Leap of Faith: Megachurches and the struggle to create a brand experience that sells

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As churches across the Commonwealth experience an increase in attendance, membership and giving, religious organizations are failing to connect with their audience and their organizational goals on social media. This exploratory content analysis evaluated the social media branding practices of Kentucky’s 20 megachurches and proposed areas of improvement. A megachurch is defined as a Protestant Christian congregation with an average of 2,000 weekly attendees, including adults and children across all worship locations.

Kentucky megachurches were selected for study as the state is ranked No. 25 in the nation for number of megachurches, making the state saliently situated to be a resource for megachurches across the country. Facebook, Instagram and Twitter profiles were evaluated on follower-to-member ratio, post frequency, promotional materials, access of new-member information and other relevant branding factors.

Results of the study found Kentucky megachurches need to significantly improve their branding practices in order to become aggressive participants in consumer marketing. In future research, the scholar aspires to measure these implemented suggestions through a case study.

Similar to their secular counterparts, megachurches are navigating their brand through a marketplace filled with modernization, secular competition, changing consumer expectations and religious shopping. By understanding this evolving role of religious consumption, megachurches will better market themselves in a way to attract more followers, connect with their audience and achieve organizational goals.

Due to the increasing consumer reliance on social media for information-gathering, networking, entertainment and brand awareness, it is imperative megachurches implement branding practices found successful in market research. Therefore, this research will establish what branding practices Kentucky megachurches do well and where improvement can be made.

Kentucky’s 20 megachurches were analyzed based on their Facebook, Instagram and Twitter platforms’ branding from Jan. 1, 2018 to Sept. 14, 2018. Collected quantitative and qualitative data were compared among branding research to create a general understanding of the Commonwealth’s megachurch branding.

A careful analysis of Commonwealth megachurches’ social media show a lack of religious marketing and branding. There are numerous factors that could explain this trend. In theological seminaries, marketing and branding practices are viewed as “practical theology,” resulting in little appearance in course curriculum. Other times, updating social media platforms is added to the present responsibilities of secretaries or other personnel. As a result, social media can easily fall at the bottom of a to-do list. Some megachurches do not have money to hire a full-time social media specialist, or they may be reluctant to let technology into the sanctity of their church.

Despite these challenges, it is integral for churches to implement social media branding in order to champion an environment that welcomes two-way discussion, new members, emotional connection and user loyalty. In the end, megachurches must recognize social media users will always have a brand experience with their church; while the experience is influenced by uncontrolled factors, megachurches have the ability to make a positive impression on social media users.

In future research, the researcher aspires to measure the quantitative and qualitative outcome of implementing successful social media branding in a megachurch. Projected outcomes include increased number of followers, engagements and actions on the page.

REFERENCES


