

3,000 on your membership list; 350 on Sunday? It may be a problem with your internal marketing



When creating your outreach plans, remember it's just as important to plan **INTERNAL** marketing for people already attending your church.

A common challenge for many churches today is that they may have 2,000 to 3,000 people listed on the church roles, but only a fraction of them show up each week.

Though there are many reasons for this and we'll be covering some of them in upcoming posts, one key reason for this is that many churches do little to no internal marketing. If a business never followed up with customers, but simply greeted them warmly when they came in the door, but never contacted them again, never sent a sale flyer or had any other contact with them, the customer would probably not return. A church is not very different.

Most churches put the majority of their church marketing and communication efforts on getting people outside the church to come to the church. Though this is important, we shouldn't stop there and just like the customer above, if a church doesn't work on communicating with current members, they may not see them often.

We also have more reasons to do internal marketing than the local business. Remember, Jesus commanded us to make disciples, not simply worship and special event attendees. We need to learn to use every tool of technology available to get people involved in the activities and ministries of our churches that will take them to the next step of Christian maturity. To do this we need to plan out our internal marketing and it works best if you have a coordinated approach using both social media and print.

Internal marketing defined

Internal marketing includes all the communications you create for people already attending your church to get them involved in the activities of your church or ministry that will help them grow to maturity in their Christian life. Not only is this important when people come to your church after a special event, but it is important on a continuing basis.

Far too often this aspect of marketing and communications does not take place in the church and if it does, it is done in an often haphazard and spotty way. This lack of attention to this aspect of marketing is seldom intentional. It happens because:

- The church staff does not see the importance of need to do this kind of marketing because of the unspoken assumption that people will automatically attend small groups, training times and other activities of the church.
- Because it is important to the staff, they think it is important to the congregation, but this is seldom true.
- Church staff is too stressed out and overworked to do one more thing in communications and marketing than they are already doing.
- There is no intentional plan for internal marketing and no way to measure the effectiveness of the program.
- Internal marketing is only done through one channel—if that's social media primarily (as much is today) this doesn't have an impact on people who prefer print or don't have access to digital channels.

Following are suggestions on how to begin to remedy this situation:

Become convinced of the need for internal marketing

Outside of the four gospels, the rest of our New Testament was written to people who were already Christians. Paul, Peter and John all realized that becoming a Christian was just the FIRST step in the Christian life. People must grow to maturity to be all the Lord intends them to be.

This growth to maturity takes place best in the context of the local church. Your church has many activities to help people grow: workshops, adult education classes, small groups, fellowship activities. But for people to grow through them, they have to be in them.

For your people to be in them, you have to intentionally advertise them—again and again and again. If you are honestly reaching previously unchurched people, they don't know all about Sunday School and small groups and discipleship classes. They have no idea what you are talking about or what takes place in them. You have to educate them about the value, invite them, remind them and do everything you can to get them involved.

In response to this advice I often hear the complaint, "People just don't care anymore" about small groups or Sunday school classes or similar events. When I hear this after probing the communication plan in the church to promote these events through all available communication channels, I find it often has nothing to do with people caring or not. Reality is that those responsible for the communications in the church assume everybody knows about these things, why they are valuable, when and how to attend. This is simply not true—the majority of the congregation has no idea of the majority of Christian growth events going on in the church or why it is vital to their spiritual health that they attend. The church staff MUST make it a priority to communicate them effectively.

When a person becomes a believer in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit lives within that person and he or she wants to grow. But the Holy Spirit most likely will not tell him, "Go to the small group that meets at the Johnsons at 456 Everystreet Lane, 7:30 on Thursday night and you'll learn what it means to have a meaningful devotional life." You've got to communicate those details and help the new believer see how important it is for him to attend.

To solve this challenge doesn't involve complex marketing strategy—but it involves a lot of printing notices, bulletin inserts, postcards, explanatory brochures, notices on the Web and in the newsletter and bulletin and every form of social media your church uses. It is a lot of work. To help people grow in their Christian lives is a monumental undertaking and one that we cannot ignore by assuming people don't care when we have not worked to communicate completely to them.

Train volunteers to help

In light of the immense amount of work involved in successfully marketing ministry maturity programs, you need to realize that your current church staff probably cannot do all the ministry communication work needed to get all the internal marketing done that needs to be done.

You need volunteer help. Sometimes when you do that you have to give up some measure of overly perfectionist control. Begin to recruit current members of the ministries you want to promote and encourage them to:

- Send out postcards
- Sent out emails
- Create and share social media about the ministry events
- Set up a web site or sub site for each ministry, e.g. for singles, students, moms at home etc.
- Start writing a newsletter in print and on the Web—different channels for different audiences
- Begin a blog about your ministry area
- Create and use whatever social media for the ministry age and interests of your target audience, including Facebook, Twitter and whatever other ones useful for you

I know in even suggesting these actions, some people will react in horror that communications produced by volunteers who cannot be continuously supervised will “get out of control” and “won’t reflect the ‘standards’ of our church.” Maybe. But look for a few minutes on how Jesus handled delegation. He didn’t leave the disciples with too many guidelines or seem overly concerned with how they would carry out changing the world.

