

*The Value and Importance of **Free Offers***

***PLUS 11 Steps** to Launching a Free Booklet Offer*

By Cory J. Miller

One of the most overlooked marketing tools for churches is the FREE OFFER – giving away something of tangible value to your prospective guests.

At my former place of employment (a graduate school for pastors and missionaries), we created a 42-page booklet designed to hit our key audience (prospective students) with an answer to an important question many of them have – how do you determine whether God is calling you into full-time ministry?

The creation of this booklet filled a key need for us: determining the effectiveness of our marketing strategies (mainly print advertisements) and recruiting potential students. It also fulfilled part of our mission: training and equipping pastors and missionaries by helping them both discern and understand God’s call to ministry.

Now in its third reprinting (7,000 copies printed as of this writing), the booklet has been an overwhelming success for us. We’ve given away, literally, thousands at a total cost of less than 75 cents per booklet.

THE LESSON: For around 75 cents a pop, we could bring customers right to our doorstep.

For a small investment, churches can also bring prospective guests to their “doorstep” while at the same time distributing biblical truth and accomplishing their mission.

COLLECTING GUEST INFORMATION

One of the keys to effective free offers, though, is tracking the requests and gleaning valuable information for follow-up.

For instance, for our free booklet offer we provide a form online for prospective students to request the information, which includes forms for their name, address, phone number, email address and how they heard about the booklet offer. I can’t tell you how valuable this offer has become to our institution. First, as the marketing director I can gauge how much “bang for the buck” I’m getting in our various advertising channels. I use the free offer as a response mechanism in almost nearly every ad I design, including prominently mentioning it on our Web site!

Second, I am able to turn the names and contact information of genuine, qualified prospective students into our recruiting department (on average more than 5 a week!).

How valuable is it when a customer comes knocking at YOUR door? Extremely valuable!

HOW CAN IT WORK FOR A CHURCH?

You may be asking though: How can this work for my church? Easily! (Or, I should say, relatively easily.)

If you can’t create your own customized content or booklet, or don’t want to hassle with it, there are a variety of options available today. Book publishers increasingly understand the value of selling their books in bulk. Examples of this that I’ve seen in Christian bookstores include Lee Stroebel’s “Case for Christ” and his youth edition “Case for Faith.”

Pastor Rick Warren is now offering the first seven chapters of his best-selling book “The Purpose Drive Life” in a booklet titled “What on Eart Am I Here For?” It can be purchased in packs of 25 and 250 at significant discounts.

FORWARD THIS FREE REPORT TO A FRIEND!

Most recently, I saw a church in New York City using this same concept with brilliance on their Web site.

They offer “How Good is Good Enough” by Andy Stanley. (Incidentally, this book is sold by Multnomah Books who I’ve noticed use this bulk purchase offer for many of their books.)

Their offer is limited to residents in their target areas. The online request form includes spaces for their name, address and other standard contact information, but they also request the person fill out a “quick” survey, which includes questions about how they heard about the church, what they’re looking for in a church, and how often they’ve attended – all valuable information for a church as it seeks to minister to its community!

THE EVER SIMPLE BIZ CARD APPROACH

Getting the word out about the offer can be relatively simple and cost effective using the word-of-mouth power of your congregation.

Imagine for a moment, if you designed a full-color business card with the free offer invitation and a link to the request form on it, printed a couple thousand of them and gave it to every one of your members, asking them to give them away to everybody in their sphere of influence.

First, you would give your members a practical tool to invite their friends, family, neighbors, coworkers to Christ and your church and/or to start spiritual discussions.

Second, there are several online printers who offer bargain (and I mean, bargain) deals on two-sided, full-color business cards, starting around \$65 for 2,500 cards, making this an EXTREMELY cost-effective tool. (Send me an email and I’ll share my list of printers.)

Third, to request the booklet, your prospective guest has to either call your church office (and talk to a minister or assistant who is specially trained to be warm and friendly and who will invite them to church that Sunday for a special pastor’s luncheon) or log on to your church’s Web site (which you have already loaded with answers to the most pertinent questions about service times, directions, childcare, and more importantly, JESUS).

