

Sidestepping 5 Communication Pitfalls that Trap Vision

Effective communication is absolutely critical to creating movement toward your vision.

The challenge then is keeping the vision of your church central in your messaging. Does clarity of vision drive your communications strategy or does communication rely on the loudest voice or greatest need? Without an intentional, strategic, vision-soaked communications plan, it is easy to fall into the pitfall of calendar maintenance and program sustenance. A pitfall that always traps vision.

Here are 5 Communication Pitfalls that every church faces and one side-step for each to keep your vision on solid ground.

1. The Program-Focus Pitfall

Many churches rely on communicating about programs rather than through vision. Every Sunday announcement begins to sound the same: "Here's what we're doing! Sign up today." Response wanes quickly, if any response happens at all, because nearly everyone in the congregation already feels overwhelmed by their schedule. The last thing they came to church to do was sign up for something else.

If all you do is communicate programs or events, your communication will likely go in one ear and out the other. So how can you sidestep this pitfall?

Never communicate about a program without first communicating vision. Ask: How does this program or event enable people to be a part of the vision and mission God has given to your church? What part of our Great Commission call might people miss if they do not participate? What are some life-change stories you can tell to demonstrate Gospel effectiveness and generate missional excitement around the program?

Side-Step #1: WHY before WHAT. Instead of just standing and announcing your church homecoming Sunday in July, hoping to convince everyone to show up and sweat together around some sketchy potato salad, stop and frame the why. Is gathering as a family important or missing in your culture? Will guests get to know the church behind the Sunday service formality? Are there stories of impact from last year's homecoming that you can communicate through a short video clip? First, communicate WHY this program or event matters to the vision of the church before you tell the congregation WHAT side dish they need to sign-up for.

2. The Too Many Choices Pitfall

Without a clear understanding of success in the mission, it is easy to elevate doing many activities above developing the few attributes of gospel-centered disciples. We proudly communicate, "There's a lot going on around here!" but do people truly know what they are accomplishing by making a particular choice?

The vast menu of options for people to get involved, simply does not work. Major research studies exist on the concept of “decision paralysis.” These scientific studies reveal that offering people too many choices actually leads to people to not choosing anything at all. It is easier to do nothing than to guess at one thing.

The best way to avoid this pitfall is to develop a comprehensive communication plan. A great plan defines one specific next step of engagement you want people to take in each ministry environment or program. Make it clear why these next steps are important for missional engagement and give clear instructions on how to do it. The number of activities you offer may decrease, but you will increase the overall participation of your congregation around what matters the most.

Side-Step #2: One + One. Pull out the worship bulletin from last Sunday’s service and stop to count the number of next-step choices you communicated. How many were applicable to your first-time guests and how many were members-only? Could the average attender even tell the difference? Commit to simplifying everybody’s world in the future and carefully craft one intentional next step for your guests and one next step for the congregation each week.

3. The Ineffective Messaging Pitfall

Some studies suggest that the average adult views close to 3,000 marketing messages per day. That’s about 3,000 intentionally designed advertisements, by marketing professionals, to creatively connect with people emotionally to compel or require action. In contrast, we in the church often assume that people will engage with our service announcement in the same way, simply because we are the church. Carrying the mandate of the Gospel requires us to be intentional and effective in church communication. The stakes may be eternal.

How much time do you spend working on and refining the language you use to communicate your mission and vision? Bill Hybels, in his book, *Axiom*, tells a story of how he spent an entire transatlantic flight working on two specific words that would ignite passion in people around God’s vision for Willow Creek Community Church. Words create worlds, and every word matters. Who can help you hone and sharpen your vision language for transformational impact?

One quick way to evaluate your existing vision is to simply ask yourself: Does this vision get me excited? Am I compelled to do something new or be someone better because of the language we use to communicate our calling?

Side-Step #3: Emotion Creates Motion. How much more effective would your immediately-swiped-left-to-delete weekly emails be if you spent as much time developing a compelling subject line as you did on the content itself? Stop and think about what really matters to the average church member in what you are communicating. If you cannot answer this, maybe do not send an email this week. If you cannot decide which one, go ahead to Pitfall #4 below. Either way, invest the time necessary to develop language that connects people at both the head and heart level to your missional calling.

4. The Too Many Messages Pitfall

Even when the message is highly crafted, it is easy to communicate too many messages. Remember those 3,000 marketing messages per day? When people come to services on the weekend or even visit your church Facebook page during the week, they have likely already been bombarded with too many ads and calls to action. Everybody has something or wants something. Unfortunately, we are sometimes a part of the problem adding multiple messages by saying the same thing many different ways.

As church leaders, we get to do more than market...we get to remind people that there is something bigger going on in the world and that they are a part of it—that is the mission God has given us. We can cut through the cultural marketing madness by focusing the church on the few simple, memorable goals that we are working toward, together. That is our vision.

To sidestep this pitfall, develop a clear, concise and compelling articulation of both your mission (what are we doing?) and your vision (what's the next milestone on the horizon?), and then say them over and over and over.

Side-Step #4: Less is More. Stop and think about your last small groups emphasis. Whether it was plugging into a Sunday bible study or committing to another night out each week, you were asking for a significant commitment. How many different and creative ways did you communicate this? More than one was probably too many. How consistent was the message of why from each of your leaders? Allowing personalization potentially creates confusion. Say more with less by refining your language of mission and vision, or even creating a complete vision frame. Then develop a team discipline to say the same thing in the same way – every time. Until leaders are tired of saying it, the congregation has not yet heard it.

5. The Lack of Follow-Through Pitfall

It is easy for church leaders to get more excited with the next new thing rather than remaining focused on the current important thing. Leaders lose credibility with staff and congregation by moving on to the next big idea before the last big idea has come to fruition.

When you communicate vision clearly—with clear milestones that everyone understands—continue to work toward those milestones as a church until you achieve them. Stay the course. Concentrate on the language to connect with your people and invite them into what God has called you to do as a church. Do whatever you have to do in order to hit those milestones. Then, move on to the next big thing.

Side-Step #5: One Thing Focus. Everyone wants to be a part of a church that is winning by doing something significant for the Kingdom. During the next church-wide emphasis, celebrate small wins along the way and tell the stories of life change. If your people have been called to invest above and beyond their typical pattern of attendance or giving, provide closure when the goals are met or the season ends. Spend the time and resources necessary to demonstrate completion, or over-communicate how the next initiative helps fulfill the last one. Stay focused on one big vision milestone at a time, communicate it in compelling ways, and celebrate it when God leads you through it.

How do you keep your church communication from falling into a vision-trapping pitfall? Keep these 5 Sidesteps in mind to stay on course and Go Ahead with vision clarity:

1. **WHY before WHAT**
2. **One + One**
3. **Emotion Creates Motion**
4. **Less is More**
5. **One Thing Focus**

If you're not satisfied with your communication strategy, start a conversation with our team. We're glad to offer our input. Your vision is at stake, so let's talk.