“Get to the work of evangelizing the world and growing believers to maturity; do it all with love” seemed to be His bottom line. Jesus didn’t specify a lot of details on exactly how to do these things.

The primary guidelines that Paul seemed to set down involved the character of leaders, not the details of ministry. Outside of the specifics of how to observe communion, the rest of the ways things should be done in the church was left open.

The lack of specifics (guided of course by the Holy Spirit) is one of the reasons why the church has been able to take root and grow in the multitude of times and cultures. If you are flexible and encouraging of your volunteers you may be amazed at how they can reach cultures in our world that the church overall may not even know exist. Some of these subcultures exist in your church itself and it may take a volunteer who is part of that group to communicate well to that group.

What might come to mind initially is that you may need some volunteers from the high school group to communicate to other high school students and that can be an extremely useful idea, but younger people aren’t the only groups. A volunteer in the senior group might take on writing and publishing a newsletter for seniors informing them about volunteer opportunities or studies for that age group. An Instagram account might be great for the high school group, a printed newsletter perfect for seniors. One communication method isn’t better than any other, but if we are going to communicate to and keep all the age groups in our churches attending the church, we need to create communications for all of them.

Make a plan for successful internal ministry marketing

The keys for a successful internal ministry marketing plan are: REPETITION, REPETITION, REPETITION and COMPLETE DETAILS EVERY TIME. For any event you want to be well attended you need to let people know about it many times and in many ways, for example: send out a series of postcards, announce it in the bulletin numerous times; have it listed on your Web site, send out emails and social media posts, do a PowerPoint presentation. This is not overkill.

Imagine an advertising executive complaining that they didn't get much of a response for a new movie when after all, they told people about it 2 times! That advertising agency would be quickly fired because everyone knows it requires hundreds of repetitions to launch a new movie. Of course we don't expect that many for any church event, but the example above was literally a repeat of a quote from a church secretary who told me that the church staff was extremely upset that they did not get a good turn out at an event and "they had advertised it TWO TIMES in the bulletin." Apparently at this church the common practice was one time and one time only. That practice will not keep people coming back to church.

Current advertising theory tells us people need to hear or see something at least 7 times for it to sink in at all. Keep in mind also that not every person will see every promotional communication you produce. They may not be in church each week (most people today, even "regular attenders are there only 2-3 times per month); your mailer may be tossed out in the food advertisements; they may not get the church newsletter, they may miss your social media post (not everyone sees or reads your Facebook or Twitter or Instagram post as they flow by).

Have a check list of the ways you will advertise all the ministry and maturity events in your church

If you have only announced something a few times in the bulletin, try something like this. For example for a major kick-off of your small group ministry you may need:

- 3 bulletin announcements
- 2 bulletin inserts or flyers
- 3 stories on the Web
- 2 postcards
- business card invitations for individual groups
- 2 follow-up emails
- an explanatory brochure on why small groups are important and what they do
- 5-7 social media mentions

Check off the activities as you do them and record the results, you will be amazed at the difference.

As you create these pieces, remember you do not need to be original or different in each one. It is far more effective to come up with one way to advertise an event and repeat it exactly the same through all your repetitions. Professional marketers do not change their message through an entire advertising campaign and you should also keep yours the same or you will confuse your readers. This is very important to remember because one of the reasons many church communicators don't repeat messages as many times as needed is they feel they need to be original each time they do it.

NO! In reality if you change the message, you don't get the power of repetition. Come up with one message, slogan, colors and repeat that again and again—that is what professional advertisers do.

The complaint then often comes up, "If we repeat things like this people will get bored." In reality, if you keep changing things, people will get confused. It isn't the audience that gets bored, it is the communication creator who gets tired of repeating the same message. Stick with it and watch attendance increase.

This repetition is especially important if your church is growing. People with little or no church background have no history of loyalty to any church program. If you are successful at winning unchurched people to Jesus, they have no idea why a small group is good for them, or what studying the Bible will do for them. You have to win loyalty, acceptance, and excitement about your programs every time you put on or repeat an event.

Not the complete answer, but an essential part of it

Increasing your communications and your internal marketing is not the total solution to declining church attendance, but I guarantee that no church will retain members and involve them in ministries that will help them grow to spiritual maturity without an intentional, intensive and complete communications program.

The Effective Church Communications website and ministry has many resources to help you do this.

Our latest book, *The Five Steps of Effective Church Communications and Marketing*, is a step-by-step program that will show you how to move people from outside the church through the Five Steps of INVITE, INFORM, INCLUDE, INSTRUCT, INSPIRE to enable them to become mature disciples of Jesus.

Granted, this is a huge amount of work, but if our goal is as it was for Paul, “to present everyone perfect, mature, complete, in Christ” when we stand before Him, it will be more than worth it.

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