

Group

FIRST

IMPRESSIONS

CREATING **WOW**
EXPERIENCES
IN YOUR CHURCH

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Reflections of a Consumer

***“The customer only wants two things—
show me you care about me personally, and
tell me what you’re going to do for me now
(help me—please).”¹***

Defining the Consumer

I’m sitting in Starbucks, and I love it. My hazelnut coffee is steaming next to my laptop. The rich aroma of espresso beans fills the air. Conversations from faithful patrons are creating a buzz of community in the room.

I’m not the only one at work in my portable office. A young college student is kicking out a term paper. Across the room two women enjoy a slice of cheesecake, interspersed with dialogue about their kids. An older couple sits quietly, sipping coffee, each person engrossed in a magazine. I’m surrounded by people in diverse stages of life: married people, divorced people, new parents, students, retired folks.

My dictionary defines *consumer* this way: “a person who consumes; buys goods and services for personal needs.” Whatever else the people around me are doing, they are consuming, and so am I.

Consumerism and the Local Church

The word *consumer* can be offensive when used in relationship to the local church. Consumerism is one thing at Starbucks, but it seems to have no place in the local church. We appropriately object to the notion of setting up our churches as marketplaces, selling our Jesus wares, and

The church is not called to be the catering, whim-granting marketplace of the 21st century.

catering to every selfish whim of the people who enter our doors. A consumer mentality—wherein I am the central figure in the universe, the church exists to tell me what I want to hear, and God is a materialistic vending machine to satisfy my every desire—is not reflective of the character of Jesus Christ. The church is not called to be the catering, whim-granting marketplace of the 21st century.

Nonetheless, I am a consumer. So are you. So is every individual who enters your church. What are the ramifications of this fact for the church?

There's a Consumer in Your Mirror

Consider the consumer role you play. Think about your daily needs, your leisure, your business. Where do you shop? Where do you conduct business? Where do you bank? Where are your clothes cleaned? Where do you buy groceries? Where do you eat? On which airlines do you fly? What hotels do you frequent?

If you were to pull out your receipts from the past six months, you'd likely see some patterns. Why do you frequent the same places week after week? Value? Customer service? Consistency?

Where Do You Consume?

Make a short list. Where do you shop? Who provides service for you? Jot down ten places you frequent as a consumer.

Complete the exercise to the left. What businesses did you list? Underline the ones you visit often or even exclusively. For each of those, cite one or more reasons you return again and again. You may shop at your supermarket for value, while quality takes you back to your mechanic. You may love shopping at a particular clothing store—physically or online—because of service and quality. Whatever you identify as the reason to return, you have established expectations of each vendor.

When Is Adequate Not Enough?

Our expectations communicate a lot about what we value. When we dine out, we expect the food to be warm, the drinks to be cold, and the service to be swift. We want our server to be personable, courteous, and conscientious. We expect the check to reflect the value not only of our meal but also of our overall dining experience.

That's why we'll eat at a fast-food diner with laminated tabletops, cheap prints on the wall, and a self-serve soda fountain. The value of our experience is reflected in the check. It doesn't cost us much. It satisfies our hunger. It's adequate.

Adequate defines many of our experiences, doesn't it? A trip to the mall, a sandwich for lunch, and a transaction at the bank are generally adequate experiences. Adequate isn't *bad*. We get what we need. The experience just isn't anything to write home about. It isn't *memorable*.

But often we expect more than adequate. We want to experience a memory-maker now and then. And when we do, a new standard has been set. We know excellence *can* be delivered. We know we *can* find a better value. Often we settle for adequate...but we know that excellence *is* possible.

Several years ago, my wife and I were invited by her employer at that time to an evening at an upscale restaurant in LaPorte, Indiana. Our dining experience there redefined our standard of excellence.

The environment was eclectic and welcoming. The charm of the room whispered "intimate," while the bright yellow paint splashed on the 20-foot walls shouted "fun." Swing jazz, playing seductively in the background, set a New Orleans mood, right for good times and great friends.

Our tables, every place setting arranged perfectly, were adorned with rare meadow flowers (a far cry from those little silk daisies cemented in clear glue). Each course was beautifully presented and delicious. The hors d'oeuvres were delectable and plentiful. It was by far the best meal my wife and I had ever tasted. Throughout the meal our server called each of us by name. This was more than a distinctive meal; this was an event.

This exceptional experience recalibrated my expectations of restaurants. Now I know what's possible. Every other restaurant will pale in comparison to this one.

Consumers' expectations aren't restricted to dining. We expect our family doctors to be on time. (OK, we really don't, which is why their perpetual delay ticks us off so much—we know it's possible to be on time!) We expect our flights to be on time, our mail carriers to follow consistent delivery schedules, and our work associates to arrive as scheduled. We expect Wi-Fi to be available for research and e-mail; we expect our elected officials to represent our best interests; we expect our favorite clothing stores to have the styles we want in the colors and sizes we need.

