

5 Keys to Creating a Sticky Church

How can we open our church doors so that people who attend can feel genuinely welcomed? Here are five keys that have helped churches successfully reach guests and transition them into church life. These keys have been incredibly effective in making churches “sticky churches” that not only attract guests but keep them coming week after week.

Key #1 – Make First Impressions Count

If you want to open that door wide, you had better do it quickly. First impressions matter. Malcom Gladwell in his book *Blink*, talks about “thin slicing” where we use little slivers of information about a person to quickly form a larger opinion.ⁱ Nelson Searcy states, “Seven minutes is all you get to make a positive first impression. In the first seven minutes of contact with your church, your first-time guests will know whether or not they are coming back.”ⁱⁱ

An absent-minded greeter, a difficult-to-find bathroom, a crowded foyer and an awkward Bible study class are enough “thin slices” for people to form a negative impression of your church.

It’s helpful to see your church through the eyes of a first-time guest. Some churches even ask “mystery shoppers” to check out their church and give an evaluation of their experience. You may want to visit another church and record your own observations. Is it easy to find parking? Can you locate the entrance? Do you know where the children go? Do you feel alienated, assisted, welcomed or smothered? How does it work in your own church? Who gets prime parking? The members or the visitors?

First impressions are often picked up from the little things that we don’t notice. The broken window and the stain in the corner all communicate a subtle message. And nothing more quickly makes a bad impression than a dirty bathroom. “When people see that you care for your facilities, they’ll not only tend to take better care with your space, but they will also more easily believe you’ll care for them.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Since greeters are your first impression of the people at your church, they should be specifically selected for their gift of friendliness. They should know how to pick up on cues about when to engage. “A good rule of thumb is eye contact. If a guest makes eye contact with a greeter, there’s a good chance they want a bit of interaction. But if a guest doesn’t sustain eye contact, they want to be left alone.”^{iv} Bear hugs and kisses on the cheek may be appropriate in some cultures, but in general, they invade the space bubbles of strangers. Good greeters have good instincts on this.

Inside the church, make sure the restrooms are easy to find and there are helpful people at every step of the way. In our church, we don’t just point you in the right direction, we walk you there. We also know that guests that come together need to sit together, even if members have to move. When you get the first seven minutes right, you’ve already made a lasting impression.

Key #2 Be Genuine

However, a mistake that churches make is to turn treating guests into a strategy. This is not about turning our churches into a mall. Rather, this is about connecting with people and letting them know that this is a place where they can find Jesus. As Mark Waltz says in his book, *First Impressions*, “First impressions aren’t about making the institution look good. They are about making Jesus look good. They are about communicating personal value to the people who matter to him.”^v

If we try to simply “impress” people with how nice our church is, they see right through the pasted-on smiles and slick strategies. This is why you need to choose greeters who have a heart for people. When you pull your team of greeters together, “Rather than presenting a 99-page how-to manual, paint a broad-stroke picture of the atmosphere you want to create.”^{vi} When they care from the heart, guests notice the difference.

Both the greeters and the members need training in how to help guests. Mark Waltz suggests using the HELLO acronym to help people start up conversations more naturally:

H – “Hello,” or “Hi, how are you?”

E – Engagement, pausing to look people briefly in the eye, connecting with them and sharing your name

L – Listen and tune in

L – Listen some more, ask clarifying questions and restate what you’ve heard

O – Offer assistance if needed.^{vii}

Part of communicating care is to not overwhelm people. As Christopher Walker states it, “you want to avoid ‘the human wall’ – so many layers of greeting and greeters that it seems too friendly or overwhelming, particularly for the first time visitor. You want to be sure your greeting is experienced as sincere and not as artificial friendliness.”^{viii}

Key #3 Make it Memorable

Disney knows all about making guests feel special. In their book, *Be My Guest*, they state that the secret to their success is creating “memorable experiences.”^{ix} They think through the potential photo albums that people will look at misty-eyed, long after the experience is over. While we are not a company satisfying customers, we can create “memorable experiences” that will make them want to come back and experience the grace they found in our fellowship.

When the Apostle Paul was shipwrecked on the island of Malta he noted that the people “showed us unusual kindness; for they kindled a fire and made us all welcome, because of the rain that was falling and because of the cold.”^x Unexpected hospitality, an *unusual kindness*, makes an event memorable.

