

Training for the e x p e r i e n c e

“Successful teams are those that understand that the desired end product is transformation, not transactions.”¹

Train the Heart First; the Details Will Follow

As you prepare your teams for ministry, training is critical. But before you address the details of delivering excellent service, you must cement some foundational building blocks within your team members. As you’re laying this foundation, I encourage you to emphasize *principles* and *values*. Rather than presenting a ninety-nine page how-to manual, paint a broad-stroke picture of the atmosphere you want to create.

If your teams get too caught up in completing their ministry assignments correctly without first engaging their hearts in the mission, your environment will be characterized by performers of tasks. The atmosphere may be efficient, but it will likely be chilly as well. Cast vision; teach the mission of your church and ministry; describe clear objectives. Then invite your teams to help create an environment in which these objectives can be met.



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A Road Map for Training Your Guest-Services Team

The purpose of initial training is to give members of your guest-services team the opportunity to agree with the ministry's objectives and understand how they can be a part of it. It's helpful to have the energy of critical mass as you define the ministry's vision, mission, values, purposes, and style. Your definition of *critical mass* will depend on your circumstances, but I've found that the more people, the better. I recommend you schedule two to three hours for this training, especially for larger groups. I also suggest that, during this training, you set aside time every ten to fifteen minutes for people to interact within small groups. This will allow them to connect relationally; teach themselves; and align with your ministry philosophy in a deeper, more personal way.

In the following pages, I'll outline a road map for group training. I encourage you to modify it as much as necessary to fit your church's unique culture and your personal training style.

The Power of First Impressions

Help your teams grasp the implications for the church of society's consumer culture. Start by using the exercise "First Impressions Last" on page 19 to help your teams grasp the indelible nature of first impressions. Then allow time for team members to talk about where they shop, the businesses and products to which they are loyal, and their own "Wow!" experiences, as well as disappointments they've experienced. This discussion will help your team members better understand your guests' expectations when coming to your church.

Your Ministry's Mission, Vision, and Values

Summarize your ministry's purpose and methods for helping guests feel welcome and safe. Encourage trainees to share personal stories about how they came to Christ and the church. If you want to adopt the "first ten minutes" principle as a hallmark of your ministry, this is an ideal time to explore that idea.

If you are just beginning this ministry in your church, I recommend asking members of your senior staff or governing board to participate in this stage of training. If you are not the senior pastor, you might consider giving some of this teaching time to your senior pastor.

Remember What It's Like to Be a Guest

One weakness plaguing many of us is the tendency to forget. It's so easy to forget what it's like to be a guest in a new, unfamiliar setting. This forgetfulness weakens our ability to meet our guests with welcoming acceptance right where they are.

Jesus knows we have trouble with forgetfulness. It might be one reason he gave us the golden rule: "Do to others what you would have them do to you" (Matthew 7:12). If we forget what we once needed in a difficult situation, we're less likely to be empathetic toward others who need the same thing. For instance, if I've forgotten what it's like to be a young child during an electrical storm, I'm more likely to be annoyed to find my daughter at my bedside at one o'clock in the morning after she's heard thunder. If I forget the kindness someone showed me in merging traffic just yesterday, I may refuse to let a driver move in front of me when I'm in a rush today.

However, when we *remember* how it feels to be included rather than alienated, we're more likely to be inclusive. When we remember what it's like to need help without knowing where to find it, we're more likely to be helpful. When we remember our own spiritual hunger and search for fulfillment, we'll be more sensitive to our guests' needs for the same things.

Who Is Our Guest?

Try this exercise to help members of your team close the gap between how they view themselves and how they view your church's guests.

You'll need

- photocopies of the "Who Is Our Guest?" handout (p. 104)
- 4 to 6 recently submitted, anonymous prayer requests
- small cards or paper
- a backpack weighted with several books or bricks
- poster board or newsprint
- markers



It's so easy to forget what it's like to be a guest in a new, unfamiliar setting.



Preparation: Prior to the training session, collect four to six actual prayer requests from people in your church. The church's weekend comment cards, Web site, or prayer telephone line may be excellent sources. Removing any names from the requests, print them on individual cards or small strips of paper, and place them in a pocket of the backpack.

Form groups of four to six. Distribute markers, a sheet of poster board or newsprint, and a photocopy of the "Who Is Our Guest?" handout to each group. Give groups eight to ten minutes to discuss the questions on the handout and illustrate their conclusions. Then have each group share its "guest profile" with the other trainees. Celebrate each profile with hearty applause.

