

The Business of Lakewood Church

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Introduction

In western societies, the Christian church is no exception to pop-cultural influences, especially megachurches—churches with mass audiences. Many Americans are bored with conventional church. Traditional worship involves too much self-sacrifice. Megachurches, such as Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas cater to the needs of their audiences. They use effective media communications strategies to accomplish big business goals by wowing them with advanced technology, spectacular performances, and positive messages. One might question the idea, “Church...a business, isn’t that sort of *unholy*?” The answer is yes, of course (at least it was a long time ago), but the American way is free market and capitalism, and it certainly doesn’t exclude churches.

Some churches sell ideological myths. Why sell Myths? It’s a profitable market because reality sucks, people are looking for solutions to the reality problem at the cost of common sense and a lot of money. Lakewood Church is very successful at using the media to sell its ideas. "I'm a big believer in the media," said Joel Osteen, pastor of Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, "That has always been my passion."¹

Lakewood has an annual operating budget of more than \$ 30 million². His church recently leased the Compaq Center—former home of the NBA's Houston Rockets—where Osteen has 25,060 worshippers in attendance each week.³ To provide insight into this big business, an indicative media

¹ Tara Dooley, Spreading Its Word, *The Houston Chronicle*, section A; Pg. 1, September 26, 2004

² Tara Dooley, Spreading Its Word, *The Houston Chronicle*, section A; Pg. 1, September 26, 2004

³ Luisa Kröll, Megachurches, Megabusinesses, 09.17.03, 12:00 PM ET http://www.forbes.com/2003/09/17/cz_lk_0917megachurch.html Christian Capitalism

literacy approach will analyze a Joel Osteen presentation⁴ using process, context, and production values as keys to interpreting the media messages.

Body

Mythic realities—cultural myths and mythical worldview:

An Optimistic worldview teaches members at Lakewood that they can control their destinies through the power of positive thinking. This is called living by faith. Its major proponents are “word-faith” televangelist teachers such as Benny Hinn, Kenneth Copeland, and Joyce Meyer. In this worldview, people believe that things manifest into existence by the power of evoking positive words and/or thoughts. The ideological Values reflect popular cultural myths that are a result of our society’s instant gratification expectations. In a way, no one wants to follow the old American dream that anyone can succeed through *hard* work.

To gain a better understanding of this worldview, a brief summary will explain the myth through American cultural perspectives of success. The measures of success in this worldview are determined by your health and wealth. For example, if you are sick it is because you don’t have enough faith. Material success is a sign that faith is working. It is very much like the secular view of Puritanism in which the successful are somehow deserving; and those who fail are unworthy. Success in this world is a path to immortality. It starts with an upward mobility in this life, ultimately creating a heaven on Earth. An act of will is required by Osteen’s audience to practice his teachings, leading to functional his purpose that we buy his tapes and tithe to his church. By practicing his methods of positive thinking, we will be in

⁴ Pastor Joel Osteen and Lakewood Church 2003, episode 202, Your Life Follows Your Thoughts

control, free to determine our own fate. For women, as standards of beauty and physical superiority are concerned, perhaps if we follow his methods we will look like his beautiful Barbie Doll-looking wife.

There is a definite matter of technique involved in the sport of positive thinking. This is why it is important to come to church every weekend to learn these strategies. Osteen promotes the American dream that anyone can be a success through hard work and discipline, but his idea of *hard* work only involves being entertained by his concert performances once a week, and by mentally exercising one's thoughts.

Process: Function

Function is used very consistently and effectively by Lakewood. There are no big competing functions to complicate matters. This probably accounts for Lakewood Church's incredible successful. An analysis will show how simple positive themes and attitudes are reinforced through verbal as well as nonverbal messages. Multiple functions are involved in Lakewood's media strategy, but it is evident that the main purpose of Lakewood Church is to make a profit by selling products that promote Joel Osteen and his mythical ideological message through programming and media exposure. For example, during one of the musical performances lead by Lakewood's worship leader, Cindy Cruse-Ratcliff, a graphic appears near the bottom of the television screen advertising that copies of the sermon are for sale by phone. Also, at another time during the sermon, a hybrid media advertisement similarly appeared with the words, "Visit us on the web" which would lead to many other tempting purchases.

False Function:

Part of the appeal is Lakewood's false function. It keeps the audience coming back to church every week for more entertaining worship and rosy sermons. It might even be thought of as using a hybrid function because it is catching on as a whole new way to present an old traditional concept of church. It makes no secret that the church services are presented in a rock concert atmosphere. "We really want it to feel like a concert," says Duncan Dodds, Lakewood's executive director. The purpose is to manipulate the audience through a combined effort of infotainment and production values. For example, after the half-hour long worship service (concert performance), Osteen admits he likes to get started each week with something funny. He begins his sermon with a light-hearted religious joke about the Pope. While the entertaining production sets the premise for his sermon as relevant and modern to our society, the use of humor also sets the mood for a casual and uplifting sermon.