We can plan for acts of kindness in our congregations. Keep umbrellas on hand for greeters and deacons to escort people in when it rains. Have books available that you can give away.

Remember people's names. Use their name three times and link it to a person or place you already know.^{xi} As you show attention to people's needs, remember their names and listen to them, you create a memorable experience. But, all of this requires a plan.

Key #4 Interact Intentionally

One church has a three tier system of greeting. The first line is the greeters who meet the guest at the door, warmly greet them and hand them a bulletin. If the greeters discover that a person is visiting us for the first time, they are then directed to a welcome station.

Many churches today no longer have a guest book. Most people, other than older members visiting from other churches, do not want to write their name and addresses down for everyone else to see. Instead, have them fill out a welcome card so you can send them something in the mail to thank them for coming to our church. In some churches, the welcome card is collected right away and in other churches, it is dropped into the offering plate. Do whatever works best for you but be intentional in your approach.

After a brief stop at the welcome station, a guide/host can be introduced. This person will help usher them to the children's division or a Bible study class or into the church to find a seat. If need be, they will sit with the person or family to help make them feel comfortable (this is especially important for single people). The host will chat with them and find out their names and what brought them to our church. Then they will be invited to either a fellowship meal or to lunch at someone's house. The host will also try to introduce them to other people at the church who would have similar interests. The host then emails a short description of that person to the guest coordinator who puts the information into a Google sheet and matches it with the welcome card. The pastor and the elders get an update of all the visitors by Sunday evening. By the time a person has visited for three weeks, a church can know that person's name and basic background.

This requires not only intentionality, but training. It's important to read books (and train our members in how to reach out. All of us can be Abrahams, who welcome strangers with intentionality.. Take Paul's words to heart, "Live wisely among those who are not Christians, and make the most of every opportunity."^{xii}

Key #5 Follow up

It's amazing how many churches do a great job of making people feel welcome, but that's where it all ends. They may get the first seven minutes right, but then you're on your own. A truly welcoming church extends that welcome again and again. Here are some proven ways in which you can retain those guests and help them to keep coming back.

Offer a free gift. Many people think that churches are simply here to take your money. When you give without expecting anything back, it motivates them to return. *Have a guest table in your foyer.* This is a place where you can find the pastor or chat to one of the elders. *Send an email*

within 36 hours and a card within a week. Make sure someone will reach out to thank them for coming and also invite them to your next service.^{xiii}

When a guest comes back, do your best to make their second experience as memorable as the first. You should particularly look to connect guests with members. Your goal is not to try to persuade them to join your church. Instead, simply show a genuine, caring interest in them and their family, and when appropriate, you can highlight programs and activities they may be interested in. Try to meet needs that they may have. You can communicate that this is a church where you can get involved, but you can also feel your way in and take it easy.

Let's all create sticky churches where people find grace, a warm welcome and an opportunity to fall in love with Jesus!

ⁱ Malcom Gladwell, *Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking* (Back Bay Books: New York, NY, 2007).

ⁱⁱ Nelson Searcy, *Fusion: Turning First-Time Guests into Fully-Engaged Members of Your Church* (Baker Publishing Group: Grand Rapids, Mich.) Kindle Location 662.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jonathan Malm, *Unwelcome: 50 Ways Churches Drive Away First-Time Visitors* (Center for Church Communication: Los Angeles, CA, 2014), Kindle Location 239

^{iv} *Ibid.* Kindle Location 169.

^v Mark Waltz, *First Impressions: Creating Wow Experiences in Your Church* (Group: Loveland, Co., 2013), 3.

^{vi} *Ibid.* Kindle Location 1401.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, Kindle Locations 1466-1572.

^{viii} Christopher Walker, *Church Greeters 101* (EvangelismCoach.org Press: Glen Allen: VA) Kindle Location, 601.

^{ix} Theodore Kinni, *Be My Guest: Perfecting the Art of Customer Service* (Disney Enterprises: New York, NY, 2011).

^x Acts 28:2, *New King James Version*.

^{xi} Leslie Parrot, *Serving as a Church Greeter* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, Mich., 2002) has great practical tips for church greeters, including how to remember names.

^{xii} Col. 4:5, *New Living Translation*.

^{xiii} Check out more ideas in chapter 5 of *Fusion* by Nelson Searcy.