



HOW
TO MAKE
A GREAT
**FIRST-TIME
GUEST**
IMPRESSION

**\$23.95
VALUE!**

BY NELSON SEARCY
Lead Pastor, The Journey Church

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MEET NELSON SEARCY

Nelson Searcy is the Founding and Lead Pastor of The Journey Church. Started in 2002 in New York City, this groundbreaking church sees the majority of its growth coming from new believers and currently meets in Manhattan and Queens, as well as in San Francisco and Boca Raton, FL.

He is the author of over seventy-five church-growth resources and ten books, including the BRAND-NEW books *Connect: How to Double Your Number of Volunteers* and *The Greatness Principle: Finding Significance and Joy by Serving Others*.

Nelson is also an experienced church planter, coach and church-growth strategist. Before founding The Journey, he served as the Director of the Purpose Driven Community at Saddleback Church. He is also the founder of ChurchLeaderInsights.com, the Church Leader Training ministry of Nelson Searcy and The Journey Church.



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INTRODUCTION

You won't get a second chance. Seven minutes is all the time you have to make a positive first impression on the first-time guests who walk through your doors. In the first seven minutes of their experience with your church, your guests will decide whether or not they're going to come back. That's before a single worship song is sung and before a single word of teaching is uttered. Maybe that seems unfair to you but, fair or not, it's true. Blame it on the power of the God-given subconscious mind.

Obviously, your guests aren't making a well-thought-out decision based on the integrity of the preaching (they haven't heard it yet), the character of the church staff (they've never met them), or the clarity of your doctrine (what's doctrine?). They're not weighing the pros and cons of your worship style and theological viewpoints. Instead, they are taking in clues about your church's atmosphere and people's friendliness on a much more rudimentary level. Their subconscious minds are working overtime to evaluate their compatibility with this new environment.

So the question becomes: How can you, as a church leader, take advantage of this reality? That is, how can you identify and strengthen what's actually being judged? What factors and feelings play into a guest's first impression? How much control can you have over doing things in a way that will make the experience a positive one? To truly get a glimpse of the power of your church's first impression on a guest, let's step to the other side and look at the experience from a first-time guest's point of view.

In the first seven minutes, your guests will decide whether or not they're going to come back.

Jon hits the blaring alarm clock and nudges his wife. Liz sits up in bed, debating with herself. Even though she has been talking about going back to church for years, she's not thrilled with the idea of following through on this particular day. She didn't sleep well last night and the

afternoon is packed with activities for the kids. But, a friend invited them for the second time and they hated to say no again, so today is the day. Liz throws back the covers and gets out of bed.

Once up, Jon and Liz's morning plays like something out of a Stephen King novel. The kids, four and two, both throw temper tantrums, the eggs burn, and the dog smuggles his latest catch into the house. Tired, irritated, and already running late, Jon finally gets everyone packed into the car and off they go...

THWART THE ENEMY'S PLANS

Let's pause for a reality check. When an unchurched person or family decides to attend your church for the first time, what do you think is going to happen to them the morning of the service? Whatever the enemy can pull out of his bag to throw their way, right? If he can't keep them from attending, he will at least make sure they hit the parking lot stressed out and in no mood for what lies ahead. He knows that if he can sow pre-service defensiveness and negativity, eight out of ten American churches won't do anything to turn that guest's attitude around. In most cases, the church will just make him self-conscious, uncomfortable and, by default, more irritable. Sadly, by nudging guests to disengage before they walk through the door, the enemy usually wins the battle before it even starts. But he can't win if you don't let him. You can thwart his plans by creating a comfortable, inviting pre-service.



PRE-SERVICE: FROM THE STREET TO THE SEAT

The pre-service is your first opportunity to interact with everyone who sets foot on your church's property – from first-time guests to long-time members – but its purpose and influence is particularly important for first-timers. Your pre-service mission, if you choose to accept it, is to do everything you can to take your guest's guard down (and even put a smile on his face) before the service begins.

There are four primary ways you can influence your guests during the pre-service: by controlling how they are *greeted, directed, treated and seated*. Let's go back to our fictional example. Take a look at how a successful pre-service might play out at any given church on any given weekend...

