

stuff you wish they taught in seminary



7 Best Practices

OF FIRST-TIME GUEST GIFTS AT YOUR CHURCH

RICH BIRCH



Are you leveraging your first-time guest gifts effectively enough to move people from being guests to fully connected members of your church?

I hope so, because this is an important piece of the connection timeframe; in fact, it's a critical point in the [eight phases of moving anonymous guests towards full community](#).

Everyone loves getting gifts upon arrival somewhere, whether it's at a home or when visiting somewhere new. These guest gifts are not solely a gesture of kindness; they also help us collect vital contact information so that we can follow up with those that visit our church for the first time. At the most basic level, we should follow this approach:

- We introduce the offer of a gift during our services (maybe we post it on the screens or in the bulletins).
- We offer the gift as a way to thank first-time guests for their visit, and we ask them to fill out a contact card when they accept their gift so we can stay connected with them.

When done well, this is a way to both acknowledge and thank the guests who come. Think about it this way: we can all remember a time when we went over to a friend's house when we thought we were supposed to show up, and while our friend invited us in, it was obvious that they didn't expect us at all.

As a church, we don't ever want our guests to feel as if they are unexpected. The first-time guest gifts are a way to show people that we both expected them and that we're thankful they're with us.

Many churches don't have a robust enough process to maximize the effectiveness of these gifts; ours certainly used to fall into that category. However, by following these seven best practices, our church went from around 800 first-time guests in one year to 3,500 the following year! While some of that was due to expansion in our overall church, a large portion of that growth stemmed from our doing a better job of collecting information from our guests. Here's how you can begin achieving similar results:

Call Them "New - Here" Gifts, Not "First - Time" Gifts

For years, we called these gifts "first-time" guest gifts. Even this article uses that same title. However, making the subtle shift in language and referring to the gifts as "new-here" gifts made a profound difference in the way people understand what we're offering as a church.

If you offer "first-time" guest gifts and your guests don't take you up on that offer on their first visit, they will wonder if they're allowed to pick up a gift the next time they visit.

We want to communicate that if guests consider themselves new at the church, then they are free to pick up their gift. They might do so on their first time or maybe during their third time—it might be six months after they've started to attend. In all of our language, we want people to know that these gifts are for anybody new here. With that in mind, for the rest of this post, we will use the “new-here” language to articulate that change.

Choose a Gift People Want

Remember when you were a kid and that crazy aunt of yours gave you socks as a gift—and worse, remember when you needed to offer that awkward “thank you”? Or when you were a kid at the mall, and there was an insurance agent handing out calendars that featured their branding all over it? *That didn't feel like a gift at all; it just felt like an advertising piece.*

Please don't do that with your “new-here” gifts.



We need to consider what gifts our guests might actually enjoy receiving. Many churches have found that t-shirts hit the spot because people—for whatever reason—are always willing to pick up a free t-shirt. Now, make sure the t-shirt design is something that someone who doesn't attend your church on a regular basis would wear. (I always say that the design on the shirt needs to at least be good enough that people would wear it when they're doing chores around the house or running a quick errand in town.)

[You can check out ideas from other churches for what they have been doing for “new-here” guest gifts.](#) T-shirts, coffee mugs, journals—all are popular choices for churches looking to encourage people to drop by their guest kiosk.

Streamline the “New-Here” Card

We ask our guests to fill out a card with their basic contact information so that we can follow up with them. This practice functions as a kind of guestbook for the church; we love to know who worshipped with us on a given Sunday. It's also a good practice to let them know that we'll follow up to find out how their experience was at our church.

Work to cut down the amount of information that you are asking for on this card. **If you aren't going to take action on the information, you simply should not be asking that question.** For example, sometimes churches ask for birthdays on “new-here” guest cards; that's actually a fairly personal piece of information that many people are hesitant to give. If you're not planning to send birthday cards to everyone who fills out a card, don't ask for their date of birth. Keep that in mind and only ask for information you're going to use.

You can also tweak the language to be more specific. Ask for their “preferred email” instead of just “email”, and rather than asking for the “phone number” ask for their cell phone number in order to be more precise and streamlined with the information that you are looking for from your new guests.

Staff the “New-Here” Area with Your Most Outgoing Volunteers

One of the significant changes we made to our “new-here” guest process included setting up a dedicated area in our lobbies where people could drop off their contact cards in exchange for the gifts. The volunteers in this area were amongst our most gregarious and outgoing and were specially trained to ensure that this first interaction went well.

We also deliberately made the “new-here” guest area slightly inefficient so that it would actually slow people down. At our church, we put the t-shirts into a bag and then hand that bag to our guests. This act of going over to pick up the t-shirt out of a bin and then put it into a bag provided the opportunity for a moment of interaction between our team members and our guests. Then at the end of every Sunday, this group of volunteers writes handwritten notes to every guest who visited; these notes are designed to hopefully make a personal connection with our visitors. Often times, the personal connection for these cards is made during these short interactions when guests pick up their t-shirts. The goal is to get those notes in the mail on Sunday, so they'll arrive as early as possible that same week.

Put the “New-Here” Guest Kiosk in a Highly Visible Area

This kiosk needs to be easy to find in your lobby. Think through the traffic flow on a typical morning and put this kiosk right in the middle of it. Sometimes this means putting the guest kiosk in an area that is more visible to people as they are leaving rather than entering your facility because they are more likely to hand in the cards at the end of the morning. Where are guests most likely to exit your facility? Ensure that the guest kiosk is within range of that area.



We made the signs for our kiosk black and white on purpose so they would stand out. I don't think you could do too much to make this area as clear and obvious as possible. Have signs that say something such as "New here?", or "Are you new here?", or "New-here kiosk." Keep it super simple and straightforward. **Seek to be clear, not clever.**

Train Your People to Look for Gift Holders

The bags we put our guests' t-shirts into are white with a logo of our church on the front of it. We offer bags on purpose, not only for the chance to connect with our guests, but also because a t-shirt doesn't fit into a typical purse so it saves our guests from carrying them around. These bags also function as a flag to our teams that say, "Hey, visitor here."

We reviewed this practice each year and invited everyone in the church to go out of their way to be friendly to those people with these bags. It was a regular part of our dialogue with our volunteer teams, and I can tell you as a staff member that it was an invaluable resource to be able to quickly identify new guests in a crowd of people in the lobby.

Coordinate Your “New-Here” Guest Gifts with Family Ministry

Many churches suffer from silos that build up between various areas of the church. Typically, the family or kids' ministry has their own “new-here”

guest gift for the kids (understandably). Just make sure that these gifts are coordinated so that the families who are visiting are getting both of these gifts. This would be important for you as you consider packaging. Ensure that the kids' bag coordinates so whether a child or an adult is carrying a “new-here” guest gift, that they will look similar so that you can see who is visiting as a family.

What Improvements Can You Make to Your “New-Here” Guest Gifts?

Start by working backwards from the ideal experience that you would like to have had when you first arrived at your church and design your guest process to mirror that ideal. Ask yourself:

- What is the perfect gift for our guests?
- What information should we be asking for on the contact card?
- What should happen when a new guest talks to a volunteer?
- What is the follow-up process?

We live in an age where people are more sensitive about passing along their contact information than ever before. When people choose to give us that information, we need to make sure that we follow up with them.

I'd love to hear in the comments [here](#) how you plan to improve your “new-here” guest gift process.

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