Debrief the entire group's conclusions, pointing out

- recreational activities common to your area;
- shopping trends;
- shared values;
- demographics related to age, marital status, children, and sometimes income ranges; and
- basic hopes, needs, and fears.

This exercise will demonstrate two things to the people in the training session. First, they know more about the people in their community than they might have realized. Second, these guests are very much like them; in fact, they have a lot in common.

Pass the backpack around the group, asking several people to select a prayer concern from the pocket and read it aloud.

As your team feels the weight of the pack and listens to concerns related to divorce, death, unemployment, and fears, suggest how this illustrates the burdens your guests carry as they enter your church. Behind the smiles are people with real needs, looking for real answers. Many, if not most, want to say, "Help me. I need something, someone, to help me with life."

Ask your group, "How many of you have carried at one time, or are now carrying, these kinds of concerns, questions, and fears?" Every hand in the room will go up. And the gap between team member and guest will evaporate, because your team will remember.

Their hearts will be better prepared to create an environment of grace, warmth, and welcome.

HELLO: An Overview

Here's a simple acronym that's easy to remember, captures the essence of the relational environment a guest-services ministry is intended to create, and generates lots of fun in training: HELLO. It outlines a natural progression of personal interaction with guests, leading them to think, "Wow! I'm impressed!"

As you explore each letter of the acronym, be sure to cite examples from your own experience as well as soliciting stories from the participants. Then, before moving to the next letter of the acronym, form groups of three. Have members of each trio choose a role: a guest, a greeter, or an observer. (Everyone will eventually rotate within the group, playing each of the three roles.) Ask each trio to role-play the letter of the acronym under discussion. This part of the activity goes very quickly.

Allow time for each trio to debrief the role-play, encouraging the members to delve more deeply into their perspectives as observer, guest, and greeter. Some of the best teaching will happen during this self-guided discussion. Remember that most of your team members are "people persons." They will teach and coach one another as they work through the activity.

Finally, take a few minutes to lead the entire group in a discussion, asking for highlights of each group's observations.

After you've completed this process for all five letters of the acronym, allow the groups to do a final role-play, using the entire acronym.

Have fun with this! It's a tool for teaching both a *principle* and a *technique* that will empower your team members to engage guests simply and sincerely. It will help your teams communicate that your guests matter to God, and therefore to you!

Although this five-step process might seem formulaic, it's really as organic as any conversation. Train with this five-piece focus, and your teams can engage every guest individually and consistently.

I've written the following text in the first person, as if I were facilitating the training session. Again, I urge you to customize your

training by using all or part of this material in a way that will work best in your church's unique setting.

H Is for “Hello”

Let's say you walk into a store at the mall, browse for a few minutes, find the item you're looking for, and proceed to the counter. Of course, you're expecting to pay for your merchandise and be on your way.


You reach the counter. “Good,” you think, “someone's actually at the counter. What a great store.” You're ready to complete the transaction. The sales associate is not. Something appears to be more important to her than you, a paying customer. You fidget as she leafs through a notebook, receipts in hand. She looks busy, even a little concerned. You sigh, shift your weight to your other foot, and push your merchandise two inches closer to her. Nothing. You're invisible.

You just want to be acknowledged. You'd like for her to simply say, “Hi! It's good to see you. Give me a second to clear this out of the way, then I'll be right with you.”

The H in H.E.L.L.O. is for, well, “hello.” It's about acknowledgment, recognition. “Good morning!” “Hi!” “How are you?” Regardless of the wording, the acknowledgment simply means “I'm paying attention; I see you.”

But your assignment as a greeter is not to be a handshaking “hello machine.” This is about being observant and cordial. Eye contact is essential. If a guest makes eye contact with you, you must acknowledge him or her with an oral greeting, a pat, or a wave.

(At this point in the training, you might refer to the tips in Chapter 4 about learning to read body language. This is a great opportunity to do some impromptu role-playing.)


We must be fully present, focused on the moment and on each person in that moment.



As we greet our guests, we must be fully present, focused on the moment and on each person in that moment. There will be other times to focus on your teammates and friends in the church. As important as those connections are, when you're serving, your attention must be on guests.

Have you ever gone into a store looking for a specific item? Let's say you want a

light blue, button-down, cotton shirt. To expedite your search, you're prepared to ask someone for help. As you enter the store, you see three sales associates on one side of the store talking, laughing, and having a good time. Their circle is closed. On the other side of the room is a sales associate, standing alone, folding sweaters.

Whom would you approach: the three associates in a conversation or the associate folding sweaters?

That's right, you'd go to the person folding clothing. Why? Because he's approachable, he's present in the moment, he's open to your question. You wouldn't address the others because you might feel rude for interrupting them.

