

What Happens When Someone Calls a TV Show to Accept Christ?

Last year, Mary Hutchinson, founder of Inspired Direct, did a comprehensive study on how media ministries handle written requests by viewers to help them make the most important decision of their lives: accepting Jesus Christ as Savior.

The results were less than compelling. This year, Mary's team decided to go to the phones, as the television preachers ask us to do. They selected several dozen ministries that are on television, some are large (mega), some are quite small. Some are the same organizations as we tested last year, some are new to the study. Many you and I know personally, and in fact in their meetings, I have have heard the discussion about how the phones should best be handled: pastoral staff? trained volunteers? an outside service provider that shares our heart and mission?

Except for a few outstanding results, we have been careful not to name names. The intent is not to embarrass, but to allow ministries to see/hear what their ministry is like from the donor's point of view. Anything we test and measure, we can improve. Is there anything more important we can improve than how to handle a person seeking salvation? Read the attached and consider what experience your caller would have experienced. Mary Hutchinson put together the following report, "Calling for Salvation":

The television lights up the far wall of the living room. A **well-known TV preacher** is telling the audience about Jesus and the price He paid for our salvation. Then comes the altar call: "Pick up the phone, call this number and make the most important decision of your life. Ask Jesus into your heart

today. Just dial this number ...” What happens then? What happens when someone takes that challenge, picks up the phone and calls one of the leading ministries on the airwaves?

Two years ago, the Inspired Direct team tested the responsiveness of several media ministries across all major Christian networks by drafting a very simple letter under an assumed name. We then asked one simple question: How do I accept Jesus into my heart? The results can be found online on [Phil Cooke's blog](#) and at [Charisma's website](#).

Our latest test also proved troubling: More than 25 percent of the calls went to voicemail, with the outgoing message mentioning that it was “after hours.” (All calls were made on a weekday before 5:30 p.m. EST.) This included three of the largest broadcast ministries of our day.

Of the calls answered by a live operator, 17 percent of them led the caller through the Scriptures, another 8 percent supplied an array of Bible verses for the donor to look up later, and 39 percent—far less than half—actually led the caller in the **Sinner's Prayer**.

Clearly, not all of the operators were trained for such a call. In fact, during 28 percent of the calls, the operators seemed uneasy or unprepared. One even suggested, “Call your pastor ...”

Thirteen percent of the ministries that answered the phone had a free resource or book that would help the caller understand the decision they had made and what the next steps should be.

But 28 percent tried to sell the “new convert” a product and 10 percent asked for a donation.

Not many ministries were willing to invest significant time for such a call:

- 37% spend less than two minutes on the call

- 27% spend two to five minutes on the call

(Yes, more than 64 percent spend less than five minutes on salvation!)

23 percent spent six to 10 minutes on the call

5 percent spent 11 to 20 minutes on the call

8 percent spent more than 20 minutes on the call

In the end, the caller found that only 13 percent of the operators were warm, knowledgeable and friendly.

A few other comments:

One well-known preacher who regularly includes a call for salvation in his messages had an operator who avoided the question and insisted on a general **prayer**.

One operator of an “older” ministry did not take the question seriously.

Another **mega preacher** had an operator that was impatient and put caller on hold—leaving the caller to listen to an unending loop of sales pitches.

A new, edgy ministry told the caller to, “just talk and your message will be played on air.”

And still another ministry, known for its Baptist roots, had the call go to an elderly operator who could not make sense of the question, much less answer it.

Impressive responses:

One smaller ministry, FaithLife Now!, had their calls directed to a Christian call center (MasterMedia) that did the best job overall.

Others that did an impressive job:

Cross the Bridge with David McGee, *Time of Grace* with Pastor Mark Jeske, *Daystar* and *Andrew Womack Ministries*.

As a consultant, I often have clients who insist their staff answer the phone. Many are volunteers and, therefore, the time spent answering the telephone revolves around the time that the program is aired.

The reality is, people call when *they* want to, not when we want them to. They write down the number and wait until the baby is asleep, their spouse is out of earshot or some other distraction is out of the way. They expect the person who answers the phone to know what the preacher has offered, be it the Roman Road to Salvation or the latest product offer.

The people that answer the phone have to be a combination of the preacher at the altar at the end of the service, the smiling face at the front door, and the knowledgeable bookstore manager in the foyer. Anything less and the ministry, the flock and the kingdom are forever hurt.

Of all the places to invest in time, talent and money, this one is huge.