

# BRAND LOYALTY IN CHURCH

BY RON SELLERS



If you've ever lived in an area where pickup trucks are common, you know what someone means when he says he's "a Ford man," or "a Chevy guy," or "a Dodge person." Truck buyers often are particularly loyal to one brand. A Chevy man might rather not drive a truck at all than to be seen driving a Ford or Dodge or Toyota. He may even have a bumper sticker that denigrates other brands, such as "FORD: Fix Or Repair Daily." This pickup owner is what we call a brand loyalist. Chevrolet is not just the truck he drives, but a reflection of how he sees himself and how he lives his life. It means something to him. That loyalty may even have been passed down from dad and grandpa.

## **Brand Loyalty in Denominations**

There's an enormous difference between "a Ford man" and "a man who happens to drive a Ford." There's just as much difference between "a Methodist" and "a person who happens to attend a Methodist church." (Freely substitute your own denomination for "Methodist" in this statement, and the other denominations named throughout this article.)

When you look out over your congregation next Sunday, consider how many of the people in your church are actually Methodists, or Presbyterians, or Lutherans, or whatever your denomination is, and how many are people who are attending your church, which happens to be part of the denomina-

tion. The answer may surprise you, and it will definitely affect your ministry.

Grey Matter Research and Consulting conducted a nationwide study among Protestant churchgoers that dug into this issue. The research evaluated specific denominations, not just "Lutheran," but "Evangelical Lutheran Church in America" and "Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod," along with all the others.

We learned that just 14 percent of all adults attending a mainline Protestant church are completely "brand loyal" – meaning if they had to leave their current church, they would only consider attending another church in the same denomination.

Another 50 percent of churchgoers do express a preference for their current denomination, but say they would also consider other denominations. Some 22 percent have a small number of denominations they would consider, with no particular favorite. There were 6 percent who say there are certain denominations they would avoid, but they have no particular ones they prefer. And 8 percent say when it comes to denominations, they have no preferences at all.

Mainline Protestants are the least "brand loyal" group in Christendom. Six out of ten Roman Catholics would only consider attending a Catholic parish. Twenty-nine percent who attend a nondenominational Christian church would

not go back to a denomination. And 19 percent who attend an evangelical church are strictly loyal to their denomination.

Consider how denominational loyalty among Protestants, both evangelical and mainline, compares to various consumer products. Although it may seem crass to compare a church denomination to a product being sold at grocery stores, the context this comparison provides is startling.

While 67 percent of churchgoing Protestants have a specific denominational preference, 70 percent have a preferred soft drink brand, 64 percent have a preferred brand of grocery store, 64 percent have a preferred brand of toothpaste, and 64 percent have a preferred brand of vehicle.

While 14 percent of Protestants are totally loyal to only one denomination, 22 percent are totally loyal to one brand of toothpaste, 19 percent to one brand of bathroom tissue, and 16 percent to one brand of pain reliever.

In other words, if your congregation represents the typical church:

- more of the people in your pews are totally loyal to a brand of toothpaste than to your denomination;
- one-third of the people joining you for worship on Sunday morning have no specific loyalty at all to your denomination; and
- 84 percent would be willing to consider switching denominations.

Grey Matter Research is in the process of conducting research for several individual denominations. Preliminary results from one study show that people attending one denomination's churches are more than twice as likely to think of the denomination as meaning their local church, rather than as a national or international body. In the same study, only one out of every eight people attending worship in a church of this denomination called themselves "highly devoted" to that denomination, and not even half said the denomination was more than somewhat important to them.

### **Implications of Denominational Brand Loyalty**

These varying degrees of loyalty to a denomination have some significant implications for your church. To start, if a significant proportion of your church members have little or no loyalty to your denomination, how much interest do they have in denominational news and business that churches so commonly provide to the congregation?

How likely will congregants be to support or participate in denominational programs related to missions, justice, or disaster relief and development? If they're not particularly loyal to the denomination, why wouldn't they dedicate their funds to groups such as World Vision or Christian Children's

## **It's likely that more of the people in your pews are totally loyal to a brand of toothpaste than to your denomination.**

Fund, rather than supporting the denominational relief agency? Pastors probably can't assume that church members will support denominational missions just because it's part of the work of the denomination – or that they'll even want to hear about it.

In the denominational study referenced above, a minority of those surveyed

felt their denomination's own mission and outreach efforts held any advantage over parachurch ministries in areas such as effectiveness, communication, or trustworthiness. A majority of respondents felt they knew just as much or more about the results of these other ministries as they do about their own denomination's outreach and relief efforts. And almost two-thirds did not see a strong reason to support missions through their own denomination rather than through an outside organization.

