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FROM
"SHOW UP"

TO
"GROW UP"

How to Make Top Content
That Makes Real Disciples

Cover design by Richard Fink.

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SHOWING UP

The Gigantic Assumption behind 80-Plus Percent of Church Communication

"Showing up," Woody Allen famously said, "is 80 percent of life."

In the conventional wisdom of ministry, showing up is also 80 percent of church.

I'm not referring to *you* showing up—you do a lot more than that. *You* are working hard out of eyesight of everyone. *You* are responding to scores of emails. *You* are studying and praying and preparing and practicing for those moments when everyone *else* shows up.

That's the 80 percent I'm talking about: 80 percent of church is *other people* showing up. *Will my staff show up? Will my leaders show up? Will my volunteers show up? Will my people show up?*

And the most anxiety-producing question of all: *will NEW people show up?* Especially, will people who don't show up to any church, anywhere, show up?

Eighty percent of our anxieties, perhaps as much of our efforts, and in most cases nearly all of our outbound communication rest on this question.

However, if showing up really is 80 percent of church, then we are in bad shape today. We're getting failing marks on the assignment that constitutes 80 percent of our grade.

Why People Aren't Showing Up

Church attendance is declining all over North America. It's declining in small churches, medium-sized churches, and large churches. It's declining in rural, urban, and suburban churches. It's declining in long-established churches and newer churches. It's declining in liberal churches and conservative churches. It's declining in churches of every denomination. It's declining in churches of every ethnic background.

Showing up isn't declining in every single church, but it is declining in every single *kind* of church, nearly indiscriminately.

Carey Nieuwhof writes, "Every generation experiences change. But sometimes you sense you're in the midst of truly radical change, the kind that happens only every few centuries. Increasingly, I think we're in such a moment now."[1]

Setting aside outsiders (people not already connected to one's church) for a moment, insiders' shifting behavior alone has a lot to do with attendance decline. Simply put, participation frequency is decreasing. It's not that you're losing people; it's that your people are coming less often. "Regular attendance" used to mean attending worship about 50 Sundays a year. Now it may be half that, for a host of reasons.

We can blame affluence, travel, programmed youth activities outside the church, longer working hours that crowd out time to relax and time to go shopping and wash the car, and on and on. We might even credit a broad, healthy retreat from legalistic preaching and teaching that blows correct religious behaviors—including church attendance—out of proportion to the whole of the Christian life.

Yet there's also a spooky factor that is fed by all of these

influences yet seems to be larger than all of them. It's that people want to show up less often, not just to church, but to anything. And increasingly, they don't have to.

People used to have to show up to a physical workplace to keep a job. Not anymore, depending on the profession and the organization.

People used to have to show up to a store to get possessions and supplies. Not anymore. (Thank you, Amazon.)

People used to have to show up to the theater to watch a good movie—or even to a video store to rent one. Not anymore. (Thank you, Netflix.)

People used to have to show up to a stadium to watch a college football game. Even though games have been televised for a long time, until recently many or even most of them were not. Now all of them are. (Thank you, ESPN.) Even as major college athletic programs are raking in money from TV rights at an unprecedented rate, aggregate attendance at football games has declined for the last four consecutive years for the first time in history.

I'm not rattling off these exhibits to set up an argument for "online church." That's a conversation (or debate) worth having, but it's not my subject here. My point is that, even aside from "the rise of the nones"[2]—which is hugely important to this dynamic— there are broad, complex, impersonal, all-encompassing economic and sociocultural influences on people both not to *have* to show up and not to *want* to show up . . . to anything.

The Communications Audit

So, the church is only one institution that's feeling the strain of this shift. But the church is feeling it especially intensely because of how much weight we've laid on showing up.

More importantly for this book, our communications, both inbound and outbound, revolve around it.

Try this tiny research project: a communications audit. Count

up every discrete online message from your church that is visible to the general public over a modest period of time. It could be over the last 14 or 30 or 90 days, depending on how vigorous your church is at communicating. The audit encompasses your website, all your social media feeds, your YouTube or Vimeo channel, your podcast, and so on. And when I'm talking about a "discrete message," I mean every news item, post, tweet, article, episode, video.

Now, of those messages, what percentage was *not* either advertising an event you wanted people to show up to or photographically documenting an event that people already showed up to (or should have)?

Do you see where I'm going with this?

Now, from what remains, clear away any messages that require viewing or listening for more than seven minutes. (There go the sermons and podcast eps.) Then clear away the remaining messages that require a modest degree of Christian knowledge to understand them. What percentage of your total number of online messages do you have left?

That percentage is how much of your communication (1) addresses unchurched and barely churched people (2) that they could consume in a fairly short time (3) that *isn't* primarily trying to get them to show up.

All the rest either tries to get people to show up or else communicates a message to those already committed enough to the faith to understand the message and/or spend a hefty chunk of time consuming it.

For most churches, that "all the rest" adds up to more than Woody Allen's 80 percent.

What Are We Communicating For?

I hope you're beginning to see what I've begun to see—that the implicit purpose behind almost all church communication is to get

people to show up . . . to our worship services, our outreach events, our small groups, our vision nights.

Now, I believe in showing up. I show up quite a bit myself. I'm raising my kids to show up, I invite unbelievers to show up, and I urge showing up on other professed churchgoers who don't show up nearly as often as they think or say they do. I'll get into a bit of why I believe in showing up in the next chapter.

Yet I wonder, what are we really expecting to accomplish with our outbound communication?

Is "show up" the best first message to send to that anonymous person who just "met" our church online, especially given the intensifying societal pull away from showing up?

What do we expect to happen as a result of the person showing up if they go against the tide and actually do show up?

What foundation are we laying in the life of a disciple-in-the-making when the primary instruction we give them (and never stop giving them) is to show up?

Finally, is "show up" the message that Jesus commissioned his apostles—and all of us, his followers—to proclaim?

NOTES

[1] Carey Nieuwhof, "10 Predictions About The Future Church and Shifting Attendance Patterns," https://careynieuwhof.com/10-predictions-about-the-future-church-and-shifting-attendance-patterns (accessed August 9, 2018).

[2] James Emery White, *The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2014).