

## Senses and Sensibility

*Combining your 5 senses and common sense in creating environments for worship*

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First impressions of your church campus and facility last. First impressions are automatic – taken in and recorded by our senses, often registered for later recall. More often than not, they make an immediate impact on our decision to participate and to return – or not. We may not agree with it or not, but the consumer mentality of the world we live in has moved full force into our church world. Our churches don't compete with the "world" so much as the experiences of the world. How can the church learn from this?

Think about the experiences your typical guest or attendee encounters during his or her daily routine. Do they have a favorite morning coffee stop? Do they listen to a particular style of music on the radio on the drive in to work – or do they travel in silence? Once at work (or school, or wherever they spend the greater part of their weekday), what is the environment like? Do they have favorite pictures around them, reminding them of what's really important in life? Do they have a candle or aromatic device nearby, silently wafting a pleasant scent in the air around them? When it's break time, or lunch time, do they go out to eat – to the same place most days? Or do they bring something from home? On the way home, do they listen to the same music (or silence) as the ride in – or so they switch to something more relaxing – or energizing? By now you get the picture – or do you?

As you live your life day in and out, you are living the life of a consumer. Where do you consume? Where do you shop? Who provides service for you? Most importantly, why? You may stop at your favorite coffee shop for a good cup of coffee – and the conversations you have with the barista and the other regulars in the shop. Your supermarket always has good value and a wide selection of the food your family likes. Clothes from a particular shop just fit better – and the sales associates are always helpful with suggestions. The point is, you have established expectations of each place and the people that work there. Is it any different for guests and attendees at your church?

If your goal is to create a space and an experience that will positively impact people you must first plan and evaluate it from the perspective of its quality. You start that process by examining the daily places and routines in the offices, retail, and recreation spaces of the people you are trying to reach. The homes they live in, the offices they work in and the stores they shop in communicate a level of expectation they have for their space.

One subtle but powerful expression of this expectation is in our five classical senses: Sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. Leonardo da Vinci reflected sadly that the average human "looks without seeing, listens without hearing, touches without feeling, eats without tasting, moves without physical

awareness, inhales without awareness of odor or fragrance, and talks without thinking.”<sup>1</sup> How can the church capture the powerful experiences of our senses and utilize them in their facilities?

## **A Brief Primer on How Our Senses Work**

### **Sound**

The outer ear catches and channels sound waves to the middle ear, which contains three tiny bones. These bones vibrate, transmitting the sound the inner ear, where thousands of hair cells are stimulated by the movement of the fluid within the inner ear. An electrical impulse is transmitted along the hearing nerve to the brain creating the sensation of hearing.

### **Sight**

The experience of sight begins when photons from the world hit the lens of our eye, and get focused onto over 130 million receptor cells on the retina. These receptor cells convert incoming light into electrical signals to be sent to the brain, making sight possible.<sup>2</sup>

### **Smell**

Every day we are confronted with a smorgasbord of smells. Our five million olfactory cells can sniff out one molecule of odor-causing substance in one part per trillion of air. We take about 23,000 breaths per day processing about 440 cubic feet of scent-laden air.<sup>3</sup>

### **Touch**

Our bodies have more than 500,000 touch detectors and 200,000 temperature sensors.<sup>4</sup> Each of these sensors gathers sensory information and relay it through specific nerve bundles back to the central nervous system for processing and possible reaction

### **Taste**

The complex process of tasting begins when tiny molecules released by the substances around us stimulate special cells in the nose, mouth, or throat. These special sensory cells transmit messages through nerves to the brain, where specific tastes are identified.

Enough of the science lab! God designed our bodies to sense, interpret, and react to the millions of stimuli that occur around us every day. How do we use this knowledge to improve our facilities?

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<sup>1</sup> Michael J Gelb, *How to Think Like Leonardo da Vinci* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2004), 97.

