

The 12 Mistakes of Christmas Outreach

After 30 years of experience with holistic church marketing and community outreach, working with churches and ministries across nearly 100 denominations, in every state and in many other countries. Drawing on that wide experience, this article outlines what they've learned to be the 12 most common mistakes churches make in Christmas outreach. Church can takes active steps to avoid these mistakes and dramatically increase the effectiveness of their outreach. Christmas outreach done in the way described here will positively impact every other facet of a church's ministry, and many of the recommendations provide smarter ways to plan for the whole year.

Mistake #1: Not planning for something great.

Seth Godwin calls it the Purple Cow.
Tom Peters calls it the WOW principle.
George Lois calls it the Big Idea.

Seeking a change of scenery, you drive a new route through the countryside. The first cow you pass draws attention. If kids are along, they practice mooing and laugh. Everyone watches for the next cow. Yet after an hour of cruising

along pasture fences, who notices anymore? Not that the cows have become any less effective at being cows. But to a passing motorist with passing interest, all those cows begin to seem familiar and ordinary and nearly invisible. The only thing that would get new attention and strong interest would be a purple cow. We live in a world of extraordinary things. The mistake often made is to settle for the ordinary, safe. Familiarity does not always breed contempt. But settling for the ordinary and the all-too-familiar may breed something else.

Invisibility. Invisibility among the unchurched, invisibility in the community. And even low visibility among your own people. This is not about being bigger or more spectacular or more outlandish. But it is about breaking through to your community with a creative and imaginative message conveying something truly remarkable and unexpected. You don't need to outdo the church famous for its two-story singing Christmas tree. You don't need to sponsor top-dollar TV ads on Christmas Eve, or reserve every billboard in the county for a Christmas message. And you certainly don't have to give up now because you didn't start way back on Labor Day to plan something incredible and beyond your resources. The Big Idea does not

necessarily mean big budget, or big staff, or big splash. Small can be remarkable. Start by applying the “Big Idea” principle to.

a)	what you and your church will do at
b)	Christmas,
c)	what your message is, and how the unchurched perceive that message
	how you will make your community, and especially the unchurched, aware.

— Big ideas are not ends in themselves. Big Ideas breed unforeseen opportunities. Big Ideas often lead to something new and powerful. They can elevate opportunity beyond the original strategy. Over time, Big Ideas spawn more big ideas, until being extraordinary and having an extraordinary impact has become part of your DNA. Big Ideas have a way of leaping beyond limits (even budgets) to transform the nature and focus of a church, or of a community.

— The Incarnation was one of God’s Biggest Ideas. Create a new Christmas tradition, that of birthing new remarkable ideas. The best ideas take risk, the best ideas reach the heart, and the best ideas are transformational.

Mistake #2

Doing little or nothing during Christmas.

— Christmas is clutter. That’s a fact. With all the messages crowding for

attention, all the competing distractions, all the busyness and demands for time and focus, it's tempting to decide not to try anything special during Christmas. Of course, every church will expect and welcome visitors during Christmas. And if any visitors happen to be unchurched, most every pastor will follow-up.

— But here's another fact. Visitors only visit churches they are aware of.

— It's hard to get around this detail. Awareness is the most basic – and most overlooked – underlying factor for attracting visitors. Unchurched people in the community who decide to visit a church, visit a church they know about.

— Even word of mouth (expecting your members to invite friends) can be exponentially more effective if the people they invite are already aware of the church, if people have a top-of-the-mind awareness of the church that is positive, attractive, even unique.

— Here's a corollary fact. It's not just that unchurched people only visit a church they have heard of. Unchurched people motivated to attend a service (say, at Christmas or Easter) are almost certain to choose a church that has captured their awareness at that particular time. To maintain high awareness, a church needs to have a strong community presence during the strategically

important Christmas season.

Mistake #3

Planning outreach without a plan.

--Your strategy for Christmas does not have to be time-consuming, comprehensive or complicated. Just don't overlook the basics.

---"I can't tell you how many times I've heard
---people say, "People will find us. We don't
---have to promote what we offer because it
---is good quality and just what they want."

— The comment is from Joyce

McClure, who coaches community organizations nationwide that promote

local use of solar energy. Her advice has surprising crossover value for

church outreach:

—

— — No idea, no product, no service, no belief

— — was ever successful without a strong

— — communication campaign. Unless you

— — tell people what you're offering, very few

— — will ever "find" you.

