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"Before the first song is sung or the message is presented, people in your church have begun to make decisions about their return visit. First impressions really matter. From the children's classes to the friendliness of your greeters, new guests are evaluating their experience with your church. Within the first ten minutes they will be either impressed or disappointed. That impression or disappointment either helps them see Jesus or distracts their view of Him."

First Impressions, Creating Wow Experiences in Your Church, Mark Waltz

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INTRODUCTION

Following is an assessment and “first impression” of a guest’s possible Sunday experience to Oak Hill Baptist Church, based on our visit to the church Sunday, October 22, 2006. This summary does not imply that every visitor would have the exact or even a similar experience. Multiple visits to the church would provide more data for review and assimilation. I have tried to be thorough in my reporting and realize some aspects may be applicable and need attention, while others may not. This review is intended to provide you with an anonymous visitor’s perspective and is intended to stimulate and challenge current thought, processes, and customer service standards by the leadership and congregation of Oak Hill. I will be happy to discuss my findings with you further and answer any questions you may have about our experience.

CHURCH PHONE

On Sunday mornings, I called the main church office line at 8:30 a.m. The phone was quickly answered by a volunteer who didn’t offer much in the way of pleasantries, as if she hadn’t planned on taking calls that morning. When I asked for directions from the Iris Inn, she was unsure of its location so the phone was given to Dan Dupree, who would prove to be my personal tour guide for my visit. Dan was warm and assertive on the phone, inviting me to come to a Men’s Class that was due to start any minute, assuring me that being a few minutes late was perfectly acceptable. Dan asked my name twice, though I declined the invitation for the early class, I mentioned that I would be attending Sunday School at 9:30. We would recommend having a more outgoing, personable volunteer to initially answer the phone on Sunday morning. This can be a wonderful opportunity to provide directions, service times, childcare details, and other helpful information to potential guests with a warm, friendly touch. As was my experience, the volunteer could get name(s) of visiting family and have someone on the look out to welcome them when they arrive on the campus.

If Oak Hill utilizes a voice message on Saturday evenings, we would suggest a special weekend-only message that provides basic descriptions of the worship services, mission/vision statement of church, specific ministries, or special events for that weekend.

PARKING AND SIGNAGE

When driving to the church Sunday morning, I initially passed Lakeside Road as I expected to either see the church from the road or to see a directional sign, and I had to turn around in a driveway. As I drove into the parking lot, I couldn’t help but be overwhelmed with the new structure that dominated my view. I did however, get a glimpse of the permanent entrance sign. Due to the location of the driveway, the sign seemed misplaced and reflected a traditional church feel with its brick framing and serif font. Given the construction, parking signage was nonexistent and there was no parking available near either of the church’s two main entrances. I drove around the entire lot to get a sense of the parking layout and settled for a spot a good ways from the entrance. I noted a greeter near the door, who welcomed me with a hand shake and a ‘hello’ but offered little more by way of a greeting. With the move into the new building, you should consider having volunteers stationed near the visitor parking to identify guests, answer any questions, and direct them to the appropriate area of the church (worship, nursery, restrooms, etc.). For example, if I had been with my son, it would have been helpful to know where to take him from the parking lot.

Some additional campus signage issues were encountered which might warrant a thorough review and strategy to improve initial communication of the Oak Hill facilities and campus, especially given the new facilities. While there may be some city restrictions on permanent vs temporary signage, any and all guesswork should be eliminated with an effective signage strategy. There is a tremendous opportunity at Oak Hill to both communicate the mission and values of the church and specific directions through parking lot banners and campus signage. Parking lot and campus banners would not only communicate messages to weekend guests, but also those who use the campus during the week.

Consider the experience of walking into a Home Depot, Best Buy, or Apple store. Notice the attention paid to where things are located and how to find certain items. Most churches can learn much from these examples of communication through signage.

