

Into the niche: Targeted marketing

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [November 20, 2002](#) issue

One of my classmates 50-plus years ago first taught me about niche marketing. A professor who monitored field work and internships wanted us to be modern. He envisioned a world of specialists in which ministerial general practitioners would, like medical general practitioners, be obsolete. (A bad guess, by the way.) We should all pick an area of focus for our studies and career. He advised us to take our present area of interest and project it into the future. Since I was assisting in student work at Washington University, I wrote “student work.”

Next to me sat Richard “Dick” Matern, a fool for Christ if I ever met one. He was pursuing at the same time a full course of study for ministry at the seminary and the whole pre-med program at nearby Washington University. He would sit in a seminary class studying chemistry or trigonometry. When called upon by the professor, he would reach to my desk, snatch my Greek New Testament and render 1 Corinthians wonderfully. Presumably at the university he would be studying 1 Corinthians in class and, when called upon, would grab someone’s science text and give the right answers.

Clearly, he was studying to be a medical minister; since he hung out with the foreign missionary group and was studying Arabic, one got a further sense of his potential specialty. As I recall, he was also studying sign language, and did field work at an African-American parish. He sustained himself by doing part-time work restraining violent mental patients at Barnes Hospital in St. Louis. Pressed for his specialty, his niche, he said something like “Missouri Synod Lutheran Medical Missionary to Deaf, Black and Muslim Psychopaths.” The “medical missionary” part at least turned out right; he has been a self-supporting apostolic entrepreneur for a half century. He found his niche.

I thought about him when I read that General Motors is trying to boost Chevrolet sales by targeting an evangelical niche. It is subsidizing Christian preaching by the big-hearted Max Lucado and Christian music, as it is called, by Christian Music specialists, both of whom it is sending on the road. Since 25 percent of Americans

are listed as “evangelical,” that is a large niche. Today our niches are niched further.

When we listen to the market-driven church specialists, we learn that there’s no way to attract the 18-34 year-olds with ancient, medieval, Victorian, modern or postmodern organ-backed hymnody. Only pop will do.

Recently I read of a language group that is down to 15 people. I put the clipping in the wrong niche in my study and lost it, so I can’t identify them. No doubt some Bible translators are hurrying to produce a Bible translation to market to these 15. *Publishers Weekly* regularly tells us that Bible publishers put out separate editions for brides, confirmands, muscular Christians, people in the military, senior citizens, participants in Women’s Bible groups and so forth.

Assuming that those last 15 tribespeople are of two genders, three age groups and perhaps four class groups, we will need quite a few different Bibles for them. One has to admire the niche marketers and targeters for trying to be “all things to all people.” But they are getting to the point of reaching with “one thing” to “one person,” as our example illustrates. It would be nice to picture all sorts and conditions of people being able to rally around various Christian packages and presentations. They’d make up large, diverse niches of their own in this niche-as-niche-can world.