



THE BRANDED generation

Evangelism in the millennial advertising minefield

BY REBECCA VERLEY

My generation has been under attack since the moment we were born. We have weathered a nearly constant barrage of advertising, and we are tired. Thanks to the Internet, social media, and smartphones, I spend my days wading through marketing

plays, trying to block out unneeded or unwanted information. It's everywhere: on television, radio, Pandora, and Facebook; in email and every sidebar on every website we visit; even in the free apps we download to our phones.

All this advertising has accomplished one thing: young adults have a keen sensitivity to anything that even remotely resembles product marketing. We know when we're being played. And that especially applies to the church.

Interestingly, these intrusive ads remind me of evangelists standing on sidewalks and handing out tracts, or knocking on my door to ask whether I know Jesus, or interrupting conversations to ask whether I want to take a "survey." I avoid these encounters as much as I avoid annoying ads.

When evangelism becomes about "selling" Jesus, something seriously wrong has happened, and millennials know it. But evangelism itself isn't the problem; nor even that



we've started using the tools of the trade. If you want to reach young adults nowadays, you have to use social media; you have to understand branding. Perhaps what bugs millennials is that the church, just like every ad, just like so much of the world, fails to deliver the goods it seems to promise—that their experience of church is profoundly underwhelming. But even if the goods are delivered, the problem continues, as evangelism then becomes a transaction, a mere exchange of commodities: I give you the street cred of having a young adult in your church, and you give me salvation. The result is that many young people are becoming so jaded that they equate sharing the gospel with marketing and refuse to speak up in fear of sending people sprinting in the opposite direction.

The question for evangelism then becomes: Can we use the tools



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of a branded generation, meeting young people online, while inviting people into something no ad can ever offer—a genuine, loving, faith-based relationship?

Changing strategies

My generation has changed the landscape of advertising. In his 2001 documentary, *Merchants of Cool*, Douglas Rushkoff reported that in the previous year alone teenagers spent more than \$100 billion, with their parents spending an additional \$50 billion on them. He estimated then that millennials viewed more than 3,000 discreet ads per day—more than 10 million total by the time they turned 18.

Phil Cooke, television producer, media consultant, and author of *Unique: Telling Your Story in the Age of Brands and Social Media*, estimates that by 2012 Americans were viewing as many as 5,000 media messages per day.

Millennials have been stubborn and unresponsive to traditional marketing, Rushkoff says. This forced companies to rethink their strategies. They were no longer selling a product only; they were selling an identity. And this is where brands became so important.

In her 1999 book, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*, Naomi Klein discusses a shift in the early 1990s to “pseudo-spiritual marketing,” which she describes as promoting a sense of community. When these shifts occur, Rushkoff says, “brands become more than just a mark of quality—they become an invitation to a longed-for lifestyle, a ready-made identity.”

Marketing culture then went through another dramatic shift with the advent of social media. Ryan Bolger, associate professor of church in contemporary culture at Fuller Theological Seminary, calls this new landscape a “participatory culture [in which] people find their identity through what they create as opposed

to maybe what they consume.” Marketers quickly went to work in this participatory space, offering pseudo-relationships with brands through platforms such as Facebook. Suddenly, you could “talk” to a brand and be its “friend.”

Phil Cooke, whose book on branding is written from a Christian perspective, says interaction is critical to building and maintaining a brand. “A good brand—a good story—must participate in the stories of others in order to invite them to write new chapters in [that] brand’s gospel,” he says.

Suddenly, brands are sounding a lot like religions: they promise community and relationships; they shape identity; they even have a “gospel.” At the same time, many Christians are sounding more like ad men, pushing products and (usually poorly conceived) brands that lack the foundational relationships and mission that were ours in the first place.

Branding, though, is not a choice anymore, says Bonnie Liefer, vice president for marketing and communications for the Coalition for Christian Outreach (CCO). “Now, people have got all this stuff coming at them, and you realize, as an organization, if you don’t get your brand together, you aren’t going to get heard. It’s just a matter of survival. It’s inevitable; we have to do it.”

Going where the people are

In the past, churches have echoed traditional marketing techniques—creating billboards or ads in an effort to draw people to an event or program. But Johannes Swart, associate professor of world mission and evangelism at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, says churches played into “the attractional game of the marketing world by trying to use the same media instead of what we’ve been given—word, sacrament.” He argues that this approach is “missing the point of going out to

where people are and building relationships with them.”

Today’s evangelism runs the same risk. That Facebook page or high-resolution video on YouTube can easily become just another ad, its proffered relationship little more than what someone can have with Coca-Cola. But there’s also an opportunity here (albeit an imperfect one) to enter the space created by marketers and tie it to meaningful relationships, stories, and mission practice in the physical world—to use their tools but for an entirely different end. This might happen through responding to a prayer request on Facebook or Twitter, an on- and off-line campaign to save a shelter for battered women, or an honest confession of the failures of the church.

Phil Cooke says that “where people are” is online, and like Paul venturing into the marketplace in Athens, we need to go there. “Facebook is the third-largest country behind China and India,” Cooke says. “This begs the following questions: Why are we not sending missionaries to that country? Why are we not planting churches there?”

Credibility

Ivan Moore, campus minister with the CCO, who has a master’s degree in mass communication, says the key to social media engagement is credibility. Moore is a millennial, and his ministry makes good use of a Facebook group. Without it, he says, he wouldn’t have learned about a girl in the ministry who made a

A TOUCH OF IRONY

The irony of including ads with an article about an ad-saturated generation is not lost on the editorial staff of *Presbyterians Today*. In fact, the young adult editorial team thought it quite fitting.

new commitment to Christ, which she announced in a post to the group. The girl, who was quite introverted, had investigated the ministry online through Facebook and then visited in person. She was impressed by the continuity of welcoming attitudes she encountered both on- and off-line.

That continuity is something millennials implicitly understand and is an opportunity for the church to reconcile branding with the Christian faith.

Millennials are a branded generation, even if we don't admit it. Yet we also crave authenticity, and we turn quickly from products, ideas, groups, or people that fall short of that bar. We are looking for a worshiping community that knows how to brand itself (make clear the identity it offers) while always being more than a brand—inviting people into relationships founded on mutual service and love.

We have to be clear about who we are and what we believe. Johannes Swart recently reminded me of a definition of evangelism by Sri Lankan evangelist D. T. Niles: "one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread." Swart believes this definition offers "that authenticity of us being beggars, and there's a humility in it."

I think millennials can profoundly impact the church when we realize our culturally trained

branding abilities and combine them with the humble authenticity founded in our true identities in Christ.

Rebecca Verley works with Carnegie Mellon University undergraduates in Pittsburgh as a campus minister for the Coalition for Christian Outreach and Shadyside Presbyterian Church while attending Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.

DON'T KNOW WHERE TO START?

The PC(USA) office of Evangelism and Church Growth has developed a new video-based curriculum that walks you through evangelism for the 21st century: pcusa.org/engage.

Many resources are also now available to help your congregation or ministry use social and other media more effectively and authentically. Auburn Theological Seminary in New York, for instance, offers workshops and consulting services: auburnseminary.org (click on the tab "religion and media").

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