— — And if you want people to know about your

— — offering, you need to make a plan — a strategic

— — marketing plan — that will serve as a roadmap

— — to reach your goals.

— 1. What are your broad goals for Christmas?

(The first answer may not simply be a number.) The answer may be to

communicate with every household in your key neighborhoods (that in

itself is a Big Idea). Or to reinforce overall awareness of your unique

image within your community. Or to use the Christmas season as a first

step to introduce a more well-defined image.

—2. Does your plan match the scale of your goal? See Mistake #4

—3. Who are you trying to reach? Think long and carefully about your intended audience. It is critical to

determine if the image and message you are communicating is both

relevant and genuinely appealing to the people you want to reach.

—4. What path of responses do you seek?

Work back from your end results to what you hope will happen first. Do

you want people to go to your web site, experience an event, participate

in a community project, visit for Christmas worship, ask for something

that will build a relational connection and help them remember you,

bookmark your site for later reference? Is there a strategic path to

your final objectives?

—5. Have you considered timing and schedule?

If your goal is to motivate unchurched people to visit on Christmas Eve

or Christmas Sunday, inviting them earlier in December may be a waste

of effort. The unchurched who do think about attending church on

Christmas, think about it a day or two or three before. It's largely an

impulse decision. Time your invitation or reminder to arrive accordingly.

—6. Does your plan fit your budget? Or in the other direction, does your budget need to be re-examined in light of

your Big Idea?

—7. Have you pre-evaluated the true cost of your strategies?

See mistake #11

—8. How will you track and evaluate results?

You will eventually want to evaluate not just the immediate results,

but also residual attendance, the increase in community awareness, image

perception and appreciation, and each preliminary response step.

—9. Are you planning broadly?

Because communication works in the larger context that surrounds it,

you will also want to plan and evaluate every other factor that can

affect results. If your effort is specifically designed to bring people

to an event (or Christmas service), you will also want to plan for

creative and thoughtful follow-up and post-event momentum-builders.

Mistake #4

Breaking the Law of Large Numbers.

—Here is a

powerful principle of city reaching. We call it Norm Whan's (of Church

Growth International) Law of Large Numbers after the man who, for over

30 years, has repeatedly demonstrated it to be valid for churches. It's a

fact. In any region or large community, during any given Christmas

season, a small but definite percentage of the unchurched population is

ready and open to your message, and is in fact open to

connecting with
or visiting a church just like yours
—The actual percentage
varies widely depending on many factors, but the underlying
principle
holds. If your church communicates the right message and image
to enough
people, with the right support strategies, a definite
percentage are
out there ready to respond. Now. This Christmas.
—The key is finding them –
and you can. Here, the statistical Law of Large Numbers must
be applied.
If you sample 20,000 households, you may uncover 1% to 3% who
are
receptive now. That represents 200 to 600 households – finding
and
reaching them could have significant impact for your church.
—But distribute 100 flyers
(or hope your members do), or mail out 500 “impact” cards, you
may not
find any of the prospects you are seeking. That is because
prospects are
never evenly spread through a small population. The smaller
your total
sample, the more random and accidental your chances of
connecting with
the right people. Conversely, as Norm Whan has repeatedly
demonstrated,
the larger your scale, the more likely you are to find the
prospects who
are immediately receptive.
—Economy of Scale. This is
related to the Law of Large Numbers. In almost every scenario,
the
larger the scale, the less unit cost for each impression.
Consequently

the cost of each actual response decreases as quantity increases.

Finding a way to think bigger almost always improves cost effectiveness

of your impact.

—Saturation or Large Net

Marketing. When the strategy is direct mail, covering every household in

a given area dramatically enhances cost effectiveness because of the

way postal rates are discounted for saturation. Saturation is also

measured in readership. Direct mail enjoys almost total readership, even

if only a glance. The person receiving the mail always looks at the

outside to decide whether to open or toss it. With a well-designed

postcard, the outside is the message. Done properly, saturation mailings

to entire neighborhoods, zip codes, or communities will cost far less

per unit than almost any other method., as low as 16 cents per home

reached, postage included.

Mistake # 5

Trying to do too much.

