How to get first time guests to return

Fact #1 - Your visitors make up their minds regarding your church in the first ten minutes on your campus.

Before a first-time guest has sung an inspiring song, watched a compelling drama or well-produced video vignette or heard your well-crafted sermon they have ALREADY made up their mind whether or not to return.

But, you probably spend more time and energy on the plan and execution of the worship service than preparing for the greeting and welcoming of your first-time guests.

Action - Use the following questions as a quick checklist:

- Are parking greeters/attendants in place? How about in our Sunday School departments and classes? Is there a PLAN in place and trained greeters ready to greet guests?
- Is there appropriate signage EVERYWHERE a guest might feel lost? Do our greeters and members KNOW about the signage and how to take a guest to where they’re headed? (e.g. - at welcome centers, is there a brochure with Sunday School class options, room locations, and a map available?)
- Are your ushers and greeters performing the “right” job, and performing it with excellence?
- Is the environment user-friendly and welcoming to guests? How about in YOUR Sunday School class? Have you asked your class lately, “What would it feel like to be a guest in our class?”
- Do we wear name-tags so guests will know OUR names? Do we remain standing during the time guests would typically be arriving, so they come into a room in a comfortable way, rather than walking into a room where everyone else is sitting? Do we have a greeter at the door of our classroom? Have we done everything we can to make it a COMFORTABLE experience to visit our class/department, so they'll WANT to return?

Fact #2 - Most church members are not friendly.

Churches claim to be friendly and may even advertise that fact. But our experiences in visiting churches as a first-time guest demonstrate that most church members are friendly to the people they already know, not to guests.

Watch to see if your members greet guests with the same intensity and concern before and after the worship service as they do during a formal time of greeting. The six most important minutes of a church service, in the eyes of your guests, are the three minutes before the service and the three minutes after the service.

Action - Encourage your church family and Sunday School members to:

- Introduce themselves with genuineness.
- Find out if guests have questions about the church.
- Introduce guests to others with whom they may have an affinity or connection.

Fact #3 - Church guests are highly consumer-oriented.

If your church building is difficult for newcomers to navigate, if your people are unwelcoming and unfriendly, another church down the street may have what they’re looking for. You need to look at your church through the eyes of a first-time guest. Rick Warren says that the longer a pastor has been a pastor the less he thinks like a non-pastor.

Action: Consider employing objective, yet trained, anonymous guests to give an honest appraisal.

- Many restaurants, retail stores, and hotels utilize the service of one or more “mystery guests”, or “mystery shoppers” to provide helpful analysis of welcoming and responding to the consumer. Churches would be well served to utilize a similar service.
Fact #4 - The church is in the hospitality business.

Though our ultimate purpose is spiritual, one of our first steps in the Kingdom business is attention to hospitality (Hebrews 13:2). Imagine the service that would be given to you in a first-class hotel or a five-star restaurant. Should the church offer anything less to those who have made the great effort to be our guests?

Action - Encourage members to extend hospitality to guests by offering...

- to sit with them during the church service and during Sunday School
- to give them a tour of the church facilities
- to eat lunch with them after service/after class
- to connect with them later in the week (SO vital! Means SO much more than a contact from staff!)

Fact #5 - You only have one chance to make a good first impression.

Your first-time guests have some simple desires and basic needs. They decide very quickly if you can meet those criteria. The decision to return for a second visit is often made before guests reach your front door.

Action - Use the following questions as an evaluation tool:

- Are you creating the entire experience, beginning with your parking lot and extending to every area your guest visits?
- Are you consciously working to remove barriers that make it difficult for guests to find their way around and to feel at home with your people?
- Do newcomers have all the information they need without having to ask any embarrassing questions? “Can you tell me where the restrooms are?”
- Are your greeters and ushers on the job, attending to details and anticipating needs before they are expressed?
- Does anything about your guests’ first experience make them say, “Wow!” and want to return?
- Do your Sunday School classes and departments regularly train and re-train greeters and all of their members on greeting/welcoming procedures, so that any guest who visits any class/department is ensured of a welcoming, warm, friendly atmosphere where they are made to feel at home, comfortable, and leave with a desire to return?

Remember, we only have ONE chance to make a first impression… how are YOU doing?

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