GREETERS/ HOSPITALITY

I arrived right about the time Sunday School was starting and was greeted both at the door by a door greeter and almost immediately upon entering the entry hallway by someone who after becoming aware that I was visiting for the first time, walked me through a hallway to the welcome/information desk and introduced me to Dan Dupree, the same gentleman I'd spoken to on the phone. Being that it was time for Sunday School to start, Dan took me up stairs to a small lobby area where adults were congregating, eating donuts and drinking coffee prior to going into one of several Sunday School classes. I didn't notice much if anything in the way of interior directional signage and wonder if I would have been able to find the adult Sunday School classes on my own.

As Sunday School ended, it was apparent that the lobby and hallway areas were alive with activity. The welcome/information desk was well staffed and people seemed to be streaming into the worship center from all entrances. I noticed as I entered, exited, and re-entered that ushers handed out bulletins at each of the 4 main entrances and that people entered worship eager to catch up with old friends and meet new ones as I was addressed and welcomed time after time. Dan walked me to the front row, where he and his wife would be sitting and left me to observe my surroundings.

Though ushers held the doors and handed out bulletins, I'm not sure that a visitor with children would be able to get any instruction at the doors to the worship center. Consider what would happen if a family visited the early service and had children who needed a nursery? Would a greeter/usher be available to walk the family to the nursery area and introduce the family to the nursery workers? Would there be another greeter available to stay at the sanctuary to distribute bulletins? By having church members serve as greeters at all the entrances invites opportunities for Oak Hill to make a personal connection with a friendly smile and handshake, something I experienced time and time again. I would recommend some training and tools be given to each person stationed at the church's numerous entry ways so to enhance the welcome experience to all guests at the church.

In addition to a brochure to welcome guests, Oak Hill might consider the production and distribution of a visitor gift bag to be passed out to each Sunday guest. The visitor gift bag can be a very effective and provide numerous opportunities for a personal follow up from staff or church members. The content of the visitor bag would highlight a strategic effort to communicate more of the church's culture, vision and connection opportunities as well as address specific needs of particular demographics from age-level ministries. Visitor bags might include a coupon to a local restaurant, cookies/chocolates, coffee mug/water bottle, note pad, refrigerator magnet/decal, newsletter, letter from the Pastor, etc.

Oak Hill could also consider starting a brief guest reception following each of the morning services. It was discussed that this could happen underneath the steeple in the new building. This is an informal, warm setting that creates a positive experience with a very personable touch from Pastor Steve and other staff members. Although this time can be designed to be casual and very relational, there could be some benefit in having the pastor, another staff member, or church member give a brief welcome to the guests. Depending upon the number of guests on any given Sunday, it may be a good opportunity to introduce staff and offer ways for deeper connection and involvement as well as spiritual development for visitors and members. It is also very important to have "takeaway" pieces provided during the guest reception time, whether that is a simple visitor brochure or a gift bag/packet.

Review the church calendar and highlight those Sundays that are most likely to have the highest number of guests. These might be due to the season (Christmas/Easter), return of college students, Homecoming Sunday, High Attendance Sunday, or based around an annual church event. On these Sundays, make sure that there are more than enough volunteers, including greeters, ushers, and nursery workers to welcome the extra guests. These Sundays might also warrant refreshments like donuts and coffee that would provide opportunities for people to connect with one another and have fellowship time together.

WORSHIP OBSERVATIONS

The Oak Hill worship experience through message and music was very strong. The sanctuary facilities provided a great environment that enhances the message delivery, music, and overall worship experience. I can only imagine that this positive environment will be magnified greatly in the new facility. A few observations:

Atmosphere/Style: As I entered the worship center, the band/instrumentalists played upbeat music. It was a little loud from a visitor's perspective who might feel uncomfortable raising his voice to someone he doesn't know. It was however, successful in creating a genuine spirit of worship and excitement and for the church family, seemed to spur on energetic and demonstrative fellowship and weekly reunion.

