

# Advertising for a Growing Church

By Gary McIntosh

Many churches do not communicate well to their constituencies. They lack a clearly communicated *image*, or what some call a *brand*. All the visual images of a church (logos, signs, letterheads, web sites, and facilities) should come together to form one unified whole. A sloppy image gives the impression of shoddy ministry, which repels people. A sharp brand gives the impression of an excellent ministry, which attracts people.

## What is an Image or Brand?

An image or brand is an intangible but important part of a church's growth strategy. Webster's New World Dictionary suggests that image or brand is an "impression by the general public, often one deliberately created or modified by publicity or advertising."

New Testament churches, of course, never had a brochure, web site, or direct mail campaign like churches do today. However, they did create an atmosphere where growth occurred, and their ministry formed an image in the minds of the people around them. The church in Jerusalem is described by Luke as "having favor with all the people" (Acts 2:47), which shows that it developed a brand awareness among people fairly soon. How did this happen? Often the means were what we today would call advertising. Note the following examples:

The **PERSONAL LETTERS** of the New Testament are an obvious advertising medium — direct mail — in our terms. Luke, John, James, Peter and Paul all used this advertising tool to communicate their love, care, teachings, and exhortation to people who could not be reached in any other way.

**WORD OF MOUTH** advertising was instrumental in reaching non-churched people around Thessalonica. "The word of the Lord has sounded (echoed) forth from you," states Paul, "not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything" (1 Thess. 1:8).

## What Advertising Cannot Do

While advertising is only one method that can be used to communicate the Good News, it is not a get-rich-quick gimmick.

**Advertising will not change reality.** If a church does not model what is advertised it will not grow. Once the public visits they will find out if the experience lives up to the story. Such false advertising may get people to attend a church service, but only one time.

**Advertising will not convert people.** Conversion is a personal commitment that will not come from a simple advertising ad or website. Even though the Gospel is a simple story, advertising is too simplistic to give people a full understanding, which will lead to conversion.

**Advertising will not cause personal growth.** Personal growth is a process not an event! Growth occurs over time as people learn, apply truth, and experience life. At the most advertising can help inform a person of an opportunity that will help them grow.

**Advertising will not replace personal relationships.** Secular advertisers know that the best advertising is satisfied customers who tell others in their social networks about a product. It is the same in the church. Andrew told Peter. Philip found Nathanael. Cornelius gathered his relatives and close friends. Word of mouth is always the key.

## **What Advertising Can Do**

Advertising is not a panacea for all church ills, but it can be a major part of a sound church growth mix.

**Advertising will build morale.** Church Growth consultants know that low morale is one of the plagues of many churches. A positive advertising strategy can raise people's morale and give them a point of reference for inviting people to church.

**Advertising will create a climate for growth.** Through advertising, potential visitors can learn of the opportunity for a personal and rewarding relationship with the living God. They can learn of your church's desire to meet their needs. They can learn of your acceptance of new people.

**Advertising will attract visitors.** Though most people cannot verbalize what attracts them to one church over another, one of the magnets is the "look" or "image" which is projected by the church. Advertising can create an inviting image and communicate specific opportunities, times, dates, and places for involvement.

**Advertising will shape community attitudes.** Advertising offers a church the opportunity to tell the community what it wants them to know; ideals such as your desire to be helpful, your assurance of acceptance, the enthusiasm of present members, and the sense of fulfillment Christ brings to life.

## **How To Begin**

Here are a few ideas to get you started on designing your own advertising plan.

- Build your church's commitment to find and fold the lost.
- Develop a communications team of an editor, writer, artist, and photographer.
- Research the needs, attitudes and interests of the target audiences.
- Focus on communicating to people within a twenty mile radius of your church's campus (ministry area).
- Direct different strategies to current members, potential guests, and the non-churched population you are trying to attract.
- Invest 5% of your total budget in your plan.

## **Balanced Strategy**

An effective church advertising strategy should be balanced between the following areas.

**1. Word of Mouth:** Stress the Great Commission and the Great Commandment. Build congregational morale. Help members identify reachable friends and family. Provide various events for members to bring their friends and family.

**2. In-house Communications Piece:** Publish a church email newsletter on a monthly or bimonthly basis. List opportunities for service. Note answers to prayer. Communicate victories and positive themes. Make paper copies available at each worship service for attendees who do not use email.

**3. First Impression Piece:** Design a brochure with the non-churched person in mind. Use pictures of people participating in your ministries. Give an invitation to attend your church. Print stories of how your church helps people.

**4. Newspaper Advertising:** Use the paper that reaches your ministry area. Stick to one theme in each ad. Make it humorous. Ask for a response. Develop four ads and repeat them four weeks at a time.

**5. Direct Mail:** Highlight one idea. Personalize it. Send highest postage class possible. Utilize multiple mailings to the same address. Expect 15 responses for 1,000 pieces of mail.

**6. Website:** Design an up-to-date website that works. Recruit a web designer who is younger than thirty-five years old to make certain the style, colors, and look of the site attracts today's youngest adult audience. Highlight your church's ministries, opportunities, and services. Make sure the site is easily traversed and has a clear pathway for potential guests to follow. Note: a church without a website is a church without visibility among people younger than forty-years old.

A basic question all churches should be asking is, "What do people outside of our church think about us?" In all cases there are only three potential answers.

1. They think of our church positively.
2. They think of our church negatively.
3. They don't think of it at all!

Answer number one creates an environment for growth. Answer number two is a tragedy. Answer number three is anathema!

Growing churches must create an environment where people **think** of their church and **think of it positively**.

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