

COLLEAGUES:

How far is your congregation willing to extend itself, if at all, into the realm of advertising?

If a paid advertisement in the local newspaper is acceptable, must it appear in the religion section, or can it run in the sports or entertainment sections? Should you buy radio spots on mainstream stations, or only on stations with a religious format? Cultural and even theological considerations can determine whether, and by what means, your congregation will feel comfortable with advertising through secular media.

Many congregations consider advertising a low priority, if not outright distasteful. Those who do advertise usually hope to attract new members. Some will advertise a program such as daycare or parenting classes, or special holiday services. A few aim to inspire, comfort, or challenge the listener or reader.

Clarity of purpose, availability of funds, and sustained effort are three of the most important factors in deciding how and why to embark on an advertising campaign. If your budget permits, you might want to consider hiring an expert. Clergy may be good at reaching people from the pulpit or one-on-one, but we don't have much experience holding forth from a billboard, or in a 15-second TV ad.

Many denominations advertise, and they can be a resource for congregations. And don't overlook the business leader, media professional, or advertising executive sitting in the pews.

Are ads a part of your ministry? I'd like to hear from you. Let's keep in touch.



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ADVERTISING RELIGION: A NECESSARY EVIL, OR JUST NECESSARY?

Recently, an Episcopalian start-up church in Maryland caused a controversy with a print and TV ad campaign that some considered clever and others found outrageous.

The newspaper ad showed a Crucifixion scene accompanied by the scrawled words: “Of course people with pierced body parts are welcome in our church.”

In the television ad (a cartoon), a father tells his son that they will go to church the next day, so the boy “can play fun games like Bible Sword Drill, and sing inspirational songs like ‘Kumbaya’ and ‘I Got Joy Joy Joy Joy Down in My Heart.’” The boy, appalled at such an “uncool” prospect, immediately hurls himself into oncoming traffic.

Though the bishop of the diocese defended the ads, a critic for *Advertising Age* named the latter “the most offensive television ad of 1998.” He noted that while the intended message was that the Episcopal New Church Center offered a positive, engaging style of worship, “the actual message is that this particular church is willing to denigrate the beliefs and cherished traditions of millions for the sake of a little attention.”

Getting attention is a primary goal of advertising, of course. But is public attention always worth the price of obtaining it? Should congregations be involved in advertising at all?

Louis C. Schueddig, executive director of the Episcopal Media Center in Atlanta, says that he encounters a surprising level of resistance to advertising among clergy, though he finds very little among the laity.

“The church hierarchy believes that the church participates in a realm of high culture and the media exist in a realm of low culture,” Schueddig says. “And they think the best way to deal with the low culture is simply to avoid it.” By contrast, he finds lay people to be more evangelical and more open to delivering religious messages via secular media.

Schueddig finds clergy unfamiliar with, and fearful of, the process of conducting an ad campaign—and impatient for results. “If an ad hasn’t brought in new people in two weeks, it’s a failure,” he says. Another obstacle is clergy’s aversion to having a long-term plan, for fear that it will become stifling and “imperialistic.”

In its recent General Convention in Denver, leaders of the Episcopal Church agreed on the goal of doubling the denomination’s members by 2020. Yet they made no effort to create an advertising strategy to reach that goal. “The bishops don’t have a clue about what it will take to implement the plan,” says Schueddig, who is Episcopalian. “It’s just a feel-good plan.”

The Church of Acts, a southside Indianapolis congregation of 500 people, sponsors one of the few local ads that could be considered controversial: a billboard along I-65 South that makes reference to the television show “Who Wants to be a Millionaire?” The billboard depicts Hell, with large flames rising up around the tagline: “What’s Your Final Answer?”

Bill Jenkins, the church’s pastor, reports no negative feedback from the ad so far. The Church of Acts also advertises on radio and television and on bus waiting benches. “The thing about advertising,” Jenkins says, “is to be committed to it. Once the word gets around, you’ll get results. But if there’s a great church in the area and people don’t know about it, how can they come?”

Advertising is currently a “hot topic” at the northside’s Fairview Presbyterian Church, says pastor John Koppitch. “We’ve got good programs, and we’re eager to increase our membership, but people don’t know about us.” Fairview’s efforts so far include newspaper advertising, a Yellow Pages display ad, and letters sent to people who have recently moved into the neighborhood. The church has seen few results from these, though it has done little to track results.

Jesus the Messiah Church reports good results with a postcard campaign. It recently mailed cards to 84,000 people on the northwest side. About 20 people have joined the church in the last four months.

