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The Top 10 Mistakes Churches Make When Reaching Out to the Campus

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10) Relying too heavily upon the campus ministry / minister – Often, campus ministers are approached by churches that want to reach out to the campus. While most ministers are excited by the prospect of volunteers helping to pick up some of the load, it is easy for churches to unintentionally add to the minister's work load, causing them to have to sacrifice other important aspects of the ministry. Want to reach out to college students and do so effectively? Start by bringing your ideas to the table along with a willingness to roll up your sleeves and get your hands dirty. The campus can be one of the closest mission trips that your church will ever take.

9) Not being aware of the rules – Every campus has unique policies set in place regarding everything from on-campus promotions (flyers and posters) to off-campus groups reserving space. Be sure to talk with the campus minister about the specifics of every school. Also, be flexible and understand that the minister's primary responsibility is to uphold the rules of the school. After all, they have to deal with school administration long after a church leaves.

8) Not looking at the campus context – College students have changed a lot, even in the past five years. Before deciding on the type of outreach project that you want to do, be sure to do a little bit of research. Spend time talking to the campus minister to learn about the needs of the students and the things that they are passionate about. Also, every college is different. Just because something worked on one campus doesn't mean that it will work on another. Be willing to do your homework before settling on an outreach idea.

7) Not looking at the campus calendar – Churches operate on an entirely different calendar than the universities do. Be mindful of test weeks. Before settling on any date, check out the campus calendars found on the school's website. Check both the academic calendar, as well as the campus activities calendar. The campus minister can give you direction on this as

well. One of the biggest mistakes that churches make is not taking into consideration simple things like the students' busy seasons.

6) Not being true to your church's culture – This generation longs for authenticity. They know that groups see them as an easy target, and because of that, they are very jaded and see right through anything less than absolute sincerity. Churches often mistakenly think that they have to make themselves something they aren't in order to appeal to collegiates. The best way for a church to impact a campus is to ask: 1) What is the campus culture? 2) What is our church culture? 3) Where do they overlap?

5) Expecting students to come to you – While it makes sense that a church would want to host an event at their facility, students often aren't willing to participate in any event that is held in a facility that they see as being affiliated with a religious organization. Even if the event is neutral and not spiritual in any way, their opinions on Christianity and their fear of “the bait and switch” keep them away. The other downside to programming off-campus is a reality that is easily forgotten – many students don't have cars. Consider moving your event to an on-campus space. Most campus ministries are willing to help secure the necessary reservations.

4) Thinking that “free” gets a crowd – Many times, churches think that simply offering something free is the key to winning over college students and drawing them to an event. Unfortunately, that is no longer the case. Students are so used to groups using giveaways as a marketing ploy that they have become somewhat immune to them. “Free” is still an added plus, but it cannot be counted on as the primary drawing point.

3) Taking a “shotgun” approach rather than a “sniper” one – Strategy will be key in effectively engaging a campus. While you will certainly need to utilize mass marketing opportunities, relationships will be vital to your event's success. When planning, begin by looking at your immediate context. Consider, “What connections do our students have with other groups on campus?” Utilize them as point people in promoting the event to their peers. Encourage them to look beyond even their friends and plan ways that they can personally represent your event to the other student organizations they are a part of, their residence hall, or their department. Have a big enough vision to seek other student groups to partner with you and the campus ministry to host the event. While the vision for the event grows by taking this

approach, the marketing of the event becomes more focused and more strategic. And, when other student groups are committed to and invested in an event, they are more likely to help you in promoting the event to their circles of influence. The fact is: people join people, not programs. Strategic use of natural relationships and partnerships is a must-do.

2) Thinking that bigger equals better – It will be easy to want to gauge your event’s success by the number of students who attend. However, you must remember that in today’s culture, students are fickle. Even university administrators have commented on this generation’s lack of follow through and tendency to change their mind at the last minute, based on whether or not a “better opportunity” came about. While this can be a little disheartening at first, never forget that every student you impact is one more than your church was ministering to before the event. Learn to celebrate even the few.

1) Thinking that once in a while is good enough – The biggest mistake that churches make when trying to reach out to the campus is thinking that once in a while is good enough. What is the biggest test of a church’s heart for college students? Their willingness to invest in the campus on a regular basis. Relationships with college students must be nurtured, and that takes time. Students will never believe that you care about them if you are only willing to be a part of their lives on “special event” days. Whether it’s taking students to lunch or coffee on campus or being open to attending campus ministry events, even when your church has no role in the program, be committed to the campus. Work with the campus minister to find good opportunities to engage students in settings that are natural for them. Let 1 Thessalonians 2:8 drive your approach to the campus – seek not only to share the Gospel with them, but your life as well.

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