Too often, though, we have to settle for adequate. If the meal is at least warm, we'll eat it. If the wait at the post office isn't too long, we'll endure it. If the doctor will make an accurate diagnosis, we'll wait. We'll settle for adequate, but we long for more.

From Adequate to “Wow!”

What my wife and I experienced at the upscale restaurant was “Wow!”—something way beyond our expectations and certainly far more than adequate. Someone went beyond the norm to communicate caring and to create a truly memorable experience.

What Are Your “Wow!” Moments? Recall two or three times you've been wowed. Who blew you away with excellent service? Who surprised you with remarkably good quality? Who impressed you with a product's value? What did the people involved in these experiences do? How did their actions and behavior affect you?

When was the last time you had a “Wow!” experience? For most of us, these moments are few and far between. It takes a lot for us to be impressed; it takes even more for us to be wowed.

We consumers don't merely evaluate *what* we consume; we evaluate the entire experience. When thinking about past “Wow!” experiences, we see faces, hear voices and other ambient sounds, remember

smells, and recall emotions. All five senses may have been engaged. The fantastic restaurant experience I described included décor, music, food presentation, taste, and service. But more than anything, it was about people and the way they treated us. When we feel personally valued in a particular setting, we'll likely return.

The opposite is also true. We'll think twice about returning to a place in which we felt marginalized or devalued.

One Friday evening I took my family to a popular national grill. Liv, our daughter, ordered a quesadilla meal, complete with sour cream and guacamole. Excited about her selection, she picked up her fork to lavish sour cream onto her first bite of quesadilla. Suddenly she dropped her fork and jumped away from the table, exclaiming, "Yuck! There's a hair!" Well, it certainly wasn't the first time my wife or I had seen a hair in a plate of food, but what happened next did surprise us.

We requested a new dollop of sour cream—twice. And each time a hair accompanied the condiment. Are you counting? We did! That was three servings of sour cream, each time with a hair from the kitchen! Liv was done, finished. She was ready to leave and never visit the restaurant again.

We politely asked for a different plate of food, hoping our server wouldn't charge us for Olivia's meal at all. When the substandard service was not followed up with any demonstration of responsibility, we left, knowing it would be a while before we returned—if ever.

Beyond unmet expectations, we didn't feel valued. We weren't made to feel we mattered. The staff gave no consideration to the fact that we might not return or that we might tell others about our experience.

On the other hand, businesses that intentionally communicate a caring attitude have won my respect and repeat business. I'm not a world traveler, but over the years, DoubleTree hotels and suites have impressed me with the warm chocolate chip cookies that are given to guests upon check-in. (Here's a company that understands the importance of little things!) When my family and I dine at our favorite local Mexican restaurant, we hope Bill is working. He sees that our drinks are fresh and warmly stops by our table to chat. His excellence earns return trips from us and rewarding

tips for him. The online travel people at Hotwire.com surprised me when their representative didn't say no to my request but said instead, "That's a really good idea; I'll note it as a customer enhancement proposal." The barista at our local Starbucks knew my name and drink. I'll keep going back to these places because they've communicated that they value me.

The same is true of guests in our churches. The churches delivering experiences that exceed guests' expectations are those to which people return, again and again, until they're no longer guests but full-fledged members of the church community. When a guest thinks "Wow!" it is because he or she feels affirmed and valued. The church has said, "You matter."

Accepting Consumers in Your Church

You may be thinking, "Yes, but responding to our guests as consumers is catering to their base wants and whims. As Christians we should be calling them to a higher standard of integrity and commitment, away from self-focused consumerism. When we see our guests as consumers, we reinforce their self-centered lifestyle. The local church is not about catering to the cultural expectations established in the marketplace; the church's job is to lift up Jesus so seekers can see him."

Our goal should be to do anything and everything that helps our guests see Christ.

I agree. Our assignment is to make sure people can see Jesus clearly. This is the very reason we must meet them where they are—consumer mentality and all. We must greet them with unconditional acceptance and respect. This is how people will begin to see Jesus clearly. Our goal should be to do anything and everything that helps our guests see Christ.

Since the inception of Granger Community Church, a prominent core value has been "People matter to God; therefore, they matter to us." Mark Beeson, our senior pastor, communicates that he values every attendee in our church. Every time Mark speaks, his listeners hear how much they matter to God. Because he has cast this vision so well, dozens of teams of people help communicate this core value every weekend. Hundreds of us have caught this vision to reach out to people who need the hope of Jesus in a world where few people really care about them. We've accepted

that it's the only way to accomplish our mission: "helping people take their next step toward Christ...together."