Jon, Liz and the kids drive into the parking lot of the church, and are immediately impressed by what they see. The building, though not large or even new, is obviously well cared for. The grass is even freshly cut. Everyone is headed toward a main front door, where a nice-looking couple about Jon and Liz's age is speaking warmly to each person and handing out some kind of program (you might call it a bulletin, but since Jon and Liz are unchurched they are more likely to think of it as a program).

Once through the door themselves, where they were welcomed with a smile and a genuine "glad you are here," Liz immediately spots two signs telling her exactly what she needs to know. One points the way to the restroom that her four-year-old urgently needs, and the other points toward the children's area. After stop number one, Jon and Liz check the children's area sign again and start in the direction its pointing. A volunteer spots them and offers to lead them directly to the right place for each of their children.

You can influence your guests by controlling how they are greeted, directed, treated and seated.

When the kids have been dropped off, Jon notices the smell of coffee and donuts wafting towards him. He turns a corner to find a table piled high with Krispy Kreme boxes, fruit, and coffee. Exchanging surprised glances, he and Liz grab a donut (well, she grabs an apple, he grabs a donut) and a cup of coffee and start timidly toward one of the aisles. Another volunteer steps up and directs them to two open seats.

Jon begins to realize that the foul mood he drove into the parking lot with has been brightened a little by the smiles around him, the coffee in his hand, and the overall atmosphere of the church. The people seem incredibly friendly and actually happy that he and Liz are there. At the church they used to go to, people hardly offered a smile, much less helpful information or a donut – and he’s always thought all churches were the same. As the service begins, he can’t help but wonder what’s going on in this place...

Creating an environment that makes your first-time guests feel both welcomed and respected is key to winning a return visit and beginning the process of assimilating them well. When God entrusts you with first-time guests, you face an incredible responsibility. One

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of the best ways to acknowledge your guests as the gifts they are is by having a pre-service in place that will far exceed their expectations and create that elusive positive first impression. You’ll excite them to want to visit your church again and again, so that they can ultimately learn about the excellence, graciousness, hospitality and generosity of the One after whom you are modeling everything you do.

Now that you’ve seen what a successful pre-service experience looks like, let’s dive more deeply into each of its four components:

PRE-SERVICE

Make sure your guests are:

Greeted: Welcomed with a smile.

Directed: Simply and politely directed to where they need to go.

Treated: Shown respect and happily surprised with comfort food and drink.

Seated: Led to a comfortable, appropriate seat.

GREET: WELCOME GUESTS WITH A SMILE

Memorize the next sentence and make it your mantra:

Everything speaks to a first-time guest.

Everything.

From the moment a guest sets foot on your property, he tunes in to receive the message your church is sending. And your church is always sending a message, whether you realize it or not. The condition of your building, your sign, your lawn, and your parking lot all speak to him. He's already making gut-level judgment calls. He's not necessarily being critical (although he may be, depending on his history with church); he's just being human. He's reading his environment. Knowing this, you have to make sure you're sending a welcoming message.

PUT YOUR BEST FACE(S) FORWARD

You have an obligation to strive for excellence. You don't have to be perfect, you just have to do the very best you can with what you've got – which is the definition of Godly excellence. You don't have to have a brand-new building or a big shiny sign to make a good

A friendly face offering a warm welcome speaks volumes.

impression, but chipped paint and overgrown grass will certainly make a bad one. If you're like most church leaders, you may be so familiar with your building and your land that you don't really see them anymore. Take a fresh look around. Drive into your parking lot and intentionally examine your church through a guest's eyes. Are you communicating the right message?

While the appearance of your church is extremely important, the most crucial part of the "greeted" area of contact is who your guests meet when they get to the front door – your greeters. A friendly face offering a warm welcome speaks volumes. Greeters should practically

radiate the underlying message you want to send to your guests: “We’re nice people, and we’re glad you’re here!”

SET CLEAR EXPECTATIONS

As you put people in place as greeters, make sure they understand the importance of their job and know exactly what is expected of them. Volunteers want and need clear direction from you and your staff. They will feel more comfortable at their post if you’ve told them what they should say and how they should say it. Greeters, along with all volunteers, have an innate fear of not

Volunteers want and need clear direction from you and your staff.

pleasing you, while at the same time you have a fear of asking too much of them. This creates a vicious cycle where everyone is tiptoeing around everyone else, and guests aren’t being greeted as effectively as they could be. Let your greeters know that you expect them to offer a big, authentic smile, say hello, and put a program in each person’s hands.