Precision and persistence separate an effective campaign from a flop, Schueddig says. The first step is to identify the audience you hope to reach, whether geographically or demographically. For example, the Media Center recently unveiled two new television spots intended for use by Episcopal churches. They are specifically aimed at females aged 25 to 50 who are lapsed church-goers; research shows that women have more influence in decisions about whether, and where, couples will attend church.

After the target audience is identified and an ad is created, it’s just a matter of time. “Decisions about

religion have a 'purchase cycle' just like consumer products," Schueddig says. "We need to be patient."

Dwight L. Moody, regarded by many as the greatest evangelist of the 19th Century, was known for his savvy use of newspapers. "It seems to me a good deal better to advertise and have a full house," Moody once said, "than to preach to empty pews."

STRAIGHT FROM THE SOURCE

AN INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE MARTIN

George Martin, an innovator in the field of religious advertising, helped start the Church Ad Project as a non-profit venture in 1978. The Project's early ads contrasted sharply with the bland advertising that dominated the field. In one of the earliest pieces, a depiction of Jesus' face is accompanied by the line, "He didn't rise from the dead to hunt Easter eggs."

In 1990 Martin became director of the struggling operation and reorganized it as a for-profit company, giving it new life. Today it is a small business operated by Martin, his wife, and two part-time employees out of a home office near Minneapolis. Martin sells a variety of advertising and marketing products through the Church Ad Project print catalog and Web site. These products are non-sectarian, and Martin reports serving "hundreds of customers" from a wide range of theological perspectives and denominations.

Martin served for many years as an Episcopal priest. He is an adjunct faculty member of Seabury-Western Theological Seminary in Evanston, Ill., where he teaches in the advanced congregational studies program. Martin's scholarly specialties are evangelism and communications. Here, he discusses the Church Ad Project in particular and the role of religious advertising in general.

Clergy Notes: What motivated you to start the Church Ad Project?

Martin: We were enlarging the pulpit, as it were, using advertising to ask questions and state the heart of the message and engage the culture. We were moving beyond the walls of the church and into the marketplace. We offered churches the chance to say something in a unique, provocative way, with messages that turned heads and stopped people in their tracks.

CN: Some of your ads might be considered irreverent. Do you encounter much opposition to them?

Martin: There's always been some resistance. Great advertising always goes toward a creative edge, toward some unexplored territory. It usually creates butterflies somewhere. I've certainly experienced them with some of the ideas presented to me.

Churches are rife with committees, and they get very protective of themselves and their budgets and afraid of what others will think. If you were to ask churches or denominations to create this kind of work, it would come out bland and watered down. We're independent of every church structure, so I can accept almost anything. Our biggest problem is getting churches to stick with it long enough.

CN: What is your response to the criticism that the ads are inappropriate for congregations?

Martin: When someone says an ad is not appropriate—that's kind of a smokescreen. The internal orientation of the majority of churches is a killer. Churches talk about how loving they are. What they mean is how loving their members are toward each other.

The church is supposed to exist for those who don't belong, but it's hard to do that. That's one of the things I'm trying to offer churches—the chance to focus more outside their doors than inside, to get away from the navel-gazing and start taking some risks. Most of the churches that exist were born in a time of risk and adventure. Someone had a vision for starting those churches and reaching people. But, unfortunately, a lot of churches have lost their vision along the way. If you find a church that is willing to advertise, then you have

some of that new-church spirit still alive.

CN: What else distinguishes a church that advertises from one that does not?

Martin: Advertising just lays the groundwork for churches to be more open, more welcoming, more outward-focused. That's one of the mysteries of it all. The churches that do more advertising tend to be more outward-focused and welcoming. They tend to accept new people and orient their worship toward new people. One thing follows another. The churches that are dying and withering on the vine—you can put your money on the fact that they're doing very little in the way of outreach.

RESOURCES:

In addition to television ads, the Episcopal Media Center offers audio and video tapes on various aspects of spirituality and church development. Contact the Center at 1727 Clifton Rd. NE, Atlanta, GA 30329; (404) 633-7800. Its web address is www.episcopalmediacenter.org.

The Church Ad Project (see related interview) offers print ads, books, postcards and radio scripts, along with advice on how to place ads. Contact the Project at 12305 Chinchilla Court, Rosemount, MN 55068-3242; (800) 331-9391. Visit its Web site at www.churchad.com.

For a fascinating account of advertising's role in American religious history, see R. Laurence Moore's *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1994).