

How Billboard-Web 2.0 Combo Grew Church Community 277%

by *MarketingSherpa.com*

SUMMARY

Multichannel marketing can be tricky even for the biggest companies. So, imagine if you're a tiny church just wanting to boost Sunday attendance.

See how Web 2.0, a strategically-placed billboard and old-fashioned postal direct mail helped attract a younger generation leery of religious messages and marketing.

The church's hard work succeeded so well that attendance grew by 277% and they're moving into a larger space to fit the new churchgoers.

CHALLENGE

“We try very hard to downplay the stereotypes people have when it comes to church and religious people,” says Eastpoint Community Church Pastor Thomas Ward Jr. “Not every Christian votes Republican, hates the Dixie Chicks and wants your money.”

Until about 18 months ago, Ward and a handful of other church leaders were in charge of a young church interested in membership growth and local outreach, but they were holding worship services in a small commercial space in Middletown, DE.

While they believed that their locality was ripe with people coming from disgruntled religious backgrounds who still wanted to participate in a spiritual community, they were unsure how to reach out to them.

“It was very important not to allow ourselves to be misinterpreted,” Ward says. “We never want people to think that we are in the business of recruiting -- because that’s not what we are about.”

They needed to come up with a way to avoid any kind of hard sell. Otherwise, people who have been burned by past religious experiences might not give them a chance.

CAMPAIGN

Right away, Ward and his team sensed that a top-notch website might appeal to the demographic they wanted to reach -- people who would rather discover a church than have a church *discover* them.

In addition, they wanted to include Web 2.0 elements to build an online community that might lead visitors to become part of their actual church community. They chose a vendor with a

specialty in online advertising for religious entities (see hotlink below).

Less than a mile from the church was a highway with 100,000 cars traveling on it every weekday. Ward thought that adding a billboard would drive traffic to the website and, ultimately, to the church.

“Again, we didn’t want to do a hard sell,” he says. “And we thought the billboard and the type of website we were planning would differentiate us from other churches.”

-> *Step #1. Billboard costs and creative*

Working with a limited marketing budget, Ward negotiated a deal with a billboard vendor (see link below), who handled non-creative tasks, such as construction contracting. The billboard cost \$1,000 per month for 14 months.

With help from the billboard vendor, Ward and his team worked on the ad’s visual and copy, choosing an image of a TV remote control for the left-hand side with the phrase, “Before you turn Church off ...” to the right.

“We definitely wanted to reach out to this audience [who perceive] church to be an irrelevant institution full of hypocrites and money-hungry clergy,” he says. “But, statistically, there’s also a huge segment of the population who don’t wake up on Sunday morning thinking about what church they’re going to attend. It’s not even on their radar.”

They included the website address under the main slogan in slightly smaller type. Although they considered a more targeted landing page strategy, Ward decided that approach violated the soft-sell aesthetic they wanted to use.

In fact, they didn’t even put the church’s street address on the billboard -- even though the chapel was nearby. “We knew that the billboard and website had the potential to, at the very least, start a soft dialogue with these people,” Ward says. “We actually wanted them to go to the website and realize, ‘Oh, that church was only a stone’s throw away from that billboard.’”

-> *Step #2. Postcard follow-up*

In the middle of the billboard campaign, they sent postcards by postal mail to 47,270 households within five miles of the church. The 6-inch-by-11-inch trifold used the same messaging and also aimed to drive people to the Web site.

For 50,000 pieces, each mail piece cost 21.3: 7.5 cents to produce, 3 cents for mail processing and 10.8 cents to mail.

-> *Step #3. Make the website appeal to younger people*

Again, copywriting and image selection needed to play a big part if Ward and his team were going to take advantage of the Web traffic coming from people who saw the billboard sign.

The slogan, “To Every Destination: A Journey,” was chosen for the left-center part of the home page, while using an image of a casual-but-stylishly dressed man and woman in their 20s. A

photograph of an old two-lane road provided the backdrop. They advertised their “rock ’n’ roll” Bible study below the fold.

“We wanted the design sensibility of the website to reflect what we do and look like in Sunday service,” Ward says. “We wanted the brand look and feel to reflect the [open] style of ministry we run.”

An image representing the billboard appeared in the lower left-hand corner to show people that they were at the right site. People could enter their email address (permission for one reply only) or send a message to the church with a form that lay above the fold and on the right.

-> *Step #4. Add Web 2.0 elements*

Next, the team worked with the same Web vendor to add community elements, including blogs and prayer boards, podcasts of the eight most recent sermons, a map of the church area, an events calendar, an email list signup and a section of charitable/faith-based partner sites.

They also added PDF downloads with information about service schedules and the ministry’s goals that people could read or pass along to friends. They specifically chose not to include a donations page because of worries that it might make the church seem too money-hungry for their target demographic.

RESULTS

Let’s put it this way. The Eastpoint Community Church is moving into a larger space so they can fit all the worshippers they’ve added thanks to the billboard and website campaign. Overall worship attendance has increased 277%.

“The overwhelming majority of the people who are becoming Eastpoint Church Community members are coming as a result of finding our website and taking interest in it,” Ward says. “We had to make more room because of all of the people joining.”

The billboard’s subtle message did exactly what it was designed to do: site traffic increased 73% for the first month, and it has continued to rise in total volume every month since. For instance, the number of unique visitors in March 2007 was 48 times higher than when the campaign started.

The postcard mailer also brought 48% more traffic to the site for the two weeks after it dropped. Of newly-joined members, 78% said their first exposure was through the website.

Even though the campaign’s primary goal was to bring in more churchgoers, donations have increased by 6%. Once church attendees become regular members, Ward expects that percentage to rise even more.

Useful links related to this article

Creative samples from Eastpoint Community Church:

<http://www.marketingsherpa.com/cs/eastpoint/study.html>

Steen Outdoor Advertising - the company in charge of Eastpoint's billboard campaign:

<http://www.steen.com/>

Electriccurrent - the marketing and communications firm that developed the Eastpoint campaign

<http://electriccurrent.com/>

Alesco Data Group - supplied the mailing list:

<http://www.alescodata.com/>

Commercial Letter - handled postcard print production and mailing:

<http://www.commercial-letter.com/>

Eastpoint Community Church:

<http://eastpoint.org/>

Eastpoint Community Church's blog:

<http://www.eastpoint.org/engine.cfm?i=8>