So team, bust up your party! To acknowledge our guests, you must convey openness. A guest may want to ask a question. If you're engrossed in a conversation with a friend, the guest probably won't ask.

(Now it's your turn. Lead your group through the role-play as suggested on page 93.)

E Is for Engagement

When you engage a guest, you move the encounter from a cordial recognition to a personal conversation that might include introductions, question-asking, and information-giving. As the greeter, your body language is critical in this step. Expressing genuine interest through your eyes and other gestures makes any conversation more engaging.

To show genuine interest, you need to slow down. This isn't easy for most of us. We always seem to have some place to be, some task to complete. Slowing your pace will help you to be present in the moment; it reminds you that people are your focus. When you pause to look people in the eye, you communicate that you have time for them.

A guest might engage you because you're wearing an official-looking name tag. Or you might take the initiative to engage a guest. For example, you might approach a young mother whose arms are full of children and diaper bags. Or perhaps you recognize that "I'm new



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here” pause by the family who just walked through the door. When you initiate a conversation, you’ve engaged the guest.

Regardless of who initiates the conversation, personalize it by introducing yourself. Maybe you’ve discovered this phenomenon: Nearly every time you introduce yourself to others, they will respond by voluntarily telling you their names. At this point, you’re no longer strangers.

Having established this warmer level of engagement, new doors can be opened within the conversation. These guests now have a personal contact at your church. If they wanted or needed to, they could now ask for someone by name. This diminishes their sense of being outsiders.

Deepen the connection by addressing the guests’ children with warmth and acceptance. As you meet your guests’ families, kneel so you’re at eye-level with younger children. Ask about names, ages, and interests. Be sure to introduce the family to the children’s ministry team in the children’s respective classrooms. By the time the parents are settled in the auditorium, their trust in your church’s ability to care for their children should be established.

Don’t try to force conversation or prolong it. Typically, the guest who wants immediate help or dialogue will take it from there. Set the stage for a natural exchange; if it doesn’t happen organically, it is counterproductive.

Although you may quickly approach someone whose body language says, “I’m new here. Please help me,” asking all the people who enter your church if they need help is like a restaurant host asking for your food order as soon as you walk through the door. Your objective is not to engage every person in prolonged discussion; it is to create a welcoming atmosphere so that when you do engage a guest, the exchange is warm, authentic, and personal.

(Now it’s your turn. Lead your group through the role-play as suggested on page 93.)

L Is for “Listen”

You’ve probably heard that God gave each of us one mouth and two ears because he wants us to listen at least twice as much as we talk. I don’t know if that was his design, but human relationships are improved when we practice it!

Appropriate eye contact is critical to effective listening. Communication expert Bert Decker says that eye contact can communicate three “I’s”: involvement, intimacy, or intimidation. He says five to ten seconds of eye contact followed by glancing away is generally a comfortable amount of time to establish involvement. Making eye contact for longer periods of time may communicate either intimacy or intimidation.² By making appropriate eye contact, you’ll involve the guest, while maintaining a comfortable environment. Listening while making appropriate eye contact also communicates interest, empathy, and focus.

Your eyes certainly communicate connection, but the rest of your body language says plenty about your interest as well. For instance, crossing your arms while listening can convey “blocking,” a barrier that demonstrates a lack of interest or, worse, resistance. Leaning against a wall, away from a person, can convey a lack of involvement. And listening with your hands on your hips can be quite intimidating.

Your posture should be relaxed and open. I encourage you to keep your hands in front of you rather than behind your back. If you’re standing, avoid placing both hands in your pockets; this can be interpreted as “closed,” in the same way as crossing your arms. Standing approximately two feet from your guests creates a fair sense of safety. However, as you read their body language, allow them to set their own personal space; then honor that boundary.

Miscommunication is often the result of poor listening. Listening actively requires focus and practice. Most of us are often too busy to listen well. When we ask in passing, “How are you?” we really don’t want to hear the long, true answer. But when we stop, make appropriate eye contact, and focus on the moment, we offer our guests a huge gift.

(Now it’s your turn. Lead your group through the role-play as suggested on page 93.)

L Is for “Listen Some More”

While listening actively requires less talking, we do need to respond to ensure we’re hearing what the other person is communicating. Asking questions and restating what you think you heard are listening skills that require time and practice to develop.

Here's an example of poor listening skills that led to unfortunate consequences. A woman, whom we'll call Janie, entered a Protestant church on a Saturday evening, found a greeter, and asked, "What time is mass this evening?"

