

Seven Minutes and Counting

*Impressions are based upon instinct and emotion,
not on rational thought or in-depth investigation.*

JILL BREMER

Be sure that everything is done properly and in order.

APOSTLE PAUL (1 CORINTHIANS 14:40)

The human subconscious is a complex and powerful entity. While most of us float through life unaware of its influence, our subconscious is constantly shaping our thoughts, experiences, reactions and opinions. In *Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious*, Timothy D. Wilson observes:

The mind operates most efficiently by relegating a good deal of high-level, sophisticated thinking to the unconscious, just as a modern jetliner is able to fly on automatic pilot with little or no input from the human, "conscious" pilot. The adaptive unconscious does an excellent job of sizing up the world . . . in a sophisticated and efficient manner.¹

This God-given “autopilot” mechanism revs into action when we face unfamiliar territory and tells us how to respond to our surroundings or situation based on any manner of outside clues. The feelings we get when we are introduced to new people or new places, whether positive or negative, are not the result of logical evaluation. They are based on instinct rather than reasoning.

More than likely, none of us are psychologists or neuro-geniuses, and we don’t need to be. But if we want to successfully assimilate first-time guests into our congregations, we do need to at least recognize and embrace the power of the subconscious mind and the role that it plays in forming that all-important first impression.

The Power of a First Impression

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. That’s before a single worship song is sung and before a single word of the message is uttered.

Obviously your guests aren’t making a logical decision based on the integrity of the preaching, the character of the church staff or the clarity of your doctrine. They are not weighing pros and cons of worship styles and theological viewpoints. In all likelihood, they wouldn’t have a theological clue about where to begin such an evaluation! Instead, they are taking in clues about your church’s atmosphere and the people’s friendliness on a much more rudimentary level. Their subconscious

minds are working overtime to evaluate their compatibility with this new environment. The question for you then becomes, What's actually being judged? What factors and/or feelings play into their impression? And how much control can you have over doing things in a way that will make their experience ring positive?

To truly get a glimpse of the power of your church's first impression on a guest, let's step to the other side and look at the experience from a guest's point of view.

* * *

It's Friday afternoon. Jon checks the clock on his desk, willing the hour hand to move faster. He can't wait for the weekend ahead. He's got no real plans, except to throw some burgers on the grill and maybe catch the early baseball game on Sunday. He's about to jump online to see if he can get good seats when Sam knocks on his door. *Oh, no*. Sam has been trying to get him to visit his church for a couple of months now, and Jon's starting to run out of excuses. Before Jon knows what's happened, Sam has talked him into promising away his Sunday morning.

Jon hits the blaring alarm clock and nudges Liz to get up. Even though she has been talking for years about going back to church, Liz was less than thrilled with the idea of following through on this particular day. She had already planned a play date for the kids. But Jon had assured her that giving over one morning to FCC (Fictional Community Church) would be well worth getting Sam off of his back.

Reluctantly Jon and Liz get up, and their morning plays out like something from a Stephen King novel. The kids, four and

two, both throw temper tantrums, the eggs burn, and the dog smuggles its latest catch into the house. Tired, irritated and already running late, Jon finally gets everyone packed into the car and off they go.

* * *

Let's pause for a reality check. When an unchurched person or family decides to attend your church for the first time, what do you think is going to happen to them the morning of the service? Whatever the Enemy can pull out of his bag to throw at them, right? If he can't keep them from attending, he will at least make sure they hit the parking lot stressed out and in no mood for what lies ahead. The Enemy knows that if he can sow pre-service defensiveness and negativity, 8 out of 10 American churches won't do anything to turn those guests' attitude around. In fact, in most cases, the church will just make them self-conscious, uncomfortable and, by default, more irritable. Sadly, by nudging guests to disengage before they walk through the door, the Enemy usually wins the battle. But he can't win if we don't let him, and that's where the Assimilation System officially kicks in.

The Pre-service: From the Street to the Seat

The pre-service is your first opportunity for interaction with everyone who sets foot on your church's property—from guests to members—but its purpose and influence are particularly important for first-time guests. Your pre-service mission is to make every effort to take your guests' guard down and even put

a smile on their face—before the service begins. There are four initial areas of contact through which you can influence your guests during the pre-service—through controlling how they are Greeted, Directed, Treated and Seated. Take a look at how a successful FCC pre-service would play out, and then we'll break down the details of each of the four pre-service components.