Function through Production Values: non-verbal:

An analysis of function through production values shows how he is associated with his message as a package deal. Osteen embodies what he teaches. He is his own testimony, and if one ascribes to his logic, it is quickly viewed that his teachings work. Just look at his success! His material acquisition of wealth and possessions are almost proof enough. His "name it and claim it" worldview presumes an ordered universe that everything happens according to the types of thoughts one evokes.

Lakewood also uses production values to serve non-verbal functions of sending latent messages that reinforce the explicit messages of positive thinking. Clever use of production powerfully affects the audience's response to Osteen and his mythical ideological message. One reason megachurches are as big as they are is because they use the technology of today. This shows the audience that Lakewood identifies with this advanced world, and conveys that their message is relevant to the needs of the audience. The nonverbal language of stylistic elements reinforces manifest messages through color,

lighting, camera angles, scale, relative position, movement, connotation, nonverbal performance, and sound. These messages conveyed through production values may hypnotize the audience by affecting an ability to reason logically and effectively.

Colored lights-Brightly colored gemstones have symbolized royalty and worthiness throughout history. Just as light emanates through colored gemstones, spotlights are projected through colored filters that dazzle and excite the audience. They receive visual messages that they are engaging in a worthy event. The brightly colored lights are perceived to be part of Osteen's essence by illuminating around him when he is on the stage (*see fig. 1.1*). He appears as if he is a precious jewel, resulting in the audience perceiving Osteen as an object of desire and perhaps even worship. Through this association, his image and message are both reinforced as marketable products.

Camera angle-Osteen is usually viewed from below and sometimes at eye level conveying at different times that he is both your friend and your superior (someone to look up to) much in the same way that some of the worship songs refer to God as a friend, but also refer to him as a mighty power. Very rarely does the camera view him from above unless emphasizing the large mass of people in attendance.

Scale-A way in which the camera takes advantage of the size of the auditorium is through scale. The already large space appears even bigger through the warped perspective of the fish-eye type of camera lens that captures a wide angle from the top of the auditorium. Another effective camera strategy is the extreme long-shot effect. In several occasions, the camera zooms way in and then way back out to convey the incredibly large expanse of space, and to show the thousands of audience members that fill his church. This shows the TV viewers how many other people love Osteen. They stay tuned-in

because they are impressed by the amount of people who approve of him. This especially lures people in who want to be a part of the “in” crowd.

Relative position-Strategically placed stage props are used to convey messages about the speaker’s identity. One gets the same feeling about Osteen as we did when Superman flew around the Earth in the 1978 film, *Superman*. A large metallic-looking globe rotates directly behind him as he performs, signaling a message that he is able to save the world (perhaps by powerfully controlling the Earth’s rotation). He makes the world go ‘round.

Movement- The movement of the rotating globe serves a purpose to continuously show activity. This is to keep the audience’s attention. When Osteen is out of the view of the rotating globe, there is always motion as he walks around, waving his arms as he speaks. Something is always happening. Multiple cameras alternate scene-to-scene, moving in and out and side-to-side, but always conveying action. The feeling of flight as the camera pans over the audience from the top of the auditorium conveys a freedom much like the sense of Superman flying. During the broadcast, the TV viewing audience frequently soars over the live band and the in-house audience.

Connotation-Lakewood’s identifying brand logo is a white dove in a circular seal. The dove has a positive connotation as it symbolizes the Spirit of God. The friendly, non-threatening circle shape frames the dove image. As a whole, Lakewood’s logo bears a striking resemblance to the Presidential Seal of the United States (*see fig. 1.2, A and B*). It is a visual communication strategy revealing the American values held by Osteen. Not only does it look very much like the Presidential Seal, but it is also mounted on the front of his pulpit like the seal on the President’s podium. Osteen’s pulpit actually looks like a podium rather than a pulpit because the platform is not raised above the surrounding level of the

stage. The image of the church seal on the podium gives a powerful and controlling presidential affect. It sends the message that Osteen is like a president who represents the most powerful nation in the world.

A camera shot of an audience member during the opening scene of the worship performance captures the background image of an American flag hanging above him (*see fig. 1.3*). The camera's perspective is from below, pointing up toward the flag in the upper left hand corner of the screen. We are naturally drawn to the image of the flag because our eyes psychologically are directed to the upper left areas of images. This image connotes a high regard for American values.

