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Marketing and the Church:

Why One of America's Oldest Establishments Still Needs to Attract New People

by

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An Honors Thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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Introduction

The idea that marketing was not simply restricted to businesses, but can expand outside of the corporate world was proposed by Kotler and Levy. In their words, “The choice...is not whether to market or not to market, for no organization can avoid marketing...the choice is whether to do it well or poorly” (Kotler & Levy, 11). According to them, marketing is about “sensitively serving and satisfying human need,” giving marketing value and a purpose outside of simply buttressing profit. (Odia & Isabor). While the term “marketing” is understood as a positive in the business world, to the church the concept of “selling” a product might be met with hesitation or opposition. According to *Christianity Today*, Christians have raised many problems dealing with marketing the church or turning “Jesus into a Brand” (Wigg-Stevenson). While it is true that there is a fine line to walk when it comes to “marketing the church,” there may be no better time for the church to employ the strategies of marketing since attendance in churches has recently plummeted. According to Pew Research, less than one-third of Americans attend church monthly, one to two times a month now being considered consistent in the modern world (Smith). On top of that, only a quarter of America attends weekly, dropping from 36 percent in 2014 (Pew Research). A downward trend like this, even more, dramatic if considering data from further back, would immediately send up the proverbial “red flag” of concern in the business world. Understanding the poor understanding and execution of the church’s marketing allows us to wrestle with concepts to address in hopes of reversing this negative slide. Before exploring beneficial opportunities with the church, understanding the purpose of marketing and what good and bad concepts look like are necessary.

Purpose of Marketing

Asking and answering the fundamental question of “what is the purpose of marketing” is the proper place to begin this discussion. Nishan Singh, an author at *Analytico*, condenses the purpose of marketing into three things: “capture attention, educate prospects, and convert” (Singh). First, being able to capture the attention of an audience, specifically, your target market, is key. Of course, it also matters how you get the attention of your audience - the bait you use will determine the fish you catch - what you use to capture the attention of your audience will most likely be the thing you have to stick with to keep their attention. Contrary to the words of the great P.T. Barnum’s philosophy, “there’s no such thing as bad publicity,” in this “cancel culture” age, there is such a thing as bad publicity. Unfortunately, the only time that some people pay attention to the church is when another priest or pastor has been accused of wrongdoing and that negative stigma is not “good” publicity. Generally speaking, capturing the attention of the audience allows flexibility for the company to work after they have people listening. Once there is an audience that has been “captured,” marketing can then accomplish the next step of its purpose: educating the prospects. The goal of this step is to inform potential members or prospects so that they can be ready to make the best possible decision (Singh). Even if the product being marketed does not stand out on its own, being able to provide clarity through information is a major step in the right direction. Finally, the ability to take prospects and convert them into long-time consumers completes the purpose of marketing. Interestingly enough, the term “converting” does double duty as a marketing and religious term. For marketing purposes, “converting” means to turn someone towards something, more specifically to have them return to where they belong. While the art of marketing begins with the attention

grab and the education of the product, developing an affinity or love for that product is how you remain successful.

Good and Bad Marketing

After understanding the purpose of marketing, analyzing the differences between good and bad marketing helps create proper strategies to be successful. One popular adage in business is that “the customer is always right.” This concept means that it is the responsibility of the business to meet the needs of each customer and that customer satisfaction is an important factor in business success. Good marketing means understanding your customers and what they need or want before you offer them anything, then offering that in the best possible way (EnosTech). The church understands that they hold the proverbial “keys to the kingdom” and it is of the utmost importance to connect these “keys” with the individual trapped in bondage to their sin (Matthew 16:14). Understanding the reality of the situation, the church works to create a positive and receptive environment to this message and utilizes various media components to create, enhance, and explain that environment. There are three common types of media expressed through marketing: paid, earned, and owned. Owned media is any content that has been created and controlled by you, like one’s website or social media (Chen). A church’s owned media usually consists of the main website, sometimes social media accounts, podcasts, or blog pages. These resources are often overlooked sources of outreach for a church to do well. Doing simple things well is fundamentally important. Paid media consists of anything that you have paid for to promote your company, as said in the name (Chen). Christians and even non-churchgoers tend to be nervous when you hear paid media and church in the same sentence. Paid media can be commercials, online ads, radio ads, etc. which may seem only possible by megachurches with

mega-million-dollar budgets or done in a way that is too “worldly” for a church. Earned media can be those things and can be done well in those vehicles, but paid media can also be neighborhood signs, street billboards, and Google search ads. Paid media for a church is not all “evil” or dangerous, but can positively reach a lot of people. Most churches will not experience or contribute to “paid media” as you may think, but there are ways for churches to utilize paid media to increase their “earned media” and hopefully build up and better establish their “owned media.” That leads to understanding earned media, which is the “coverage or promotion of your brand through organic means,” being the toughest type of media to get (Chen). Not only do churches want people talking about their church, but more importantly they want to introduce people to their “product”: Jesus. Earned media done well has a long-lasting effect, being discussed and shared by people long after each marketing effort. When you understand how your audience consumes media, pursuing those outlets can lead to successful earned media. The church can “change its language” without changing its message, changing the vehicle can attract new audiences while remaining true to who you are. If a church is trying to attract millennials, they would need to create outlets that are attractive to them like social media, podcasts, and events that millennials would appreciate. Good marketing understands their consumer and seeks to satisfy their needs using appropriate vehicles.