* * *

Jon and his family drive into the parking lot of the church and are immediately impressed by what they see. The building, though not large or even new, is obviously well cared for, right down to the lawn. Everyone is entering through the main front door, where a nice-looking couple about Jon and Liz's age is speaking warmly to each person and handing him or her some kind of program. (You might call it a bulletin, but since Jon and Liz are unchurched, they are more likely to think of it as a program.) Once through the front door themselves, where they are welcomed with a smile and a "Glad you are here," Liz immediately spots two signs telling her exactly what she needs to know: One points the way to the restroom that her four-year-old urgently needs, and the other points toward the child-care area. After stop number one, Jon, Liz and the kids check the child-care sign again and start in the direction it's pointing. A volunteer spots them and offers to lead them directly to the right place for each of their children.

When the kids have been dropped off, Jon notices the smell of coffee and donuts wafting toward him. He turns to discover a table piled with Krispy Kreme boxes, fruit and coffee. He and Liz exchange pleasantly surprised glances, and then each grab a donut (well, she grabs an apple and he grabs a donut) and a cup

of coffee and start timidly toward one of the aisles. Immediately, another volunteer pops up and directs them to two open seats. Jon begins to realize that the foul mood he drove into the parking lot with has been brightened a little by the smiles around him, the warm coffee in his hand and the overall atmosphere of FCC. The people seem incredibly friendly and actually happy that he and Liz are there. At the church they used to go to, people hardly offered a smile, much less helpful information or a Krispy Kreme—and he’s always thought all churches were the same. As the service begins, Jon spots Sam just sitting down and can’t help but wonder what’s going on in this place.

* * *

Creating an environment that makes your first-time guests feel welcomed and respected is key to a successful Assimilation System. When God entrusts you with first-time guests, you face an incredible responsibility. Those newcomers will likely make a decision about their return visit before they make it to their seats, based on the subconscious and conscious tools of evaluation God has blessed them with. You can acknowledge your guests as the gifts that they are by having a pre-service system in place that will far exceed their expectations and create that elusive positive first impression. You’ll excite them to want to visit your church again and again so that they can ultimately learn about the excellence, graciousness, hospitality and generosity of the One after whom you are modeling the system of their assimilation.

Now that we’ve seen Jon and Liz’s successful pre-service experience, let’s dive more deeply into each of its four components.

them. So take a fresh look around. Drive into your parking lot and intentionally examine your church through a guest's eyes. Are you communicating the right message?

New York City is a renter's culture—even when it comes to church facilities. The Journey doesn't own a location. Instead, we rent multiple event venues throughout the metro area. Since it's not actually our space, we can't control everything we'd like to about each building's appearance. But even though there are things we can't change, we make sure we've done the best we can with what we have control over. We can't fix the cracks in the sidewalk out front, but we can sweep up the trash—even if it is city trash from the day before, it becomes our responsibility if it poses the threat of hindering our guests' first impression. Make no excuses when it comes to bringing the appearance of your space up to par. You can't do everything, but you can make sure that God's house—whether old or new, big or small, rented or owned—is presentable for the company He's expecting. Remember: *Everything speaks to first-time guests*.

The most critical part of the “greeted” area of initial contact is who your guests meet when they make it to the front door of the church—your greeters.² A friendly face offering a warm welcome speaks volumes! Greeters should practically radiate the underlying message you want to send to your guests: “We are nice people, and we are glad you are here!” After first- or second-time guests visit The Journey, we encourage them to fill out short surveys about their first impressions. (We will examine these surveys and their usefulness a little later.) By far, one of the most common responses we get to the what-did-you-notice/what-made-you-want-to-return kind of questions

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reference the people the guests met upon entering. Here's just one of the many we've recently received: "Q: What did you notice? A: Smiling friendly faces greeting us as we entered the building. A very positive experience!"

As you put people in place as greeters, make sure they understand the importance of their job and know exactly what is expected of them. Volunteers need and want clear direction from you and your staff. They will feel more comfortable at their post if you've told them what you want them to say and how you want them to say it. Greeters, along with all volunteers, have an innate fear of not pleasing you, and at the same time you have a fear of asking too much of them. This creates a vicious cycle where everyone is tiptoeing around everyone else, and the guests aren't being greeted as effectively as they could be. At The Journey, our greeters know we expect them to smile, say "Hello!" and make sure each guest gets a program. The most important part of that job is the smile.

