



## **Churches Communicating a Message of Hope**

Expert Recommends Better Media Strategies

By Father John Flynn, LC

ROME, JULY 26, 2009 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Inadequate coverage of religion by the media is a frequent problem, but one expert is insisting that churches need to communicate their message a lot better.

Phil Cooke is the son of a preacher and runs his own media production and consulting company, Cooke Pictures. In two recent books he analyzed the changes in popular culture and how the younger generation uses the media. If churches want to be listened to, they need to respond adequately to the new situation, or risk not being heard.

While the books are written in the context of the evangelical churches in the United States they contain valid points for all involved in religion and the media.

In his 2008 book, "Branding Faith: Why Some Churches and Non-Profits Impact Culture and Others Don't," (Regal), he admitted that the idea of using language such as branding in a church context may seem inappropriate.

In the end, however, the issue is not just a superficial marketing exercise, but is about how people perceive the organization and its message. So his proposal is not an attempt to "re-brand" the Christian faith, an idea which he describes as absurd, but rather how to go about expressing the faith in a media-dominated culture.

In describing some of the changes in contemporary culture Cooke notes that the term mass media is no longer accurate. Today the media is more about personalization. The number of TV channels has exploded in recent years, the Internet has opened up new possibilities for communication and the audience share for the mainstream TV stations and newspapers has drastically declined.

Even more importantly, the attitude of the audience is very different. In the past, church leaders and Christian broadcasters thought they had the answers to what their audience wanted, and that the audience would listen. By contrast, today the audience is in charge and the challenge is to make them hear and respond.

## Perception

The key to effective branding is about perception, according to Cooke. This is evident from people's fascination with celebrities. Nowadays, just being in the news makes someone famous, and actual accomplishment isn't necessary anymore, he pointed out.

In that sense it's useful to observe how the advertising industry has moved from informational to emotional advertising. Very often today, when we see an ad, it's not about the product; rather we are told how we're going to feel when we use the product.

While churches can consider that the issue of perception is a merely manipulative tool, Cooke recommended that we consider its positive potential.

A successful brand communicates ideas, values and standards. There is, of course, a negative side to branding, Cooke admits. The buying and selling of products through manipulation and distortion alters our priorities.

On the other hand, Cooke argued that often the churches have done a poor job of communicating with the culture. To engage a post-Christian culture we need to speak in a language they understand, he explained. This means respecting their values -- even if we don't agree with them -- and be compelling enough to justify their attention.

"If we're going to be successful in communicating a message of hope, we need to realize that the culture doesn't think the way we do," Cooke noted.

## Digital world

In his book published earlier this year, "The Last TV Evangelist: Why the Next Generation Couldn't Care Less About Religious Media and Why It Matters" (Conversant Media Group), Cooke emphasized how in this era of instant information, perception matters more than ever.

We are now overwhelmed by the choices we have regarding media. In addition, not only is the younger generation picky about the media they choose, but they also want to interact with the media.

"A previous generation was happy to listen to the latest sermons, but the millennials want to be part of a dialogue, they need to talk back or they won't be interested," Cooke adverted.

Therefore, Cooke suggested that we start to engage the culture by listening. He also pointed out that a single medium is no longer enough to capture the full attention of a consumer.

As more media options become available, rather than eliminating previous media choices, new choices are simply added to the mix. This means that simply offering a TV show or a radio program is not enough.

Cooke also insisted that churches need to take into account the rise of social media. Few people under 30 don't have a personal page on a social networking site, he pointed out.

Cause marketing is another feature of recent times. Corporations have discovered that supporting charities can be good for business. The younger generation is attracted to cause marketing, and instead of simply donating money, they become identified with a cause.

Mobile technologies and blogging are other developments that the churches need to pay more attention to, Cooke argued.

## Recommendations

In his two books, Cooke makes a number of recommendations to church leaders on how to communicate better their message.

One of the main points is about the power of images. Young people today speak the language of design, he commented. So if churches want to make an impact, design is the language we must learn. Without a visual element, reaching people today will prove far more difficult.

Cooke also warned against the danger of chasing relevance. "Most people work so hard to be relevant that they spin hopelessly into irrelevance," he observed. The mistake is confusing relevance for trendy. Relevance isn't about chasing trends, Cooke said, rather it's about standing the test of time -- eternal truths with a capital "T."

Particularly in his second book Cooke criticized the tendency to concentrate on negative messages. Boycotts and negative campaigns simply don't work, he argued.

"Today, Christians are known as the people who are against everything," he said. "If anything, we should be known as the people who are for something, something positive that can transform lives and impact the culture," Cooke argued.

Of course, he added, it's perfectly appropriate to name evil for what it is, and to mobilize in order to change this situation. What we should avoid, however, Cooke recommended, is making an enemy of an issue.

Cooke also maintained that in the future we won't be talking about the Christian media, but Christians who create media. It's not about creating a safe harbor where we can be protected from the world, but more about engaging the contemporary culture and communicating the Gospel message.

### Meaning

He also argued that the search for meaning is the most powerful force in the world. What we need to do is show the culture that we're not against them, that we have a compelling story, and that the story can change their circumstances. When that happens, I believe they will listen, said Cooke.

Cooke criticized the tendency of some Christian churches to provide what are portrayed as easy and simplistic answers for their audience. We need to admit, he argued, that often the right answers are difficult. In that sense the media efforts by churches will try and engage the audience in the questions, and then help them find the answers.

We need to keep our focus on reaching the world with a message of hope, Cooke concluded. A theme that has been key in the priorities laid out by Benedict XVI, particularly in his encyclical dedicated to hope.

Our focus, Cook concluded, needs to be on reaching the world with a message of hope. Advice any church will benefit from.