

First Impressions: Ten Ways to Make Guests Feel Welcome

People never get a second-chance at a first impression. Neither do churches. My family recently visited a church (*no, it wasn't your church*) and were able to get in and out undetected. Nearly everything about a Sunday morning worship service communicates something to first-time guests. From the church bulletins to the parking lot layout, churches demonstrate how much - or how *little* - they care about people. Here are some things I learned from my last church visit.



1. Create a *culture* of hospitality

Hospitality is not just for Martha Stewart types. In fact, the Bible exalts hospitality as a godly virtue (3 John) for all believers. Emphasize, as often as it takes, the value of hospitality with your leaders.

2. Train your greeters (*Again and again and again. You'll always be training your greeters*)

Not everyone at your church is qualified to be a greeter at the door. Not only should you be selective when you *choose* greeters, you should invest plenty of time in training. A genuine smile that engages the eyes, a handshake, and a warm, genuinely friendly "Hello!" all go a long way to make guests feel welcome.

3. Design a logical flow of traffic

This point applies both to large churches and small ones, both cars and pedestrians. First-time guests can become easily frustrated when it's unclear where they should go. And if you have to resort to traffic barriers to get people to where you want them to go, please remember this... a barrier is, to a first-time guest, just a barrier. It looks like a big "go away" sign. Even if the WORDS on it say, "**guest parking this way**", they see the orange stripes and the barrier long before they read the words. A barrier is just a barrier.

4. Spell-check everything

Typos on your website, signage, worship guides, and even *song* lyrics can send the message you don't care. Set up a system to ensure all written communication is checked for spelling errors.

5. Mark your entrances (*and your restrooms, and everything else a guest might be looking for.*)

When guests come to your church, do they know what entrance they should use? A well-marked entrance takes some of the pressure off of guests who might be too nervous to ask for help.

6. Avoid awkward greeting times

Many churches include a time of greeting between members at the beginning of a worship service. For guests, it's the first day of school all over again. Explain the purpose behind the greeting time and coach your people on how to do it well. Guests value, much more than the *scripted* greeting times, the unscripted, but genuine greetings they receive from members before and after the services.

7. Prepare a concise explanation of the child care system

Families with young children will be anxious about leaving their kids with strangers. Don't overwhelm them with information, but explain your church's plan for taking good care of their children while they attend the worship service.

8. Be careful how you gather information

Some churches are too pushy. While it's important to gather information for follow-up with guests, be careful you don't send the wrong message in how you ask. Consider including a communication card in your church's worship program. Ask everyone, including members, to fill out the card and drop it in the offering basket.

9. Train members to assume they're the only point of contact

Unless *everyone* has this mindset, everyone will defer their responsibility to be hospitable. Don't miss an opportunity to take an interest in guests. Invite them to lunch after church if you attend a morning service.

10. Treat guests like VIPs

Most of all, guests want to feel respected and welcomed. Offer reserved parking close to the front door. Have volunteers escort guests from the parking lot to the child care area and auditorium.

Remember, first impressions matter. And they really do last. With a well thought out, pre-service plan, your church can show guests just how much you care and want them back.