

Is Your Church Parking Lot Driving People Away?

Could your church parking lot be sending the wrong message to visitors? Does your ministry outreach shout “Everyone’s welcome!” while your parking lot screams, “Go away”? It’s possible for even the best-planned ministry to be stymied by a poorly-run parking lot. Often what keeps a church from growing is not how the ministry is presented; it’s how easy it is to park or maneuver around your parking lot. The fact is, if new people are going to come to your church, in most situations, they are going to bring their cars.

Most ministry leaders are so busy with details of planning and preparing ministry activities they are often unaware of what is happening with the church parking. Ministers and church staff are usually the first to arrive to the church, parking in an empty lot. At the end of the day, they are most often the last to leave the church, driving out of a mostly empty parking lot. Unfortunately, many ministry leaders are blind to the possibility that their church parking lot may be turning away visitors who want to come to their church and even frustrating their existing church members.

Unchurched people don’t have all the same motivations and commitments to attending church that your church members have. Going to a new church can be an intimidating experience for some people. Something as seemingly small as poor parking can be just the excuse needed to put off attending a church.

Five keys to a well-run parking lot

You can improve your church outreach, use advertising, even get your church members motivated to bring their friends, yet if you don’t manage your parking lot well, your impact will be limited. The good news is parking lot management is not rocket science, all you need to do is apply the five keys to a well-run parking lot:

1. Provide adequate space for all the people who come to your church to park.

Many church architects recommend as a rule of thumb that you have one space for every 1.8 people attending your church (divide number of people by 1.8). This number represents the average number of people in each car. That means if you want to provide parking for 200 people, you will need around 112 parking spaces. Say you have 100 people at your church, but you have a goal to increase attendance to 150 people, you will need to make sure you can park at least another 28 cars. Some researchers say if your parking lot is 80 percent full, people will feel your lot is “too full” and may not stay. Make sure you have ample room for new people!

2. Have clear signage with easy-to-follow directions.

Don’t overlook simple direction signs that can help people who visit your church. Make sure people can tell which doors to use for children’s ministry, welcome center, sanctuary, etc. Make sure the signs are all sending the same message as well. One church had conflicting “One Way” signs that inadvertently sent traffic toward a head-on collision—very confusing for guests! Make sure signs are visible to drivers also. In one church, the children’s wing sign was not visible from the perspective of drivers, but only to people standing on the grass across from the children’s area. If drivers can’t see your signs, they can’t navigate your lot and may become frustrated.

3. Recruit and train parking lot greeters.

Greeters in a well-run parking lot are as important as having greeters inside the building. When a person visits a church, the church experience starts in the parking lot. Sometimes new people will pull into your parking lot, and then lose their nerve to go inside. A parking lot greeter can wave to those people and show them a warm welcome right when they drive up. A friendly greeting sometimes is just what the newcomer needs to find the courage to come inside. They also can help manage the flow of your parking lot and provide added security, features that will make your guests happy.

4. Make sure parking is provided for guests.

Set aside some choice parking spaces near the door reserved for "Our Guests," and assign greeters to help new people find these places. Don't forget to inform your parking lot greeters of everything going on inside the church. It is just as important they know the goings-on inside the doors as what's going on outside. Also, encourage them to show a smile as they greet people. There's nothing worse than a gruff parking lot attendant.

5. Provide easy access from your parking lot to the church building

Not every parking space you consider a space may be considered usable. Some parking spaces are hidden behind your building and are located in places that are far away from your entrances. You can help people by providing a lift to people who park off site. Also make sure you have a paved walkway from your parking areas. People walking in dress shoes (and high heels) will not want to traipse across a grassy lot to get to the front door.

Written by Chris Forbes, the founder of MinistryMarketingCoach.com and marketing evangelism specialist for the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma. He has served as the interactive media specialist for Purpose Driven Ministries and as media strategist for the International Mission Board, SBC. ©Copyright 2006. Used by permission. All rights reserved.