

# Will the Great Commission Become the Great Ad Campaign?

– Dr. James F. Engel –

---

*As Christians increasingly use marketing insights to communicate the gospel, CT Research Fellow James Engel has reason to watch with interest. An author of widely respected marketing textbooks, Engel has long encouraged biblically consistent application of marketing and managerial concepts. But as this article adapted from Transformation journal shows, Engel is wary of some of the potential pitfalls.*

---

Consider these two headlines and the claims that accompanied them:

- **"The *Sunchip* Also Rises."** Frito-Lay's® multigrain salty snack, *Sunchips*, has generated over \$100 million in sales with \$30 million in advertising.
- **"200,000,000 Reached with Mass Media."** The electronic miracle of radio and TV evangelism generates great breakthrough.

Do you see any essential differences between the two reports? One appeared in a secular trade journal, the other in a denomination's annual report. I suggest they are disturbingly similar.

The implication of the second is that new technology will allow us to "finish the task" of world evangelization and usher in the Lord's return. Such approaches lead me to think we are dangerously close to neglecting biblical mandates for Christian witness and the lessons of church history, to say nothing of evidence of how conversion really takes place. While I applaud the acceleration of evangelistic efforts, I do not endorse an uncritical embracing of every method or new technology.

Properly used, the mass media (anything other than personalized, face-to-face communication) are powerful tools for communicating the gospel. But Christ's words in Matthew 28:18-20, often referred to as the Great Commission, are in danger of being reduced to the Great Campaign, as we are urged to win as many customers for the gospel as possible before the end

of this century. Most problems with such use of print and electronic media arise through the adoption of a wrong paradigm, which missions scholar Samuel Escobar terms "managerial missiology."

## **MORE THAN NUMBERS**

Escobar coined the phrase managerial missiology to refer to an unduly pragmatic orientation. This approach reduces missions to numerical analysis and marketing principles. Escobar labels its acceptance as "yielding to the spirit of the age!" I concur. Managerial missiology has led us in some unfortunate and even dangerous directions.

The claim of media impact cited above is a good example. It represents faulty logic; no reputable marketer would ever make such a statement without valid evidence. When pressed, the mission board admitted it had no definitive factual basis for the claim that so many were reached by mass media. The most that could be said is that approximately this many people could have turned on their radios or TVs every time a program was aired. To say that a given number were reached is little-more than wishful thinking. This claim represents not only bad science, but defective missiology.

Problems also arise in some Christian groups when they turn to mass media with undiscerning urgency. In their attempts to evangelize the world quickly, they lose sight of the long view of God's work in the world. Some lose sight of the fact that people are converted one at a time, largely through face-to-face interaction. They forget that one-on-one witness has been the bedrock of evangelistic strategy throughout history. The gospel becomes understandable when it is incarnate in the lives of others. It is the ongoing story of Jesus Christ lived out in community that gives the whole picture.

The gospel is simply not a consumer product to be presented by mass-merchandising methods. Effective witness normally will not happen solely through mass media (although "closed" countries where no other avenue of access to non-Christians exists form an exception).

Admittedly, certain patterns are common to any decision-making process with major implications, including the decision to follow Christ. But people do not choose from a menu of philosophies or religions on the basis of which offers the greatest benefits, or solely because one answers certain motivations and needs. We do not build "product awareness" in hopes that the consumer will

visit the distributor or outlet (in this case, the local church). The communicator does not "close a sale" as he or she would with products such as *Sunchips*®.

The communicator's responsibility is to tell the story of Jesus in such a way that it is understood. It is ultimately the Holy Spirit who works miraculously and sovereignly through both conviction and regeneration to bring about conversion. While much can be gained from good management principles, how does one set numerical goals and definitive strategies when persuasion is not our ultimate responsibility?

## **THE AUDIENCE IS SOVEREIGN**

To grasp how mass media can be used properly, we first ask what it means to say that someone is reached. One axiom of marketing and all other forms of communication is that the audience is sovereign. This means that members of the audience will see and hear what they want to see and hear.

In the case of electronic media, it would be unusual for 15 to 20 percent of a given audience even to have their radios or TVs on, let alone for them to pay attention, comprehend, and respond. This fact has been documented in thousands of studies.

We have discovered over the years that people are equally selective in responding to Christian programming, especially when receptivity is low. Obviously, the Holy Spirit can and does override this human tendency, but it is presumptuous to contend that technology will suddenly enable us to bypass normal limitations.

At an earlier time in my life, I would have been more sympathetic to media-driven strategies to reach the masses. I am increasingly coming to see, however, that undue preoccupation with accelerated world evangelization may be causing us to lose sight of biblical realities. Those in Third World countries have opened the eyes of many of us to what I call a kingdom paradigm for world evangelization. This emphasizes building faith communities that exemplify the "narrow way" proclaimed by Jesus, terminating "top-down" strategies in favor of grassroots efforts, and a holistic gospel manifested in both word and deed. In this model, local bodies have foremost responsibility for strategy. Evangelism grows out of people's empathetic relationships in which the story of Jesus Christ is both demonstrated and proclaimed.

