

# First Impressions

by Steve Law, FCBA

**YEARSAGO** a survey said the number one thing church guests remembered about their first visit was (drum roll, please), the landscaping. That's right—the church lawn! Not the sermon or the greeters but something most members take for granted (until the weeds take over). Guests speculate that if a church takes care of its grass, it is probably doing a good job on other things such as worship, childcare, etc. So, use this list to help ensure you are giving a good first impression.

## 1. STREET SIGNS

Make sure there are street signs on the corner(s) nearest your building. If not, ask the city or county to install signs on your corner (not one of the other three). Make sure people can clearly see your church is at the corner of Elm and Main Street, and not the other church at Elm and Second Street.

## 2. EXTERIOR CHURCH SIGNS

Ensure that the road-side signs with the church's name are uniform. Some churches have signs of different architectural styles (Gothic, Baroque, Mission) reflecting the committee in charge at the time. Nice lighting is critical.

"Keep it simple, stupid" works for church signs, too. The signs should have "just the facts"—after all, there is only so much fine print you can read at 35 mph. The church's Web site should be somewhere on the sign.

Signs with changeable lettering are not bulletin boards but are marketing tools—the messages must be a positive reflection on God and your church. Pithy messages are cute, but what are you communicating?



## 3. PARKING LOT ENTRANCE SIGNS

Can drivers see quickly (at 35 mph) where and how to get into your driveway?

What about coming in at night, in snow, or rain—is the driveway marked with reflectors, poles, or other visual aids?

## 4. PARKING LOT MAINTENANCE

Every two years have your parking lot re-striped. Well-marked lines help people park cars properly. It also cuts down on "creative parking."

"Creative parking" can lead to fewer actual parking spaces and to a bad impression to guests. It is also a hazard if it blocks access for emergency vehicles.

Some first-timers come to an evening performance. Light the parking lot so they can see how to get back to their cars and continue their positive experience after the special event. Of course, residential churches need to consider the impact of lighting on neighboring houses and turn off parking lot lights at a reasonable hour.

## 5. GUEST PARKING

Ensure your guest parking (not "visitor parking") is near the main entrance doors. Label these spaces clearly so members do not park there.

Some churches replaced "handicap parking" with "special needs/senior adult parking" so police cannot ticket non-handicap vehicles. It serves the same function but gives more flexibility.

## 6. LAWN CARE

Is your grass cut and are leaves raked on Thursday or Friday, especially during your growing season? Do your trees have mulch beds? Every three months, walk the entire church grounds with your lawn care

## After all, you only get one chance to make a first impression—make it count.


- Some churches have greeters in parking lots helping drivers find spots and directing them to a door. That is an excellent way to impress people—especially if those greeters accompany young families all the way to the welcome desk.
- The front door greeters should have assigned doors—they will get to know the people coming in their doors and vice versa. Make sure the greeters have the latest church directory so they can call people by name—it will really impress guests who see people greeted by name.
- The welcome/information desk volunteers should be extroverts off the scale: warm, friendly, and anxious to go out

of their way to help people. Do not let these critical volunteers burn out. Heap praise on them but also let them know how much is riding on their actions.

- Parents want to know their children are safe—volunteers need to explain the safety (a better word than “security”) measures in place. Print up a card explaining the details: what to do when you drop off your child and how to retrieve your child. The welcome desk volunteers can explain these details en route to the classroom.
- The welcome desk volunteers also need to walk with guests to their Bible study (Sunday school) room or the worship center, but the volunteer also needs to explain to the guests how

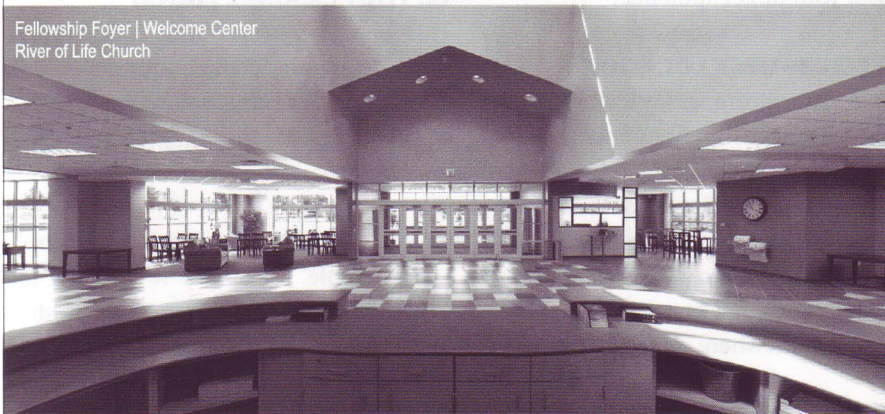
to find their way out of the building after worship (many church buildings resemble rat mazes) or perhaps the welcome desk volunteer can ask a member sitting nearby to “host” the guests.

