open rate (i.e. how



many of your recipients open your email), and the system will automatically remove email addresses that no longer work, and they will even handle requests to be removed for you.

However, for smaller houses, there is nothing wrong with storing your email list in a standard Microsoft Office application, and pasting the addresses into the BCC recipient box (taking care not to use the 'To' or 'CC' address boxes). A more personal feeling email, sent direct from the house, may have more impact – especially when we all receive so many marketing emails every day.

What to send – dos and don'ts...

Do use an attention-grabbing subject line. “News from St. Balthazar’s” is unlikely to get people clicking with great interest: try something like “In need of some respite?”.

Do distinguish your email from a standard marketing message by expressing genuine care for your recipient. Something like the following will mark your note out from the crowd: “While we are sending this message to many friends and former guests, please be assured you remain in our prayers. Whether or not it is possible for you to attend any of our forthcoming events, we hope you are well and that you will come and visit us again soon.”

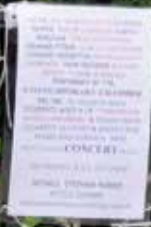
Don't schedule your email for times when people are less likely to read them – bad times to send are Monday mornings and Friday afternoons, when people tend to be particularly keen to keep their inboxes clear.

Do try and keep the email relatively brief. There is no need to include every single detail – the beauty of email is that you can include hyperlinks to the details on your website. Title, leader and a brief description, along with the relevant date(s), may well be enough to pique interest.

Don't just send an attachment asking people to open it for details – paste the main content into the body of the email. Not only will this increase the likelihood that busy people will read the material, many email programmes will strip out attachments, or warn recipients not to open them.

Do sign it off personally – a named person will always generate a greater sense of engagement than “From all at St Balthazar’s”.





5



Local promotion

Would your nearest neighbours know what goes on behind your doors? In this chapter, we'll look at ways in which you can spread the word to your local community.

Physical approach

Estate agents talk about a property's 'curb appeal'. By that they mean the way it looks on the outside, to those walking by. Many of our retreat houses are blessed with beautiful buildings, often set in even more beautiful gardens. But sometimes first impressions – which, after all, are the only impression many local people will have of your house – can be undone by putting operational needs first.

Examples might include having large wheelie bins lining the entrance; or brusque instructions about parking or how to gain access to the house. While of course some operational notices are helpful, even necessary, the tone and positioning should be secondary to the overall sense of welcome and tranquillity that guests should feel from the moment they approach your threshold.

Signage

For many decades, churches have understood the value of noticeboards. They provide a highly visible window into what happens in and around the church: services, other events, notices of marriages, whimsical riddles to encourage spiritual reflection. Much of this isn't necessarily relevant for retreat houses: many are situated away from heavy footfall in any event. But that is no reason to avoid making your name signage do some low key marketing for you. At the very least, it might explain that you are a "Christian retreat centre, open to all" or similar. Nowadays, including your web address would be considered perfectly normal.

Posters

You don't need a guide like this to explain that posters still help generate interest, especially within local churches. Many retreat houses benefit from having a distribution list of local churches, of all denominations, who agree to display event posters. For those who have such amenities close by, your local library or other community centre might be willing to display posters for your events. Don't be afraid to ask in pubs, cafes, gyms and shops – they may not feel able to help, but the conversation might spark other opportunities!

If you do decide to branch out with your posters, it is particularly important that you de-jargonise 'churchy' words, and ensure you contain all the information that someone might need to consider whether they can attend:

- > Date (including day of the week) and time
- > Precise location (include postcode), and whether parking is available
- > Cost, and mention of any concessions/ bursaries available
- > How to book
- > And remember your event's USP and PSP!

Leaflets

As with posters, it can be remarkable how many public places are willing to stock leaflets for non-commercial endeavours, if only you ask. Your trustees or Friends might also be able to help – send them a pack and challenge them to get through them all!

Given you don't know who will pick up your leaflet and where, it is a good idea to use the additional space to include elements that you can't fit into event posters: a map showing your location, more details about any bursary schemes to which retreatants might be able to have access, and details of how the reader can register to receive your regular email updates.



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Diocesan/regional promotion

In this chapter, we'll look at what you can do to leverage the networks across your region. We are assuming that your retreat house has some form of relationship with your Anglican diocese, and if not, some of this advice may be less relevant – but there is no harm in asking the relevant diocesan officer if they can still offer you some help.