The greeter, whom we'll call Beth, assumed Janie had a grasp on religious vocabulary and assumed her question should be interpreted literally. She replied, "We don't have mass this evening."

Janie left the building. Did she leave because she really wanted to attend mass in a Catholic church? Or did she leave because she thought there were no more services that evening? We'll never know. Had Beth slowed down, made no assumptions, and listened actively by asking a clarifying question before answering, the conversation might have gone something like this:

"What time is mass this evening?"

"Hi! Welcome. Let me make sure I understand what you're asking. By the way, my name is Beth."

At this point Janie would likely have introduced herself, and these women would have been on a first-name basis.

"Well, Janie, are you asking about a Catholic mass, the Lord's Supper, or the time of our service this evening?"

Then Janie might have answered, "Oh, sorry. I don't know what you call it. I grew up Catholic. I'm just wondering what time your service—or mass or whatever it's called—starts." Or she may have said, "Oh, I'm looking for Communion at a Catholic mass." In either case Beth would have known what Janie really wanted and could have directed her appropriately.

Beth failed to ask questions and restate what she thought she heard. This kind of miscommunication doesn't have to happen in a guest-services ministry. Asking questions clarifies facts, reveals feelings, and opens the door to rapport. Restating what we think we've heard allows speakers to correct us or to affirm that they've been listened to well. Both skills are essential to a successful guest-services ministry.

(Now it's your turn. Lead your group through the role-play as suggested on page 93.)

O Is for “Offer Assistance”

Once you’ve established that you understand your guest’s need, you’re ready to offer assistance. Of course, how you provide that help will depend on your assigned responsibility and the nature of the need. You may be serving at a post you can’t leave. Perhaps you’re serving at the guest-services center; will other guests not be served if you escort a family to the children’s center?

When responding to a guest’s request, remember these two priorities: First, if you can offer the assistance personally, do it. Either your post can be abandoned for a short time, or you can find another team member to temporarily take your place. Second, if you must rely on another team member to assist your guest, introduce the guest to your teammate. Do not require your guest to repeat his or her request. Rather, explain what is needed, assuring your guest that he or she is in competent hands.

In either case, never point guests toward their destinations. Always escort them or see that someone else does. Whether they want to get to the children’s center or the bookstore or the restroom, always take them; never point the way.

Have you ever asked for directions to a restroom or a particular product in a large department store? “Just follow this aisle to that pink blouse there on the corner. See it? Turn left, go to the green carpet, follow that to the right until you get to the lingerie. You’ll see an elevator on the left. Take the elevator to the second floor, and follow the red and white tile through the appliances section. Then turn right and go to...”

“Huh?”

Always stop what you’re doing and escort guests to their destinations. Never point, never direct, regardless of how close the destination is or how easy it is to find. People are wowed when this kind of personal attention is given to them. They are surprised that people care enough to take this much time.

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suggests ending every conversation with a guest with this fairly standard question: “Is there anything else I can help you with today?” But then George adds, “because I have time.” This phrase is simple, but it is truly profound.

No phrase communicates more value to guests. “Is there anything else I can do to help you today? Because I have time.” Try it.

(Now it’s your turn. Lead your group through the role-play as suggested on page 93.)

Branding

Help your trainees understand the importance of consistency by discussing the concept of branding. Ask them with what organizations they identify the following words or symbols:

- swoosh
- red and white bull’s eye
- golden arches
- Whopper
- latte

If they identified these symbols with the following companies, then someone’s done their job: Nike, Target, McDonald’s, Burger King, and Starbucks. See how a clearly defined brand ensures name recognition?

With name recognition comes reputation. If every pair of shoes you’ve bought from Nike has been comfortable, durable, and affordable, then Nike has credibility with you. Conversely, if you’ve been consistently disappointed by a certain brand, your experience will probably prevent you from buying that brand again.

When guests talk about your church at their workplace on Monday morning, they describe its reputation. Those who have not been to your church have it defined for them by someone else’s experience.

A local church’s reputation evolves and is cemented when every team on every weekend meets the same standard of excellence. That’s consistency. During their six-week rotations, if Granger’s team members created their own culture, handled the guest-services center in their own way, or served guests in the bookstore by their

own standards, there would be no consistency. The stories at the office from one Monday to the next wouldn't match. The church would develop a reputation for unreliability. Guests would not be satisfied, much less engaged.

Consistency is also vital because of the "rule of representation." According to this rule, when a guest encounters any one individual in an organization, he or she has encountered the organization itself.

