

# *Marketing Your Parish*

*Advertising Best Practices  
for Effective Evangelism*

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### *Executive Summary*

Despite a legacy of 2,000 years as the greatest marketing organization the world has ever seen, the church has been sitting on the sidelines during the ad revolutions of the past 50 years. Mention “advertising” around Christians and you’re sure to provoke a reaction. Suggest churches should market to targeted segments of the population, and you’re starting to tread on forbidden turf. However – be it a congregation, diocese, denomination, or the universal Body – the church cannot afford to consider “advertising” a dirty word.

Fundamentally, commercial and church marketing are more similar than you might think. Both require a coordinated strategy of sending messages to a targeted group of people, and both chart their efficacy with one measure: conversions. Effective commercial advertising sells products, whereas effective church advertising gets confirmed communicants in the pews.

In this sense we are all advertisers; the church simply deals in spiritual rather than tangible goods. Moreover, through the intelligent application of commercial marketing strategies, together with a purposeful digital-media plan, you can significantly increase the number of people who express interest in your church as well as those who actually join.

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#### ***Advertising As Evangelism: It's Nothing New***

The church has utilized effective marketing and advertising for a long time now. The introduction to the Gospel of Luke (1:1-4) has all the hallmarks of an effective product pitch: It casts doubt on the competition, appeals to eyewitness testimony, and offers a “satisfaction guarantee.”

Albert Lasker, one of the greatest ad copywriters of the past two centuries, championed the idea that commercial advertising was “salesmanship in print.” In other words, the printed word could replace the door-to-door salesman. St. Luke knew as much. If Phillip could be such an effective witness to the truth of Jesus Christ during his encounter with an Ethiopian eunuch, how many more people could be reached by a well-written advertisement for the truth? **Church advertising is no more than evangelism in print.**

Jesus sent the first disciples out in pairs to preach the coming of the Kingdom of God person-to-person. Later, the church added epistles and gospels to its marketing mix. Still later, during the preaching revolution led by Dominican and Franciscan friars, the church perfected the preaching model at scale. The church then adapted to the disruptive new technology of the printing press and other forms of mass communication. Finally, it sent missionaries to nearly every inhabited corner of the globe.

## *What Churches Can Learn from the Golden Age of Advertising*

Commercial advertising, in contrast, has only been around for a little more than a century – but there’s no denying its impact. From candy bars to politicians, commercial advertising creates household names out of just about everything imaginable. Yet the church, with its 2,000-year track record of innovative global marketing, has been a bystander to the ad revolutions of 1960s and the ongoing digital boom.

The great ad men of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries determined that the measure of good advertising is its benefit to the bottom line. In commercial advertising this means increasing inbound leads and driving conversions. A converted consumer then becomes loyal to the brand and recommends it to family and friends.

Likewise, a converted Christian who takes all the public steps to demonstrate adherence to the teachings of Jesus Christ (baptism, Holy Communion, confirmation, and so on) becomes an evangelist, or “brand ambassador,” for the church. Effective advertising – whether commercial or evangelical – drives this conversion process. The principle is not complicated, but its implementation does take leadership, planning, creativity, and sustained effort.

## *The Conversion Funnel*

The consumer conversion process starts with a conversion “funnel.” The funnel first siphons the widest possible targeted reach of anyone who might consider buying a certain product and, through rigorous market research followed by very targeted advertising, narrows that down to the point of sale. The church’s conversion funnel starts by reaching all who might consider going to a church “someday,” and narrows these potential converts all the way down to the point when a bishop lays his hand on their heads.

**There are four stages to the church’s funnel: intention, consideration, evaluation, and conversion.**

The key is to speak differently to people at each of these stages. The story is the same throughout, but the messages will change to meet the potential convert’s stage and needs.

### ► *Simplicity, Community & the Landing Page*

St. Luke’s Episcopal Church in Montclair, N.J., was suffering from low Sunday attendance and a deficit of over \$100,000.

The Rev. John Mennell wanted a simple way to revive the community, so with local kids, he formed the St. Luke’s Association for Wiffle Ball (SLAWB) and allowed everyone who received communion that day to participate. They made a web page, tracked stats and had up-to-date, tongue-in-cheek reporting.

Soon after, both Sunday attendance and pledge giving had doubled.