Also, when you offer studies or classes such as "Presbyterianism 101," how relevant is that to church members? If you preach about the theological positions of your denomination, how many people in the pews want to hear about it? For example, does it carry any weight with your congregants to state the American Baptist Church position on a topic?

How likely are church members to stick around if they perceive that the denomination is supporting a position on some issue that they don't agree with? This is especially important as mainline denominations struggle with controversial social issues related to sexuality, biblical inerrancy, abortion, and immigration, among others. When a church member who is "brand loyal" disagrees with some denominational position, he or she may be willing to stay and work for change from within the denomination. Those who are not may just choose to go elsewhere.

Finally, when church members are not "brand loyal," they are not brand advocates. Dodge brand loyalists will freely tell others how great Dodge trucks are. They'll promote their favorite brand in water cooler conversation or in blogs. They understand what makes a Dodge different from a Nissan or a GMC, and seek to convince others of what makes the brand special. If a person says, "Why should I buy a Dodge?" they can often provide a cogent argument. For example, if a church member invites a friend to your church, and that friend asks, "Why do you go to a Lutheran church?" or "What do Lutherans believe?" what are the chances that question will receive an eloquent, informed response?

How many people in your church really understand what makes your denomination distinctive, or even cares? How many can articulate what makes their church different from the Southern Baptist Convention or the Disciples of Christ? How many can express why denominations even matter at all?

## Growing Awareness

This information is not to suggest that you should downplay your denomination or that denominational identity has become unimportant. It is to raise awareness that a key element of successful communication is to understand the perspectives of the audience and to form a message that takes these perspectives into consideration. Most pastors can no longer rely on a high level of denominational loyalty within the congregation, and it is unwise to disregard that fact when preaching, teaching, and making announcements in worship.

So, to what degree should pastors try to change this dynamic in their congregations? Some may not place much priority on denominational loyalty. If that's your case, just keep your congregants' perspectives in mind and limit focus on things that many members simply don't care about.

Other pastors may want to develop a greater sense of connection between the congregation and the denomination. If that describes you, it's time to brush up on your branding acumen. Think about brands that have a clear identity. An example might be Volvo, which for years has stood for safety. The company didn't develop that overnight – it took years of intentional communication, focus, and actual performance to develop that brand reputation. They didn't do it with a neat logo and a catchy slogan, any more than you developed your own reputation in the congregation by showing up with a particularly nice haircut one weekend. Growing denominational awareness and loyalty within the congregation is not the same thing as selling televisions or mouthwash, but it does have many common elements. Both require:

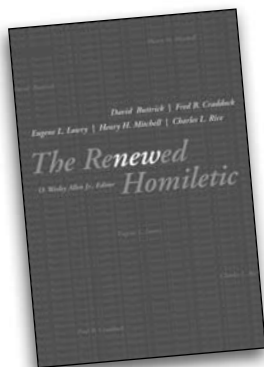
- understanding what your audience believes, feels, and thinks right now;
- understanding what makes your "brand" different from others;
- understanding how and why the organization can make a difference to members and affect their lives;
- making a conscious, consistent effort to build the brand; and
- clearly, concisely, and repeatedly communicating the distinctives to your audience in a way that is relevant to them.

So the next time you look out over your congregation, ask yourself three questions. First, "How many of these

people are actually loyal to our denomination?" Second, "How does the answer to the first question affect what we do in this church?" And, finally, "What, if anything, am I going to try to do about it?"

– Ron Sellers is president of Grey Matter Research & Consulting in Phoenix, Arizona (480-245-6483), and has been serving the Christian community through research since 1987. Grey Matter was formerly Ellison Research.

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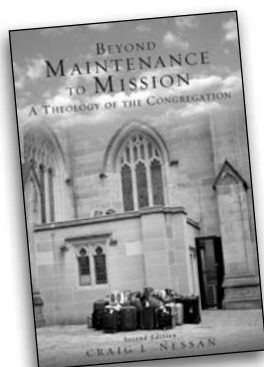
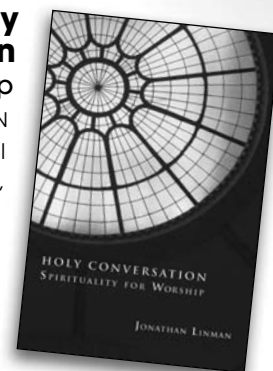
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