Going Outside the Church Walls

Making Your Outreach Ministry Effective and Organized

Reaching out to your community is an essential component for growth and vitality. Churches that reach out effectively grow in size and influence. On the other hand, churches that fail in the area of outreach become stagnant and may fail as a result, so it is imperative for churches to take every opportunity to strengthen their outreach efforts.

Unfortunately, many churches struggle to reach out in an effective way that is relevant to the people they are trying to reach. They find it difficult to connect with new people and bring them into the church. They also encounter problems with staying connected with the people that they bring in or meet through their outreach efforts.

In this paper, you will be introduced to numerous practical ways to overcome the difficulties associated with outreach. There are many useful strategies and tools available to help you move forward with outreach and begin to see the positive results you desire.

Practical suggestions will be made in this paper on how to reach out by doing each of the following:

- Researching your target audience
- Finding ways to drive people to your church
- Making people feel welcome
- Reaching people through events
- Mobilizing and equipping your members to invite people
- Tracking attendance
- Publicizing your ministry and events to the community through various communication outlets
- Getting involved in what is already going on in the community
- Using the right tools
- Committing to a good follow-up plan

By implementing the suggestions in this paper, your church can accomplish outreach goals that before may have appeared impossible. You will find useful ideas and tools that will equip you to do outreach well. Let's take a closer look at how to achieve this.

Know Your Target Audience

The first step in any effective outreach effort is to do your homework. It is important to know who it is you're reaching out to so that you can cater services, activities, and events to that demographic. A good place to start is by looking at your current attendees:

- Who is currently attending your church?
- What characteristics do they share?
- What appeals to them to make them keep coming back?
- If some aren't coming back, what needs aren't being met?

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By taking the time to understand your attendees, you'll be able to attract similar types of people who would also connect with your church. Not being realistic in your outreach target efforts could result in wasted time and resources.

For example, focusing efforts on attracting singles to a church filled with young families with children is probably not the most effective form of outreach. If you already have a strong children's ministry, use that in your efforts to attract new families.

▶ Turn Members into Inviters

Motivating and equipping your members to invite people to your church is probably the most effective way to reach out and bring in new people. In "Simply Strategic Growth," pastors Tim Stevens and Tony Morgan share the following valuable insight:

"A couple of years ago, we conducted an all-church survey. Among other things, we asked people how they had found out about the church and what had prompted them to show up the first time. It probably won't surprise you to learn that over 74 percent of the people we surveyed had visited the first time because of an invitation they received from a friend."

Every member in your church has what is known as a "sphere of influence." This is basically the people with whom your members have relationships and potentially some persuasive ability. These include friends, coworkers, relatives, and neighbors.

Within every sphere of influence, you can almost guarantee that one or more people would attend church or an outreach event if they were invited. Because of this, you should make every effort to motivate and equip your members to invite people that they know.

Teaching
You can use teaching resources to motivate members. Sermons and bible studies on outreach are great ways to begin to move the hearts of your members toward reaching out. Remind members to draw on their personal experiences when speaking to people. What was their first impression, how did they feel, and what made them want to come back?

Tools
In addition to motivating members with teaching, it is also helpful to provide some kind of tangible tool that they can use when inviting people. There are many online services that offer small invitation cards to their users. Include the name of your church and key words to describe your church, as well as directions and times. You can also create e-mail templates for your members to use to follow up with people they've spoken to about attending. Encourage your members to increase the e-mail's effectiveness by adding hyperlinks to the church Web site and to online directions.

Additional Locations
It is a statistical fact that if your church is more than a 30 minutes away from a member, that member will not invite their friends and neighbors.

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They feel it would be an imposition to ask their friends to visit that far away. To curb this problem, consider having more worship locations or becoming a multi-site church if you think you have the resources.

Events

Events that you hold help your members become inviters. Give them great services and events to which they will feel comfortable inviting people. Having events and services that appeal to the interests and needs of the people that your members are targeting will boost the confidence of your members as they invite the people in their sphere of influence. Consider providing:

- Grief support groups
- Mother's Morning Out
- Meeting place for professional organizations
- Teen nights
- Art shows
- Concerts
- Discussion groups on popular TV shows, movies, and books

Plan Ahead for Attendance Tracking and Volunteering

While your members are inviting people from the outside, consider taking steps to mobilize volunteers from within your church. Volunteer ministry should be a priority for all churches.