Mass media of all kinds can play a distinctive role in this paradigm, but their use must be grounded in the following principles:

- **The local church is both message and medium.** All too frequently I hear the one-sided view that the church is on earth for one reason—to reach the lost. If that were true, then the local church is only a communication medium. In many ways the church is the message. Michael Green comes right to the point:

Unless the fellowship in the Christian assembly is far superior to that which can be found anywhere else in society, then the Christians can talk about the transforming love and power of Jesus till they are hoarse, but people are not going to listen very hard.

The mass media are secondary to the firsthand witness of individuals and groups of believers. Mass media have no message if the story of Jesus is not evident and alive in local churches.

- **God created humans to have five senses, not one or two.** The undue Western preoccupation with the spoken or written word continues to baffle me. People use more than the left hemisphere of their brains in coming to Christ and growing in the faith. We need to learn anew from liturgical church traditions that art, music, sacred dance, drama, and other less cognitive media can tell the story of Jesus.
- **Understanding must be created, not assumed.** I find it disturbingly common to encounter a philosophy of ministry that is based on the premise that I communicate the Bible, God does the rest. At first glance this sounds quite biblical, but when translated into practice, it becomes nothing other than a lazy justification for ignoring the example of Jesus, the master communicator.

Communication does not occur until there is a match between the message as intended by the sender and the message as perceived by the audience. This does not just happen. It takes intensive effort. Jesus demonstrated this compellingly when he communicated with those who were genuine seekers. First, he understood people's longings and pain through continual exposure and genuine empathy. He started where they were and patiently moved them from the known to the unknown. Second, aspects of his message changed from one audience to the next, reflecting their unique needs and dispositions. Finally, Jesus moved beyond felt need to real need, reflecting the agenda of his Father, not that of the world.

## **INTEGRATING THE MASS MEDIA**

While face-to-face witness is the historic cornerstone of evangelistic strategy, other media can be especially useful in sowing seeds of awareness and stimulating interest. Mass media and personal witness are being integrated fruitfully all the time.

Audio-taped messages, for example, build awareness of one Supreme Being and the possibility of knowing him personally, thus laying the foundation for real response when a believer makes a personal visit. A magazine tells the story of an addict who found new life in Jesus, and this motivates a reader to seek Christian help. Short-wave broadcasters are cooperating to find ways to plant churches, initially through programs aimed at the unreached. Showings of Campus Crusade for Christ's Jesus film often surface the receptive, who then receive personal witness. The same can happen in an evangelistic crusade.

Because of the priority of integrating mass media with the local context, the days of importing media from the West should be drawing to an end. Missions writer Walter Sawatski has clearly demonstrated the harm being done in the Commonwealth of Independent States by well-meaning outsiders flooding it with Western-oriented media that fail to create understanding. Having spent nine weeks in that country over the last two years, I can testify to the validity of what he says.

Local churches and believers have an indispensable contribution to make to contextualized mass media. Media Associates International, an agency dedicated to training Christian writers around the world, has joined hands with local leaders to train hundreds of local authors who now produce materials that have true relevance and power.

Would that we were willing to spend less time and money importing Western books and televangelists and more on equipping nationals to do the job! Where this has been done conscientiously, the gospel invariably is communicated with far greater effectiveness. It is time for our priorities and strategies to shift.

## THE NARROW WAY

One of the final lures of managerial missiology lies in the area of appeal to felt need. People do respond when their felt needs are addressed in a way that does not call for an altogether different motivation and lifestyle. The "broad way" of appeal unfortunately has found its way into evangelism, especially the mass media. I cannot think of a better way to lay a thin veneer of Christianity over an otherwise unchanged group of people. It is possible to build a large church quickly and easily by promising that Jesus is the answer to all our hopes and felt needs. Crowds thronged around Jesus during his early ministry because of this very expectation. However, as he focused on the narrow way, on the true meaning of kingdom living, the crowds dwindled.

Christ did take felt need seriously, but this was only the starting point. He quickly moved to the underlying real need and issued a stringent call for commitment and radically altered lifestyle. Numerical growth can slump drastically when we follow his model, but do we have any other choice? While we may end up with "negative church growth" we may experience decidedly positive growth in the numbers of those who are willing to forsake everything and follow Christ.

I must admit that there are times when I wish I could turn off the switch of all Christian mass media. I have asked myself whether it would make any real difference. But then I always realize anew the mass media's great potential for good. When used at the grassroots to put forth a message characterized by biblical fidelity, true relevance, genuine contextualization, and full accountability, we can use mass media as the powerful tools God intended them to be.

*James F. Engel is Distinguished Professor of Marketing at Eastern College,  
St. David's, Pennsylvania.*

*The above has been used with the expressed permission of the author and Christianity Today ©,  
Christianity Today ©, 1993.*