This one thing I do... (Phil 3:13)

—It is much

easier to be complex than to be simple. Marcello Serpa, a Brazilian

famous around the world for creative marketing ideas that succeed on the

simplest essence, offers advice so plain it's tempting to skim past.

The key, says Serpa, is “having an objective and trying to reach it with minimum resources, getting there by the shortest route, with minimum energy.” For making strong community connections, this applies equally to the plan and to the message.

—Your Plan.

Within any given timeframe, you can only do a few things well, and only one thing very well. It’s a mistake to implement every good idea you have between now and December. Decide which ideas can keep until later and which have limited shelf life (things you can’t do the same way in January because the window of opportunity will have passed). Then evaluate which ideas most authentically represent you and your church, which ideas will have the most long-term impact, and which ideas are most likely over time to be transformational.

—Your Message.

Whatever strategy you choose, avoid information dump. It’s tempting to cram everything in, but too much information invokes the Law of Diminishing Returns. Say one thing, say it well, and you are more likely to be heard.

— Your Long-term Impact.

Relating this to the longer-term, the “one thing” your plan and your message should do is support the “one thing” that best conveys who you are – that one unique, authentic image position every public

impression
should seek to build and reinforce.

Mistake #6

Sending a Christmas Message.

—During

Christmas, probably the biggest mistake is to send a Christmas message.

Let us explain. This does not mean ignoring Christmas, that would be a

bigger mistake. The mistake is doing what everyone else is doing, or

doing what people would expect a church to do – relying on a typical

Christmassy look, oft-repeated themes, typical Christmas activities, and

well-established Christmas sentiments.

That's like fighting clutter with clutter.

—Doing what's expected.

Doing the expected is based on a rational urge to play it safe. But if

you really want to reach your community (at any time, but especially at

Christmas) there is nothing more costly than playing it safe.

You can be

safely lost in the sameness of the pack, mostly invisible to those you

want to reach.

— Consumers in Western

nations are bombarded, even pummeled with marketing messages every

waking second. In defense, people have adapted highly-effective coping

capacities inside their brains to filter messages. No matter how

beautiful or season-appropriate, the familiar messages that look like everything else are essentially invisible messages.

—**What to look for.** The

Edelman Company, a global PR firm, completed a study on what types of messages make it through people's internal filters. What characteristics will cause people not only to notice a media message, but actually welcome it?

—Respect

—Emotion

—Genuineness

—Empathy

—Engagement

—Michael

Newman, a creativity guru and author of *Creative Leaps*, says all great communication "has an element of novelty (doing the unexpected), generates positive feelings (they are likable), and has meaning (relevant)."

So, what to do. . .

—1. Be

different – churches think they have to look and speak Christmassy to be heard at Christmas when in fact just the opposite is true

—2. Be very intentional

about communicating with the heart. The unchurched don't turn off their basic needs at Christmas, some of those core needs just come nearer the

surface.

—3. Be relevant. Make sure you are speaking to felt needs (surface needs) in the language of the unchurched and in a way that breaks through to the core needs of their heart.

—4. Be unique. If you contract with an agency, ask for and insist on an exclusive license, so your entire communication is guaranteed to be uniquely yours in your community. Work with your media team or agency to build on and thread this image through everything (and that means everything) you do.

Mistake #7

Always trying something new.

—We talk a good deal about the power of being distinctive and fresh in your communication. But if this principle is misunderstood, it can lead into another very common mistake: promotional habits that lead to “the church of many faces.”

—Your strategy and message and graphic images and ideas should be distinctive, creative, and fresh, but your positioning and identity should remain very consistent.

This is not about some PR spin to manipulate your public image. It’s about knowing who you are. In fact, the “identity positioning” concept

challenges a basic idea at the heart of commercial advertising – that the primary purpose of advertising is to sell. That’s not your primary purpose. In the words of Al Ries, the man who originally coined the term “positioning”, rather than advertising to sell in the marketplace of ideas, your media should “establish and reinforce a position or identity in the prospect’s mind.”

—Applied to churches. For communications intended to build relationship, the goal is not so much to communicate details about the church, but rather to create a unique image position in the mind of the unchurched in your community that in turn, leads to appreciation, a special bond, and an ongoing relationship. The first thing to know is that if any awareness of your church exists, an image position already exists. In the simplest terms, there are three broad position categories the unchurched have for churches:

1)	a distinct and appreciated image
2)	a distinct and negative image
3)	an unclear image that because of its lack of distinction becomes associated with whatever general image (positive or negative) the unchurched have of all churches.