- Names are powerful—guests will notice as they walk with their welcome desk volunteer when she greets passing members by name. It says a lot that these volunteers learned members’ names and greets each one by name.

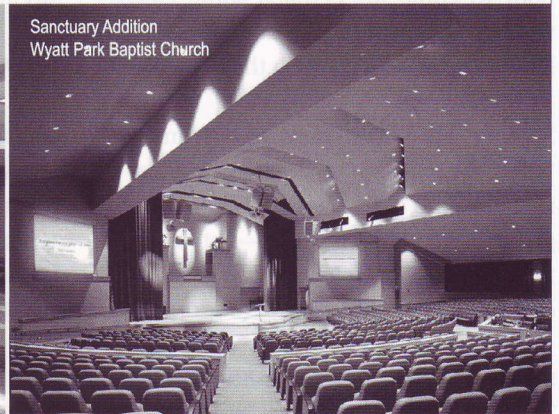
You get the idea. If you do not, then ask a fellow administrator to visit your church as if for the first time and give you a report with this checklist. Do not shoot the messenger—she is trying to do your church a favor by giving guests a great first impression of your church. After all, you only get one chance to make a first impression—make it count. 

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provider—let him know your expectations clearly.

Dead trees and dead branches are dangerous to people and cars—cut them down. It is cheaper than a lawsuit.

Trees are great—they help the church's "green" image and provide shade. Get trees with color (maples, cherries, crepe myrtles) instead of pines—people driving by will notice colorful trees. Avoid oaks; they will tear up your pavement and sidewalks. Ask a local nursery for advice; you might even get trees for free.

### 7. FLOWERS BEDS

You need to have something in your color beds year-round (unless your winter flowerbeds are covered in snow). Flowers say a lot to guests—get flowers with lots of colors. It will get attention.

Remove bushes in islands because they block the driver's view when looking for an empty spot. If you want bushes, put them against the building (and use azaleas or hydrangeas).

### 8. MARKED ENTRANCE DOORS

Are the doors you want guests to enter clearly marked? If you have multiple buildings, how do guests know which door to come in? Perhaps some clearly visible wording over the door like "Main Entrance" will cut through the confusion.

Regular attendees may enter through "short-cut" doors. If a guest follows a member into one of those side doors, the guest is immediately lost—not a good first impression. Help guests know which doors to use (and which not to use).

### 9. APPEARANCE OF ENTRANCE AREA

The main guest entrance lobby should be busy with people and signs to convey an image of an active, on-mission church but not cluttered with "funeral parlor" furnishings. Make the first impression an attractive, warm, colorful visual experience.

### Summary

- Guests make a judgment on your church based on first impressions. Sometimes this impression determines whether or not a guest will return to visit again.
- Signage is very important: both inside and outside the building. Mark entrances to parking as well as to the buildings.
- Ensure your guest parking (not "visitor parking") is near the main entrance doors.
- Use color in landscaping, both with trees and flower beds.
- Provide welcome desk locations at entrances most likely to be used by guests.
- Although your members are the most frequent visitors to your church Web site, make sure the site gives non-members what they need.
- Enlist greeters for parking lots who can help drivers find spots and direct them to a door.
- Encourage greeters and welcome desk volunteers to greet members by name make a very good first impression on guests.

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The furnishings in your lobby telegraph the demographic your church seeks to reach. Your grandmother's furniture, while pretty, will appeal to, well, your grandmother and not 20-somethings. What does your lobby say about your target audience?

### 10. WELCOME DESK LOCATION

Your Sunday morning welcome desk should be visible instantly and not crowded by workers talking to each other about Saturday's ball game. Get the desk as close to the primary guest entrance door as you can—maybe even out on the sidewalk! If guests do not know where to go, they will go somewhere else or go home.

### 11. INTERIOR CHURCH SIGNAGE

Is your interior signage coordinated? Is it in clear and large print? Is it visible down hallways? Some churches have color signage for different buildings or different age levels such as green carpet and green signs for elementary school classes. Just do not make the mistake of changing your signage style with every new building.

New signage is expensive—but it can have a "wow" effective both on members and guests. Use color—it is very effective in all areas of your church buildings.

### 12. THE PERSONAL TOUCH

This is a list of physical first impressions. There are whole books devoted to the Sunday morning volunteers. Here is a brief list of these "personal" first impressions:

- Your Web site was created by people for people. Make sure it is saying the right things about your church. Most visits to church Web sites are by church members seeking information about church programs. Does your site give non-members what they need (including a positive first contact)?
- You may have police directing traffic in the street near your main parking lot. Are they courteous or surly? Make sure they understand they, too, are part of the image of the church.