FLASH YOUR “SMILE PRACTICE”

At The Journey, we take the idea of greeting our guests with a smile so seriously that we’ve been known to do smile practice! Our volunteer system is a little different from most. We never know who is going to show up to help with the service on any given Sunday. We have developed a culture where our people always have the option of coming an hour early to serve, so every week we trust God that one hundred to two hundred volunteers will show up – and they do! Once the volunteers arrive, we divide the responsibilities among them. We want to make sure the friendliest people, with the most genuine smiles, are stationed as greeters so sometimes we do “smile practice” in our pre-service volunteer meeting to make sure we choose the right people. Not only does everyone get to practice putting on a huge smile, but the ones who end up as greeters understand that the smile they give guests is so important that it just landed them the position.

There's an old business axiom that says you can hire unfriendly people and work hard to teach them to smile, or you can hire smiling friendly people and turn them loose. The latter seems like a nice shortcut to us, which is why we think it's important to intentionally choose our greeters instead of simply taking the first volunteers for that position. I suggest putting smile practice in place in your culture, and positioning great big grins at your front door.



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DIRECT: SIMPLY AND POLITELY DIRECT GUESTS WHERE THEY NEED TO GO

The second step in a successful pre-service is to make sure your guests are quickly, simply and politely shown where they need to go, either by a sign, a volunteer, or both. Imagine if Jon and Liz had walked through the door of this unfamiliar church and had no idea where the restroom was. Since their child needed one, not only would they be facing a minor emergency, but they would have been put in the awkward position of having to stop someone and ask. Automatically, this would have made them feel more uncomfortable and out of place. Their level of anxiety would have risen, at the expense of their positive first impression. The same story applies if they didn't know where or how to drop their kids off for the children's ministry.

THE SIGNS...SHOULD BE EVERYWHERE!

When it comes to real estate, we all know the importance of location, location, location. Within the church, the equally important and correlating phrase to remember is "signs, signs, signs!" Signs are the single best way to ensure that your guests can find what they need. The two areas in particular that demand clear signs are the restrooms and the children's area. If your front door is not easily discernable from the parking lot, make sure you have a sign in place for it, too.

Even if you think you have enough signs, you need more.

A common tendency is to think that your guests will figure out how to find what they need – that your building is "pretty easy" to navigate. For you, that's true. For your guests, who have never set foot in your door and whose anxiety levels are already registering high, it's not. They have taken a big step by simply crossing your threshold. Make sure you throw them the safety net of letting them know exactly where to go next. Even if you think you have enough signs, you need more.

In traveling to and working with thousands of churches across the country, I am continually amazed at how difficult it is to navigate the average church building. More than half of the time, I'm not sure exactly where to park, where to enter the building or how to find the main sanctuary – and I am generally good with directions! If I find it difficult to navigate unfamiliar church buildings, then apprehensive, unchurched guests definitely find them confusing, and confusion creates anxiety. If your building is the least bit perplexing to your first-timers, they will become even more anxious than they already are. Good directions and an abundance of signage can lower their anxiety and point them through the open door that leads to hearing the Good News.

If your guest asks for directions, your staff person or greeter should act as a personal escort.

While signs are key, they're not enough on their own. Let your staff and greeters serve as back-up to your signs. Train your staff, and then have them train your greeters, to look for people who seem unsure of where to go, then approach them and ask if they need help. When your guest, in turn, asks for directions to a particular location, your staff person or greeter should not just point out the way but act as a personal escort. If the location in question is the children's area, your staff person or greeter may want to go so far as to introduce the new parents and children to whoever is in charge of the children's ministry. As the old saying goes, "God is in the details."



TREAT: SHOW RESPECT AND HAPPILY SURPRISE GUESTS WITH COMFORT FOOD AND DRINK

A first-time guest wants to feel respected and welcomed. He wants to know that you are happy he's there, and that you are serious about making sure he has a good experience. The way you, your team, and your regular attenders treat him and his family will tell him most of what he needs to know. Sadly, a large majority of American churches aren't eager to welcome guests, much less make them feel at home. When a guest shows up, these churches have no idea what to do with him. The unfamiliar face is as intimidating to the church family as their faces are to him. We've all heard the stories, or witnessed services ourselves, where first-time guests were altogether ignored, or made to feel like they were in the wrong place. What do you think that communicates about God's love? Do you think that guest would ever choose to return to such an environment, or ever return to another church again?

