More than the Service: Designing the Guest Experience
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How to Use This Tool
This Conference Classics process tool is designed to accompany an audio recording of a Willow Creek Association conference session. You can refer to the tool while listening to the session and use it afterward to dig deeper into the content, or you can use the tool to get the highlights without even listening to the session.

This tool consists of three parts:
- The PREVIEW section lists the problem that the session addresses and the recommendation that the speaker makes.
- The KEY CONCEPTS section breaks the session down into the core ideas most important for you to understand.
- The REFLECT section includes questions to help you practice, apply, and implement what you’ve learned. Although the questions are geared primarily to individuals, groups can use them as a discussion guide.
Problem: Too often churches only pay attention to the design of their services, not realizing how many other elements affect people’s openness toward God from the moment they arrive on campus.

Recommendation: Thoughtfully design your entire guest experience to maximize opportunities for people to connect with God.

Key Concepts

Definition of an Experience

- Tom Peters, business guru and author of the book Design describes an experience as a holistic, emotional, and transforming event.
- He adds that an experience is a soul-jogging, spirit-lifting adventure or happening with a beginning, middle, and an end that leaves an indelible memory.
- Though not a designer himself, Peters has a great idea of design and how it can affect people.
- Here are examples of concepts that have become more of an experience:
  - Harley Davidson
    - They’re not just motorcycles.
    - They’re an opportunity for a lifestyle.
  - Starbucks
    - They call themselves “the third place.”
    - It’s not home or work.
    - It’s more than just coffee.
    - It’s the experience you get when you’re there.
- Church needs to become a fully impacting experience for the people who walk in.
  - It’s not about creating a fantasy.
  - It’s about having the authenticity of the place shine through as guests enter and all the way through until they leave.

Why Create an Experience

- The experience you create is based on your culture, your church, and its values.
- It’s not about entertainment, though humor and entertaining elements are used.
- The purpose is helping guests in their spiritual journey and drawing them closer to God.
- It’s about engagement.
- Why take the time to design the experience?
  - You will have an experience of some kind.
  - The question is if it will be random or designed.
- We have the ability to pay attention and design the experience for maximum impact.
- At Willow Creek, a piece of the experience the team has to counter is the size of the church.
  - The wow factor can be intimidating and cold.
  - The team looks for ways to shrink the place in the experience they create.
  - They use the terms service hosts and guests rather than ushers and congregants.
  - They treat everyone as a guest, no matter how long they’ve been attending.
- Even those who are believers need to connect with God on a daily basis and need to be engaged for that purpose.
- You don’t want your guests to have a random experience.
It takes a lot of detail to put it all together
One out-of-place stimulus (such as a sloppy or unfriendly volunteer) can negate what you’re trying to accomplish with an experience.
Remove things that aren’t harmoniously telling the same story.
Taking time to design the whole experience makes all the difference in the world.

- The service needs to continue the story.
  - Create a seamless transition from the lobby to the service.
  - Disney calls it a cross fade when you leave one place and enter another.
  - Integrate the brand into the service.
- Don’t forget that when the service ends, the experience is still there.
  - You want to reinforce that powerful experience they’ve just had as they exit.
  - Make sure lobbies are clean as they exit.
  - The exit has the same power as the entrance.
- Does the experience live on?
  - How do people process or take the next steps?
  - Provide resources.
  - Encourage people to gather over meals to talk about their experience.
  - The memory of a good experience will contribute to your guests’ desire to return.
  - Experience can be reinforced through taste, as when gathering for a shared meal.
  - In most cultures the sharing of food goes way beyond nourishment of the body; it is a social activity.
  - Encourage development of gatherings over food.

Reflect

1. The best way to understand the experience of a guest at your church is to hear a guest’s perspective. Below, write the names of two or three people who are new to your church. If you can’t think of any, write the names of acquaintances you have who don’t attend your church. Record a date when you will contact them to request their feedback on your church. If the people you listed don’t attend your church, plan a date with them when they can visit your church for the purpose of giving you feedback.

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