

Why the Next Generation Couldn't Care Less About Religious Media

The following is an excerpt from my book: *The Last TV Evangelist: Why the Next Generation Couldn't Care Less About Religious Media, and Why it Matters*. If you're involved in religious media, you need to read this—and pass it on to your pastor or leadership team. Here are some of the biggest reasons TV evangelists and pastors on TV are not reaching this generation:

OFFENDER #1: If you talk in a different voice when the camera is turned on: Everywhere else on television we see reality. Love it or hate it, reality programming has left an indelible mark on the industry. So when you appear on your program with your “classic TV voice” it sticks out like a sore thumb. You know who I'm talking about. Numerous ministry leaders are gracious, authentic and engaging when talking with friends over lunch. But turn on the camera, and they become someone else. The television commercial business is a great example of the change.

National spots used to be narrated by men with powerful voices. Deep voices that resonated with power and authority. But listen to a commercial today. More often than not, it sounds like a regular guy—or woman. The advertiser knows the connection doesn't come from a perfect voice, but from the sound of someone like you and me. Watch regular television and listen to the difference. Stop trying to be bigger than life. Be real. Speak normally. It doesn't make you more anointed or powerful when you try to sound like God. Talk like everyone else, and you'll be amazed at the connection. The “over the top” era is done.

OFFENDER #2: If on TV you wear different clothes or hairstyles than everyone else: Back in the glory days of “variety” programming, stars wore some pretty weird outfits, and the audience loved it. When I took the tour through Graceland—the estate of the late Elvis Presley—I marveled at the collection of his outrageous concert outfits. Unbelievable stuff. A walk through the historical section of a prop and costume department in Hollywood is a similar experience. But that was a different time. While I’m always open to change, as of this writing:

Nehru jackets are done.

Big gold chains are for hip-hop artists and gangsters.

Trust me. Everyone knows that’s a toupee on your head.

T.D. Jakes is cool. White preachers that try to dress like T.D. are not.

T-shirts under sportcoats went out with Miami Vice.

Spandex is not for TV—ever.

And when it comes to TV evangelists, what’s the thing about hair? Do I really have to elaborate? Years ago, I filmed one offender deep in the desert of the Middle East for a TV segment. The wind was raging, and his comb-over was so huge, he went through nearly a case of hairspray to keep it under control. When he was finished, his hair looked more like a NASCAR helmet. The desert sands were blowing all around him, and my crew was fighting to hold down the equipment, but that comb-over stayed firm without a hair out of place. If a nuclear attack had happened at that moment, I wanted under that helmet of hair. Study the wardrobe and hairstyles of secular TV hosts today. It’s remarkably normal stuff. Tasteful and subtle. Now—quick—switch back to a Christian TV program.

Ouch.

To be fair, let me turn the tables and say something to today's "hip" young pastors: *It's time to stop wearing those striped shirts with the shirttails out when you preach.* Wearing jeans and open collar shirts is fine. But styles change and it's time to change with it. Hundreds of young contemporary pastors all look alike today—jeans, striped shirts, tails out. And while you're tossing out those shirts, dump anything with big designs on it. You know what I'm talking about—the t-shirts with the big printed crosses, or the torn up sport coats with stuff written on them.

The point is, people change, trends change and fashion changes. When every pastor in America looks alike, nothing is distinctive anymore.

OFFENDER #3: If you use the phrases, "Shake the nations," "Transform your life," or "Touch the world" more than once in a 30 minute TV or radio program. Yes—I admit being guilty of these offenses in my day, but I went into treatment and I'm better now.

The point is about *hype*. There's just too much of it in religious media. When every CD set, book, or sermon from every preacher will change your life, then nothing will. The audience gets numb when the superlatives come in a continual flood. I always coach actors that during a dramatic scene, speaking in a loud voice all the time actually lessens the impact of the scene. When someone talks loud continually, after a while the audience simply filters it out.

Talking loud has impact, only after you've been speaking in a softer matters. Stop the , God can do amazing things. He can transform people's lives. He can shake nations. But be realistic about your products and your ministry. Let other people say nice things about you. Modesty is a virtue. You'll be amazed at the credibility you'll gain with the audience.

OFFENDER #4: If the audience notices the furniture more than

you. I was once asked for my thoughts on a particular Sunday morning program, and when I viewed the DVD, the first thing I noticed was the set design must have cost an absolute fortune. Not because it was creatively designed, but because it looked so expensive. It was almost all white, very elaborate, had a few gold touches, and generally, looked like the inside of a palace. For some reason I can't figure out, we've come to think that we'll gain more respect as Christian broadcasters if we create the illusion of a really expensive set. I made two comments to the pastor. First—why should I financially support your media ministry? Your set makes it appear you have all the money you'll ever need. Second—this environment is so far removed from my daily life, I can't really relate to you or your message. He didn't take my advice, and his audience continues to drop. (Well, what did you expect?)

I love a great setting for a program and our company has designed and built some amazing sets for our media clients. When it's appropriate, it can make a huge impact because it places your message in a complementary setting. Sets are important. *But the program is about your message – not about you or your set.* Keep that in perspective.

OFFENDER #5: If you're still doing a talk show format with a monologue, a live band, and interviews. The comedy greats like Carson, Leno, Letterman and others have taken control of that territory, and plenty of others—especially in late night programming—are following in their footsteps. So let's look at another approach. For some mysterious reason, certain Christian broadcasters think this format is sacred, and have tried it over and over and still haven't succeeded. But by contrast, Oprah, Dr. Phil, Glenn Beck and plenty of others have all done successful interview programs without the need of a live band, monologue or the other trappings of late night TV.

Be bold. Be innovative. Stop copying other people and explore the right format that will showcase your gifts and talents—not

look like someone else.

OFFENDER #6: If you're still building altars of prayer requests people have sent in. It's done for one reason—to impress the audience with numbers. If the audience can see that thousands of people responded, and the evangelist has built an altar from the requests, then maybe I should send in mine as well (and include a check.) As most of these points I'm listing indicate, this was started by well-meaning people with the best of intentions. Truth be told, it was probably a good idea ONCE. But when it's done over and over, it simply loses it's meaning.

An older generation was touched by big, expansive gestures, but a younger generation sees it for what it is—excessive manipulation.

Anytime you use an idea like this, make sure you're sensitive to the issues of manipulation and exploitation. As I'll say over and over throughout the book, we're creating media for a generation that's been sold to, marketed, and branded all their lives, and they're the most media savvy generation in history. Be very careful that even with a well-intentioned idea, that it's not perceived as a gimmick or publicity stunt.

OFFENDER #7: Finally, if the singing group on your program is called "The (insert name here) Singers." I think this idea went out about the time of *Lawrence Welk* or *The New Christy Minstrels*. In junior high, I was in "The New Creation Singers." In seventh grade it was cool. It's not now. The (insert TV evangelist name) Singers. You get it. Enough said.

The list of religious media indiscretions could continue, but you get my point. The production styles, creative ideas, fashions or techniques that worked yesterday don't always work today.

Please remember that in listing these particular offenses, I'm not commenting on the intentions or integrity of particular

ministries who are still trying these worn-out methods. I have the greatest respect for anyone trying to share their faith with the culture. But I'm commenting on the need to stop kicking a dead horse and start looking at a new method of transportation. Our job as communicators is to see the changes coming in the culture and adapt, so our message is as relevant now as it was yesterday—and will still be tomorrow.

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