There are great tools available to help you organize and manage your volunteer efforts. Fellowship Dallas in Dallas, TX, uses a volunteer management software program to simplify their volunteer ministry and help them find volunteers quickly when a need arises, whether it is for an outreach event or ministry function. Matt Gibert, connecting pastor at Fellowship Dallas, says:

"As our church gets bigger, the management of (volunteer) information becomes exponentially more difficult. So the real value is twofold: it enables the church to identify and locate people with particular giftedness for their area of ministry where there's a need, and for people who really want to serve, it enables them to find opportunities that match their giftedness. So there's a benefit for the church and for the person who wants to get involved."

A well-managed volunteer team can enhance a visitor's experience at your church. For example, when someone arrives for an outreach event, be sure it is clear where they need to go. Have your volunteers place signs at your entrances or even stand in a safe location to direct traffic. Since individuals may not be familiar with your facility, they will appreciate your attention to ensuring that they know where to park, where to enter the facility, and how to find the correct room. Online maps of your facility can also ensure that people know where they are going and will help them feel comfortable when they arrive.

Contact Management Software

One great tool is contact management software that exchanges information with your Web site. This allows you to assign contacts to your volunteer team members and then track the connections that each of them makes with a member or visitor. Your team

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members can access information about individuals who are in your church management system, including a photo, so they can have more familiarity with individuals before contacting them.

The program should also allow you to generate reports of the people being contacted based on:

- Assigned team member making the contact
- Type of contact
- Date range
- Contact status

You can find out much more about building and maintaining a strong volunteer ministry by downloading our volunteer white paper entitled "Raising Your Volunteer Numbers" at **www.ideastoimpact.com/volunteering.**

Tools for Outreach

There are other tools you can use to maximize your outreach efforts and keep track of volunteers, attendance, and the impact you make. Make sure you familiarize yourself and your staff with them before the outreach event, activity, or service that you want to track.

Web Site

We live in a culture that is often dependent on getting information from the Web, so give your audience the information they want. There are tons of ways to reach out to people from your Web site; make it dynamic and relevant.

- Use your site to advertise your upcoming events.
- Let members see the small groups they can join.
- Let people sign up for events and small groups directly from your site.
- Upload podcasts and video streaming to your site.
- Create a blog to link to your site.
- Allow your members to get RSS feeds from your site.

A great way to acquire and maintain a quality Web site with these features is by using an online service to host your site and help you build and edit it. With this kind of service, you are given the tools to design your site and edit it whenever you want, and no additional software or coding skills are required. You simply decide who is permitted to edit the site. This saves you from having to build a site from scratch and gives you the flexibility to start small and adjust as your needs or budgets change.

Using your Web site for outreach offers advantages for members and non-members. For example, set up online registration to enable easy online payment for your event if there are any fees.

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Gail Smith, office manager at Lutheran Church of Hope in West Des Moines, IA, says:

"We can just send out a postcard and say, 'Check out our Web site,' which is much cheaper than sending out a newsletter. With Vacation Bible School, we used to send out packets to everybody, and now we put it all on the Web. It makes it a lot more cost efficient."

You can also reach out to individuals who are looking online for a church by listing your site on search engines like Yahoo!, Google, MSN, and information sites about your community. Many of these sites will allow you to submit your site information and you'll receive a free listing. Keeping your site updated, fixing broken links promptly, and adding relevant materials will ensure your site remains in the major search engines' listings.

Facility Scheduling

Since first impressions are critical to your outreach events, be sure that when you hold an on-site event that you avoid overlapping time, facilities, or resources with another activity.

Melissa Coleman, network administrator at Covenant Love Family Church in Fayetteville, NC, uses a ministry scheduling software program to help with this. She says:

"You can't overbook. If a room is taken or a time slot is taken, (the program) will tell you that it can't be booked. Beforehand, we had to go back and scrutinize the calendar."

