



Church Inc.

IN ADDITION TO THEIR REGULAR HOW-TO RESOURCES,
BUSINESSES LEARN FROM THRIVING WORSHIP CENTERS.

BY LOYD MCINTOSH PHOTOS BY CARY NORTON





What are they doing right that I'm not? If you've used that phrase, then you know how it feels to watch others succeed while you struggle. Whether it's the guy who always gets the girl, the team that always catches the right breaks or the girl in class that seems to always breeze to an A+ while you struggle for a B-, success can prove elusive.

In today's economic climate, many businesses are looking for signs of success anywhere they can. While luck may be part of it, there is always a plan behind true success, and there is usually someone behind that design willing to tell you how he or she made it happen. You just have to know where to look. Modern, often nondenominational churches have seen booming growth in recent years, and many of their strategies translate easily to the business community.

Chapter 1: Simplify and Serve

Trent Cotton, a human resources consultant, says communication is where many businesses take a wrong turn. Cotton is a member of Westwood Baptist Church in Alabaster, and he consults with businesses, using biblical themes as his foundation. He believes much can be learned from the pastors of many of the fastest-growing churches throughout the nation.

While there are inevitably a few shysters out there, most, he says, are presenting the Gospel in an undiluted form, and it should not go unnoticed that these churches are bursting at the seams. A hefty dose of the truth, it turns out, is good for business. "There is a ration of pastors that sugarcoat the Gospel. However, many of the churches that are experiencing unprecedented growth don't sugarcoat it."

In the same way, Cotton says companies often hide behind slogans and promises, but then can't deliver in a crisis. A recent example, Cotton notes, is BP. "What if BP had just come out and said, 'We goofed, and we're going to

work hard to fix the problem' from the very beginning?"

"One thing businesses can learn is to be church-like with the message. You have to be the message," he adds. "If what you're doing doesn't resemble your message, then you may need to change how you do things."

Church at Brook Hills member Andy Underwood has become inspired by what he sees around him in his church—a back-to-basics approach. A salesman for First Data, a point-of-sale retail computer systems company, and the founder of the non-profit organization Skills For Orphans, Underwood believes churches and companies alike could reach more people if they would strip away the convoluted marketing schemes and overly clever advertising and focus on simply serving their community and customers.

"I think churches lose their way when they try to be like companies that use advertising to make us laugh or freak us out," Underwood says. "I think our church is growing because we serve needs. That's exactly what I look to do in my work, keeping my focus on serving people."

The reality is, many modern churches are running circles around companies today when it comes to simplifying the language, losing the jargon and identifying new populations to serve. Locally, the Birmingham YMCA recently spent a year overhauling its member engagement process. Vice President of Association Advancement Lisa Jones assembled a team that talked to former members, looked at other businesses and visited several churches, including Church of the Highlands on Grants Mill Road and Mountaintop Community Church in Vestavia Hills. Jones says she and her team learned a lot from these churches about serving needs, but what really stuck out was how they communicate to the unchurched. By stripping away the lingo, Jones says the YMCA has made it to serve "health seekers" through a member engagement process called "Pathways."

"Businesses are really guilty of going insider with language," says Jones. "Here at the YMCA, for instance, we would talk about a class or an exercise program and talk about 'core conditioning.' To someone who doesn't know that the core are those muscles that



keep your spine erect and keep your stomach taut, it's the center of an apple."

At several churches, Jones and her team were interested in signs and placards that easily communicated information to newcomers as they passed through the lobby. "One of the churches we looked at had a sign that read 'What next?' So, you make it very clear that there is a point of contact and a way for people to get more information. That's something that we are very intentionally trying to adopt at the YMCA," Jones says. "A lot of our branches are really big and really busy, and it can be very easy to join and be lost."

One of the keys to a strong organization is great service through empowerment, says Neil Clement, co-founder and shareholder of RichardsonClement PC, a local law firm specializing in corporate litigation defense. Clement, also a member of the Church at Brook Hills, says he is inspired by the focus on missions the church has adopted and it identifies needs, empowers those served and fellow church members alike.

"Brook Hills is extremely mission-minded and good at finding local communities to serve, like the East Lake and Gate City communities, and taking them under their wing," Clement says. "Your corporation needs to think about who it is serving and work hard to empower its customers and staff."