Diocesan newsletter/emailing

Every diocese has some form of regular newsletter or email, and most will have some form of events listings section. These are typically widely read, especially among those who might be interested in taking a retreat. Get to know the editor (usually the Diocesan Communications Officer), their deadlines, and in what format they like to receive submissions. They are likely to be particularly interested if you have an unusual or particularly timely theme, or if you are running an event aimed at a particular demographic of people. You can find more inspiration about what makes a good news story below (under “Local media”).

If you are not formally part of the diocese, it would still be worth making contact (details will be available via the diocesan website) to highlight how your house can help serve parishes and their clergy.

Diocesan website

If you have your own website, be sure to ask for a prominent link from the diocesan website – and not just under the section about resources for clergy! Remember that links from reputable websites with reasonable traffic levels help boost your own position on search engines.

Archdeacons' Visitations

Typically, archdeacons visit a parish once every three to five years. The visit consists of a check of various practical and legal aspects of the church's life, such as ensuring the fabric of the buildings are in good order and that safeguarding policies are properly displayed and up-to-date. However, the visits also include a pastoral element, where the

archdeacon discusses the parish's mission plan and how they can support this. Many archdeacons would appreciate relevant information about forthcoming retreats and other spirituality events that might assist clergy and churchwardens, so that they can pass on some practical suggestions for signposting. You can contact your closest archdeacons via the diocesan website.

We also suggest sharing your forthcoming programme with your Diocesan Director of Ordinands (DDO) and those with responsibility for continuing ministerial training (lay and ordained). Again, you should be able to find their contact details via the diocesan website.

Wall planner or desk calendar

A traditional way that businesses have encouraged people to remember their service or product is to send them a calendar of some sort at the end of the preceding year. Taking inspiration from this, retreat houses might send such gifts to clergy in the diocese and key diocesan officers to serve as a reminder throughout the year. If you have attractive gardens, you could use photographs of your grounds throughout the seasons to illustrate each month, and if not, good quality images of artworks or even ‘stock’ images from services like [Shutterstock](#) could be used. Where the design allows, key events in the house's calendar could be pre-highlighted. Many online or local printers can produce a fairly small print run of wall planners or desk calendars relatively inexpensively. Some printers may also be able to mail out your calendars on your behalf, if you provide them with the mailing list (which, for parish clergy, should be available from your diocesan office).

Promotional goods

Other promotional goods – such as pens, mugs and USB memory sticks – can be produced remarkably cheaply, and can serve as a novel way of reminding people about what your house offers. A simple online search for ‘promotional branded goods’ will reveal a multitude of suppliers. You will need to supply a high quality version of your logo as a digital file (i.e. not embedded in Word document or similar) and any other wording or ‘tagline’ you want to include. Don’t forget your web address, as long as there is little danger it will change within the next few years.

If you run a bar or shop, you could sell such products for a small profit. If you intend to give them away, however, do think about how you would distribute your stock before you order. Often minimum print runs can be quite high, so it is best to check that you have sufficient storage for surplus stock if necessary.

Local radio

Most local BBC radio stations, and even some commercial stations, run ‘pause for thought’ type slots, which are typically two or three minutes of a programme dedicated to voices

from different religious groups. Radio stations which carry such opportunities are often keen to hear from fresh voices that bring a different perspective to their current roster of contributors. This could provide a great opportunity for your Warden or similar staff member to promote the value of rest, retreat and reflection, to a wide general audience.

Always check first and listen to a few examples before contacting the station, so you can get a feel for the format and what is expected. If you think you could give it a go, writing or emailing to the station’s Programme Controller (details usually on the station website) is the best approach, though they may not respond immediately – and if they do, don’t be surprised if they offer you a slot at very short notice!

The key to the content is to be topical and relatable, avoiding churchy jargon and including personal anecdotes where possible (and true). You will be given a strict time limit and you must stick to this to avoid problems for the presenter. Larger stations may even run occasional training sessions for such contributors, and your Diocesan Communications Officer should be able to help with extra advice.





Once you have an idea of your story, you need to write it in a format that news editors can consider for use. This is known as a press release, and there is a fairly standard format. You can read more about how to write a press release at <https://www.procopywriters.co.uk/2015/09/how-to-write-an-effective-press-release/> and some helpful guidance on standard format can be found at <http://www.lovebritishfood.co.uk/resources/guide-to-writing-a-press-release>.

