

Successful P&P

*The union of planning and promotion
is often a poor marriage.*

A Quick Bite Publication
Scott Vaughan Communications, LLC



Successful P&P

One of the struggles facing most churches is the dysfunctional marriage between planning a ministry event and promoting a ministry event. For a ministry event to accomplish its goals, the marriage of planning and promotion must be a healthy one.

Recently, I met with a church planter and we talked about the official community launch of the church. The church has been meeting for about a year, but has now rented a community facility and is ready to launch. I commended the pastor because he has a vision for the Sundays leading up to the launch and for the launch itself. I also commended him because he has given the young church time to plan for the launch and to promote it. Then he asked the questions that face so many planners, who are gifted at organization but not always gifted in communication strategy.

“How much time do we need to promote the launch?”

“What’s the best way to advertise and get the best return on investment?”

“Is there a gradual progression of how we promote our launch?”

And, ultimately:

“We know what we want to do that Sunday, but how do we promote it?”

And, there is the point of disconnect: We are planning first-class ministry activities designed to build the Kingdom, but then we are applying bargain basement thinking to promote these activities. For me, that just looks and feels like bad Biblical stewardship. And, many ministry planners amplify the bad stewardship by saying, “That was pretty good” or “That wasn’t bad” when they post-evaluate a ministry activity. Sadly, ministry planners often settle for “good is good enough” when equal attention to promotion and planning will take an event to “great” status.

Problem No. 1: Planning is fun.

Most church events or ministry activities are organized by people who are passionate about the particular ministry endeavor. When a group gathers to plan a children’s activity, those planners are passionate about children’s ministry. Planning is generally driven by passion. Typically, those people recruited for planning or who volunteer for planning also have a passion for *planning*. It would not surprise me to learn that most ministry event planners have the spiritual gift of hospitality, and are more right-brain creative. I believe most planners are creative-thinkers who like to see events and activities bloom.

Activity planning isn’t considered work to ministry planners - it gets at passion and that translates into fun. And, the ministry planners - passionate about the ministry and about planning - begin developing first-class endeavors. And, they love doing it. (Sure, if the well is tapped too often and too much there will be a level of burnout, but a little rest and those planners will gladly return to the wheel.)

If planning hinges on passions and passionate people are most likely to give their best effort, why is that a problem? In my experience, it’s because the planning process doesn’t include discussion of promotion. Too many times, planning is so much fun that no wants to stop and tackle the perceived mundane

- Why are we doing this? How will we measure success? How will we attract people to our event? Planners don't like a lot of questions! Pretty soon, too many planning decisions have been made without consideration for promotion. And, it's tough to go back and retro-fit talk of promotion.

In the case of my church planter friend, launch Sunday was planned for the January weekend of the Martin Luther King national holiday. The national holiday is also a long weekend, meaning public schools are not open on Mondays. In his church planting market, there's a lot of transient growth, probably translating into travel on holiday weekends. In fact, I pulled some research - my own - that showed a real dip in church-related small group attendance on the Sunday of Martin Luther King weekend. As a promoter, I suggested Martin Luther King weekend *might not be a good weekend* to launch the church plant.

"You may want to think about having the launch before or after that holiday weekend," I suggested. I noticed a furrowed brow. That kind of thinking was a joy-killer and a speed bump to passionate, fun planning of ministry activity. Typically, planners will shrug off the speed bumps and plow straight ahead - win, lose or draw.

It's important for every planning team to include one or two people - from the outset - whose passion is communication. If nothing else, these communicators can help steady the course as planning takes place.

Problem No. 2: Church communication ministry

My research shows that 52 percent of churches assign church communication ministry to a staff member, who also manages other responsibilities that don't include communication. The most obvious scenario is the church secretary or ministry assistant who must juggle lots of responsibilities, including communication. In this model, communication is usually the distribution of a printed newsletter and bulletin, and perhaps working informally with one or two others who might help with a website.

Beyond that 52 percent, 18 percent of churches report having no communication ministry. Another 16 percent of churches rely on volunteers, who are generally unmanaged. The reality is that in about 86 percent of churches - throughout North America - there's a distracted or less-than-focused approach to church communication and promotion. There may be some passion, but there's also a lot of frustration, a lot of burn-out, and that all leads to apathy.

"I just want to get the newsletter out so I can mark something else off my list," a weary part-time staff member said to me.

Can you see the problem? Passionate ministry planning meets frustrated and tired communication ministry. But, wait there's another wrinkle.

Problem No. 3: The Emperor's New Clothes

There's a lot of delicious parallel between Hans Christian Andersen's The Emperor's New Clothes and the work within our churches.

Churches are natural environments for mercy and grace. We are called to be merciful and we are called to extend grace - undeserved forgiveness. I understand that and support it as model behavior for followers of Jesus. But, and it's a big one, many churches over-extend mercy and grace to the point of

codependency. We tell people what they want to hear rather than what they need to hear.

“Your event was awesome!” even when we know it wasn’t really that good. (Awesome may be the most over-used and poorly-used word in church culture today.)

“You folks worked really hard to pull that off” as a consolation to goals not met.

In churches, planners and leaders over-extend accolades to one another because they want those same accolades to be reciprocated. If I over-extend affirmation to your event planning perhaps you will provide that same courtesy back to me.

Then, as planners receive affirmation, true or not, the affirmation gives our planning and promotion a false sense of success. So, we plan and promote the same activity in the same way the next time around. In essence, we learn “settle” and believe everyone is happy with that.

In The Emperor’s New Clothes, everyone wanted the king to be happy and so everyone told him what he wanted to hear. In the end, the people let their king parade through town wearing no clothes. A child, if you will recall, noticed the naked king and acknowledged it. The veil was torn. The truth was revealed. (Unfortunately, in the fairy tale, the King did not change his behavior, but continued in the procession.)

