



KNOCK, KNOCK. ANYONE HOME?

CHURCH
CUSTOMER SERVICE:
AN OXYMORON?

BY ALAN NELSON

IF JESUS WERE TO KNOCK ON THE DOOR OF A TYPICAL CHURCH, THERE'S PROBABLY ONLY A 50/50 CHANCE HE'D GET A RESPONSE.

We say we want to reach out to people. We say we want our churches to grow. We say we love people. We say our church is friendly and welcoming. However, the *actions* of a large percentage of churches communicate otherwise.

Rev! contracted with five people from different parts of the country to contact 30 churches in their areas; 10 by email, 10 by phone, and 10 by U.S. mail (150 total).^{*} These churches were randomly selected and varied in size, denomination, style, and age. The results stunned us.

Although there are books and articles dealing with the role of hospitality and how churches can make favorable first impressions, most of that has to do with things such as signage, facilities, and guest services on Sunday morning. But what about simple courtesy on the other six days of the week? Or following up on interest shown by potential members

and visitors? What impression do the people who answer the phone make on potential newcomers?


Here's what we found:

- **Only 56 percent of churches responded to their local "secret shopper's" email request for more information.**
- **Only 54 percent of churches called or mailed info after receiving a personal letter requesting information.**
- **Only 38 percent of churches returned phone calls from a potential parishioner, which consisted of a voice mail left on the answering system outside of office hours, requesting information about the church.**

Have our churches become secret societies for members only, or are we just ignorant when it comes to following up on potential parishioners? Many of those that did send info merely plopped a brochure or form letter in an envelope, void of any personal touch. While our researchers reported that some

churches responded wonderfully, these were a distinct minority. Few of us consider our churches as a business, and that's okay in some ways. But imagine what would happen if Apple computer ignored 44 percent of its emails from prospective customers. Would Best Buy find it acceptable to ignore 46 percent of product interest letters? Or would Wal-Mart find it an acceptable practice for 62 percent of customer-interest calls to be never returned? Without question, if corporate customer service yielded these results, employees would be dismissed quickly...along with their CEOs.

So why have we allowed the front-lines of God's work to become so mediocre? We complain that more people aren't coming to church, when in reality, nearly half of churches appear to put little energy into responding positively to interest contacts from potential parishioners.

Rev! also interviewed six people regarding their interactions with churches. Plus, we called a variety of churches after hours, to see what kind of phone messages we experienced. 

THE BOTTOM LINE IS THAT WE'RE IN THE PEOPLE BUSINESS. MOST CHURCHES CAN IMPROVE THEIR IMAGE WITH JUST A LITTLE FOCUS AND TRAINING.

Here are some of our findings:

Long-winded recorded greetings—Some churches we contacted had long recorded greetings we had to endure before being able to leave a message. Then the only options required punching in the staff member's last name. The problem is that if you're new and don't know that person, you can't leave a message. This is unfriendly to guests who are less apt to know the names of staff members than regular attendees.

No response to offers to volunteer—"I began attending a local church and wanted to get involved," said one highly skilled professional. "I called to volunteer for a ministry role. No one called me back. I received a form letter in the mail along with an application for ministry involvement and was instructed to submit it and then someone would contact me. It was a huge turn-off."

Staff members who don't return calls—One business executive who serves on his church board said, "Our pastor was bragging on the staff in one of our board meetings. I was far

less positive about our staff because I know that several of them don't return their calls. If I had staff members who didn't return their calls, they wouldn't be my staff members for long."

Rudeness on the phone—One marketing executive we talked to suggested that you can actually observe denominational and church-age trends. The rudest secretaries to him seemed to be at Lutheran churches, with Methodists close behind. He offered an explanation for this in that the tendency among some mainline churches is to staff the reception area with a person who does not attend the church. Therefore, there might be an emotional disconnect between representing the church well and merely answering the phone. On the other hand, the friendliest receptionists tended to be Assemblies of God and smaller Baptist churches. Newer churches tend to be friendlier than older churches.

10 Ideas for Improving Customer Service

1 Provide a live person on the phone if at all possible, or at

least provide the office hours when a person can expect a live response.

2 Make sure you convey adequate information on the phone machine for people to know what extension to reach and that there are not more than three separate messages to listen to (and buttons to push) before you can find the right person.