Once you have your press release (which typically should be no more than 500 words), it should be sent by email to the editorial or

news desk of each local outlet you want to target. You should be able to easily find the right email address from each outlet's website, or your Diocesan Communications Officer may have a list.

Your press release can be sent as a bulk email (as long as you BCC the recipients), with your headline in the subject line. It can help pique an editor's interest to include the name of your nearest town or village in the subject line, so that they can see at a glance that it's a truly local story (try "Local veg on the menu at Ancaster retreat house for National Vegetarian Week").



Including images

Nowadays, most local news outlets don't have the resources to send photographers to many events. They are happy to use images submitted with a press release, as long as the photographs are of a good quality and composition. Images should be taken at least 300 dpi at around the size of a piece of A4 paper (you can check the settings on a good digital camera, and the resolution can be checked by accessing the 'Properties' in the image file). Images taken on all but the latest camera phones will probably not be of sufficient quality.

Photographs for publication – dos and don'ts...

Do include people in your image. Not only do people like looking at images of other people, but local newspapers in particular are keen to show as many local people as possible because the received wisdom is that this increases sales from the person's family and friends.

Do check that you have permission for the people photographed to be published to protect their personal data and comply with the Data Protection Act.

Don't just line everyone up in a straight row.

Do try and include an object to illustrate your story – e.g. garden or cooking implements, or people holding different styles of clocks to illustrate taking time out for retreat. Even if it is slightly contrived, including people in uniform or dress representing their function (e.g. chefs in their whites; clergy with the dog collar on) also helps the reader make sense of the story at a glance.

Do edit the image file name to clearly refer to your story, and **don't** just use the default numbers produced by your camera.

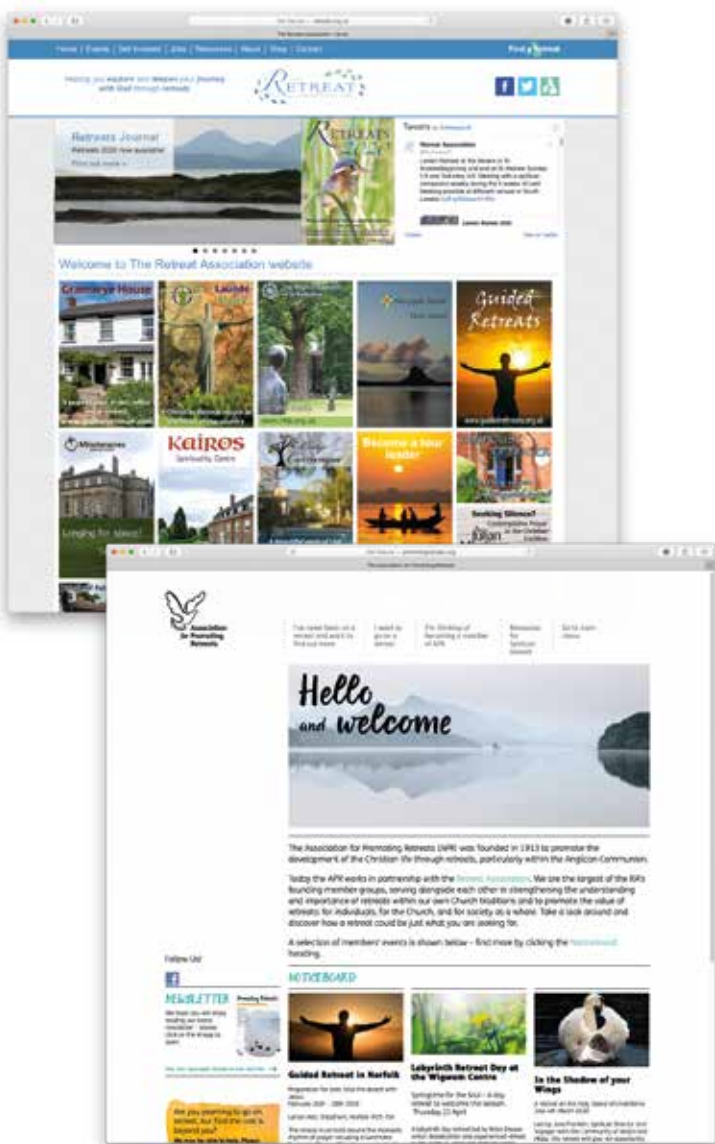
Do provide a caption in the body of your email, including full names of anyone pictured. Typically you should do this under the 'Notes to editors' section at the end of your release, explaining the contents (e.g. "Attached images show (left to right) trustees Andrew Arnold, the Revd Betty Brown, Charlie Chalk and Dinah Doolittle outside St. Balthazar's House, Ancaster, with the commemorative time capsule.").