—Ultimately, image position is about who you really are. The strongest positioning

is an authentic reflection of your true identity. Making connections that create relationship requires a clear and distinct focus.

—Applied to your church. Without going too deep into the Law of Positioning, here are some suggestions. You may have already done this at least in part, but the first step is to discover or clarify your unique identity and calling. Aside from the first call of every church (we might describe as a call to discover, nurture, and offer as worship the individual “purpose-driven” call of their members), every church also has their own unique corporate call to purpose. There is a distinct role you are to play matched to a special need you’re called to fill. In other words you are called to be unlike any other church in your city, not just to be different for difference sake, but to be truly effective. Identifying and clarifying your unique difference—who you really are—can make all the difference in the world.

—First, ask yourself this... what is it that you do best as a church, what are you especially gifted or equipped for, what passion drives you, what burden moves you, what vision excites you, and to what need are you drawn? Your next step is to find a remarkable and memorable way to communicate your identity within your community’s marketplace of ideas. One way to do that is

to ask
yourself (or better yet the unchurched) this question: How are
these
needs continually and deeply felt by the unchurched and how
are they
generally expressed in their own words? Answers to these two
sets of
questions form the core foundation for your positioning
strategy—your
'difference' in the things that 'really' matter.

— Voice.

Finding your voice, or your own unique, creative, remarkable,
memorable, authentic, and sometimes even audacious way to
communicate
that difference will create the endearing bond that makes
every message
and every ministry so much more effective. It's the difference
that will
make you stand out even in the blur of the Christmas rush.

Mistake #8

Doing Outreach instead of Withreach.

—In many
ways outreach is no longer working. And in the way we
generally do it,
maybe it shouldn't. Outreach defines problems (in the lives of
the
unchurched) and announces answers. Withreach seeks to discover
God
already at work in lives, and to join God in what He is doing
in that
life. Instead of "you have a spiritual need, I have the
solution," a
Withreach mindset sees each person as a treasure who has much
to give.
Withreach seeks out those treasures, to come alongside people,

to
discover the story of God being played out in their story, and
together
reach for the purposes of God. In this way people come into
the Kingdom
naturally and with a better understanding of God's heart and
ways, as
genuine relationship is built in the context of real-life
community.

—Outreach tends to focus
on locating unchurched people who need God and zeroing in on
either
immediate conversion or membership or both. Withreach tends to
awaken
the desire for God through a direct experience of God's
essential nature
and ways, such as participation in an Isaiah 58 ministry or by
experiencing community first hand. Withreach communicates "We
are in
this journey of purpose together, I'll come along and help. We
both have
much to give, we both have much to learn."

—Examine
your Christmas activities, community media and ministry, the
events,
the invitations, the way you connect with visitors, the way
you
follow-up, the total atmosphere, in light of Withreach
thinking.

For a closer look at Withreach read *Why Outreach No Longer
Works*
and the ongoing discussion at .

*See the comparisons contrasting traditional outreach and
Withreach* 

MISTAKE

9

**Not making Christmas
children-centered enough.**

—There are four primary themes of Christmas: Kids.
Kids. Kids. Kids. That is...

One, the children
all around us (in our neighborhoods and in our church, happy
kids
and hurting kids).

Two,
the child heart of our Christmas past (good memories and bad,
and
the unfulfilled dreams to which they are tied)

Three,
The Child that was “born unto us” and all that that means for
us.

Four,
the child heart of faith, the citizen-child of the Kingdom.

—So much
of Christmas is about children, a fact which may hold within
it
an essential truth. We say we want people to experience God,
yet
we may at times withhold the God-qualities of joy, freedom,
spontaneity,
honesty, and uninhibited spiritual energy best expressed by
children.

Even at Christmas, if we are not careful children can be more
like
window dressing, moments of kid stuff dominated by hours of
adult
stuff.

—Making
Christmas sufficiently children-centered requires creative
intentionality.