In one prominent Manhattan McDonald's, there's a sign that reads: "We expect all of our employees to smile at you. If you are not smiled at while your order is being taken, you get a free order of French fries or a free small drink." Why would McDonald's do that? Because they understand the undeniable power of a smile. According to Paul Ekman, Professor Emeritus of the Department of Psychiatry at the University of California Medical School in San Francisco, "We can pick up a smile from 30 meters away. A smile lets us know that we are going to get a positive reception and it's hard not to reciprocate."³ A smile lightens the load of opposition and defenses that an unchurched person may be carrying through the door. But not

just any smile—a genuine smile. A smile that doesn't engage the eyes is automatically interpreted as false. Great greeters are truly friendly people who make **eye contact** and offer sincere smiles.

We at The Journey take the idea of greeting our guests with a smile so seriously that we've been known to do smile practice. Our volunteer system is a little different from most. We never know who is going to show up to help with the service on any given Sunday. We have developed a culture where our people always have the option of coming an hour early to serve, so every week we trust God that 100 to 200 volunteers will show up—and they do! Once everyone arrives, we divide the responsibilities among them, and we want to make sure the friendliest people with the most genuine smiles are stationed as greeters. To choose our greeters, we have been known to do smile practice in our pre-service volunteer meeting. Not only does everyone get to practice putting on a huge smile, but the ones who end up as greeters understand that the smile they give guests is so important that their own smiles just landed them the position! There's an old business axiom that says you can hire unfriendly people and work hard to teach them to smile or you can hire smiling friendly people and turn them loose. The latter seems like a nice shortcut to us, which is why we think it's important to specifically *choose* our greeters instead of simply taking the first volunteers for that position.

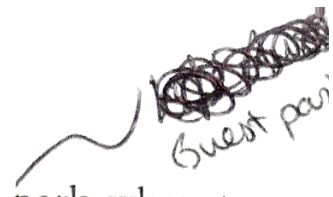
2. Directed

The second step in successful pre-service contact is to make sure your guests are quickly, simply and politely shown where they

need to go, either by a sign or a volunteer—preferably by both. Imagine if Jon and Liz had walked through the door of FCC and had no idea where the restroom was. Since their child needed one, not only would they be facing a minor emergency, but they also would have been put in the awkward position of having to stop someone to ask. Automatically, this would have made Jon and Liz feel more uncomfortable and out of place. Their level of anxiety would have risen at the expense of their positive first impression. The same thing would occur if they didn't know where or how to drop their kids off for the children's ministry.

We all know the cultural importance of location, location, location! Well, at church, the equally important and significantly connected phrase to remember is “signs, signs, signs!” Signs are the single best way to ensure that your guests can find what they need. The two areas in particular that demand clear signs are the restrooms and the children's facilities. If your front door is not easily discernable from the parking lot, make sure you have a sign in place for it as well. Again, we are so familiar with our surroundings that we become blind to them. Our tendency is to think that our guests will figure it out and that the building is pretty easy to navigate. For you, that's true. For your guests who have never set foot in your door and whose anxiety levels are already registering high, it's not. They have taken a big step by simply crossing your threshold. Make sure you throw them the safety net of letting them know exactly where to go next. Even if you think you have enough signs, you probably don't.

In traveling to and working with thousands of churches, I am continually amazed at how difficult it is to navigate the average church building. Whether I'm arriving for a seminar or



a service, I'm usually unclear on exactly where to park, where to enter the building or how to find the main sanctuary—and I am generally very good with directions! If I find it difficult to navigate unfamiliar church buildings, unchurched people who are already anxious about the situation they are entering into must certainly find church buildings confusing. And confusion creates anxiety. If your building is the least bit perplexing to your first-timers, they will become even more anxious than they already are. Good directions and an abundance of signage can lower their anxiety and lead them through the open door that leads to hearing the good news.

Every good system needs to be backed up. Let your staff and greeters serve as backup to your signs. Train your staff and have them train your greeters to look for people who seem unsure of where to go, and to approach them and ask if they need help. When your guest, in turn, asks for directions to a particular location, your staff person or greeter should not just point out the way. Instead, they should provide a personal escort. If it's to the children's ministry, your staff person or greeter may want to go so far as to introduce the new parents and children to whoever is in charge of the children's area. As the old saying goes, God is in the details.