For instance, Clement says after founding his firm in 2008, primarily focusing on worker's and employee compensation, he says they have branched out into corporate law service after identifying the need in the law community.



LINDA CRUMP

MOUNTAIN TOP COMMUNITY CHURCH
DIRECTOR OF ASSIMILATION
AND WOMEN'S MINISTRY

Chapter 2: Find Disciples

Before beginning her career in the ministry, Mountaintop Community Church Director of Assimilation and Women's Ministry Linda Crump spent 15 years as a successful Mary Kay representative, developing a number of skills that she applies to work at Mountaintop. Perhaps her most important gift is her ability to assess a person's talents and skills and developing roles for them in the church, whether they are a paid staffer or a church member.

A common problem in many churches is the predetermined roles for volunteerism regardless of the passions, abilities and gifts of the individual. It's the square-peg, round-hole syndrome that plagues many churches—and businesses.

"When I came to work here, Mountaintop didn't know how to get people involved and working for the church," Crump says, who now oversees a team of over 350 volunteers.

Crump turned the process on its head with her skills from the business world, using one-on-one discussions, personality surveys and gift surveys to find out what a person is passionate about. Then, she finds the person a role.

For instance, Crump identified a need after a spate of medical emergencies at the church. "I realized we had dozens of doctors, nurses and paramedics in the congregation who would be willing to put their skills to work for the church," Crump says.

Crump recruited 25 people to form an

emergency management team, which is prepared to stabilize a problem until help arrives. Crump says allowing people to use their skills and passions leads to a happier core of worker bees.

Mountaintop member Steve Bottoms came to the church after a 40-year absence from religious life. A retired firefighter, Bottoms applied many of Crump's concepts to his business, Prescription2Fitness, a cutting edge, health and wellness center in Vestavia.

In his business, the employees who deliver wellness advice are called on to be counselors to their clients, many of whom come to Prescription2Fitness hundreds of pounds overweight. Bottoms says he isn't as interested in the certifications and advanced degrees many health and fitness experts like to show off.

"I really don't care about those because we do things so different here I just have to retrain them everything anyway," Bottoms says. "Our staff has to care about people first. We can teach them to do everything else. You can't teach people to be caregivers, and what we are essentially is caregivers."

Chapter 3: Making a Change

That's not how things are done here isn't a phrase the Rev. Van Moody pays credence to. As the pastor and founder of The Worship Center, Moody has grown his church from just 20 members to more than 4,000 and two

locations since its inception in 2006. At the original Roebuck location, services start at 7:30 a.m., an unheard of time when first proposed. "People told me that would never work here in Birmingham," says Moody. It's now the church's most popular service. The lesson: "Don't be bound by tradition. Just because something has never been done doesn't mean it won't succeed," Moody says. "Many people don't know biblically what the church is supposed to be. What most people fight about in the church are mainly cultural traditions."

However, Moody warns that change, particularly major change, can backfire if you proceed but don't factor in the emotional attachment people have to those traditions. "You have to communicate change in a language that people easily understand," Moody says. "When people fight change they are often grieving over what they used to have or remember. You have got to allow people to adjust and understand that change it not frightening and the organization is getting better."

Local businesswoman and Church of the Highlands attendee Lisa Baker sees this concept up-close-and-personal on a daily basis operating her company mymarketstreet.com, a web community designed to give small businesses without a website a presence on the Internet. Baker understands the anxiety many small business owners have about jumping online. "It can be overwhelming, particularly for businesses that have been in a family for generations and are used to doing things a certain way," Baker says. "I try to take it slow and help them understand all of the reasons why they need to do it."

Jones says being willing to walk through each step of a new and scary process, a key piece of insight gained from churches, is transforming how the YMCA engages "health seekers."

"Two years ago you could come into a big anonymous place like the YMCA at Trussville or Greystone, and a lot of what you got out of that experience was what you put into it. It was all on you," Jones says. "What we now know is that a full two-thirds of our folks need more help than that." ●



STEVE BOTTOMS

PRESCRIPTION2FITNESS

REV. VAN MOODY

PASTOR AND FOUNDER OF
THE WORSHIP CENTER

