

Fresh Eyes of a Secret Visitor

A Travel Free Learning Article

By

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I once directed communications for a large non-profit that operated residential facilities across the state. When I hired a new associate, one of the first things she asked was, “Why is the dumpster on this campus not hidden behind a privacy screen of some kind? It is right out in the open and looks like an ugly campus feature.”

I hadn’t noticed – anymore.

I immediately realized my new asset was a fresh set of eyes and I asked her to write down everything she noticed that seemed odd, old or out of place as she lived and worked among these facilities.

The simple truth is that our eyes and psyches quickly accommodate things that jarred us earlier and we no longer see them. The peeling paint, weeds growing through parking pavement, odd smell in the basement classrooms, non-functioning light switches, cracked window panes, poor sound on the left side of the sanctuary, etc., all disappear beneath the cloak of familiarity.

If you grew up in the church you never noticed those things. If you’ve been in your church any length of time you no longer notice those things. But visitors notice them and each sign of neglect sends a clear, distinct and loud message: we don’t care.

A pastor friend told me he was called to a formerly large, middle-aged church in the near suburbs of a significant North Carolina city. In his first week he conducted a tour for the deacons to point out such things as I noted above. When he told them such disrepair plainly stated that this church did not respect God’s house, that excellence did not matter to them, the deacons were insulted – at first.

But they swallowed their insult and set to work getting their facility into the kind of condition that backed up their claim to be committed to excellence. It is not just because of their new attention to detail, but today that church is thriving and on mission.

Have you ever driven a familiar path and noticed construction on what is now an empty lot, and realized you could not name the building or business that had formerly stood there? Part of the problem is simply that we adjust to the landscape, file facts in the back of our minds and forget them if they are not a threat. It does not take long for imperfections to become like chameleons and fade into the landscape, escaping our gaze.

We see them immediately the first time we visit a church. If we come back it’s because we saw enough other positive elements that overcame negative first impressions.

But should your facility let barriers remain that have to be overcome?

How many times have you declined to return to a place because of negative impressions – whether a church or restaurant or ball part?

Can you think of positive first impressions that made you say, “Wow?” I remember the first time I was in a church restroom that was wallpapered and had a flower on the sink. I literally did say, “Wow.” It was such a positive impression and said so much about how the church must attend to the other details that had it been in my city, I would have seriously considered joining there.

Find someone with a fresh set of eyes to look over your facility. Demand them to be brutally honest about things they see that you no longer see. At The Columbia Partnership we have a significant checklist of items that we look for specifically during a secret Sunday visit. We later go over the list with your church leadership to help you see things that will send a more positive message with just a little attention. Let us hear from you at Client.Care@TheColumbiaPartnership.org.

[Norman is one of six columnists who rotate in the weekly eNews of The Columbia Partnership. Next in Jameson's series of articles on church communications: Signage.]