DELIVER "RAVING FAN" SERVICE

The church is not a business, but if you want to learn how to make your visitors feel welcomed, it's a good idea to take some cues from the customer-conscious service world. Good businesses understand that treating a guest with respect and making sure he has a good first experience is essential to winning a return visit. Shouldn't churches be the ones teaching the business world about embracing and serving those who walk through our doors? This is where Biblical hospitality meets the business concept of customer service. Unfortunately, in most churches, the customer service aspect of ministry has been on the decline for way too long.

This is where Biblical hospitality meets the business concept of customer service.

In *Raving Fans*, Ken Blanchard's exploration of stellar customer service, he defines three secrets to creating environments that will wow your guests and make them feel like they're being treated well. One of those secrets is to always "deliver your vision plus one percent":

"Let's look at it," said Andrew. "The secret says two things. First, it tells you to deliver. Not sometimes, not most times, but all the time. Second it talks about 'plus one percent.' I'll come back to that, but first of all we have to talk about delivery."

"Consistency, consistency, consistency," interjected Charlie. "Consistency is critical. Consistency creates credibility. My pro will explain how it works. Andrew, if you please."

"With pleasure, Charlie," said Andrew. "As Charlie told you, consistency is key to delivering Raving Fan Service. When you're creating Raving Fans, it's a fragile relationship. They've been burned before and don't trust easily. You're trying to pull them in and they're usually trying to resist. Consistency will overcome resistance, but in the meantime, they're watching like a hawk for you to mess up."

OVERCOME SKEPTICISM THROUGH CONSISTENCY

When you give your guests a consistent experience, their skepticism goes down while their curiosity goes up.

This couldn't be truer when it comes to creating raving fans out of first-time guests. Most of the people who walk through your door have been burned by church, negative press about the church or by a friend or family member in the name of religion. More than likely, they are skeptical and waiting, as Andrew said, for you to mess it up. When you give them a consistent pre-service experience that makes them feel important, their skepticism goes down while their positive impression and curiosity goes up, leaving you in the perfect position to make a real spiritual impact. So how do you continually add the one percent that makes their experience just a little sweeter? Well, food isn't associated with comfort (and pleasure) for nothing.

FEED THEM AND THEY WILL COME

James Beard once said, “Food is our common ground, a universal experience.” It also provides a welcome, comforting treat in any situation. A cup of Starbucks’ coffee acts as a security blanket for millions of adults every day. Ever notice how a two-hundred-pound man in a crowd of strangers suddenly feels more comfortable if he has an eight-ounce Styrofoam cup to hide behind? Providing food is one of the best ways to show your guest you care about him, and a sure way to put him at ease. When done well, food can go a long way toward wowing your guest, but when done poorly, it can really turn him off.

A few words of advice: Don’t skimp on food. This is not the area to try and save a nickel. Don’t cut things in half to make them stretch. Don’t glare at the person who takes three donuts. Food is your chance to show the unchurched person that you care enough to offer him something for free that will meet a need; it’s your chance to show him an example of God’s generosity.

Food is certainly not a necessity, but it goes a long way toward making a solid impression. If you choose to do it, do it well. Keep in mind that you aren’t preparing a five-course breakfast. You are simply making your food offering with excellence. Quality, not extravagance, is the key. Recently at The Journey, we received this survey response from a first-time visitor, “Q: What did you notice? A: The smiles, warm reception and Krispy Kreme donuts. Q: What did you like best? A: Besides the friendly atmosphere, again the coffee and donuts!” We hear echoes of this sentiment every week.

Don’t skimp on food. This is not the area to try and save a nickel.



SEAT: LEAD GUESTS TO A COMFORTABLE, APPROPRIATE SEAT

Now that your guest has been sincerely greeted, helpfully directed, and well treated, all that's left is for him to be properly seated. While it would be easy to let your guests fend for themselves to find a seat, it's a terrible idea. Think back to Jon and Liz. If no volunteer had stepped up to show them to a seat as they started timidly down the aisle, they would have walked by filled rows, glancing uncomfortably for empty seats, hoping they wouldn't have

While it would be easy to let your guests fend for themselves to find a seat, it's a terrible idea.

to squeeze past someone already situated. They probably would have ended up close to the back of the church, where they could more easily find space without having to interact with anyone and more easily remain anonymous.

