

What's your passion? To market themselves, churches need a product

by [Anthony B. Robinson](#) in the [April 27, 2016](#) issue

I frequently get messages from church leaders who are wondering, “How can our church attract millennials?” It sounds a little like a fisherman asking an alleged angling expert what bait or technique will catch a prized but elusive fish.

The millennial generation comprises those born between the early 1980s and early 2000s—people between the ages of 15 and 35. It's a generation mostly missing from Protestant churches.

Even more frequently, I see articles advising churches and their leaders on what it is that millennials really want. They want—the emphasis depends on the article—less traditional church but more ancient church, or fewer demands on their time but “more meaningful discipleship opportunities,” or music that speaks to the heart but not the schlocky praise music beloved by baby boomers. The search for the Holy Grail has been replaced by the quest for the elusive millennial.

The person I talked to most recently about this issue had done a fair amount of research. She had conducted some focus groups and visited a couple of churches that were attracting twenty- and thirtysomethings.

This work led her to a conclusion: “Millennials aren't all the same, and they don't all want the same thing when it comes to church.”

That seems like a good place to start: forget about generalizing about millennials and what they want.

The next step, adopting business language, involves thinking less about reaching a certain market and more about the nature of the product. Rather than worrying about how to market the church, it might be better to get a clear idea about what it is you are trying to sell.

Since many mainline churches have long assumed a culture of churchgoing, they are often especially challenged when it comes to articulating what it is they are selling. They tend to assume people should want what the church has to offer, even if none

of them can quite say what that is.

For a congregation to take the product-driven rather than the market-driven approach would mean asking questions like: What is the particular understanding of the gospel and of the church that we believe in? What are we passionate about? How do we give form to our vision of the gospel and the church in the ways that we gather, worship, pray, teach, sing, and serve? What is our “product,” and are we delivering it with excellence and enthusiasm?

Answering these questions can be hard. A pastor’s vision may shape the identity of a congregation—and that can work at times. But usually a congregation needs to claim an identity that grows from inside the community and that draws on its history and deepest convictions. And often a congregation needs a process of discernment in order to locate that identity.

One approach I have taken with congregations is a variation on the Twelve Step program. It starts with having people acknowledge that they need God and need to hear God’s call—they need a power greater than themselves. An approach of radical humility can move congregations toward places of deep faith and reliance on God. It can help them identify what they really care about.

Discovering that passion means also becoming authentic—a crucial step. Visitors—and especially millennials—can sniff out inauthenticity. You can’t market something that you don’t have to share.

The underlying pitfall of the market-driven strategy is that it approaches people from a sense of deficit. “If we can just get these people, then we’ll be OK.” A better strategy is to be comfortable with who you are, celebrate what you are at your best, and share that with others. Some will take you up on it, some won’t.

After becoming clear about what a congregation is offering the world, the church’s next step is to think about how it can share it with people who might be interested. This is where some aspect of marketing comes in. But it’s easier to see how to get the word out to those who might be interested when one knows what one is passionate about.

“What is it,” I asked a recent caller, “that you believe is the Christian gospel and the work of the church? Why does it matter?”

She responded: “Those are difficult questions.” She paused. “But they are good questions.”

In the end, churches will need to be both market- and product-driven. No church can be indifferent to its context or to changing social realities. But these factors are finally less important than core convictions—the vision of church and gospel it is passionate about.