

Why TV Ministry Still Matters

Despite the phenomenal growth of the Internet and mobile devices, we'd be remiss to abandon the last truly "mass" medium

One of the most disturbing trends in the ministry world is the disappointing lack of interest in using TV as a tool for impacting today's culture with the gospel. Back in the '70s and '80s in particular, men like Billy Graham, Oral Roberts, Rex Humbard and others reached vast audiences through TV.

In many ways those years were considered a "golden era" in Christian broadcasting and gave birth to numerous global television networks. But a number of high-profile scandals helped turn a younger generation of pastors and leaders against the medium—and far too many cheesy, corny and low-budget programs didn't help. For many church leaders today, much of what they see on Christian TV is frankly an embarrassment.

If that's what television ministry is, they understandably want no part of it.

As a result, many of these pastors have turned to the Internet and mobile apps as evangelistic and discipleship tools—and aren't remotely interested in broadcast TV.

But despite the phenomenal growth of the Internet and mobile devices, I still believe television will continue to be an incredibly important medium for the church. After all, over the last century, radio never displaced movies, and TV never displaced radio. Everything finds its level in the media universe. So though a study from Nielson Holdings and *The Wall Street Journal* found that the number of households watching traditional TV fell by about 1.2 million last year, television is still the last truly "mass" medium.

The recent and growing demand for TV commercial spots confirms that statement. Amid fears of the Web stealing ad revenue, TV ad dollars continue to rise—as indicated by the average cost of a network TV spot growing 17 percent during the last TV season, according to the same study reported in *The Wall Street Journal*.

Major advertisers are still looking for the largest possible audience, and this has enormous implications for ministry. The truth is, while there are many people unplugging from traditional TV and gravitating to the Web, two things are important to remember:

1) Great numbers of those people are viewing popular TV programs on their laptop. They may not be using a traditional TV set, but they're still watching *American Idol*, *Glee* or the NBA playoffs. I recently sat on a plane next to a woman watching a Joyce Meyer TV program on her iPad. While short films on websites such as YouTube are extremely popular, a vast and significant audience is simply trading hardware, not looking for different content.

2) Though more and more people are on Facebook, blogs and various websites, it's a scattered and splintered audience. There are more than 845 million Facebook members worldwide, but they're not viewing the same content. It's essentially millions of people interacting with millions of individual—and different—friends.

That's why to reach a concentrated, mass audience, television is still the medium of choice. Even though local satellite and cable systems have many channels, the most popular by far number only a handful. As a result, TV has become the last great American campfire. It's the one place where an entire nation—and indeed the world—is focused on virtually the same information and entertainment.

What does that mean for ministry? It means TV isn't

dead—either as an entertainment medium or evangelistic tool. If the church is going to impact the larger culture, then television should be a priority. Obviously, a complete evangelistic, advertising or marketing campaign needs to embrace multiple platforms; but to reach the largest single segment of people, don't leave TV out of your plans.

At the same time, we must remember the lessons from the past: More poorly produced preaching programs or cheap interview shows will only make your message more and more irrelevant. Changing today's culture isn't just about getting on the right platforms; it's about original ideas that capture people's attention.

That's enough writing. I need to go check tonight's TV schedule ...

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