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National promotion

Don't be shy! APR's own research shows that many people inclined to take a residential retreat are prepared to travel some distance, with six in ten retreat-goers saying they would be prepared to travel more than 50 miles, and four in ten saying they would travel more than 100 miles from home. So take advantage of this market, and use the national platforms at your disposal – many are much cheaper than you would imagine, or come as part of your membership of APR or one of the other Retreat Association member groups.



Retreat Association's *Retreats Journal*

This flagship annual publication contains articles and book reviews on that year's theme, alongside information and programmes for over 175 Christian retreat centres in the UK and beyond. Retreat houses are helpfully displayed by region and a quick reference guide to identify retreats by theme, making it a key channel for communicating your house's programme for the year. The publication also includes details of courses, networks and associations that promote spirituality and spiritual direction.

Retreats is sent to all members of the APR and the Retreat Association member groups as part of our membership packages, and is available to order online from the Retreat Association website and from some Christian bookshops.

Separate advertising opportunities are available in *Retreats*, and all retreat house members of the Retreat Association and APR receive 10% off the usual price. Bookings are typically required by September for publication in that December's edition. Details of sizes and rates can be found on the Retreat Association website from July to September.

RA/APR Websites

The Retreat Association (www.retreats.org.uk) and APR (www.promotingretreats.org) websites carry basic details of their member houses. The Retreat Association website has an interactive map page with links to the majority of retreat centres listed in the *Retreats* handbook – www.retreats.org.uk/findaretreat.php. Do check that yours is up-to-date, especially if you have moved domains in recent months.



The RA website, which receives upwards of 4,000 unique visitors each month, also provides affordable opportunities to advertise your house on its homepage. Details can be found at <http://www.retreats.org.uk/advertising.php>.

Advertising in the Church press

While not necessarily cheap, taking out display advertising in the *Church Times*, *The Church of England Newspaper* or other Christian publications may help you reach an audience that you otherwise never would. Both of the Anglican titles carry a 'retreats and holidays' supplement a couple of times a year, and these

can be particularly effective times to promote your house to an audience thinking about where to take a retreat. Be sure to include mention of what makes your house distinctive – perhaps by referring to the local scenery and walks, or the number of fully accessible rooms you have available.

Every publication's website carries details of how to contact their advertising teams. Simple text adverts tend to be charged by the word. If you want to have a 'display' advert (which includes some element of visual design or image), the publication can typically design these for you for an additional charge.

Last word

Inevitably we have only been able to scratch the surface of the many and varied ways in which retreat houses can help raise their profile locally, regionally and nationally. We hope to have at least been able to offer some food for thought, and some practical ideas for reaching out to a wider audience about the value of retreats for individuals, for the Church, and for society as a whole.

If you have any specific questions or comments about any of the contents of this toolkit, we'd love to hear from you. Drop us a line at promoting.retreats@gmail.com.

Finally, good luck in your endeavours. The trustees and members of APR will keep you in our prayers in all your work, as we jointly help further the Kingdom of God by preserving and promoting spaces for rest, prayer and reflection here on earth.

Acknowledgements and further reading

This guide was primarily written by Ben Wilson, Vice-Chair of the APR until October 2019. The APR Trustees are grateful to all those who helped in the production of the resource, including the staff and trustees of the Retreat Association.

If you are interested in learning more about communicating Church activities, the following books may be of interest:

100 ways to get your church noticed,
by Neil Pugmire (Church House Publishing)

So Everyone Can Hear – communicating church in a digital culture, by Mark Crosby (SPCK Publishing)

If you are particularly interested in exploring more about using websites and social media may find the following introductory guides of interest, and the author of this toolkit has drawn upon some of the ideas in these books:

The Church Online series of basic guides by Laura Treneer (Bible Reading Fellowship)

Church Where Art Thou? Get Your Church on the First Page of Google, Ronke Jegede (JIL Publishing)



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