

# 10 MISTAKES THAT CHURCHES MAKE WHEN IT COMES TO FIRST TIME GUESTS

by Greg Atkinson



As someone who visits lots of churches for the first time, I have a checklist of no-no's to share that I hope will help your church.

## **GREETINGS & SALUTATIONS**

Not having greeters and parking lot attendants to welcome people as they arrive and say goodbye as people leave can come across as cold and unfriendly. Conversely, if you do have greeters and parking lot attendants, they arrive feeling welcomed and leave with a positive impression. Pro tip: Make sure your greeter's hands are empty and ready to serve (no coffee, no cell phone, etc.).

## **POOR SIGNAGE**

Poor signage keeps your guests from being able to quickly find their way around your facility. Don't forget to include signage for restrooms, children's check-in, auditorium entrance, and parking lot directions (handicap, first-time guests, parents of small children, expecting moms, etc).

## **CHRISTIANESE**

Theology is important, but your guest doesn't know what sanctification, atonement, and justification mean. Use those important words, but explain to people what they mean as you go. Be careful about other religious words and phrases like "bow your head and close your eyes," "brethren," and using the word "lost" to describe folks who aren't yet Christ-followers.

## **INSIDER LANGUAGE**

Never assume people know anything about your church/pastor's history or even about names of your children's classrooms (zebras, giraffes, etc. as opposed to nursery, preschool, 5th graders, etc.). A simple change in names, from sanctuary to auditorium for example, can help make your church become a church where unchurched people feel welcome.

## **UNFRIENDLY LANGUAGE OR CALLING ATTENTION TO GUESTS**

Avoid using the term "visitor" instead of "guest." Also, avoid making guests stand up and be acknowledged or slapping a visitor name tag on them.

## **UNCLEAN FACILITIES & WEIRD SMELLS**

Every church has the potential for positive or negative cleanliness. Make sure to mop/vacuum, dust, pick up trash inside (in the auditorium, restroom, etc.) and outside (parking lot, landscaping, grass cut, etc.), clean windows (fingerprints), and make sure your children's area is especially clean, safe, and secure. Also, never underestimate the sense of smell. Mold is a bad smell. Coffee is a good smell. Bleach is a bad smell. Citrus is a good smell. Many churches have restrooms that are disgusting and smell like urine. This lack of attention to detail can be costly and discourage many from ever returning.

## **POOR COMMUNICATIONS PIECES (AND TOO MANY OF THEM)**

### **Communication Card**

It is important to collect contact information so you can follow-up with first-time guests. Use a well thought-out and sharply designed communication/connection card. Get all the info you need, but only get as much as you absolutely need (name, email, phone number, etc.). Use the sample communication card in the First Impressions Bundle as a template to get you started.

### **Website**

People will check out your website before they ever walk into your church building. If your website is poorly designed it makes a bad first impression and creates unnecessary doubt about the quality of your ministry. Not having an “I’m New” or “What to Expect” page can make guests feel like you aren’t expecting them and haven’t considered their questions. For example, include service times, directions, what to wear, etc.

### **Less Is More**

Resist the urge to communicate about everything going on at your church which will overwhelm a newcomer (bulletin, inserts, and quantity of info in a welcome packet). Pro tip: instead of promoting a ton of events, point people to an events section on your website.

## **INEFFICIENT CHILDREN'S CHECK-IN & PICK-UP**

First-time church guests will not understand why there is a long line when it's time to drop off or pick up their children. You must succinctly explain your security protocols and gather information (contact name, phone number, and allergies) as quickly as possible with a friendly and well-trained team member. Avoid asking for unnecessary information. Invest in a good software solution to help you with your children's check-in process.

## **POOR SECURITY**

One issue that is huge to visiting families is security. If a parent is worried about their child's safety, they will not enjoy the service and will likely not return. A children's classroom must be clean, safe and secure. Security also includes the checkout process. If anyone can walk into a classroom and pick up a kid, you're asking for trouble and will turn off potential newcomers. It's important that your kids' volunteers are trained well and know to ask for the parent's sticker when picking up their kids. This is vital and goes a long way to ensuring a tragedy doesn't occur and a parent has peace of mind.

## **CHEESY/UNTHOUGHTFUL GUEST GIFT**

Giving a first-time guest a gift is a great way to honor them and thus should be taken seriously. Be thoughtful as you're determining what kind of gift to give. Meet with your team and try to be as creative as possible and dream of a gift that you would actually want and that is unique to your church's culture or your community (a gift from your local farmer's market or mom & pop shop is great!).