Simply put, there are only two types of marketing: good marketing and bad marketing. Bad marketing happens when you push products without necessarily understanding the customer’s wants and needs (EnosTech). Again, contrary to the P.T. Barnum quote, there is such a thing as bad publicity when dealing with the church. Dangers associated with the church’s use of marketing have produced an excess of books and articles including *Selling the Church, Dining with the Devil*, *Jesus is not a Brand*, etc. Many of the cases discussed were rooted in churches not

understanding how to market well and the painful results that ensued. A poor marketing effort usually leads to poor earned media, but a bad marketing effort will lead to high earned media, also known as bad publicity. Especially in the present social media age, bad publicity can trend and spread like wildfire. Some more popular examples are the Pepsi and Kendall Jenner ad, Tesla's Cybertruck demo, and the #DeleteUber campaign to name a few. These companies suffered horrible feedback and backlash on pretty much every social media platform, losing followers, supporters, and eventually customers. Churches do not have to blow up on social media for there to be a "social media effect" on poor marketing. When people get hurt or offended by things, word spreads quickly in whatever way it wants. Bad publicity does not pause to consider intentions either. As seen in the above examples, those efforts were all supposed to be positive but when poorly marketed and portrayed, no one cares about what they tried to say. The church cannot fear people not liking their message; they need to boldly proclaim the message of the Gospel and if the world "hates" the message, the church can rest in the fact that they were forewarned of this impending response (John 15:18-25). Another description of poor marketing can be seen in any effort that lacks longevity. Attracting people is definitely a good step, but doing anything that does not have a lasting impact can be wasteful and is probably not the best option. When a company markets a product or idea and their consumer interaction is equivalent to or less than before their effort, that would be considered a waste. So, after knowing what good marketing and bad marketing look like, analyzing the opportunities the church has to capitalize on will allow us to combine the church and marketing.

Missed Opportunities of the Local Church

As mentioned earlier, people's consistency in church attendance has gone down drastically over the past decade. An eleven percent drop over almost a decade may not seem dramatic; but after looking at the numbers over the past century, the overwhelming negative trend is significant. Gallup first measured church membership in 1937 in America at 73 percent, and it remained around 70 percent for the next six decades until the 21st century (Jones). Church membership includes people who go to church at a fairly consistent rate. Church membership is now around 47 percent, decreasing over 23 percent in only 2 decades after almost no decline for 60 years (Jones). A lot has changed in America in the past 80 years: World Wars and other foreign disturbances, increased consumerism and technology, political tensions and divides, civil rights and immigration improvements, etc. With all of these changes throughout the past century, the church appeared to many to be the only thing steady, but something changed at the turn of the 21st century. Today people are increasingly more self-centered and self-focused, less family-oriented, and less trusting than ever before. Some may blame technology, political tensions, or increased consumerism, but all of those things can be seen as a product of people leaving the church. The church has always been a place of stability even when it seems like nothing else is, that is what needs to be marketed. Amid the chaos, something, or better yet someone, needs to be the peace in the storm. The church can be that because of the solution of a relationship with Jesus to offer. Marketing anti-hate, anti-chaos, and anti-violence is the cry of society, that is what Jesus offers. The church is not a place of condemnation, but to people who do not understand the church, that is what it has become because the church has not marketed itself well.

Another missed opportunity for the church has been the retention and involvement of members. As mentioned earlier, church membership among Americans has decreased by almost 50 percent in the last two decades. Decreased membership means decreased commitment and consistency to the church as well. One of the old marketing sayings is that it costs five times more to acquire a new customer than to retain an existing customer (Landis). If the church adopts that mindset from a marketing viewpoint, paying attention to the needs of its members and keeping them should be more important than trying to get new people. One of the effective marketing strategies is utilizing their existing members as marketers. The mission of Christians and members of the local church is simple: to share what has been shared with them. If the church can mobilize and invest in its members, not only will membership increase, but retention will as well. The figures below both display the staggeringly low numbers of consistent church membership at the turn of the 21st century. Focusing on consistent members increases retainment, and the more involved and committed those members are, the more “marketing” they would do for you.

