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Revolutions in Egypt, in the Confessional and at the Met

by Richard McPherson

During the same week the world was awed by reports of technology's role in the Egyptian revolution, the *New York Times*' Maureen Dowd wrote brilliantly about a new iPhone and iPad app called "Confession." It provides age- and gender-appropriate questions to help guide Roman Catholics through the Ten Commandments and identify their transgressions. (A real priest still has to offer absolution, no matter how good your phone plan is.)

Simultaneously, the *Times*' Arts section reported that the Metropolitan Museum of Art had consolidated its wide-spread technology operations into a single digital media department, a move driven partly by research showing that 40% of museum visitors had first visited its website. Clearly the site increasingly serves as a virtual lobby for millions of people. Moreover, the new media department will report straight to Met Director Thomas Campbell, who is pushing hard to add mobile information, tours and online access to curators.

These three wildly diverse developments contain an unmistakable message for our entire sector...

Technology, from website "maintenance" to mobile apps, is in reality both a central function – and a senior-level one. No longer are technology activities "add-ons" to other functions or the problem of the poor web guys in the basement. New, especially mobile, technology is pivotal to success, whether in the hands of museum directors, churches or millions of Egyptians.

There have always been non-profit "haves" and "have not's," historically defined by the size of their endowment or their access to major donors. These continue to be critical factors, to be sure.

Increasingly, though, the definition of success – the new divide between organizational haves and have-nots – will be whether their structure and budget reflect technology as a core, senior function, or something marginal, managed by junior or even mid-level personnel.

So examine your org charts, budgets and even your basic assumptions about how to involve your constituents with your mission and goals.

One of the priests advising the Confession app developers, Rev. Dan Scheidt of Mishawaka, Indiana, said the new app isn't intended to replace face-to-face interaction but to prompt people to go to church. At first it was odd to see parishioners enter the confessional with tiny screens glowing, but he noticed that it seemed to help people "focus, and recollect more."

Like many new technologies, mobile apps are most powerful when they serve large organizational goals, whether in the hands of revolutionaries, museum directors or churches. As Father Scheidt said of the new confession app, "It's just meant to prompt discussion." To which we can only add, amen.