3. Treated

What do first-time guests want to feel? Respected and welcomed. Guests want to know that you are happy they're there and that you are serious about making sure they have a good experience. The way you, your team and your regular attenders treat guests and their families will tell them most of what they need to know.

Sadly, a large majority of American churches aren't eager to welcome guests, much less make them feel at home. When guests show up, these churches have no idea what to do with them. Unfamiliar faces are as intimidating to the church family as they are to first-time guests. We've all heard the stories about (or witnessed firsthand) first-time guests being altogether ignored or made to feel as if they were in the wrong place. What do you think that communicates about God's love? Do you think those guests would ever choose to return to such an environment or ever return to another church again?

The church is not a business but, again, if we want to learn how to make our visitors feel welcome, we would be smart to take some cues from the customer-conscious service world. As we saw in the Ritz-Carlton example, businesses understand that treating guests with respect and making sure they have a good first experience is absolutely essential to winning a return visit. Shouldn't churches be the ones teaching the business world about embracing and serving those who walk through our doors? This is where biblical hospitality meets the business concept of customer service. Unfortunately, we have all let the customer service aspect of our ministry slide for way too long. In Ken Blanchard's exploration of stellar customer service, *Raving Fans: A Revolutionary Approach to Customer Service*, he defines three secrets to creating environments that will wow your guests and make them feel well treated. One of those secrets is to always "deliver your vision plus one percent":⁴

"Let's look at it," said Andrew. "The secret says two things. First, it tells you to deliver. Not sometimes, not

most times, but all the time. Second it talks about 'plus one percent.' I'll come back to that, but first of all we have to talk about delivery."

"Consistency, consistency, consistency," interjected Charlie. "Consistency is critical. Consistency creates credibility. My pro will explain how it works. Andrew, if you please."

"With pleasure, Charlie," said Andrew. "As Charlie told you, consistency is key to delivering Raving Fan Service. When you're creating Raving Fans, it's a fragile relationship. They've been burned before and don't trust easily. You're trying to pull them in and they're usually trying to resist. Consistency will overcome resistance, but in the meantime, they're watching like a hawk for you to mess up."⁵

How true this is in creating Raving Fans out of first-time guests! Most of the people who walk through your door have been burned by the Church, by negative press about the Church or by a friend or family member in the name of religion. More than likely, they are skeptical and waiting, as Andrew suggested, "for you to mess up." When you give them a consistent pre-service experience that makes them feel important, their skepticism lowers while their positive impression and curiosity rises, leaving you in the perfect position to make a real spiritual impact. And how do you continually add the one percent that makes their experience just a little sweeter? Well, food isn't associated with comfort (and pleasure) for nothing!

The late food writer James Beard once said, "Food is our common ground, a universal experience." It also provides a welcome,

comforting treat in any situation. A cup of Starbucks acts as a security blanket for millions of adults every day. Ever notice how a 200-pound man in a crowd of strangers suddenly feels more comfortable if he has an 8-ounce Styrofoam cup to hide behind? Providing food is one of the best ways to show your guest you care about them, and it's a sure way to put them at ease.

When done well, food can go a long way toward wowing your guests, but when done poorly, it really turns them off. A few words of advice: Don't skimp on food. This is not the area to try to save a nickel. Don't cut things in half to make them stretch. Don't glare at the person who takes three donuts. Food is your chance to show unchurched people that you care enough to offer them something for free that will meet a need.

Food is certainly not a necessity, but we've found that it goes a long way toward making a solid impression. If you choose to do it, do it well. Keep in mind that you aren't preparing a five-course breakfast. You are simply making your food offering with excellence. Quality, not extravagance, is the key.

Recently, we received this survey response from a first-time visitor: "Q: What did you notice? A: The smiles, warm reception and Krispy Kreme donuts. Q: What did you like best? A: Besides the friendly and casual atmosphere, again the coffee and donuts!" We hear echoes of this sentiment each and every week.

4. Seated

Now that your guests have been sincerely greeted, helpfully directed and well treated, all that's left is for them to be properly seated. While it would be easy to let your guests fend for themselves to find a seat, it's a terrible idea. Think back to

and Liz. As they started timidly down the aisle, if no volunteer had popped up to show them to their seat, they would have walked nervously by filled rows, looking for empty seats, hoping they wouldn't have to squeeze past someone already seated. They probably would have ended up close to the back of the church, where they could more easily find empty spaces without having to interact with anyone and where they wouldn't have to truly engage the worship service. Thankfully the aisle usher, who was ready and eager to escort them to seats, relieved Jon and Liz of the pressure they were starting to feel. The usher could ask those already seated to slide toward the middle or to stand and let Jon and Liz slide in, which the two of them would have been reticent to do on their own. So Jon and Liz end up in comfortable seats, close to the front, without fumbling through any anxiety-inducing situations.