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11 STEPS TO LAUNCHING A FREE BOOKLET OFFER

Here are 11 steps for launching a free booklet offer in your church and community:

- 1. DETERMINE THE LENGTH AND SCOPE OF THE OFFER.** Will you set a certain time period for the free offer, or will the offer be ongoing?
- 2. SET YOUR BUDGET.** Think in terms of how broad this offer will be announced. For instance, if you plan to email a link to the free offer request form to your members, asking them to forward it to their friends, you’ll need to plan accordingly for a certain percentage of responses. (Be careful, if you implement the offer just right, you may be flooded with a 100 requests on the first day, as what happened with our free booklet offer – which I happen to think is a good problem!)
- 3. PICK THE BOOKLET YOU WILL OFFER.** With your budget in hand, go browse the aisles of your local Christian bookstore or online outlet and see what they offer in terms of special bulk pricing discounts. Then buy an adequate number of books so you are ready for the first initial orders to come in. Be realistic about the quantity you buy. This will depend heavily on your community’s size and how well your members participate in spreading the word.

4. GET THE ONLINE REQUEST FORM READY. It is very important to have the online systems in place for the offer before you launch it publicly. You don't want to frustrate your prospective guests by an online form that doesn't work properly. Test, test, and retest the form. Make sure the link to the form is prominent on your site and have it ready to go when you officially launch the offer.

5. POLISH YOUR WEB SITE. Go through your site and ensure up-to-date information about your church. (See "8 Great Guest Questions to Answer With Your Church Web Site.")

6. PREPARE THE MARKETING MATERIALS. Whether it's a special business card invitation, a three-week newspaper ad, or an email to your congregation, create an environment that will allow the offer to be successful. (Be sure and include a short press release or email to your local newspaper editor, telling him/her about the offer. Editors like "free" rather than events or offers that have price tags attached to them.) Whatever strategy you use, be sure to include at least two ways to request the booklet. I recommend a link to a request form online and a phone number to your church office.

7. TRAIN YOUR PEOPLE. This is especially important for secretaries and receptionists as well as your congregation. Give them all the information they need to help those who request the offer and to get excited about the potential of the results.

8. ESTABLISH YOUR FOLLOW-UP STRATEGY. Most importantly, make sure you deliver the requests in a timely fashion. Set the key people who will take and distribute the requests.

9. LAUNCH THE FREE OFFER. Depending on your budget, launch big! Make several announcements from the pulpit and hold up the booklet to show your congregation what you are giving away. Have all the essential elements in place to ensure the promotion goes smoothly.

10. TRACK THE RESULTS. On the free offer I produced for the seminary, I could always tell when my print advertisements ran. The requests spiked, and then faded the week or so after the ads ran. Since I included a place on the request form to determine where they heard about the offer, I was able to see my return on investment almost instantly. Through tracking this information, over time I realized where my most important advertising was located: on our own Web site. I found simply putting the words: "Request Your Free Booklet" in red, capital letters on the main home page was the most effective method for generating requests.

11. TWEAK THE OFFER. Based on your results, make changes as needed. If your advertisement in the local paper just isn't getting the results you want, make adjustments to it, or cancel it. When you find what works, keep going with it. If your people just aren't behind the promotion, start asking them why. Don't be afraid to try other techniques in getting the word out. After a couple of months, I realized I could generate almost the same amount of requests by switching from display advertising to classified advertising in key publications. By tweaking the ads, I saved money and got the same benefit.

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ABOUT CORY MILLER

Cory Miller has worked in journalism and public relations since 1998. He has served in the communications field at three daily newspapers, a sports magazine group, at two Southern Baptist churches, and a seminary. Additionally, he has written for *Baptist Press*, *On Mission* magazine, *Purpose Driven Ministries*, *Missouri Pathway*, and *Oklahoma Baptist Messenger*, among others. He is available for freelance writing, graphic design and church communications consulting work.