How do you view first-time guests in your church, particularly those guests who are seeking God—again or for the first time in their lives? What labels have you attached to them? "Nonbelievers"? "Unchurched"? "Lost"? "Sinners"? Words like these are often used to describe people who are seeking—those who are searching for answers, exploring the claims of Christ, looking for hope in a hopeless world. But when we attach such labels to those who are not Christ-followers, we need to be aware of the nuances those labels carry with them. For instance, terms such as *sinners* and *visitors* have caused us to further alienate those who are really no different from ourselves; we're all on a spiritual journey in search of purpose and fulfillment.

On the other hand, terms such as *seekers* and *unconvinced* help us approach our guests with a message that is sensitive to their exploration and journey toward God. When we remember our guests are *seeking* and are *unconvinced*, we tear down invisible barriers and are able to more naturally communicate love and acceptance.

I suggest we remember that our seeking friends are also *consumers*. I know that such a label may seem too marketplace-oriented. Perhaps it sounds shallow, if not hollow, but it is honest. Those who seek—who decide to "try church again," to explore the claims of Christ in relationship to their lives—are "shopping" for a church. More important, they are shopping for a spiritual *experience* that addresses their personal needs. I propose we meet them right where they are: at our doors, shopping for help in life, full of expectations, hoping someone will care for them.

Jesus and Consumerism

I still see "WWJD" printed on bumper stickers, wristbands, charms, and Bible covers, encouraging us to continually ask ourselves, "What would Jesus do?" Let's consider how Jesus encountered consumerism in his day, and rather than asking what he *would* do, let's consider what he *did*.

Read this account of one of Jesus' miracles, as described in Mark 6:34-44.

When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things. By this time it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. "This is a remote place," they said, "and it's already very late. Send the people away so they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat."

But he answered, "You give them something to eat."

They said to him, "That would take eight months of a man's wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?"

"How many loaves do you have?" he asked. "Go and see."

When they found out, they said, "Five—and two fish."

Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to set before the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand.

Writing about this same event, the Gospel writer John describes a conversation in which Jesus confronted the motivation of his "consumer" crowd: "Jesus answered, 'You've come looking for me not because you saw God in my actions but because I fed you, filled your stomachs—and for free'" (John 6:26, *The Message*).

Before and after this open-air, impromptu banquet, people came to Jesus in search of healing for themselves, their families, and their friends. They wanted their own needs to be met. These crowds definitely fit our definition of *consumers*.

But here's the amazing thing: Jesus didn't stop healing or performing other miracles. He continued to play into the people's consumer mind-set. He did this because he wanted them to see the Father. He didn't seem too worried that their motives were self-serving.

When Jesus asked people to move from consumerism to commitment (John 6), some "followers" turned away. The same thing may happen when people in our churches are invited to embrace a personal relationship with Jesus and follow him by serving others. Even so, Jesus continued rolling out the red carpet and communicating this simple message: "Lost people matter to my Father; therefore, they matter to me." This must be the church's message today as well.

Is it possible that the church will somehow communicate a value system of consumerism that merely reflects the self-focused interests of our culture? Perhaps, but I believe it is worth the risk. Because in time, our guests' values will get sorted out inside a *personal relationship* with God. As this relationship develops, the materialistic consumerism that poses a threat to personal holiness and integrity will begin to melt away.

The people who come through your doors on the weekend are initially making decisions as consumers. Whether they return rests on their entire experience on your campus. They leave asking the same questions they ask of businesses throughout the week: "Was this worth my time? Do the people care about me? Am I valued here?" How will your guests answer these questions?

Competition You Never Asked For

Maybe you're thinking, "First you suggest we need to *cater* to consumers, and now you are talking about *competition*. I want my money back!"

I can appreciate this concern. After all, none of us decided to lead in a local church because we wanted to compete. This isn't *our* gig. It's God's.

In time, our guests' values will get sorted out inside a *personal relationship* with God. As this relationship develops, the materialistic consumerism that poses a threat to personal holiness and integrity will begin to melt away.

Your competition, the rival that will keep people away from your church, is any business, service, or experience your guests have encountered in the past few weeks.

This is not about us; it's about him, his church, his people. It's him we offer to those who seek—not a program, not a celebrity preacher, not a mere experience. We offer Christ.

But because we live in a consumer environment, there *is* competition. There are winners and losers. If your church is going to be effective, then you must beat the competition, pure and simple. You must find out who the competition is, what it is doing, and how to win its consumers to your church.

You must figure out how to convince potential guests why they should be at your church on Sunday morning.

OK, time out. Let me assure you I'm *not* saying other churches are our competition. As pastors and leaders, we're not attempting to beat out the other churches in town. We don't watch what other churches are doing so we can "top" them. No, the other Christ-centered churches in town are on our team. They are leading and loving for the same cause. They are arm-in-arm with our church, making a difference in our community.

