

This Matters to Every Guest You See

There are a lot of reasons a church might grow. Sometimes people come because of the preaching. Sometimes people come because of the music. Some people like the great programs for kids and youth.

But I'm convinced that amid all of our emphasis in the last few decades on building weekend services that are more attractive to outsiders, there's an often overlooked factor in church growth . . .

Growing churches are friendly to guests.

All churches *think* they're friendly, but when you take a good look at them, you often discover they're friendly to people who have been attending for 15 years or more—not to *new* people.

A guest's experience in the first 12 minutes dramatically influences whether they're coming back or not. You never get a second chance to make a first impression.

When non-Christians come to your church for the first time, their number one emotion is fear. What will people think? What are they going to do? Am I going to have to sign something, sing something, sacrifice something, or say something?

They don't know what's going on, and they're scared to death.

Your first goal with guests (and by the way, I never call them visitors) is to get them to **relax**. Then you can communicate with them. When people are afraid, their barriers are up and it becomes a case of, "I dare you to teach me something!" No matter how good your sermon is, they won't listen to the Good News about Jesus until they get past those fears.

You need to put guests at ease.

How do you do that? Here are some ideas:

- **Reserve your best parking spots for guests.** It just shows you're thinking about *them*. If you had guests for dinner at your house, you'd probably do whatever it took to make them feel more comfortable. You'd use your best silverware and your best dishes. You might ask them about food preferences before you plan the meal. You should show similar courtesies to guests at your church.
- **Station greeters outside your building.** You need people strategically placed around your campus to greet guests. At Saddleback, we used to play a game. I would dare people to get into the building without having their hand shaken at least three times. We place greeters way out in the parking lot. Why? We've found that some people hate to be greeted publicly during the service, but they love to be greeted personally.
- **Set up an information table.** Put all sorts of information on the table that might help people find their way around. Put maps out with classrooms and restrooms easily

marked. Put out brochures about the church that give people information they can take home and read at their convenience. Most importantly, have hosts stationed there to help people find their way around. Make sure your hosts know where the restrooms are and where the children should go!

- **Have music playing when people enter.** In America almost every public building has music playing. Even in the elevator, music is playing. You go into the restroom and music is playing. You go into a restaurant and music is playing. People expect to hear music. If you walked into a church right now and everyone was dead silent, you'd probably be uncomfortable. On the other hand, if you heard fairly loud praise music playing, you'd probably feel much more comfortable. Here's something interesting I've found: If you play soft music, people talk softly. But if you play loud music, people talk louder. When non-Christians come into your church, they want it to be noisy.
- **Allow guests to remain anonymous in the service.** Please don't make guests stand up. The three greatest fears people have are going to a party with strangers, having to speak before a crowd, and being asked personal questions in public. So when we ask our guests to tell us their name and where they are from in front of everyone, we subject them to all three of their greatest fears at one time. Bad idea. How do you identify guests if you don't have them stand up? Have them fill out a welcome card. Then someone from the church can connect with them later.
- **Offer a warm, casual public welcome that relaxes people.** If you want to make guests feel welcome, you've got to be at ease yourself. That's what most people expect—just watch the late-night TV shows. Like it or not, how the pastor and the worship leader interact with each other sets the tone for good or for bad in a service.
- **Use technology to break down the barrier.** Have an app or web-based connection card. Allow people to send a text to a short number to get more information. Ask people to check in on Facebook. And help people know where to go online for more information if they skip the information desk (because most of them will).

In the early years at Saddleback we used to say, "If this is your first time at Saddleback, we're glad you're here. We want you take a deep breath, sit back, relax, and enjoy the service." You know where I got that? I heard someone say it on an airline once! Sit back, relax, and enjoy the flight. All we're trying to do is help people relax and then make them feel comfortable.

You have to break down the fear barriers before people will ever open up to your message and consider coming back to your church. Try these guest-friendly tips in the coming weeks, and help your church grow this year.

> [Read more from Rick.](#)

Learn more about your how you can become a friendlier church - [start a conversation with Guest Experience Navigator Bob Adams.](#)

Want to learn how to create an EXCEPTIONAL Guest Experience at your church? [Check out Auxano's Guest Experience Boot Camp, coming to Newport Beach, CA, January 29-30.](#)