This rule was illustrated to my wife and me a few years ago at the Marriott in Jacksonville, Florida. As the bellman, Steve, assisted us with our luggage, he chatted with us about our trip, our family, and our marriage. As we talked he learned we were celebrating our twenty-first anniversary. That evening, Steve had a basket of fruit, chocolates, and a bottle of champagne sent to our room. We were wowed!

More recently we were guests at the Westin Hotel in Indianapolis. When Garfield, the director of marketing and sales, discovered we were celebrating our twenty-second anniversary, he responded in much the same way. By five o'clock that evening, we were surprised by a knock on the door. We were treated to chocolate-covered strawberries and a chilled bottle of bubbly.

In both cases an individual went out of his way to make us feel especially valued. My wife and I still talk about how thoughtful it was of the Marriott and the Westin to treat us so splendidly. To Laura and me, Steve *was* the Marriott, and Garfield *was* the Westin.

When guests encounter any individual on your guest-services team, they encounter your church. We tell our team members, "You *are* Granger Community Church. When you smile, our guests will leave thinking, 'What a pleasant church!' When you wow people with your listening skills and service, they will know that this is a church that cares. You *are* the church."

Of course this is also true of negative experiences. If one greeter is indifferent, doesn't really listen, or doesn't follow

A tremendous resource we use in our training comes from the folks at Chart-house Learning. They've worked with the team at Seattle's world-famous Pike Place Fish Market to produce a delightful video training guide called *FISH!* (visit www.fishphilosophy.com for ordering information). This training video will revolutionize your team, helping its members understand the power of branding to create new "Wow!" experiences for your guests.



through, the guest naturally assumes that the church is cold and uncaring.

Here's the good news: When you select people who are *SHAPEd* for this ministry and you train them, value them, and lead them, you will have a brand that consistently honors the name of Christ, and this reputation will be confirmed every Monday morning.

This Is Not About Cloning!

When we talk about branding, we're not talking about cloning. The goal is not to instill uniformity; it is to instill ownership and consistency. When every member of your team buys into the mission, vision, values, and purposes of your ministry, this personal ownership will be expressed in unique ways, but the overall experience—of welcome, caring, and warmth—will be consistent. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:7, “Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits. All kinds of things are handed out by the Spirit, and to all kinds of people! The variety is wonderful” (*The Message*).

Protect and encourage the authenticity of your teams. Unique personalities are tremendous assets on every team. When your teams own the ministry because they are wired to serve there, “Wow!”s will happen.

Consistency Happens Through Ongoing Training

As I stated earlier, I recommend you set aside a block of time to provide training on everything we've discussed to this point in this chapter. However, the vast majority of your team training will occur outside of this structured group time. True consistency and quality will emerge during on-the-job and just-in-time training.

Sometimes on-the-job and just-in-time training may be done in very small groups, but most of the time this level of training should occur one-on-one. It should happen relationally, on the spot, and should always include high levels of praise.

Celebration as Training

Praise is great one-on-one, when no one else is looking, but be sure to also honor your teams in large-group celebration events. Every year we throw a big party for all our First Impressions teams. We

spend an evening celebrating teams, individuals, and our collective ministry. We give awards based on humorous happenings, extreme commitment, and over-the-top guest service. It's a great opportunity to recast vision and lay out a road map for the upcoming year.

Take the time. Love your people. Celebrate them and honor them!

TRY THESE NEXT STEPS...

- What perceptions do your core members currently have of your guests?
- What could you do to help them see your guests differently, as they really are?
- If every guest were acknowledged without being smothered, how would that compare to what is happening now?

Endnotes

1. Laurie Beth Jones, *Teach Your Team to Fish* (New York: Crown Business, 2002), 111.
2. Bert Decker, as quoted in *50 Powerful Ideas You Can Use to Keep Your Customers* by Paul R. Timm (Franklin Lakes, NJ: Career Press, 2002), 45.



Who Is Our Guest?

Use the questions below as a springboard for defining our church's typical guest. Think of people such as your neighbors, friends, co-workers, workout partners, and the families of your children's friends. Choose an "artist" or two from your group to illustrate the group's answers, creating as complete a "profile" as possible.

- What does this person do for a living?
- What does he or she do for fun?
- Where does he or she shop? What is important to this person when shopping?
- Who are his or her friends? How deep are these friendships?
- How old is this person?
- What is his or her marital status?
- Does this person attend school? Where? What's his or her focus?
- What about family? Does this person have children? If so, what schools do they attend? In what other activities do they participate?
- What are this person's goals and dreams?
- Why did he or she come to church last weekend?
- What's on this person's mind? What are his or her worries and fears?
- What needs might this person verbalize to others?