You can learn more about how to improve scheduling of your church facilities and resources from our events white paper entitled "Events from Start to Finish." To download your free copy, visit **www.ideastoimpact.com/web_eventswp.**

▶ Publicize Your Events

Once you've adequately planned your outreach strategy, motivated your members, and set up the right tools, you can focus your efforts on promoting your events and worship services. There are many outlets available to help you publicize your event.

E-mail

E-mail is a convenient, efficient, and effective way to publicize your event. Using a Web-based e-mail service to send larger mailings is one way to simplify this task. Most

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services offer tools and templates that will enable you to create personalized, professional looking e-mails in the form of:

- E-newsletters
- Announcements
- Invitations
- Press releases
- Promotions

These Web-based services should allow you to customize the templates specifically for your church. This kind of customization saves you time and effort and ensures that every e-mail campaign you send looks great. (Remember, first impressions are important.)

An e-mail solution like this gives you a flexible menu of content layouts and makes sure that every e-mail is individually crafted and personally addressed. No more generic aliases or e-mails that show your entire address book to the world.

Before you send, you can proof the message for unfriendly words, phrases, or formatting likely to hinder your delivery to some inboxes and correct them to improve your delivery rates. You can even schedule your mailing for whenever you like. These services also allow individuals to opt in and out of your e-mail lists, which helps you to eliminate spam.

When you decide to send e-mail to members and prospects, it is important to have their permission to send these types of communications. Most individuals are open to receiving informative, relevant information via e-mail. Be sure that you identify your church in the subject line so they recognize who the communication is coming from.

Many e-mail services also contain the ability to track the e-mails that are sent with such information as:

- Which recipients opened the e-mail
- Which ones clicked hyperlinks within the e-mail
- Who forwarded the e-mail
- Who opted out of the list

These tools will allow you to track individual interests and receptiveness to communications, and it helps you in future efforts to reach these individuals.

Using e-mails is also a great way to track the success of your outreach programs. For example, if you send an invitation for a particular speaker, concert, or other event at your church, you can see who opened the e-mail, clicked on registration links, and ultimately which individuals actually attended the event. If someone didn't come after registering, you can follow up with them to provide information on future events or even direct them to view a video of the event online.

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There are a number of things your church can do specifically to spread the word. Many churches have had success with the following:

- Handing out literature such as tracts or magazines
- Mailing invitations or postcards to non-members in neighborhoods that have high numbers of members
- Organizing small groups that meet throughout the community
- Targeting sections of the church Web site specifically for outreach
- Creating e-mail invitation templates that can be used by your members for outreach
- Setting up booths at community events, school registrations, and other functions
- Getting materials into relocation packets sent by the local visitors bureaus, chambers, or large employers
- Giving out tapes and DVDs about the church or particular outreach events
- Creating an inexpensive giveaway, such as the popular rubber band bracelets with the church Web address stamped on them

Direct Mail

Using the mail is also a valuable way to spread the word about your event. Consider using mailing software that interfaces with your church management software to invite community members to special events. This kind of program can generate lists and produce labels to make mailing easy.

There are also services especially for bulk mailing that allow you to CASS-certify mailing addresses for accuracy, thereby making you eligible for postal discounts.

Local Media

Don't be afraid to "think outside of the box" and do some things you may have never done before. For instance, there are ways to get free publicity from your local media. These organizations are always looking for stories, so if your event has an interesting slant to it, you could land on a radio station, television station, or in your local newspaper.

If you decide to contact the media about your event, there are a few points of advice to keep in mind. Matt Donnelly writes the following in "The Church Leader's Answer Book":

"Along with story ideas, send background information to reporters – a sheet or pamphlet with key facts about your church. Since journalists have little time to research their stories…it is to your benefit to fax or hand-deliver background information about your church."

In the article "Community Event Calendars: Who Knew They Were This Good?" on churchbusiness.com, Chris Forbes writes that newspapers and community organizations often will post information for free about local events because the information adds value to their publications and resources. He adds: "Publications like to have as much good information as possible, which is why they welcome the information sent to them. And people tend to buy the publications featuring their church."