There were several occasions in which lighting and background music were paid close attention, and each time had a positive effect on the atmosphere without disrupting the flow of worship. Once item contrary to this atmosphere was in the powerpoint screen presentation. While lighting and sound were working in tandem, the background screens used to project lyrics were dated and disconnected. This is an opportunity to further the experience by creating something that supports Oak Hill's mission and vision in a simple, consistent way. Beyond these elements, there was an intentionality and flow to the service that aided the worshipper do just that. Never did I miss not being provided an order of worship to follow along in that music, prayer, message, and invitation were well-arranged and well-timed and seemed to flow into and out of each other as opposed to being separate components. One challenge moving forward will be to continue this thoughtfulness and excellence while remaining authentic and unrehearsed.

Announcements: Though the new facility was just behind the congregation, there was no mention of it's completion in the service. It is understandable that it has been a work in progress over the last several years, but as a guest, I would have liked to know a little about it's use as well as hearing God's and the church's faithfulness in seeing it built. The update should focus on it's impact on the church's ministries and changed lives, rather than solely on the facility enhancements.

Pastor Steve, whom I now recognized as the man who first spoke to my as I entered the church and personally walked and introduced me to Dan Dupree, welcomed all to worship, provided some brief announcements, asked visitor's to fill out a card, and stated the purpose of this and every Sunday morning's gathering, to worship. In the future, you might use this time for subtle messages about the church's core values. For example, adding a simple statement to an event announcement like "At Oak Hill, we want to create an environment for everyone" helps people understand why the church is hosting a community movie night or picnic and communicates many strong messages.

Also, you might point out the many additional announcements in the bulletin as a way to highlight that source of information. Upon launching the new Web site, the announcement time in the service will be an opportune time each week to give the web site address and encourage people to visit the site.

The more thorough announcement time happened on powerpoint screens behind the praise team as they sang. I wasn't sure if this was a time of worship or of information gathering in that the music was powerful and compelling and the slides were disconnected and each had their own look and feel, causing none to particularly stand out. One option would be to have slides reflecting just the most important announcements that Pastor Steve or another announcer can walk through so that there is both the verbal, supported by the visual. Then let the bulletin fill in the additional details.

Another thought is that whenever possible, find platforms in worship to tell the Oak Hill story and relate stories about the church's ministries. Typically, church announcements only focus on upcoming events and do not tell the stories of what

happened at past events. Take a few moments occasionally to share what happened on the junior high mission trip or at the recent men's breakfast, Pig Jig, etc. This helps members and visitors alike learn about what God is doing through the life of the church and encourages their participation at future events.

Churches often unknowingly speak in a language that might not be understood by an outsider. Be careful not to use church speak or insider language in your announcement time or bulletin by assuming visitors will be familiar with GIC, SWAT, or anything else specific to Oak Hill. Use the opportunity to educate and communicate the distinctives of the church to members, regular attendees, and guests.

Welcome to Guests: The welcome to guests attending the service seemed to be limited to an invitation to sign the card in the pew rack. While many guests want to initially remain anonymous, some people need to be encouraged to fill out the card and let the church know of their presence. This would also be an opportunity to communicate some branding messages/core values/distinctives of the church. As I sat on the front row, there was no chair back in front of me so I had to reach behind to get a card. Seldom will visitors sit on the front row, but including the card either loosely or perfed in the bulletin is another option. Also, this card could take on a multi-use format, not only to register guests, but also to gain other information, whether decision based or prayer based.

The "Welcome each other in the name of Christ" time with the choir leaving the risers to join family and friends in the audience was exceptionally warm and welcoming. It gave the choir as well as other members the opportunity to circulate and introduce themselves to guests. Short introductions across the board to elements of the service go along way in clarifying reasons for doing things a certain way and in not assuming everyone understands why you have a welcome time, or what the purpose of the offering is, or why we give an invitation. As people become less and less concerned about denominational ties, it will become more and more likely that visitors will be unfamiliar with much that has been assumed as common knowledge about church.

