**Follow-up after a church holiday outreach event: speed dating or relationship building?**

By Yvon Prehn

What kind of a relationship do you have with someone, if you meet and then walk away, never to call, talk, or see the person again? Not much of one is it?

In contrast, what about a relationship where two people meet briefly, but then keep in touch through letters, emails, phone calls, and additional get-togethers? We’d label that a meaningful relationship. If we want any kind of relationship, friendship, or romance to progress, we know we’ve got to expend some effort to grow the relationship.

As a church we begin relationships with the people in our communities when we host outreach events. As we progress into the holiday season with packed calendars, take some time as a church staff to evaluate what you do to nurture your relationships with guests who visit your church after your initial encounter.

## Make your church outreach events more than Speed Dating

Unfortunately, instead of a taking time to develop relationships with the guests who visit, many church outreach events are similar to the Speed Dating popular today. If you are unfamiliar with Speed Dating, this is where single people spend a few minutes with a potential romantic interest over coffee, dessert, or some shared activity (one recent speed dating event for farmers had folks weeding a field together) and then they move on to the next person.

Though lasting a bit longer, some churches offer a sort of speed dating experience to unchurched members of their communities. They invite them to events such as the upcoming Community Thanksgiving or Christmas Caroling. The visitors are hustled through the event and then leave, hopefully with a nice feeling about the church. The church staff breathes a big sigh of relief to have that activity over for the year.

Next comes the Christmas Eve service; then the New Year’s Eve Watch Night service (and one eye is on Easter that comes quickly in the New Year). All of these events are lots of work to put on, consist of great programs, and usually many unchurched people attend.

These events are a wonderful way to introduce the church to the community, but as with any relationship, you need to actively work to develop the relationship if you don’t want people to leave each one as unconnected with the church as when they came to the first one. If you simply hustle people through the events, you aren’t making a connection with them that will ultimately involve them in your church.

## Don’t assume people know what your church does on a regular basis

Many churches assume that if people come to a holiday event at the church for children, such as an alternative Halloween event or Christmas Party, if they like it they will automatically come on Sunday for your Kids Kove (or whatever you call your children’s program). But unchurched people in our secular world today may not even know that something called “Kid’s Kove” exists or that churches have events for children on a regular basis.

You have to follow up and let people know what you do on a regular basis and invite them to it. You cannot make assumptions that people who grew up without church know what a church does every week.

## Here are some ideas how to do make connections with people on an ongoing basis:

YOU MUST have a connection card at the event to get information from people. If you don’t gather basic contact information you can’t even begin to follow up.

For more information on how to create and use a spec ial event registration card, see the section on [www.effectivechurchcom.com](http://www.effectivechurchcom.com) about connection cards.

Once you get names, there are many ways to reach out to people to develop a relationship including:

Of course you’ll want to send some sort of thank you for attending note with an upbeat invitation to come back to church

## But don’t stop there!

There are so many events coming up in the fall and all of them give you a natural opportunity to reach out. Here are a few ideas:

* Try sending upbeat emails and postcards that give families ways to celebrate the holidays with their families.
* Send them a booklet that tells them the history of an upcoming holiday, for example all about Advent and ideas for how to celebrate it.
* Stories or devotions about the holidays, Bible stories in modern versions or explanations why we celebrate the way we do.
* Recipes are always appreciated. If you personalize the recipe card from your church, every time your guests use it, it can remind them of your church and the wonderful event they attended.
* Invitations to additional holiday events—as new people to your church they may not have any idea that after the Community Thanksgiving Service your church always hosts a Caroling and Chocolate party early in December. Go out of your way to invite and remind people of additional ways to connect with your church.

## Little things really do mean a lot

I can still remember the first rose my husband gave me at our first lunch date. “To remind me that some men are still romantics,” is what he said as he gave it to me. It was a little flower that has long ago crumbled (though I kept it for quite a long time) and a little thing that he said, but both helped start a life-long relationship.

It may not seem like a lot to send out a postcard or recipe, or to email an invitation, but never underestimate how the Lord can use these actions to create a life-long relationship with a visitor to your church.