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### *Develop a Clear Vision and Start the Conversation*

Good marketing is the beginning of a conversation. It may entertain and edify, but if it doesn't receive a response, it's not good marketing. We want new people to say yes to continuing a conversation we started about our life in Christ. It's the very essence of an inbound lead: permission from the audience to keep the conversation going, and the expressed desire to learn more.

So how can your church jump-start a conversation with your community?

**Before developing a marketing plan, you have to be clear on your vision. This is your church's reason for ministry.**

It doesn't change year to year, but rather provides continuity for your church over the long haul. What will change through the years, however, are the initiatives your church undertakes to make its vision for ministry a reality (forming partnerships with local civic leaders, establishing and maintaining a school, increasing enrollment in youth programs, etc.).

#### ► *Social Media & Sermons*

The Church of the Holy Apostles in Katy, Texas, has an average Sunday attendance of 400-500, a number that continues to grow.

Darrel Proffitt, lead pastor, attributes this success in part to social media. The church presents his sermons as a series, which allows for easy promotion, and they use videos of congregants' personal testimonies to support sermon points. Outlines of sermons, or "messages," are included in bulletins and made available on smartphone and tablets through YouVersion live events.

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### ***Generate Inbound Leads***

Remember, people interested in learning more about the church's message – known as inbound leads or prospects – fuel the conversion funnel. Most churches have at least a rudimentary lead-generation system, such as the guest register or a visitor card in the pews. But the traffic to your congregation's or diocese's website is also a great source for leads.

Use your website as an entry to potential conversions. Use Google Analytics to look at your traffic: How many unique page views does your website attract per month? Is it more than your average Sunday attendance? Don't think of your website as a single homepage where everyone has to come in through the front door. Your website should change as often – more often – than the liturgical seasons! Are you blessing the animals? Set up a special page just for that. Is your church school holding an enrollment drive? Make a new page.

**For almost every reason a person might Google your church, you should have a separate landing page for them to discover.**

If your church has a social media presence (which it should), Facebook likes and Twitter followers are also leads. They can be your digital word-of-mouth evangelists to their friends for your church, and as a rule, word-of-mouth recommendations generate the highest-quality leads.

Using digital media intelligently and purposefully can increase the number of inbound leads quickly. Your goal is to build a list of people who have shown an interest in your church: collect their names, e-mail addresses, phone numbers, and a record of how and why they contacted you (e.g., “via landing page on website for blessing of the animals” or “pew card, for church school”).

### **► *Lead Generation & Your Website***

Web solutions expert, Michael Elias of Monk Development, analyzed 50 church websites and found that the most popular sections related to people attending for the first time – a category he calls “I'm New.”

Organize your site so all basic information is easily discoverable, and engage both new and regular parishioners with constant updates such as blogs, news feeds, event videos, and status updates.

### ***Write Your Church's Marketing Plan***

**Once your vision is in place, you're ready to write your marketing plan.**

**Here's how:**

**1. *Create your marketing calendar.*** List all of your marketing opportunities, which are the chances to start new conversations about living a life in Christ. Use the liturgical calendar as your template: All the major holidays are a chance to spread the word about what your church is doing. Then add the local school calendar, the local events calendar, and events from the national or even international calendar.

Think about the lives of the people you're trying to reach. What events are important to them? Admission to college? Watching the Super Bowl? Take a look at the editorial calendar for major magazines like Vogue, Wired, Condé Nast Traveler, and Time (available online on their advertising pages). Major media plan their coverage of what's important to people months in advance. You can too.

**2. *Determine your marketing mix.*** A complete marketing plan will be a mix of initiatives in each of these five categories:

- **Paid Advertising:** Post your church's name, logo, and message in any number of media outlets: the local newspaper's church directory (online or print); the Yellow Pages or other print advertising; paid searches such as Google, which drive traffic to your website; paid ads on Facebook, radio, TV, or billboards; and sponsoring scouting troops, booster clubs, concerts, and plays. **Your advertisements should always have a clear "call to action," such as "To find out more about our MOPS program, enter your e-mail address here."**
- **PR and Publicity:** Spread your message "organically." Another name for this is "earned media." Check the editorial calendar of your local paper and other media outlets and look for stories that overlap with your church's ministry initiatives. For instance, perhaps the local paper, regional magazine, or convention and visitors bureau is planning an issue on education. If one of your ministry initiatives involves a school, contact the editors of that publication to share your story for that article. **The best PR practitioners contact relevant local editors, reporters, and bloggers regularly.**