Offertory: You might consider a brief note in the bulletin or an introduction to the offering about your expectations of visitors and giving. Something like "As our guest, please do not feel obligated to participate in this part of the service. This is a time for our members and those who attend Oak Hill regularly to worship by giving back to God." This is also an opportunity to emphasize the importance and expectation of participation in all things for members.

You might also use the offering introduction creatively to educate the church on giving resources to the church in a helpful and inspiring way. Giving people a tangible way that their tithes and offerings will be used that week, month, or year can be a very positive way to share the ministry experiences and share stories of God's blessings of fruit in life. This is an outstanding way to educate the congregation about the ways the church budget is being used to reach people including the many mission opportunities. Consider having individual testimonies, written inserts on ministry highlights in the bulletin, stories, or even a live presentation about the impact of the offering.

Message: Pastor Steve's message on "Three questions we need to ask ourselves about worship" was a powerful challenge to the congregation. There was no disconnect in that people were engaged and followed him intently. It was evident that Pastor Steve connected to the congregation, loved them and cared for them, and was in turn greatly admired and appreciated. His style was confident and informed while remaining humble and sincere. He was passionate and relaxed, authoritative and approachable. He was dressed in dark slacks and a gray button down and I noted that several of the other staff that I had been introduced to wore the same attire. This touch showed a thoughtfulness of the staff and communicated a sense of oneness in an institution that is often known to produce silos among the various ministries.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Following are some questions and comments for the Oak Hill Baptist Church leadership to consider as you plan a strategy that will effectively impact guests and members each week:

- Apart from the Sunday worship, how do the individual ministries of Oak Hill connect guests and newcomers to the mission and vision of the church? What are the communication tools used to connect people to Oak Hill's Sunday School classes?
- How can I (young, old, single, married, divorced, etc) connect to the ministries of the church? Where? What does this connection look like? How is this connection evaluated and tracked?
- What will I physically take away from Oak Hill after visiting a Sunday service?
- What do you want people's first impression to be of Oak Hills? Mine was one of sincere warmth and care from the people with an emphasis on worship. How is that strategically communicated to visitors and members?
- How do I find out more information about the church's ministry on my first, second, third visit to Oak Hill? Is it dependant on word of mouth invitation? Does the church have a membership class? We recommend giving regular reminders of the opportunities for people to learn more about Oak Hill.
- How can Oak Hill cultivate and develop the greeter ministry? Make sure the greeters are trained on how to approach new people, how to direct and help them with their questions, and how they can make guests feel comfortable and welcome, especially as you move into a new building. Also, remind your greeters to have the kind of enthusiasm that makes people want to come back to be a part of your ministry. Expand your greeter ministry to include parking lot greeters who will welcome people right when they drive onto the property. They should be both men and women of varying ages. Make sure they are outgoing people who are willing and able to provide friendly direction. Keep them up-to-date so they can be knowledgeable about where to park and where to go, and what entrance to use, etc. Make sure these folks are not too pushy or overly direct as they are the first contact for a visitor of the church.
- How can the church's facilities enhance the experience for guests and newcomers? Be deliberate about the experience people will have upon driving onto the church's campus. Consider the activity and layout of the new welcome center, coffee stations, signage, navigation in a way that provides a strong experience for all who step onto the Oak Hill campus on Sundays and throughout the week.
- Do Oak Hill members and regular attenders know how God is working in individual lives at the church? Make a habit of asking people to share what God is doing in their lives through the ministry of the church and get permission from them to use those stories in your promotions, publications, ministry events and worship services.

CONCLUSION

Overall, Details' experience at Oak Hill was very positive. There is an obvious commitment to excellence and honoring God in word and deed. Many of our observations from the experience are not negatives for the church so much as areas of focus that will help move the experience from good to great. We commend the church leadership and numerous volunteers for their passion for Christ and the church. You have something special at Oak Hill and we are excited about our ministry partnership with you as you grow and minister to your surrounding areas.

Blessings.

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