

The Effective Guest Center

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Motivating Guests

The Guest Center represents the best and last onsite opportunity to demonstrate to visitors that your focus is on understanding them; that you are an outward focused church (see *The Outward Focused Church*). By the time the visitor departs the church (or arrives at their car), they have typically decided about whether or not they will return. The effective Guest Center confirms their expectations (see Law 4 from *“The Seven Laws of Assimilation”*) and provides a memorable conclusion to their *“attending experience”*.

The first key to an effective Guest Center is to motivate visitors to actually go there. There are a percentage of people who love to be recognized and who will go out of their way to make themselves known. They are a minority. Even early adopters, who are largely sold on your church on their first visit, will be hesitant to advance themselves during the press of a post-service crowd. The following are some basic strategies that are helpful to increase the percentage of guests who come to your guest center.

1. Location! Location! Location!

Put your guest center (or centers) in the natural path of ingress and egress for your guests. Churches will sometimes fight an uphill battle to get guests to come to their center because of its location. This is particularly true where a church has the perfect classy room on the ground level that is just a little bit out of the way. Expecting first-time guests to come looking for you when they are wondering about how their children are doing is heading in the wrong direction for great customer service. It is generally a better solution to set up one or more simple guest centers with nicely draped tables that meet the guests where they are, then to have one awesome guest room that is off the beaten track. Staff these centers with smiling Connection Partners (lay volunteers) who know how to maintain eye contact and make people feel welcome.

2. Provide Incentives

People love anything that is a bargain or better yet, free. It is amazing to watch upscale people line up for an early morning sale just to save a few bucks. I am amazed to see how many guests come to our guest center every week to get their free coffee mug (with the church logo) or any of the other freebies we give away. This may seem crassly commercial to some but the secret is in how you present the gifts to guests. Avoid a quid pro quo scenario where guests are told that they will get some *thing* in exchange for their guest card. It is far more effective to describe the gift as an expression

of appreciation for their visit from a church that cares. Announce that you have free gifts for 1st, 2nd and 3rd time visiting guests at the Guest Center. Research shows that the more people visit, the greater the chance they will become church adherents. Invest accordingly by providing gifts that increase in value with the 2nd and 3rd time visit. Use those opportunities to capture information that they have returned and to engage them in caring conversation.

Guest Center Objectives

The Guest Center experience should reflect the welcoming comments made in the service. In addition to the offer of a gift, it is critical that visitors experience a dialogue they perceive is focused on understanding them and their needs. Though the visitor initially expects to spend only a moment or two at the Guest Center, we know they will likely extend their time at the Guest Center when provided the opportunity to have a sincere conversation talking about their interests and concerns. Be sure you accomplish the following two objectives.

1. Capture Information

The initial objective is to capture accurate contact information from your guests. The effective Guest Center does not operate in a vacuum. If you do not have a well developed assimilation ministry in place, all you can hope for in a Guest Center encounter is a good one-time conversation. The effective Guest Center utilizes good contact information to empower their assimilation teams to engage their guests in sustained relationship building.

Look for obstacles that are impacting this information gathering objective. Is the press of foot traffic in too close a proximity to make your Guest Center comfortable for guests? If your visitors have to wait in a line for more than a minute or two, your center is understaffed. Are Connection Partners available to talk to the guest's children during this critical window of opportunity? Carefully and regularly observe and watch the dynamics of your Guest Center during the busiest times.

2. Discovery

Your second objective is to engage guests in meaningful dialogue. It is best to begin this dialogue by taking a moment to confirm the visitor's telephone # and best times for the visitor to be called (entered on their Visitor Card). Many times, when giving this a second thought, visitors will give you a more convenient place (ex: workplace) or time to reach them. Though brief, this discussion confirms the expectation they will be called and makes for a truly welcome "Welcome Call".

Next, a quick glance at a Visitor Card gives the Connection Partner a number of starting points to begin asking visitor-focused questions (what underlying needs are behind the visitor wanting information about a specific ministry). Many people are willing to share their story with a stranger if they are convinced that they really care. A one minute conversation will turn into a lengthier conversation and can turn into an openhearted discussion where real ministry takes place. This Guest Center experience may be the key to seeing a visitor become a member of the church family. Try to locate your Guest Center near a setting where guests can grab a cup of coffee and get further acquainted with the Connection Partner.

Subsequent to the dialogue, it is invaluable for the Connection Partner, or Guest Center volunteer, to jot a few key notes on the back of the visitor card. These initial comments, when entered into a visitor's file, can go a long way towards empowering assimilation team members in making effective follow up calls. In this way the effectiveness of a Guest Center goes far beyond the interactions of the day.

Disseminating information is best accomplished through a separate nearby Information Center and takes a backseat in priority to spending time in meaningful dialogue. Remember the priority of your objectives in your Guest Center. Distributing information is not one of them.

Remember; make this last impression a lasting impression!