Within our churches, we must shake off the desire and need to over-affirm others, over-extend mercy and grace for bad decisions, and protect the happiness of people. We need to call things like they are - **planning without promotion as part of the planning mix is foolish. Likewise, failure to have a strong promotion ministry is foolish. And, while results may be good, they may not be great and in matters of faith I believe we are called to a standard of greatness. There is no room to ‘settle.’**

A recipe for success

1. Empower a communication ministry team - one member for every 150 members of your church with a minimum of six individuals. Members need to reflect the diversity of your church and your community. Each member needs to have a passion for communication, and that passion may be expressed through their vocation or past experiences. At least one member of the team needs to be a comfortable and confident writer. Most team members need to be comfortable proof-readers. The purpose of this team is to support the staff member or volunteer assigned with church communication.

2. The ministry team should review the church’s communication methods, strengthen these methods, and work with staff about networking with event planners. For example, when a planning team gathers for a church ministry activity, one or two communication ministry team members should be assigned to that project. This ensures promotion is always considered as a part of the planning mix. Most communication teams will limit planning interaction to church-wide or community outreach events, and make the team available by invitation for other smaller activities.

3. Planning teams should be assembled nine months before the scheduled event. I use a nine-month model as a parallel to human gestation. Let's allow nine months for this ministry activity to be born. The actual planning of the event - who, what, when, where and why (why are we doing this?) - occurs in the first three months of the planning process, leaving six months for promotion and tinkering with the smaller details. Following this model (see chart at close of this document), eliminates most knee-jerk or panic-driven decisions.

After planning occurs in the first three months of the nine-month lead-in time, promotion occurs in the final six months leading up to the event. During this six-month period, promotion really occurs in three phases:

Mark Your Calendars - This is the initial phase, where people are provided the basic calendar information for the event. All that's required is a saturation of the entire church family, and any free community publicity that might be available. Continue this saturation throughout the six-month promotion cycle.

Benefit To Participation - The next phase of promotion involves narrowing the promotion focus to the 'most likely audiences' - those people groups most likely to attend. To those groups (often determined by age, gender or household composition), it's important to begin communicating the *benefits of participation*. I encourage churches to complete this sentence as part of event promotion: *At this event, participants will <fill in the blank>*. That becomes a benefit statement. The more benefit statements you can direct at a 'most likely audience' the more likely an event will meet its goals.

Sense Of Urgency - The last phase of promotion is creating a sense of urgency. Promoting registration deadlines (and enforcing them), communicating limited seating capacity (if it's truthful), and communicating limited available resources (if it's truthful) will help last-minute promotion. It's also a good idea to advertise strong registration numbers - *more than 100 have registered* - if it's truthful, because people want to 'get on board' with something they perceive as popular. This phase of promotion needs to saturate everyone - communicate throughout the church and community, but also communicate separately and succinctly with those 'most likely to attend' audience groups. Also, it's in this phase that you might introduce testimonials from influential people planning to attend the event. Nothing drives participation like the endorsement of a respected individual who is planning to attend the activity. And, it helps for that testimonial to include *why* attendance is important. (Some churches will mix testimonials into promotion throughout the six-month timeframe, and that's excellent - just mix up the testimonials so that new ones are always appearing - don't recycle testimonials for long periods of time.)

By what means do you communicate with people? You use every resource you have plus those methods used by your 'most likely to attend' audience groups. For example, you will certainly use your church website, bulletin, newsletter and e-mail to communicate with your general audiences. But, you may want to use Facebook or event text-messaging when communicating with some 'most likely to attend' audiences. There must be flexibility in how to communicate with people even if it's outside the church's comfort zone. That's why the

communication ministry team is important - to explore and help launch new and innovate ways to communicate.

No more frustration. It's important for churches to promote as well as they plan. If we promote 'greatly' and promote 'poorly' the end result is 'good is good enough' in what we do through ministry. I've not yet found the church that is truly comfortable with that end game. <^><

Planning/Promotion Diagram

Spring (March-May)	Summer (June-August)	Fall (September- December)	Winter (January- February)
Plan for Winter	Plan for Spring	Plan for Summer	Plan for Fall
Initial Promotion for Fall - Mark Your Calendars	Initial Promotion for Winter - Mark Your Calendars	Initial Promotion for Spring - Mark Your Calendars	Initial Promotion for Summer - Mark Your Calendars
Advanced Promotion for Summer - Benefit Promotion	Advanced Promotion for Fall - Benefit Promotion	Advanced Promotion for Winter - Benefit Promotion	Advanced Promotion for Spring - Benefit Promotion
Ministry or Event Occurs - Sense of Urgency	Ministry or Event Occurs - Sense of Urgency	Ministry or Event Occurs - Sense of Urgency	Ministry or Event Occurs - Sense of Urgency

Scott Vaughan was a 20-year newspaper writer, editor and publisher before entering vocational ministry as a church communication strategist. As a member of the media, he won awards in both the Georgia and South Carolina press associations, and served on the South Carolina Press Association's Executive Board. For nine years, he was marketing director for the South Carolina Baptist Convention, serving churches of all sizes, in all cultures, and of all ages. In 2003, he created his own ministry, enabling him to serve a larger ecumenical community that reaches across the United States, and into Canada and Australia. He is a professional public speaker, and has the gift for creating original presentations customized for audiences. He is a local church leader, serving as a deacon and small group teacher/leader. He is active in his community, specifically supporting children and young people through youth sports. He and Vicki have been married 23 years and have four sons, ages 20-12.