Advertising

These publications may have special advertising sections, so be sure to take advantage of this outlet. Also consider leaving information at local hotels, visitors bureaus, and larger employers in your community. Posters are an easy way to target specific audiences for events, too. You may have members who own businesses frequented by the audience you're targeting. Be sure to ask these business owners if they'll post information on the events in their establishments.

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Another good option for publicity is your local chamber of commerce. Forbes notes: "Some chambers of commerce require membership before posting calendar information. Since a membership costs money, it's not a free marketing tool. But it can be considered a 'nearly-free' marketing tool. An annual membership for a non-profit organization usually is nominal. Once you are a member of the chamber of commerce, they can help by including your church's information in their directory. They also will list some of your events in the public calendar."

Community Events

Remember that personal invitations are the most effective publicity for your church, service, or event, so consider getting involved in what is already happening in your community. Your church could get involved in any of the following:

- Emergency shelter
- Habitat for Humanity
- Women's shelter
- Nursing home
- Inner city community center
- Food bank
- Cleanup efforts for roads, parks, or other public areas
- Scouting
- Senior activities

➡ Keep People Committed to Your Church

The final step in creating effective outreach is following up with the new people who visited. In his article entitled "Reach People through Special Sunday School Events," Jay Johnston, director of FAITH/Evangelism and Discipleship at LifeWay Christian Resources, says:

"The key to any successful special event is follow-up. Suppose 100 new people attend your church the day of the special event. Do you think they will return simply because of the great teaching, wonderful, music, and inspiring preaching? No! They will return when they realize that they are loved and cared for by your church. Nothing says we care like a personal visit. If 100 new people attend your church because of the special event, then 100 new people should be added to your prospect file and be visited within two weeks of the event."

Hopefully, you've gathered contact information from each of the new people who attended your function, and you can then begin to connect with them personally to thank them for attending and to invite them to something else. This will increase the chances that each one will return to your church again. To learn how to track attendance effectively, don't forget to view our "Events from Start to Finish" white paper at **www.ideastoimpact.com/web_eventswp.**

There are other great options as well. Many churches call visitors or send a letter or postcard from the pastor thanking them for visiting and inviting them to return. Consider dropping off a gift such as cookies or bread and some additional church information.

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Don't stop here. Once people have visited a function and been contacted, don't drop the ball. Get them involved. Help them determine their skills and gifts, and show them where they can serve. Help them get connected in ways such as:

- Joining small groups or teams
- Serving in a volunteer capacity
- Giving back to the community
- Donating money or goods to the church or to a community organization

➡ Begin Reaching out Today

Outreach begins when you start taking steps to make it happen. With a strategic approach and the proper tools, your church can move forward with outreach right away. Let's review once more the basic elements of doing outreach in a more organized and effective way:

Research your target audience.
- Pay attention to community demographics.
- Take note of the demographics within your organization.

Empower your members to reach out to the community.
- Prepare them with teaching.
- Give them the tools.

Set up and create events, services, and activities.
- Create a task team to decide on the outreach events and activities.
- Find people to serve at these events and keep track of these volunteers.
- Use the right tools for tracking your outreach events and the people in them.

Get people to your outreach events.
- Advertise and market the events.
- Find people through community efforts and outside activities.
- Invite these people.

Connect and commit after the outreach.
- Follow up with guests who attended the events and services.
- Get these people involved.

These solutions can help you rise above the challenges faced when trying to establish a successful outreach ministry. By applying them, your church will be primed for growth and impact in your community.

To get more information about how ACS Technologies can help you be more effective in your outreach efforts, please visit www.acstechnologies.com or call toll-free 800-736-7425.

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▶ About ACS Technologies

ACS Technologies is a leading provider of information management solutions for churches, schools, and other faith-based organizations. Founded in 1978, ACS Technologies serves over 22,000 organizations worldwide. From church management software to forms and supplies to professional Web sites and consulting, we offer multiple product and service suites in order to meet our clients' varied needs.

ACS Technologies has developed these outstanding software products to focus on the special needs you address every day. We've designed our products to work together, integrating them to increase efficiency and reduce redundancies for your benefit. Our mission is simple, and our vision is focused – we empower our client partners with specially designed software solutions.

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