One large downtown church has a 35-minute Christmas Eve service (the only Christmas Eve activity at the church). It is planned by, mostly led by, and entirely centered around children. It's an annual tradition, and always packed – with children and with their adults. It is scheduled early, at 5:30 PM, so family Christmas Eve events can follow. There is no sermon, choir, or praise band. The pastor opens the gathering by inviting parents to relax, and allow the children the freedom to be themselves. Small children stand on the pews to see, giggles and laughter burst out spontaneously, the manger scene pageant never quite goes right, the hymns are children's carols, and people (adults especially) say it is the best church service of the year. It represents Christmas, and a celebration of joy and life, and community in a real way.

— Research

reveals that the unchurched long to experience life and the feeling of being alive. But most tend to view the Church as dull and lifeless.

Is it possible that our best, and most overlooked city-reaching

assets, are children? Think of the many ways children could participate

in other creative bridges to the community. Consider all the possibilities!

—And

for that matter, maybe we should ask children how they would want to do Christmas at church? In fact, if you were given permission to dream, what would you really rather do for Christmas? Most likely it would be the kind of thing that would be highly appealing to the unchurched as well, and create that WOW effect we talked the thing that would put you on the path to becoming truly remarkable!

Mistake #10

Communicating a heart-less message.

—Heart

meltdown. Remember the “Love Bug” virus?

Back in the year 2000, a virus attached to an email with the subject

line “I love you” spread to 45 million computers worldwide in just

a few hours. Why? Because so many people, even tough business executives,

couldn’t resist opening an attachment that arrived with the subject

line “I love you.” It was a message that instantly broke through

the clutter, slicing swiftly past caution, alertness, training,

experience, and common the heart.

— Discussing that phenomenon four

years later, Australian columnist and lecturer Michael Newman wrote:

— -- “It was all over

in seconds. Over 40 million

— -- computers worldwide

melted down from the

— -- heart. In lives
increasingly experienced via
— -- monitors, there's
a hunger for genuine empathy
— -- and direct, personal
contact. People live in a
— -- cold, scary and
often heartless world. Companies
— -- fire them. Spouses
divorce them. Institutions
— -- stitch them up.
Fear stalks the daily news...
— -- There is an incredible
and untapped need for love
— -- out there."

—Why is it, then, that so many of
the unchurched have a perception of church that is decidedly
mixed
when it comes to an image of love? To cut through clutter,
slice
past caution, and be heard by the unchurched, requires
messages
that connect with the heart. This is not the age of reason.
People
are not so much seeking explanation as they are connection.
People
are attracted by churches that respond to their God-created
inner
need -a deeply embedded inner desire – to experience
community,
authentic relationship, and the mystery of love.
—For years,
writes the author of a major new book on advertising, "most
advertisers
were preoccupied with finding the logically right answer,
instead

of the emotionally real answer.”

—The

Heart at Christmas. Ask an adult to identify his or her very earliest memories. Invariably, at least one of those

first treasured and fragmentary childhood memories is wrapped up

with Christmas. Christmas, for those who grew up in our culture,

is attached to deep-seated meaning from youngest childhood, a never-quite-lost

connection to wonder and anticipation and joy and celebration, promise

and surprise. And for most, to family and warmth and love. Depending

on personal history, Christmas may also tap deep-rooted memories

of insecurity, pain, or loss.

—At

Christmas in our culture, the heart of man becomes more accessible

than at any other time of the year. There simply is no other time

when more unchurched people are more open to a message that reaches

out to the heart.

Mistake #11

Choosing costly options.

—The strategy with the lowest cost may in fact be the most costly. Consider these factors to help you avoid the mistake of

getting less-than-optimal value for your investment.

—SCALE: Economies of scale for marketing mean that as you increase the number of impressions, you decrease the cost.

Larger numbers generally provide lower cost per impression. Conversely, small plans have higher unit costs. To analyze this factor and apply it to your own plans, see “Breaking the Law of Large Numbers” (Mistake #4)

—MEDIUM: Not all media formats deliver equal results. For example, a broadcast spot may come with a huge volume of potential impressions – everybody who lives within the reach of the station signal. But that’s not the whole story. Further factors to consider are how many will actually be tuned in and paying attention at the moment of your spot (and not flipping channels or hitting the mute), and how many of those live within driving distance of your church? Newspaper also is losing cost effectiveness and circulation numbers do not translate into readership, far from it. The Internet is becoming a powerful media tool, but a web site is a cobweb without something to drive traffic to it.

