

The Holy Grail of Marketing

Getting new people to come to church is a tough task these days. And the further we go into the 21st century, the harder this task will become. In the past organizations could count on using the traditional media, such as radio, television, and direct mail to reach a large percentage of the public. Today, none of these are as reliable as they once were due to the fragmentation and shift of marketing venues. Considering the following:

- In the 1950's an episode of "I Love Lucy drew 70%" of available audience. Today, "Desperate Housewives draws less than a third of Lucy's ratings.
- Today more people watch cable TV than the three Networks.
- In 1993 there were 130 websites; today there are tens of millions.
- In 2001 there were virtually zero blogs and today there are over 30 million and exploding by the second.
- In the 1960s an advertiser could reach 80% of U.S. women airing an evening simultaneously on the three major networks. Today it would take over 100 TV channels to reach the same audience.
- Niche media is growing –Cable TV, podcasting, wireless messaging, the Internet and Google Adds.

So everyone is looking for the Holy Grail of marketing when all the while it's right under our nose.

In the book *Applebee's American: How Successful Political, Business and Religious Leaders Connect with the New American Community* the authors suggest we are moving back into a pre-TV world where *word of mouth*(WOM) is going to be the major form of spreading ones message or selling a product. Already more and more major companies are shifting their advertising dollars from tradition media to niche and word of mouth media. According to the authors *"the Challenge, then, for societies institutions, businesses, and government (and churches) and the people who run them- is to adjust to this new reality in which word of mouth rules and learn the word of mouth rules."*

If you want more new people to attend your church, WOM is the Holy Grail. WOM marketing is the most powerful tool in your evangelism toolkit. What better way to spread the word about your church than to have an army of supporters constantly talking about or referencing it in personal conversations or online conversations?

WOM marketing takes many shapes these days. It used to be that WOM was basically limited to a one-on-one conversation between two people. However, today WOM includes websites, blogs, YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, and the list seems to increase daily. When a church learns how to integrate all of these venues what is called Viral Word of Mouth (VWOM) occurs. The word about your church spreads through a micro community like a virus.

When that happens, your efforts have created a buzz that on its own brings more people to your church.

VWOM Happens When Two Things Take Place:

- People leave your church so pumped they don't have a choice but to talk about it with their friends and invite them to share it with them;
- And the church provides multiple venues that support the story they are telling- website, TV, promotional CDs, blogs, billboards, brochures to hand out, Tweets, Facebook, etc.

How to Get VWOM Started

Most likely you will need to kick start the VWOM buzz. While there are many strategies available, it's important to focus on producing an excellent product as this will greatly facilitate the word-of-mouth process.

Here's an example of how to start the VWOM buzz.

Several times a year, the pastor of the church does a blockbuster sermon series on something that affects just about every person on the planet. For our purposes, the sermon series is titled "Does God Have an Opinion on Sex?"

The two Sundays prior to the series the pastor shares with the congregation the importance of telling their networks about this series. The pastor also asks them to blog about it and put it on their Facebook and Tweet about it and whatever other venue they are comfortable with. And because they *trust* their pastor's ability to deliver a message that will actually help people, they are willing to invite their networks.

The Sunday before the series the congregation receives two colorful, graphic filled brochures announcing the series. The pastor asks the people to take a moment to pray that God will give them the names of two people, one to write on each brochure. Finally, the pastor asks the congregation to take that brochure to that person during the week and invite them to take part in the series.

At the same time the church is Tweeting and Blogging about the series. A provocative video appears on YouTube and Facebook announcing the series. Members of the congregation are pinged concerning the video. They make comments on it and send those comments to their networks. A 15-30 second version of the video appears ten or twelve times a day on network cable. Three strategically placed billboards also announce the series. By the time the members of the congregation get around to giving out the two brochures most likely the recipient is already aware of the series and probably mentioned it to friend. The message has gone viral.

Now the beauty of all this is that most of it doesn't cost much. If you leave out the TV commercials and the billboards the cost of WOM is minimal and you can still reach VWOM without TV and billboards.

You Need Fans not Members for VWOM

Word-of-Mouth marketing doesn't exist in a vacuum. Part of the success of VWOM marketing/evangelism is how healthy the congregation is as well as how clued in the congregation is to the Great Commission. If your church is so in-grown that it seldom thinks about the plight of the surrounding community, the odds are your church isn't going to experience VWOM. So the more you preach on Sunday as if your congregation was full on non-Christians and the more you emphasize the role of the Great Commission in your preaching the more likely you are to be able to attain VWOM.

Look at it this way- your church doesn't need members; it needs fans. For WOM to work at your church the congregation has to so in love with God's mission that they don't mind raving about what God is doing through their church. One way to do that is invite their networks to come and see.

An Interesting Study

You might be surprised to learn that the majority of households do not mind being invited to church by a complete stranger. An interesting study was done by the North American Mission Board in which they asked 1,200 random Americans "Would it be okay if someone came to your door and invited you to church?" Fifty-three percent of those asked said "Yes." And to make that study more interesting, people between the ages of 25-54 had the most positive response rate.

Word of Mouth Guidelines

- Deliver what you promise.
- Deliver a great experience over and over.
- Train every leader to work their networks.
- Everyone is a potential evangelist.
- Some people are more influential than others and are the backbone of word of mouth marketing.
- Outgoing people are your churches best assets.
- Saving time and being relevant are crucial.
- Small groups are at the heart of most word of mouth campaigns in churches.
- All conversation has to be honest.
- Whatever you do has to be so "gut filling" and value driven that people will tell their networks about it.
- Identifying and equipping the communication evangelists in your church is the role of all church staff.
- Give your evangelists something to talk about.
- Make it easy for people to easily spread the word about you (Create a button for their blog or web site, a card or CD they can pass along to a friend, or build a 'tell a friend' option.)

VWOM Happens One Way or Another

VWOM can go two ways. If people leave your church excited and fulfilled, they are likely to tell three people. However, if they leave bored and unfulfilled, they are likely to tell seven people.

VWOM marketing begins with something worthwhile to talk about. So, before you try to stir up a VWOM buzz you'd better make sure you have something worthwhile happening at your church.