

# Reaching the Present Age

By Vajaah E. Parker

Charles Wesley in the familiar hymn, “A Charge to Keep I Have,” contextualizes “calling” as a commitment to “serve the present age.” The Church as an institution should always have relevant ministry at the helm of its agenda. Though the message of Christ is timeless and its implications eternal, generations are shaped by the circumstances of their time. The church has to continuously take the pulse of the culture, not for the sake of conformity, but to present the Gospel in a fashion that can be readily accepted and best applied.

In an effort to truly reach the present age, churches can garner key principles from the business world partly to evaluate their relevance but mainly to reach more souls for Christ. Marketing, “is the process used to determine what customers value and the set of processes for creating, communicating and delivering that value to customers.”<sup>1</sup> Too often, congregations offer the same suite of services, in the same way, under the same name without regard for the very people whom these services should be strategically positioned to reach. Corporations, on the other hand, are intentional about understanding the mindsets and behaviors of consumers to whom they target products. Marketers determine product, price, placement and promotion according to the consumer’s valuation of cost, convenience and communication preference.<sup>2</sup> In the same vein, the Church must be deliberate about discovering the values and needs of individuals who would benefit from its message and ministries. The church must then package and present, accessible and relevant ministries to its potential beneficiaries. Creative youth ministries in particular, understand and leverage these concepts.

Marketing, in terms of ministry, boils down to, **you reaching them**. With this mantra in mind, the Church takes the recipients of its work into consideration as it prays and plans to serve.

In order to **reach them**, each ministry must be able to articulate its identity by delineating its core purpose and what it is positioned to offer. Each ministry should assess its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to gain a deeper understanding of the capabilities of its’ current team and the status of its present efficiencies. This S.W.O.T. analysis should empower the ministry to state its essence and create a brand. Essence is the intrinsic quality of something that determines its character.<sup>3</sup> A brand is a mixture of attributes, which if managed properly, creates value and influence.<sup>4</sup> The essence and brand of a ministry should be evident in every act of that ministry. The ministry should be known by its essence and recognized by its brand. However, everything, including the conduct of its workers and the standard of excellence of its services will affect how a ministry’s brand is perceived.

As a whole, the local church is comprised of different ministries to meet a multitude of needs for a diversity of people who vary in composition and interest. Once a ministry has defined its identity it must accept the challenge to ascertain the demographics and disposition of its target audience. For example, a youth ministry would need to know the age range, geographic location, maturity, academic standing and interests of the young people within its congregation and community. Reaching an outgoing high school student struggling to pad their resume for college with extracurricular activities and sports would be dissimilar to ministering to an introverted pre-

teen who is trying to find identity and belonging. By discovering the characteristics of its target audience, a clearly defined youth ministry can operate in its strengths to deliver value to its young people. Learning more about people can be done formally through statistical research and surveys as well as informally by asking and listening. **Ultimately, if what a target audience values and needs (not just wants) is not what a ministry is providing, in a way that is convenient and appealing, a ministry ought to evaluate if it is relevant to the present age.** Or, it should at least ask, why are we making it difficult for those who need what we have to get it?

Finally, reaching the present age will require communicating needs based services according to the resources of the ministry and the preferences of the target audience. Forms of promotion include but are not limited to television advertising, radio promos, postcards, newsletters, flyers, bookmarks, websites, E-blasts and social media -- ranging in budget from millions of dollars to free. The means of promotion should primarily be determined by the ways in which the target audience communicates. Advertising a youth empowerment session in a newspaper may not be as effective as passing out handbills and sharing the event on Facebook and Twitter.

The reality is that if the Church doesn't position ministry to meet the needs of the world with the message of Christ and the transformative work of the Spirit, people will be persuaded to pursue other means to meet their needs. Thankfully, God is truly the master marketer. In order to reconcile humanity unto himself he packaged his value into the form of Jesus and offered him as a free gift that the world might be loved. In the same vein, the Church must determine the time, talent and treasure that each ministry is willing to invest in making accessible, the value that each ministry has today, for today's congregation and community, in today's culture.

### Notes

1. Kotler, Philip; Gary Armstrong, Veronica Wong, John Saunders. "Marketing defined". Principles of Marketing (5th ed.) New York, NY: Prentice Hall, p. 7, 2008.

2. Schullz, Don E., Stanley I. Tannenbaum, and Robert F. Lauterborn. Integrated Marketing Communications. Lincolnwood, IL: NTC Business Books, a division of NTC Publishing Group, 1993.

3. "Essence". Oxford University Dictionary. Online Edition. 2011.

4. "Brand Careers - Glossary." Brandchannel. Brandchannel.com. Web. 20 Dec. 2011. Online location: [http://www.brandchannel.com/education\\_glossary.asp](http://www.brandchannel.com/education_glossary.asp)