—In 30 years of using and studying all types of media, we’ve come to increasingly recommend direct mail (used in the context of other community-specific strategies). It not only provides one of the best cost-to-impact ratios, it’s also highly adaptable and

target-able,
offers the best way to insure widespread first impressions and facilitates sustained and multiple impressions with each retained hard-copy.
But, to be most effective, it needs to be used strategically, as part of a holistic, city-reaching plan.

—CONTENT: But by far the best way to lower unit cost is to increase the effectiveness of the content. Double effectiveness here and you cut your response cost in half, sometimes with no increase in cost at all. It's important to remember that, contrary what we routinely think, the effectiveness scale of your creative content or approach should not be thought of as being on a scale of 1 to 10. Instead, you should view it as a -10 to +10. Here's why. The wrong content or strategy can just as easily turn people away rather than attract them. That would be a strategy that achieved a result far worse than doing nothing at all.

—We should write this in large, bold type at the top of every city reaching plan: The most expensive strategy is the one that does not do what it is intended to do.

Mistake #12

Not Connecting Christmas with Easter

—Don't overlook this common mistake. In American society,

there are two times of the year when people who rarely go to church are most likely to think about going to church. One is Christmas, the other Easter. Whether this is connected in their minds, or not, it needs to be connected in yours. To help understand and explain why, let's illustrate this mistake (and how to avoid it) in the context of an actual plan:

—1.

Early impression. At Christmas, you choose a creative message that doesn't merely announce your holiday plans or invite people to visit, but connects with the heart while introducing or reinforcing your identity and image within the community. Let's say you choose a strategy of Large Net saturation [see Mistake #4], mailing to a substantial number of households during Christmas, thereby gaining the economy of scale. Thousands of people see your message, even if only briefly (it takes hardly three or four seconds to form an impression). Hundreds or thousands who receive your postcard (even those who then toss it away) will form an early – but positive – impression of your church from the image and message on the card. As yet, they may know little about your church. Even though a percentage will visit based on your first mailing, others will not. But, they

now have an early awareness and impression.

—2.

Reinforcing the impression. The next time many of these initial non-responders will most likely think about going to church will be three months later at Easter. Do they still have your card from Christmas? Some might, but most won't. But many will have a lingering impression. But, the positive impression you generated during Christmas, though real, could be wasted if you treat the Christmas message in isolation. But if you have a built-in plan to send the same households another unique message at Easter, a message that reinforces the same positioning and identity you presented at Christmas, then the reaction is a positive "Oh, yeah, I remember that church. . ." (even though they may not always be able to recall why). Your goal at Easter is to build on what you successfully started at Christmas.

—3.

Moving Target. Norm Whan's Law of Large Numbers (see Mistake #4) shows that within any given timeframe, a small but definite percentage of the unchurched population is open to your message and unique image, and is in fact open to connecting with or visiting a church just like yours. It is important to realize that this opening is

not frozen in time, not a snapshot, but is a moving target.
When
Jesus told Peter to cast the nets on the other side, Jesus was pointing
him to a moving target at just the opportune moment. Quite possibly
Peter and his companions had tried that spot before during the long
discouraging night. But Jesus knew what was happening below the
surface. In a part of the lake where there had seemed to be no fish,
now there were many.

—When
you launch an effective community campaign at Christmas, there will
almost always be an initial response group of ‘first attenders.’
But not all people who form a positive first impression from your
Christmas message will be ready or able to visit your church at
that time.

—If your
creative content is good, you will have succeeded in generating
some ‘first attenders’ plus a much larger pool of people with positive
awareness – but the job is not done. A few months later at Easter,
as the Holy Spirit continues to work beneath the surface, people
who had that positive first impression are likely to be open again.
Some, because of what is going on in their life or their heart may
now for the first time be ready to visit. ‘Connect the dots’

by
reinforcing your original image position and build upon that
positive
awareness you already generated.

—Done

right, six months from now (after going through two of the
best
community-connecting seasons of the year) your church can be
miles
ahead in your goal to reach the unchurched in your community
and
create that special bond and endearing relationship with them,
securing
a unique and appreciated place in their minds and hearts. And
that
result will impact every other facet of your ministry.

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().*