3 Be sure that the person answering the phone knows who is in charge of various ministries (such as children's, youth, administration, worship). Whether the person is paid or unpaid, the phone person should know ministry staff and how to best get a message to them.

4 Establish and enforce a policy of 24-hour turnaround on phone calls, one- to two-day return of emails, and a two- to three-day response to mail. Inform all ministry leaders to do the same, at least during the normal business week. When this is not possible, such as when you're out of the office or on a trip, make sure you say so on your auto-reply email response or voice mail. We called one church and the voice message said the pastor would be back on June 9. That would be fine, except that we were calling on November 29. (And yes, he was still employed at the church.) Leave a sticky note by your phone to remind you to update your message as soon as you return.

5 If you say you'll pass on the message to someone, do it. Communication internally says a lot about how you function as a team and care for people.

6 When leaving messages with people, provide info that progresses a conversation, or state the

best times to get you. "Tag, you're it" doesn't cut it. Plus, when leaving messages, make sure you say your phone number slowly or repeat it.

7 Let the person at the front desk know if you're expecting a call, so that he or she doesn't say "no thanks" when the return call comes in.

8 Train your front-end people and phone answerers well, whether they're paid or unpaid. First impressions are lasting ones. Here are some guidelines to share with the people who answer the phone or welcome visitors in the office:

A. *Be warm; have a fun day; sound like you want to be there.*

B. *Understand what your mission is, that you're there to help people and not just answer the phone. You're here to serve.*

C. *Think CARE: Credibility, Appreciation, Responsiveness, and Empathy.*

D. *Do one unexpected thing for every caller or visitor. Maybe just say something in an uncommon way, "Enjoy the rain today."*

9 Pastoral staff, be wary of rarely being available. This smacks of having a big ego. It communicates, "I'm very important. Don't try to reach me. I'm busy, very busy."

10 Every church needs an attractive Web site. Web presence is the new business card. It's relatively inexpensive and can even be free. But when you have a Web site, make sure it's updated with new info, contact info, and phone numbers. Examples of good church Web site developers are Faith Highway (www.faithhighway.com) and

Church Websites (www.churchwebsites.com). Keep church info updated. (Our researchers found three wrong email addresses, one change of mailing address, one bad phone number, and one phone number that was in fax mode.) Do a Google search of your church to make sure the contact info is correct, as well as the phone book and church info.

The good news for many churches is that one growth solution is clearly in their control. We invest big chunks of our budgets on ministry programs, outreach, and advertising, while failing in basic customer service. No matter how much we say we want people to attend and we love others in the name of Jesus, we need to show it.

The bottom line is that we're in the people business. Most churches can improve their image with just a little focus and training. Even though we complain that more people aren't coming to our churches, we often overlook the common sense issue that every business in America has to consider—customer service. What can your church do to improve its frontline effectiveness?

Just because we are conveyors of grace doesn't mean we should be

consumers of it. If we operated more like effective people-oriented companies, we'd likely be much better off in terms of how we serve people... who are made in the image of their Creator. Jesus tells us that as we treat others, so we treat him.

Revelation 3:20 ("Behold, I stand at the door and knock") is commonly used as a verse for people to make decisions for Christ. If Jesus used modern ways to "knock at the door" of your church through emails, phone messages, or personal letters, what kind of response would he get? Nothing profane implied, but for God's sake, we must do better. 🗨️

***FOOTNOTE**

- Research took place in five metro areas: Indianapolis; Atlanta; Phoenix; Orange County, California; and Fort Collins, Colorado.
 - 28 out of 50 emails from churches were returned.
 - 27 out of 50 personal letters were answered.
 - 19 out of 50 phone calls were returned.
- Net total: Just under half of potential members' requests for more information received a response.**

ALAN NELSON is the author of *Me to We (Group)* and the executive editor of *Rev!* Magazine.

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It's best to assume that our church customer service needs fixing. Most of us think we're doing better than we really are. More than 90 percent of people think they're above average when it comes to getting along with others. So why not run some of your own research by asking or hiring some "outsiders" to call, email, and mail letters to your church in order to get info and request a response. Feel free to use the form we used in our research. Go to www.rev.org, click on **EXTRAS** and then "**CUSTOMER SERVICE RESEARCH**."