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- **Presence Opportunities:** Set up shop where your potential new members already are. Do you want to broaden your high-school youth group? Visit the homecoming game. Are there local music festivals in your area? Go. Be present at the county and town fair and bring materials that are relevant to the group you are targeting. Shoot videos of youth-group members describing what they love about the group and share them onsite at your booth or via YouTube links in a pamphlet you're handing out.
- **Thought Leadership:** This is your chance to let your light shine. Your clergy have years of training and experience, and each Sunday they create a thought-leadership piece: It's called a sermon. Sermons can generate blog posts or e-mail newsletters, and they can be parsed into tweets and Facebook status messages. Your members are also a vast knowledge source. Ask them to talk or write or make a video about the first seven years of marriage, becoming a parent, growing old, and as many other Christ-related topics as you can think of.

Post links to this thought-leadership content on your website, on Facebook, and on Twitter. People ask Google all the time if God loves them, if their life has meaning, if Jesus is real. **On your website and in all your marketing outreach, provide answers from personal experience, then invite your audience to join your mailing list.** Package your best content into a regular e-mail newsletter. Each time you receive an e-mail address, phone number, Facebook like, or Twitter follower, you've been given permission to continue the conversation.

- **Awards and Recognition:** Take and give credit where it's due. Compete with other churches for the best service-project idea. Are organizations you already partner with holding contests or competitions? Make sure you enter and publicize when you win. Or be the source of the award: host a preach-off with local clergy, give an award for best youth programming, or recognize when fundraising goals are met. **Whenever you receive or give an award, be sure to tip off the local media. Awards and recognition showcase the best parts of your congregation's life together and can create word-of-mouth buzz that generates interest from outsiders who want to learn more.**

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### *Can You Be Googled?*

A full 77 percent of Christian churchgoers recently surveyed said their church's website was "somewhat to very important" in making their decision to attend that church.<sup>1</sup> Even more – 83 percent – said the website was "somewhat to very important" in motivating them to participate in church activities.<sup>2</sup>

But having a website alone isn't enough. Your website needs to be kept alive with constant updates, new postings, and continuous enhancements. Many church websites are completely static or updated less than twice a month. If this is true for your church, you're losing tremendous opportunities to attract and engage new parishioners.

Having trouble keeping your website up-to-date? That's where we can help. The Episcopal Church offers news feeds, press releases, live streaming of worship from around the church, and multimedia content profiling the mission and lives of congregations and individual Episcopalians. And the best part is that it's **free** and easy to use.

#### **But isn't having a Facebook page for your parish enough?**

Facebook may be free, but you don't control it. Facebook does. You should assume that a significant proportion of people Googling for a church are looking to join a church – and they won't find you if you're only on Facebook.

Everything leads back to your website – not just your Tweets, Facebook posts, and YouTube videos, but all of your traditional outreach efforts, such as your parish newsletter, direct mailings, and advertisements. Post everything on your website. Make it self-contained. If you do your job right, most information about your parish should be easily discoverable online by first-time visitors to the site as well as by regular visitors.

Launching a parish website doesn't have to be hard or expensive. The Episcopal Church has partnered with several vendors, including Monk Development and Digital Faith. Both offer template-driven, easy-to-use solutions. Parishes on an even tighter budget should consider free alternatives such as WordPress or FaithStreet.

#### **At the end of the day, there's no reason your church can't be online.**

<sup>1</sup>Goodmanson, Drew. "Website Wisdom: New research, cooperative reveal best practices for churches." *Your Church* Nov/Dec, 2009: 24-27. Retrieved from <http://essentialchurchplanting.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/website-wisdom.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.



### **About the Episcopal Church**

The Episcopal Church welcomes all who worship Jesus Christ in 109 dioceses and three regional areas in 16 nations. The Episcopal Church is a member province of the worldwide Anglican Communion.



### **About The Living Church Foundation, Inc.**

The Living Church Foundation, Inc., is an independent, not-for-profit foundation of communion-minded and -committed Anglicans from several nations, devoted to seeking and serving the full visible unity of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. The Living Church Foundation publishes *The Living Church*, a biweekly magazine of news, cultural analysis and teaching; *The Episcopal Musician's Handbook*, offering guidance on hymn selection in coordination with appointed lectionary texts and seasonal customs; Illuminations, a lector's aid for Sunday worship to encourage congregational comprehension; and Covenant, a weblog community of evangelical and catholic Christians.