If your biggest competition on Sunday morning isn't another church in town, then what is it? Your competition, the rival that will keep people away from your church, is any business, service, or experience your guests have encountered in the past few weeks. The competition includes restaurants, malls, golf courses, and amusement parks. First Bank (not First Church), United Parcel (not United Methodist), and Zappos (not Nazarenes) set the bar for service.

The competition doesn't happen only during weekend worship services. The competition for your guests began when they were wowed in another environment. One or more of your guests shipped a package to the other side of the country last week, assured it would arrive there by noon the next day. You have a guest who fired two people last month because they didn't make their sales quotas for the second month in the quarter. Another guest picked up his laundry at his local cleaner, pleased his shirts were treated with medium starch and ready in two days as promised. You have guests who are greeted by name at their local coffee shop and rewarded

with free drinks because they are frequent shoppers. Even their discount supercenter provides special parking for pregnant moms and handicapped patrons. Your guests have high expectations that are formed every day from new encounters with excellence and conscientious care. Although too much of their world is merely adequate, they know excellence, and they return to places where they experience it.

Will your guests' experience in your church be worth getting out of bed?

Finally, don't forget the profound competition of your guests' warm, cozy beds. After all, competition in the mind of the consumer is about the value of the experience. Will your guests' experience in your church be worth getting out of bed?

Competition for experiences that affirm the customer's value is so intense in today's culture that consumers often base the quality of any business—or church—on *the first few seconds of their experience*.

First Impressions Are Lasting Impressions

First impressions aren't limited to any single aspect of the guests' experience. The SuperAmerica company training program summarizes it this way: "From the customer's point of view, if they can see it, walk on it, hold it, hear it, step in it, smell it, carry it, step over it, touch it, use it, even taste it, if they can feel it or sense it, it's customer service."² That pretty much covers it. If it can be experienced, it's service—whether it's poor service or phenomenal service.

Additionally, service of any kind isn't merely about *first* impressions; it's about *lasting* impressions. Some of the impressions you've retained about a business (or church, for that matter) didn't come within the first few minutes of your experience; they occurred sometime later. But they remained.

Complete the exercise on page 22. Now evaluate the impressions you jotted down. Which reflect your feelings from your *initial* encounter, and which ones describe your thoughts at the *end* of your experience with that organization? What does this tell you about the impressions we retain?

First impressions in the local church are about creating the atmosphere expressed in Jesus' invitation to grace-filled community in Matthew 11:28-30.

As you review the few words you just recorded, you'll find a mixture of phrases that express not only your first impression but your *lasting* impression as well. These impressions will help you decide to return or to find another provider.

Organizations that understand the lasting nature of first impressions also understand that *people matter*. When people matter, guests are wowed. And when guests are wowed, they know they matter.

Consumers Are People, and People Need Relationships

In the end, an appropriate approach to consumerism is to see not consumers, but people—people who matter to God. The motivation to make a “Wow!” impression is not to better everyone else in town. It's not about stroking our egos, pleased with how excellent we are. “Wow!” impressions matter because people matter. What they think matters. What they believe matters. What they want matters. What they need matters.

First Impressions Last

Let's try this word-association exercise. Look at the following list, and jot down your first thought about each place. Don't spend a lot of time on this—just write the first thought that comes to mind.

McDonald's _____

Your last hotel stay (not the name of the hotel, but your impression of it)

Your last airplane experience (again, not the name of the company)

Your bank _____

Your local church _____

Starbucks _____

When our guests know they matter, we've connected with them on a human level. It's really the only place to connect. It's where Jesus connects with us.

First impressions in the local church are about creating the atmosphere expressed in Jesus' invitation to grace-filled community in Matthew 11:28-30:

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly (The Message).

People matter to God, therefore they *must* matter to us. If we in the local church can faithfully follow Jesus' model in communicating this truth, the guests in our churches will experience acceptance and grace. They will know they are valued. They will observe authentic relationships and long to be part of them. It all begins with meeting people where they are.

Try These Next Steps...

- The next time you dine out, talk with your dinner guests about your shared experience. What disappointed you? Did the staff members do the best they could with what they had? What would have created a “Wow!” experience for you?
- At the end of your day or week, make a list of your consumer encounters. When did you feel valued? What did someone do or say that caught you by surprise in a positive way? When were you wowed? How could an aspect of this “Wow!” experience be duplicated in your church?
- Did you have the opportunity to show someone that you value him or her this week? What did you do? What could you have done better?

Endnotes

1. Jeffrey Gitomer, *Customer Satisfaction Is Worthless, Customer Loyalty Is Priceless* (Atlanta: Bard Press, 1998), 35.
2. As quoted in *Delivering Knock Your Socks Off Service* by Kristin Anderson and Ron Zemke (New York: American Management Association, 2003), 29.

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