



People Welcoming People

Building a Team for Great First Impressions

By Mark Waltz

Recently my wife and I joined some friends to try out a new restaurant in our town. Within minutes of being seated I began my usual verbal assessment of the staff, the atmosphere, the architecture, and the décor. We hadn't even ordered yet. My wife joked about how impossible it was for me to eat anywhere without making a "first impressions" analysis. She's right. It's impossible. I experience first impressions in every restaurant, every hotel, every store, and every airline.

And so do you. We all do. Everywhere we go, we determine the value of our encounters based largely on our involuntary first impressions. New people to our churches experience the same response.

What's the first impression your new guests have about your church? The first impression occurs before the service begins—before the reading of Scripture, before a song is sung, before the message is spoken. First impressions happen in the parking lot, at the entry of your building, in the children's hallways, and in your lobby or narthex. People make decisions about staying or returning to your church within the first few minutes. Based on your guests' first impressions in those early moments, are you giving them a reason to return?

First impressions matter because people matter. If people return, they will continue to hear that they matter to God, that they are invited to follow Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, if the parking lot is chaotic, if the facility is unkempt, if the people are unfriendly or closed to new people, your guests' first impression will be anything but positive. If they don't feel like they matter to your church, they may never really hear how much they matter to God.

Of all the steps that can be taken to create a warm and personable welcome—easy to find parking spaces, clear signage, clean restrooms, quality coffee, or creative children's rooms, to name a few—none are more important than the people who create the welcome. People create atmosphere. People form a culture that says, "You're welcome here." People communicate "You matter to God." Getting people on your team who are wired by God to help others feel welcome is the first—and most challenging—step to creating first impressions that cause guests to return to your church.

From my experience leading teams of greeters, ushers, parking lot shuttle drivers, coffee shop workers, and other first impressions volunteers, I've identified a top ten list of characteristics that define the people who best create an atmosphere of welcome. How would your church be different if every guest was welcomed by people like these?

1. Aligned People. That is, people who embrace and own the church's mission

At Granger Community Church, people who welcome guests in any way must value that our environment and purpose is Christ-centered. It's not just a club, not merely a nice place to be. It is a place to belong. We are about creating an experience where people are encouraged to question, explore, and make decisions. We want them to take steps toward Christ.

When people aren't aligned with who you are, what you're doing and how you're doing it, they will always pull away from your mission, vision, and values. When people are aligned, they will pull with you to create an experience for your

guests that is consistent with your mission.

2. People-people. People who genuinely love people

You know intuitively when people are less than sincere. You've experienced the supermarket clerk who doesn't make eye contact, doesn't speak to you until she tells you the total amount of cash you owe, and scowls to her associate in the next lane about how long she's been at work. We know when people really care, and when they don't.

If your teams aren't made up of people-people, your guests will know. They'll sense it when team members...

- complain (about another department or church ministry, about a leader, about a system, about their serving role)
- can't leave soon enough (always watching the clock, eager to get on with the rest of their day)
- rigidly perform the tasks of their role without connecting relationally (answering questions, providing information, but not offering a personal interaction)
- are indifferent or even rude.

But, when your team is made up of *people-people*, your guests will engage. They will know they matter.

3. Marketplace Customers. People who remember their own guest service experiences—both desirable and undesirable

I want people who are innately sensitive to the needs, interests, and expectations of our guests. It's in their nature. In part it's because they remember experiences when they've been "wowed." They also remember their own disappointment

when the service at a store or restaurant could have been better, when they could have experienced more value and care. These people aren't self-focused snobs. They understand human value and how it's communicated.

Bring *marketplace customers* onto your team. They will help you create "wow" experiences that convey personal worth to your guests. They will deliver basic care and personal service. And when your guests experience that they matter to you and your church, they'll be open to hear that they matter to God.

4. Image Savvy People. *People who look in the mirror before they leave the house*

Perhaps at first glance this sounds shallow or externally focused. Externally focused it is; shallow it is not. Our guests are asking this question as they approach our doors (or yours) for the first time: "Are there others here like me?" or "Will I fit in here?"

Do your team members accurately reflect the community in which you live? Does your team carry a sense of God-honoring pride as they represent your church, and more importantly, Jesus Christ?

This tension exists in the outward-oriented, evangelistic church: we want to create diverse opportunities for our people to express their uniqueness as they serve, while at the same time maintaining excellence from the perspective of the newest guests who do not yet share our faith and family values. There are people who won't serve as an usher or greeter in your church, simply because they lack a presence and appearance that immediately endears others.

I want people who look in the mirror before leaving the house. And as they look in the mirror, I want them to ask themselves, "Will people want to meet me today?"