FIGURE 1: Church Membership Decline in America

(Gallup Polls, 2021)

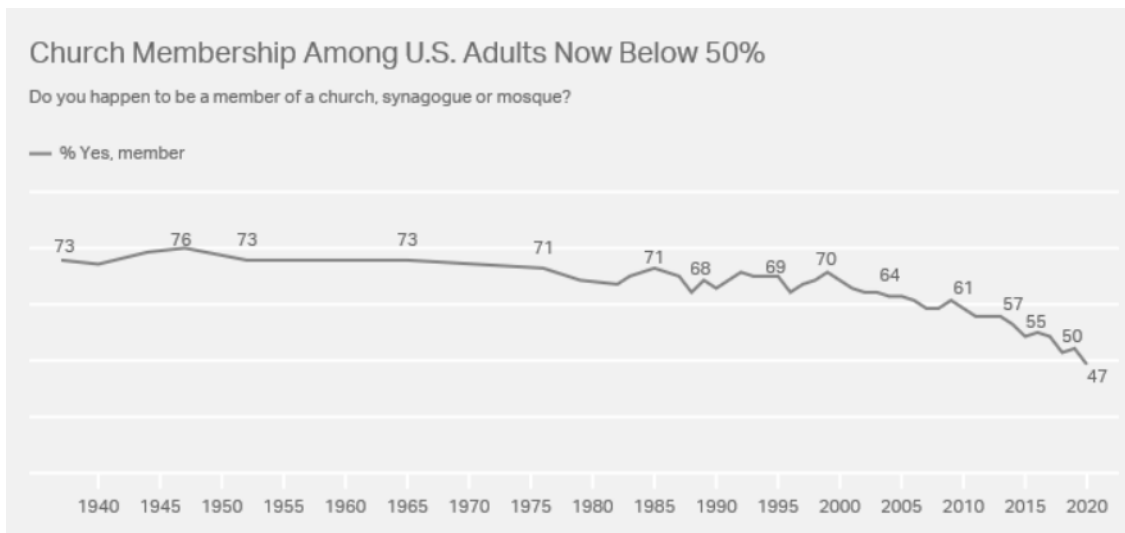


FIGURE 2 – Breakdown of Church Attendance in America

(Pew Research Group, 2021)

A quarter of U.S. adults say they attend religious services at least weekly		
<i>Aside from weddings and funerals, how often do you attend religious services?</i>		
	2020	2021
	%	%
Monthly or more	33	31
At least once a week	26	25
Once or twice a month	7	7
Few times a year or less	66	68
Few times a year	19	15
Seldom	23	26
Never	24	27
Refused	1	1
	100	100

Negative ways a church can use marketing

There are ways that churches can use effective marketing strategies that work for businesses but can be harmful to the message and purpose of the church. Anytime the marketing, or anything in general, distracts from the focus of the church, the marketing becomes destructive. There are plenty of commercials or ads that you can think of that you have no idea what company it is promoting even though they are entertaining, attention-grabbing, and memorable. Capturing people's attention cannot come at the expense of informing your audience about what is being offered. There are times that some churches have marketed themselves as a show to come watch, akin to an invitation to be entertained. We also see the opposite where some churches have been incredibly exclusive or shaming people, being a place people do not want to step foot in. The message of the church can not and will not be appealing to everyone's ears and nor should it, but the approach and delivery of that message do not need to be even more repellant. In the same way, if the church's advertising and attraction are misleading and not about Christ, then it can be very confusing to people. Marketing is not the message, but the means to

convey the message. The church shouldn't let marketing conflict with its primary responsibilities of equipping the saints and ministering to the lost.

Positive ways a church can use marketing

Avoiding potential poor marketing is important, and some strategies can be used to create the most productive and positive marketing. First off, the church needs to understand that its target market is everyone, yet there are different ways to target certain individuals or groups of people. The church should have different strategies for older people than they would for millennials, different strategies for singles than for families, and so forth. Understanding how their different demographics work and consume and then utilizing different marketing strategies for each market is important. To be clear, just because the strategy changes does not mean the message should. Clarity is essential since the message is the focus. While the message of Christ's love and forgiveness may not be received and accepted by all, it should be marketed to everyone "who has ears to hear" (Matthew 11:15).

Conclusion

The word marketing comes from the concept of the merchant buying and selling a product - in the market. From a Christian perspective, marketing tells the story of the redemptive work of Jesus Christ - who bought and redeemed mankind for a price, saved from sin, and set apart for service to the Lord. Churches have this story, the greatest story to tell, but people are not listening (Hendricks). The issue for the church in a word: communication. The story of Jesus and his impact on people's lives need to be heard by more people and more often. Consider the philosophical question: If a tree falls in the forest, and there's no one to hear it, does it really

make a sound? If the church cannot communicate its message so that people can hear, are they actually sharing the message? In simple terms, the message of the church is that Jesus came, died, and rose again so that man can be restored in his relationship with God. The top companies in the world generally have two things in common: amazing marketing and an amazing product. The church has the best product to offer, the church should also have the best marketing to share that product.

“How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!’”

Romans 10:14-15

The role of marketing in the church is to help fulfill the “Great Commission” (Matthew 28:19-20). Marketing is not everything, but it can be a vital tool and incredibly effective when used properly. We are to be good stewards of the message given to us. Even in decline and in doubt, the church has hope. Thankfully, that hope is not in man or marketing, but in the grace of Jesus Christ.

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