The first time my wife and I went to a Broadway show, we saw the value of a good usher in action. From the moment we entered the theater, we were literally ushered to our seats. If you've ever experienced Broadway, you know the drill: The usher who scans your ticket points you toward the correct entrance (or in our case, the correct staircase for the cheap seats!), where there is another usher who points you toward the correct aisle, where there is yet another usher who walks you directly to your row and motions to your seats. In that first Broadway experience, we knew that as long as we had our ticket in hand for the ushers to see, they would do all the work. We were along for the ride. That's usher service. On the other hand, we've been to sporting events and concert venues where we missed the first 15 minutes because we were still trying to find the correct wing,

level, section and row that would lead us to our seats. We were on our own, juggling concession purchases and upset that we were missing something we had paid to see. There was certainly no usher in place to make sure we had a smooth experience.

Here's the difference in thinking: Those Broadway shows run every night. They want you to come again. They want you to tell your friends. They want you to bring out-of-town guests. They want to ensure you've had an experience that will keep you coming back for more. At most concerts and sporting events, the venue proprietors aren't nearly as concerned with earning your repeat business. They know that the draw is that night's particular entertainment. The next night their guests will be a new, differently focused crowd who will be there to see their favorite artist or team, generally in spite of venue conditions. Earning a return visit through impressing a high level of service is not a priority to them.

When it comes to providing service to our first-time guests, we need to be continually aware that **our goal is to make them as comfortable and happy as possible.** We want them to come back. We want them to bring their friends. Let's approach this area of service with the mindset of Broadway's bright lights rather than that of self-service stadiums.

The thinking behind *Greeted, Directed, Treated* and *Seated* may be a paradigm shift for you. Until this point, your plan for first-time guests may have been simply to get them through the door and make your impression with the service itself. While that sounds good in theory, research has shown time and time again that you don't have that luxury. By the time your service starts, your guests have already made judgments about your

environment, interacted with people who may or may not have rubbed them the right way, figured out how to navigate your hallways and found themselves a seat—more than enough experience with your church for that gut-feeling to have firmly formed. And once the first impression has been made, you can do very little in the service to change it. What's more, if they have formed a negative impression, that impression becomes the lens through which they view everything else in the service. Conversely, if you create a Raving Fan in the pre-service, they will engage in the rest of your service with a heightened enthusiasm, which leaves them more open to hearing from God.

In his instruction to the church practitioners at Corinth, Paul encouraged his listeners to “let all things be done decently and in order” (1 Cor. 14:40). Why? Because everything done in preparation for a church service works together to represent God's character to unchurched people. They may not immediately know why they like your church or why they feel comfortable, but it's because you've done the work to set them at ease before they knew they were coming. You have established an environment that resonates positively with their subconscious mind before they even evaluate that environment on a conscious level. Something in them connects with the smile they've been offered. They feel relief that they don't have to ask for directions to the restroom. They feel loved by the donuts and coffee you've made available to them. They appreciate the seats you've provided.

In the first seven minutes, all of these things work together to create an impression that will open a future door of opportunity for you to minister in their lives in a truly meaningful

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way. With a strong pre-service in place, seven minutes is all you need to show your guests just how much you care about them and want them back!

Adding the Assimilation System has increased our effectiveness simply because we are investing time, effort and resources into the most important aspect of our mission as a church—reaching people who are far from God.

BOB FRANQUIZ, CALVARY FELLOWSHIP, MIAMI LAKES, FL

Notes

1. Timothy D. Wilson, *Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 18.
2. For sample job descriptions of ushers and greeters, visit www.ChurchLeaderInsights.com/Fusion.
3. Paul Ekman, quoted by Carlin Flora, "The Once-Over," *Psychology Today Magazine*, May/June 2004. <http://psychologytoday.com/articles/pto-20040713-000004.html> (accessed August 2007).
4. Ken Blanchard, *Raving Fans: A Revolutionary Approach to Customer Service* (New York, NY: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1993), p. 100.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 102-103.