Performance-nonverbal-Non-verbal Gestures are used by Osteen to reinforce verbal messages to the audience. For example, he often clenches his fist when encouraging the audience to live in victory and power. He frequently looks up toward the sky during the sermon. This helps to create an attitude of "looking up" as opposed to being down in the dumps, or singing the blues. In another gesture, he raises his bible up in his right hand while reciting his creed (*see fig 1.4*). The upraised gesture symbolizes victory and championship. The image almost looks as if he won an Olympic metal. This reinforces Lakewood's slogan that explicitly encourages championship.

Sound-The music is upbeat. State-of-the-art sound equipment provides the ultimate music experience. A professional-sounding live band performs the worship music. There are also no slow songs conveying negative-sounding words. Amazing Grace will most likely not be heard at this church because such lyrical phrases as a "wretch like me" would conflict with the positive message. The overall choice and quality of sound evokes a positive affective response—the response that keeps them coming back every weekend. The modern production equipment convinces the audience that they are a part of a progressive, forward movement.

Function through worldview: verbal Instruction:

Lakewood is motivated by a purpose to create a worldview. In this case, the ideological worldview is the marketed product. Certain choices of words and phrases take on particular meanings that shape the ideology, but this critical analysis will reveal how the product is a myth. Thousands of people uncritically trust the myth as reality—and like an endless cycle, the more people that join the illogical bandwagon, all the more will believe in it.

Repetitive verbal messages instruct the audience. It reinforces and embeds Lakewood's values through the use of slogans, creeds, euphemisms, and clever vocabulary.

Slogans-Lakewood's catchy slogan is "At Lakewood, Discover the Champion in You!" It is first seen and heard at in the Introductory clip shown before each broadcast. Then it is inserted on the screen in the form of a graphic during the televised broadcast and at commercial breaks; and lastly, it is the last thing one hears at the end of the broadcast. The belief that "you will learn how to win at Lakewood" becomes embedded in the subconscious mind. Other slogan-type phrases are repeated in his sermon to reinforce and embed ideas. Commanding phrases like "don't be a spectator, be a participator" are words meant to motivate one to action. If the last thing the audience goes away with is the lingering catch phrase, then the goal was accomplished because it has been embedded in their minds.

Creeds-Lakewood enforces its own creed that explicitly and verbally instructs the audience how to think, and what to believe. It is reinforced by an effective use of repetition. An easily understood creed breaks down the essentials of the myth. It is evident that his audience members weekly recite it—as the crowd seems to know it by heart. In this particular sermon, he holds up the Bible in his right

hand as he and the audience simultaneously recite it verbatim. The explicit message is clear in that you have what you say you have:

This is my Bible.

I am what it says I am.

I have what it says I have.

I can do what it says I can do.

Today I will be taught the Word of God.

I boldly confess my mind is alert, my heart is receptive.

I will never be the same.

I am about to receive the incorruptible, indestructible, ever-living seed of the Word of God.

I will never be the same.

Never, never, never.

I will never be the same. In Jesus name.

Amen.

Euphemisms are important to a Lakewood sermon because the language must be very positive. Code words such as the “enemy” are used as euphemisms in his sermons. When he says “the enemy”, everyone understands he is referring to the Devil or Satan, but the word “enemy” is softer and isn’t likely to offend anyone. It lends itself well to Osteen’s positive messages. Instead of saying “born-again” which is identified with a negatively perceived, judgmental subgroup of Christianity, they use the phrase “our re-created spirit”. Theologically, It means the same thing, but it isn’t identified as being negative.

Vocabulary is tailored to the Christian popular sub-culture. Common language unites people. For example, casually using the word “Amen” as a term that means “You agree, right?!” is an inclusive way that Osteen relates to the audience. For example, Osteen’s wife shared a story with the audience about a recent dilemma, she concluded the story with a rhetorical “Amen?” The identifiable sub-cultural

language creates a parasocial relationship between each individual audience member and the media communicator.

Conclusion

In summary, Lakewood's main function is its marketing strategy. It is achieved through production values and verbal performance skills. Media communication strategies are used by Lakewood Church to meet its profit goals by catering to the needs of its audiences. Reinforcing easy-to-swallow mythical ideologies and providing hi-tech entertainment through stylish production values effectively attracts over 25,000 consumers to buy into the message each week. Americans are quick to leave their brains at the doors when hypnotized by media production values, brainwashing latent messages. A new American way revealed itself as free market and capitalist, but not through patience or critical thinking because we are a society who expects easy and instant gratification. However, we are inclined to try new ways of thinking so long as we don't have to think too hard.

Lakewood Church's success at using the media to sell false ideas is proof that people are uncritical to the messages they receive through the media. Myths proved to be a profitable market because audiences are too busy or lazy to take the time to think about the media messages in which they are exposed.





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