<sup>2</sup> *How Does the Sense of Sight Work* [database online] Edited by Michael Anissimov, Accessed 14 October 2008); available from <http://www.wisegeek.com/how-does-the-sense-of-sight-work.html>; Internet

<sup>3</sup> Gelb, 126.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

## A Fresh Start – Getting Back to Basics

Do you long for the “good old days” when the pace of our lives was simpler and life was slower? As comedian Will Rogers once said, “Things ain’t what they used to be – and probably never was.” There’s no use longing for the good old days. In a world that is:

- Increasingly hurried
- Painfully insecure
- Physically and mentally exhausting
- Socially and economically fragmented, and
- Psychologically and emotionally demanding

Millions of people are desperately in need of opportunities to feel:

- Free from time pressure
- Safe and secure in their surroundings
- Pleasantly stimulated, physically and mentally
- At peace with themselves and others, and
- Ready to be open-minded, creative, and productive<sup>5</sup>

Organizations that can provide such opportunities by re-imagining the customer experience will attract an enormous number of customers in the years ahead and keep them coming back.

### Customer experience – in a church?

Here’s where the “common sense” comes into play. Just like the business you frequent often, churches delivering experiences that exceed guest’s 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 or valued. The church has said, “You matter.”<sup>6</sup>

While you may not be trying to sell a product, your guest (and potential member) is very much “shopping” for a church. More important, they are shopping for a spiritual *experience* that addresses their personal needs.<sup>7</sup> Why not make sure you do all in your power to make it happen?

### A Potpourri of Guest Improvement Ideas

*Visit your church ...again* – How familiar are you with your own church building and campus? We all tend to get comfortable with our own surroundings and overlook what our guests see. Try to see your facilities through a fresh set of eyes – your guest’s eyes.

- How easy is it to drive onto your campus and find convenient parking close to your buildings?
- What’s the condition of the parking lots, sidewalks, and landscaping?
- Are there greeters and parking lot helpers to guide you into the building?
- Are the buildings and rooms identified?

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<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Tisch, *Chocolates on the Pillows Aren’t Enough* (John Wiley & Sons, New Jersey, 2007), 18.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Waltz, *First Impressions: Creating WOW Experiences in Your Church* (Group, Colorado, 2004), 139.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

- Is there a welcome area that is warm and inviting and that has smiling helpful people staffing it?
- Do you have a café or refreshment area nearby for guests and members?
- If you have children, it is easy to find the right place for them? Do the security measures in place give you a sense of peace as you leave your child?

*Visit another church in your community* – What can you learn from visiting another church? How do they handle parking and greeting? What kinds of signage do they use? How are the people greeting one another? Do feel like they're invading your "space", or are you comfortable? When you first walk inside the building, what do you smell? Is the area visually cluttered, or pleasing? What's the noise level like? Is there a café area? Is it clean? Overall, does the facility make you feel welcome? How does the personal impact of the people fit in to the surroundings?

*Visit other types of places and engage all your senses* – The next time you dine out, take on the role of a critic. Not just of the food, but of the total experience. What are your impressions of the parking area, the restaurant, host/hostess, wait time, staff – and don't forget the food! How was the *experience*? What wowed you? You're not trying to find something wrong – you're trying to train yourself to use all your senses to imagine what guests are experiencing when they come to your church. Mark Waltz's book *First Impressions* has a great "Be the Guest" form that helps you use your senses to record and learn from experiences at churches, restaurants, shopping areas – anywhere people experience life.<sup>8</sup>

*Identify potential distractions – and work to remove them* – If your guests become distracted because they can't find a place to park, or their children's room has an odor in it, or whatever, you will have a difficult time re-engaging them for the real experience you're trying to establish: a personal encounter with Jesus. When you eliminate potential or obvious distractions, you are one step closer to satisfying your guests.

Company's coming – are you ready to "Wow" them? Use your common sense to engage all of your guest's senses and their first impression will be a positive – and lasting one.

Expand your "sensory knowledge by reading":

- First Impressions: Creating Wow Experiences in Your Church, Mark L. Waltz.
- How to Think Like Leonardo da Vinci, Michael J. Gelb
- Chocolates on the Pillow Aren't Enough, Jonathan M. Tisch

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 35.