5. Disciplined Conversationalists. *People who intuitively know how to carry on a conversation with others without feeling like the conversation has to be all about them*

You've met the opposite of this person. Maybe you're married to one (I hope not). These folks know no stranger, and are not

afraid to talk to anyone. And that really is the problem—they talk *to* people, not *with* them. They can be highly entertaining, but often not engaging.

I want people on my team who know how to engage people, honor safe personal boundaries, and show a genuine interest in others. Guests can see right through self-centeredness. When our guests interact with our team members, I want them to feel the presence of Jesus.

6. Excellence-Champions. *People who see, hear, and feel what's excellent and take initiative to fix what's not*

When I experience an appetite-suppressing, nauseating restroom at a restaurant, I consider the entire staff to be negligent. I don't really care whose job it

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is to clean—someone, anyone, everyone on the team should care enough about the guest's experience to get a bucket and some Lysol and get busy!

When someone at your church or mine can't find the right kid's room or finds no tissue in the restroom or trips over the rolled up door mat - someone on our guest services team should spring into action. Excellence-Champions think of people. They think about experiences. They understand what it is to communicate value to people through excellent experiences. So, they anticipate, they prevent, they own the opportunity—and the problem.

7. Optimists. *People who see the glass as more than half full*

Or to put it another way, people who see the best in life, in people, and in

general circumstances. Optimists not only refrain from negative comments about the world as they see it, they take great joy in finding things to celebrate. Optimists are contagious. But then, so are pessimists.

Choose well. How your team and guests are influenced depends on your willingness to invite cheerful, "glass half-full" people onto your guest services teams.

8. Servant-hearted People. *People who understand it's not about them; they do what they do to serve both guests and their fellow teammates*

I want team members—in guest services or any other team—who willingly see beyond themselves and who understand that the message we're striving to make clear is about Jesus—not them. Servants who "get it," who are being changed by the love of Jesus, focus outward toward others and see others as worthy of their personal attention.

9. Interesting People. *People who draw others to themselves because they are appropriately interesting*

Yes, this is extremely subjective. Who, after all, gets to decide if someone else is interesting?

Try this approach. Think about the last time you went home from a service, a party, or a sporting event where you personally met someone new, someone interesting. After you were home,

were you still thinking about them? In a good way?

- Did you tell someone else about them?
- Did you find yourself wondering when you might bump into them again?
- Did you sense that they thought you mattered?
- Did you want to learn more about them?
- Did you appreciate their demeanor—confident or humble or jovial or sensitive?
- Did you enjoy their personality?

Identify interesting people. People you want to be around. They will help your guests feel warmly accepted. They will bring a sense of aliveness to your team and culture. They will allow your guests to go home sensing they met someone who genuinely cared, who would be great to know better...someone they'd love to

return to your church and see again.

10. Missional People. *People who reach out to those who are seeking God*

Our mission at Granger is “helping people take their next step toward Christ...together.” Ultimately, I want mission-focused people on my team. I want missional people who...

- understand we’re all on a spiritual journey toward God
- embrace the mission to create an atmosphere conducive to taking steps toward Christ
- are clearly focused on others because their search matters, because their Creator says they matter

People who understand the missional objective to acknowledge and encourage

steps toward Christ will contagiously impact the team’s focus as well as morale. People who are working toward the church’s agreed-upon mission will energize your team and keep first things first for every guest that comes through your doors. □



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Tips for Helping Newcomers Feel at Home in Worship

- Accept and encourage casual attire.
- Do not ask visitors to stand and identify themselves. Seventy percent of new attendees feel negatively about being recognized. However, they do expect people to be friendly and welcoming.
- Provide nametags for the whole congregation and develop the habit of wearing them. Form a “tag team” to organize and promote name tag use.
- Review your church bulletin and other printed material to make sure information is not “insider oriented.” Avoid church jargon and assuming that people understand the context.
- Make sure your order of worship is easy for a visitor to follow. Include written or verbal explanations of what is going on and why. Print the words to all prayers, songs, and responses.
- Sing at least one hymn each Sunday that is well known outside the church, such as “Amazing Grace,” “Joyful Joyful,” or “Morning Has Broken.”
- Include a welcome to visitors in the opening words before the service. Make sure the person speaking identifies him or herself. It is best for the pastor to issue this welcome.
- Remember that visitors sometimes arrive a few minutes late. Don’t front load all the information directed at them.
- Place information about your church’s ministries where a visitor can easily find it—preferably in the pew, or a clearly marked location near the entry points used by visitors. Don’t expect them to go somewhere else to find it.
- Prepare Visitors Packets to be handed out by greeters with information about your church programs.
- Give visitors with small children a small activity packet (with crayons, pipe cleaners, stickers, etc.) as they enter worship.
- Avoid all talk about money with visitors.
- Keep the discussion of “family business” to a minimum in the services. Limit announcements.

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