

SUBLIMINAL MESSAGES IN CHURCH SIGNS ©

by
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Malcolm Gladwell, in his book *BLINK*, argues that individuals form an impression of others in a matter of seconds. To make his point, Gladwell cites studies of college students who watched three 10 second muted videos of a professor. Those watching the videos rated the professor the same as those who actually took his or her course. The same results occurred when students watched five second and two second videos of professors. (p. 12-13) Throughout the book, Gladwell argues that we are constantly forming impressions about people and our environment instantly.

Applying Gladwell's insights to a congregation, visitors form an subliminal impression within a few seconds after entering the parking lot. That impression is confirmed or challenged the moment they enter the congregation's building. Remember, we are talking about a matter of seconds in which impressions are formed.

To help identify the impression a visitor has, a congregation can ask and answer the question, "Can visitors find their way to the office, the sanctuary, or the restrooms without asking for directions?" If the answer is "yes," the subliminal message is "We want you here and we want you to be comfortable." If the answer is "no," the message is, "You are welcome if this is your second or third visit." To put the question a different way, "Is our congregation adequately signed to allow visitors to identify which door to enter when they are in the parking lot or which hallway leads to the office or a meeting room?"

Two critical questions

In any discussion about church signage, it is important to first define the purpose of signs; i.e., are church signs for the convenience of visitors or for members? Defining the purpose of church signs will inevitably cause dissonance among the membership of the congregation. One group will argue that signs are not needed but if we have to have them they must be aesthetically pleasing. This group's argument is that we already know which door or hallway leads to our desti-

nation. Another group will argue that signs are for the convenience of visitors; therefore, they are to be highly visible and functional even if they are not always aesthetically pleasing. Until the purpose of signs is decided, discussion about where to place signs will always be contentious.

The second question is, "Are our signs designed primarily to help those who visit on Sunday or Thursday?" If signs are for Sunday, they must be at least seven feet above ground level. In large gathering spaces such as the narthex, they are placed above doors. In hallways, they are perpendicular to the wall. The reason is that on Sundays, the narthex and hallways are crowded with worshipers, those going to and from Sunday School classes, and small groups of friends socializing. Any sign not above the heads of the crowd is useless because they cannot be seen.

If signs are for Thursday morning, the dynamics change. It can be argued that Thursday signs can be placed at eye or chest level next to a door. In this position, signs may be considered more aesthetically pleasing. In addition, there are fewer individuals milling around the narthex or hallways on Thursday than Sunday.

Using the information stated above, I advocate for both/and rather than either/or; i.e., signs for both Sunday and Thursday visitors. Sunday signs placed over doors or perpendicular to the wall are one or two words such as "Church Office," "Sanctuary," "Library," or "Room 101."

Thursday signs have additional information. As a result, they have a different design. Thursday signs are easily changeable. For example, an 8 1/2 x 11 plastic sign holder (sold at Staples or Office Depot) is placed next to a door. The paper inside the sign holder can be changed daily. The sign reads as follows:

ROOM 104
SECOND GRADE CLASS
JIM AND MARY SMITH
(TEACHERS)

If the room is also used for meetings on Thursday, the sign reads:

ROOM 104
TODAY THIS ROOM WILL HOST:
10:00 BIBLE STUDY (Pastor Jones)
3:30 MENTORING (Mr. Smith)
7:00 COMMUNITY OUTREACH COMMITTEE

One congregation that I know includes the instruction: PLEASE MAKE SURE THIS ROOM IS CLEAN AND READY FOR THE NEXT GROUP.

Changeable signs next to a Sunday School/ Meeting Room door have two benefits. First, they help the parents of a child attending Sunday School for the first time feel more comfortable by putting in written form the grade of the class and the names of the Sunday School teachers. Second, listing all the meetings that occur in this particular room is a subliminal message about the congregation's ministry portfolio. The sign becomes a constant reminder of what the congregation does to grow the faith of its members and minister to the larger community.

Implementing a signage plan

Implementing a signage plan is a six step process:

First, form a signage task force. Task force members should be well respected. The general membership of a congregation often follows the lead of those they respect; i.e., "If so and so says it is ok then it is ok with me." If the pastor tries to implement a signage program without the collaborative efforts of a task force, there is a high probability the congregation will reject any signage effort.

Second, before the task force does anything else, it has to determine the purpose of signage as discussed above. The purpose of signage should take into consideration the purpose of the congregation. If the congregation's purpose is to "make disciples of Jesus," does the purpose of signage help achieve that purpose or does it hinder it?

Third, learn from others. The signage task force should visit a shopping mall. Task force members agree to park their cars in the middle of the mall's parking lot, and then look at the store fronts while standing next to their cars. The chairperson of the task force asks task force members, Where is RadioShack, Hobby Lobby, and Barnes and Noble? How do you know the location of these stores? Where are the signs for these stores. The answers are obvious but sometime we miss the obvious because the obvious is too common place.

If the mall has a Kroger store, go into the store and look for aisle signs for cereals, snacks, household goods, and bread. Where are these signs placed? Ask, Why are the signs placed where they are placed? Again, the answers are obvious but we often take for granted or miss the obvious.

Now go back to the congregation's property and park in the middle of the parking lot. While standing next to the cars ask, How does our building mimic the signage at the mall? Would we be more welcoming to visitors if the congregation had similar signs? If we were to add signs to our entrances, where would we put those signs? Next, enter the building and ask task force members how they would find the office, sanctuary, and restrooms? If they have answers, and there are no signs, ask how they knew the location of these sites. If there are signs, ask if they will be seen on Sunday? Finally ask, Would the congregation be more welcoming if it followed the example set by Kroger?

Fourth, decide who will provide and install the signs. Church members can do this by buying sign letters from Home Depot or a local printer. The other option is a professional sign maker who can be hired to do the job. If a professional is hired make sure you are very specific about what you want as most professionals come with a set package that may not meet your needs.

Fifth, present the signage plan to the governing board. Begin with the congregation's purpose and how signage helps meet that purpose, describe your visits to the mall and Kroger, identify who will install the signs, and then gain permission to implement the plan. In this process, the signage task force educates the governing board about the importance of signage to make visitors feel welcome.

Sixth, do it. Install the signs.

Summary

To summarize, the signage in a congregation or the lack of signage sends a subliminal message to visitors; namely, YOU ARE WELCOME HERE or YOU ARE WELCOME IF YOU HAVE BEEN HERE BEFORE.

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