Thankfully, the aisle usher, who was ready and eager to escort them to a seat, relieved Jon and Liz of the pressure they were probably starting to feel. The usher knew how to ask those already seated to slide toward the middle, or to stand and let Jon and Liz slide in, which the two of them would never have done on their own. So, Jon and Liz ended up in comfortable seats, close to the front, without having to fumble through an awkward situation.

STRIVE FOR "USHER SERVICE"

The first time my wife and I went to a Broadway show, we saw the value of a good usher in action. From the moment we entered the theater, we were literally ushered to our seats. If you've ever experienced Broadway, you know the drill. The usher who scans your ticket points you toward the correct entrance (or in our case, the correct staircase for the cheap seats!), where there is another usher who points you toward the correct aisle, where there is yet another usher who walks you directly to your row and motions to your seats. We realized that as long as we

had our ticket in hand for the ushers to see, they would do all the work. We were along for the ride. That's usher service.

On the other hand, we've been to sports arenas and concert venues where we missed the first fifteen minutes of the event trying to find the right wing, level, section and row for our seats. We were on our own, juggling concessions and upset that we were missing something we had paid to see. There was certainly no usher in place to make sure we had a smooth experience.

Here's the difference in thinking: Those Broadway shows run every night. They want you to come again. They want you to tell your friends. They want you to bring out-of-town guests. They want to ensure you've had an experience that will keep you coming back for more. At most concerts and sporting events, the venue proprietors aren't nearly as concerned with earning your repeat business. They know that their draw is the night's particular entertainment. The next night, it will be a new, differently-focused crowd, who will be there to see their favorite artist or team, generally in spite of venue conditions. So, earning a return visit through offering a high level of service is not a priority to them.

Your goal is to make your first-time guests as comfortable and happy as possible.

When it comes to providing service to your first-time guests, be continually aware that your goal is to make them as comfortable and happy as possible. You want them to come back. You want them to bring their friends. Approach this area of service with the mindset of Broadway's bright lights rather than that of self-service stadiums.



SEVEN MINUTES AND COUNTING

The thinking behind “Greeted, Directed, Treated and Seated” may be a paradigm shift for you. Until this point, your plan for first-time guests may have been simply to get them through the door and make your impression with the service itself. While that sounds good in theory, research has shown that you don’t have that luxury. By the time your service starts, your guests have already made judgments about your environment, interacted with people who

Once the first impression has been made, you can do very little in the service itself to change it.

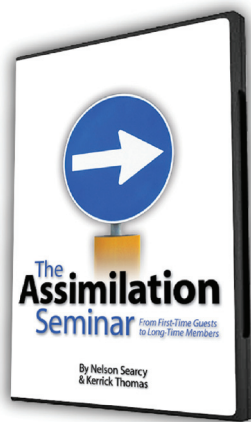
may or may not have rubbed them the right way, figured out how to navigate your hallways, and found themselves a seat...more than enough experience with your church for a gut-level impression to have firmly formed. And once the first impression has been made, you can do very little in the service itself to change it. If they have already formed a negative impression, that impression becomes the lens through which they view everything else over the next hour or so. Conversely, if you create a “raving fan” in the pre-service,

they will engage in the rest of your service with a heightened enthusiasm, which leaves them more open to hearing from God.

In his instructions to the church practitioners at Corinth, Paul encouraged his listeners, *“Let all things be done decently and in order”* (1 Cor. 14:40). Why? Because everything done in preparation for a church service works together to represent God’s character to the unchurched person. They may not immediately know why they like your church, or why they feel comfortable, but it’s because you’ve done the work to set them at ease before they knew they were coming. You have established an environment that resonates positively with their subconscious mind, before they even evaluate it on a conscious level.

Something in them connects with the smile they’ve been offered. They feel relief that they don’t have to ask for directions to the restroom. They feel loved by the donuts and coffee you’ve made available to them. They appreciate the seat you’ve provided. In those first seven minutes, all of these things work together to create an impression that will open the future

door of opportunity for you to minister in their lives in a truly meaningful way. With a strong pre-service in place, seven minutes is all you need to show your guests just how much you care about them and want them back!



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I hope you'll let me help you keep more guests and accomplish all that God wants to through you and your ministry.

Your partner in ministry,


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