

The Nativity story, as told through social media

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- If the Virgin Mary had an iPhone: A new viral video puts a 21st-century spin on the Nativity story.

From elementary-school plays to plastic Joseph and Mary figures on lawns, the holiday season brings all kinds of re-enactments of the birth of Jesus.

But what if the Nativity were to happen today, in the age of Google and Twitter?

A popular new video takes the Immaculate Conception into the 21st century. Designed by Excentric, a Lisbon, Portugal-based digital marketing company, "The Digital Story of the Nativity" tells the familiar biblical story through Google searches, e-mails, tweets, Facebook "Likes" and Foursquare "check-ins."

Miguel Figueiredo, president of Excentric, challenged his creative team a few weeks ago to show traditional companies how they could harness social media.

"This is something very powerful for brands. In Portugal, there is a lot of step back to this. People are afraid to do this sort of thing. So we decided to do this for our sake," Figueiredo told CNN.

It took the team about five weeks to go from the drawing board to uploading the video.

Its highlights include:

- Mary shopping online for a donkey, and Joseph acquiring a cow in FarmVille
- The three kings checking into the manger on Foursquare
- The wise men shopping on Amazon for gold, frankincense and myrrh
- Untold numbers of Facebook "Likes" after a status update announcing Jesus' birth

The Portuguese version of the video has 1.5 million page views. Two English language versions have a combined for more than 1.4 million hits, both staggering numbers for videos uploaded less than a week ago.

Figueiredo said the goal was not just to go viral but also to show his clients in Portugal how social media tools can work and how seamlessly they can blend in with one's own story.

"We took the story that everyone knows and (our clients) could follow it to learn, especially for people who are pretty far from the usage of (social media) tools, and take them step-by-step through the benefits of each of these platforms," he said.

Excentric also knew the timing of the video's release would be critical. They looked at when people in Portugal use Facebook and how it has rapidly become the social-media platform of choice there.

"We also chose a date where people start thinking about Christmas and sending post cards but they are not actually doing it yet. So we took that time when people are very sensitive to receive these type of things, so they think, 'Oh what a great idea for me to send as my own Christmas cards,' " Figueiredo said.

American audiences may be seeing more of the video this Christmas season.

Figueiredo said a number of American churches have called to ask if they can show the video in their services.

The clip appears to be inspired by the Google TV commercial about a Paris-based courtship, told through Google searches. It's not the first viral video to reference that Google ad -- other similar spoofs include a birthday surprise gone horribly wrong and an imagining of Tiger Woods' Web searches after his ill-fated November 2009 car wreck -- but it may be the most clever.

Google's Parisian-themed commercial first ran during the Super Bowl last February, which shows how some viral ideas can stay ripe for parody for months.

Figueriedo said his digital marketing company does not specialize in religion and does not currently have any religious institutions as clients. He said they knew the Nativity story inside and out because Portugal is a predominantly Catholic country.

"The story for us is very familiar, even all the details. Of course we involved the people who are more connected to the religion on a more daily basis and they were very participative in the creative process," he said.

The religious angle of this video isn't likely to be repeated in future Excentric videos.

"We are certainly not proposing turning religious stories into marketing tools. We picked this particular story for this video precisely because we are not promoting any commercial brand for the main audience," Figueriedo said.