

Are You Ready for Prime Time?

A Travel Free Learning Article


By

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'Tis the season .

No, I'm not losing my mind. I don't mean the Christmas season. I mean the visiting season. There are two times of the year when congregations should be optimally prepared for visitors: Christmas Eve and Palm Sunday to Easter. It's not just Easter Sunday that people visit your church. Some may come to a midweek Holy Week service because you are close to them or because the other church they have been visiting does not have a Maundy Thursday (or convenient Good Friday) service. You need to be prepared. You should always be prepared, of course, but this time of year is prime time for visitors.

In honor of the season, here are 12 tips to make sure you are ready for company. And just so you know, I'm going to ask you a zillion questions that will help you examine your invitational readiness.

1. **Be ready with a friendly website.** It used to be said that a person's visit to church started in the parking lot when they drove in. Nope. Though the parking lot is important and will be addressed later, it's not the starting point anymore. The starting point for a visit to your church happens online for almost everyone. Even if they have driven by your building for years, even if they have been invited by their best friends, even if you are the most well-known church in town, people will visit you on the web before they visit you in person. The welcome needs to start there. What's your web presence?

First, go to your website right now and take a look.

- *Can it be easily navigated?* How long does it take to go from one page to another? (Many people will not wait more than a few seconds for a click-through page to load.)
 - *Is it dominated by pictures of people or pictures of buildings?* (A small picture of the building or buildings is OK, but the main message should be people.)
 - *If you have used stock photos rather than pictures of your members (not a bad idea, especially for the home page), do those pictures reflect the type of folks people will see when they walk in the door?* If you have great stock photos of young adults, and visitors arrive to see only white-headed folks, you will not be making a great impression. Your website needs to be attractive and vibrant, and it needs to reflect who you really are as well as who you want to be.
 - *How current is the information?* An out-of-date website sends the message that you are not attending to business. Don't just set it and forget it. It is not a bulletin board.
2. **Be ready with other social media.** Now that you've viewed your website, look at any other web or social media sites you have.
 - *Are your Facebook pages and Twitter feeds updated regularly?* Does your website have a "Find Us" button with Facebook and Twitter symbols?

- *Are your messages so interesting that members will retweet or Facebook-share them with others?*
 - *Do you manage to tell stories and provide opportunities for interaction? Remember, social media is an invitation to a conversation, not a broadcast.*
 - *If you have a blog, is it updated regularly? Did you know that a pastor's blog is more often read by visitors than by church members? Are Facebook and Twitter followers alerted to new blog posts?*
3. **Be ready with your overall web presence.** Google your church's name and city and see what happens. As Chris Anderson, the editor of *Wired* likes to say, "Your brand is not what you say it is. Your brand is what Google says it is." What's the first thing people will read about you if they Google your church's name?
 4. **Be ready with an inviting physical presence outdoors.** Have someone who is not a member tell you what it's like to view your church from the outside. Here are some things to have them evaluate:
 - *Is the entrance visible? No, I mean the real entrance. If the door all the insiders use is different from the visible front door of the church, you better have great signage so people know where to enter.*
 - *How are we cosmetically? Yes, I know what's inside is more important. But we want people to want to get inside. Landscaping, fresh paint, and well-tended walkways all contribute to the welcome you are extending.*
 - *Is there adequate parking? If the parking lot is more than 75 percent full at the beginning of a church service, you are telling people there is no room for them here. Time to add another service.*
 - *Are there portions of the parking lot from which the church is not visible? If you have a large and confusing parking lot, you need parking lot greeters to welcome and direct people.*
 5. **Be ready with inviting human beings at all the doors.** Hospitality training is essential. Greeters should wear name tags, introduce themselves, and be knowledgeable enough to direct visitors with children to the appropriate classroom, guide visitors to a welcome center, restrooms, the worship space, etc. Welcome centers should have information (brochures, newsletters, sermon DVDs or CDs) easily available.
 6. **Be ready with an inviting physical presence indoors.** What is it like to walk into your church's space? Is it dank and dark, or light and inviting? Is it freshly painted or shabby? Is the carpet worn or stained? Public spaces like hospitals redecorate roughly every three years to maintain a fresh looking presence. That is not practical for churches, but the same principle applies. Look like you're ready for company. Interior signage needs to be visible and easily understood. Vague arrows pointing down the hall are not helpful.
 7. **Be ready with a professional-looking nursery.** Visitors need to be reassured that their children will be safe in their absence. There need to be adults present; not just teenagers ditching worship. Many congregations have a pager system so that parents can be alerted if there is a problem while they are in worship.

8. **Be ready with well-equipped, age-appropriate children's classes.** Visit elementary schools to get a feel for age-appropriate décor and resources if you haven't been to one lately. If there are congregations nearby that are well-known for excellent children's ministries, take a few of your education volunteers over for a tour. Effective congregations are uncommonly willing to share their knowledge with others.
9. **Be ready by eliminating jargon and initials from all written and spoken communications.** You might have CYF or CYO or MWU groups, but you better not call them that in print and on the screen. You better not use initials you think everyone knows, because everyone doesn't know them. Make sure all print and verbal announcements are jargon-free. Have someone who is not a member of your denomination or communion review materials and bulletins regularly to make sure they are understandable to everyone. This also includes announcements that refer to church spaces by name without indicating where they are. "Everyone is welcome to coffee in the Common Room" actually means "Only those who know where the Common Room is located are welcome." A better way is to say "Everyone is welcome for coffee in the Common Room, which is just to the right as you exit the sanctuary through the double doors at the back."
10. **Be ready by focusing on the visitors' needs rather than the church's needs.** Sure, you are eager to be inviting and grow. Yes, you need good voices in the choir. Of course, you could use help in the nursery. But these are not appropriate things to mention to first-time visitors. Focus on welcoming them and learning about ways the church can be helpful to them. If you are good welcomers, there will be time enough later on for those other discussions.
11. **Be ready with prompt follow up.** Have a regular follow-up plan that automatically goes into effect after someone visits. Experts differ on what comes first and what are most effective, but common elements are a letter from the senior minister, a phone call and/or visit from a church member. Many congregations do *screen-door calls* on Sunday afternoons to first-time visitors, dropping off a loaf of bread or a plant. The important thing is to have a system that is consistent with your congregation's culture and to follow that system every week.
12. **Be ready with prayer and a pastoral presence.** You don't know what has brought someone to church. You don't know if there is a deep spiritual need, a family crisis, or just a feeling that it is time. Congregations that include visitors in their prayer ministry (inviting everyone to submit prayer requests along with their offering, for example) and then follow up with a card or letter letting people know you have prayed for them, offer a compelling example of the kind of spiritual care people will find in your midst.

These are my first 12 tips for welcoming visitors. What have I left out? What works for your congregation? Join the Travel-Free Learning Dialogue on Wednesday, April 13 at 2:00pm EDT. Let's talk!

Important Things to Know

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