

# CONGREGATIONS AS CONSUMERS: USING MARKETING RESEARCH TO STUDY CHURCH ATTENDANCE MOTIVATIONS

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*This article describes a study that applied techniques more commonly associated with consumer product marketing to the measurement of churchgoing motivations. The study used descriptive research, employing a mail survey questionnaire technique.*

*Results suggest that the top two motivations for church attendance are “giving thanks for life’s blessings” and “providing personal spiritual fulfillment.” Other factors of importance to churchgoing behavior are also detailed.*

*Marketing implications of the study are also discussed, including the selection of themes for church marketing efforts, particularly those building on the themes of “thankfulness,” and “fulfillment.” Another implication suggests that motivational areas that received lower motivation scores, such as “music,” “liturgy,” and “friendly priests” are important to parishioners, and should certainly not be neglected. In a sense, they may represent the basic “product features” that consumers have come to expect from consumer products (such as airbags and antilock brakes in motor vehicles)—and also in their religious services.*

*This study adds value to the field of marketing and religious studies because it builds two bridges from the existing literature. First, it uses market research techniques to link Religious Orientation Scale work to the direct measurement of churchgoing motivations. And second, it extends published marketing research efforts among the general public and among other denominations for the first time to a sample of Roman Catholics.*

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## INTRODUCTION

As the marketing field has matured, many of the techniques used by professionals to market for-profit businesses have been embraced by other fields. Some of the first converts to the use of marketing were not-for-profit organizations, followed more recently by health care and higher education. The seminal work of Kotler (1987, 1985, 1975) helped legitimize and speed this adoption process. However, one critical profession seems to have lagged behind in the adoption of marketing techniques: religion.

The need seems obvious, based on recent data. According to the American Religious Identification Survey, 15 percent of Americans reported their religion as “unaffiliated” in 2008, up from eight percent in 1990. The size of this segment is even more alarming among young adults aged 18-34, with 46 percent reporting that they currently practice “no religion” (Bulik 2009).

That is not to say that all religious organizations share this caution. In fact, many religious orders and individual congregations have embraced marketing as not only an acceptable practice, but almost as an extension of their mission by “enabling the church to reach our world for Christ” (Parro 1991).

In her book, *Brands of Faith, Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age*, Epstein (2007) discusses parallels between the marketing challenges of religious organizations and consumer product marketers.

“We’re so used to having our products created for us that fill our needs...that it makes all the sense in the world we’d expect the same from our faith” (Bulik 2009, p. 4). Other authors have also explored the “branding” aspect of religion, (Cooke 2008), how “pop” culture can be channeled to help make religious services more accessible (Stevens 2008), and even offer specific marketing strategies and tactics for congregations to follow in their desire to succeed (Reising 2007).

One specific congregation often cited as a fervent adopter of marketing techniques is the Willow Creek Community Church, an interdenominational evangelical congregation in South Barrington, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago. This congregation has grown from 125 worshippers for weekend services to 16,000, who pack the church’s 4,500 seat arena-like sanctuary during four weekend services (Burger 1997). In fact, Willow Creek’s marketing efforts have been so successful, The Harvard Business School has featured the congregation in a business case study. The Harvard study attributed the church’s success to “knowing your customers and meeting their needs” (Lewis 1996), a distinctively marketing-oriented approach.

The awakening to marketing is not limited to interdenominational congregations. For example, in New York City, the rabbi of the Makor Jewish Religious Center conducted focus groups with his “target market” to determine their needs—and what could be done to convince them to attend services. In response to this market research, the rabbi decided to dramatically revamp the congregation’s services (Wellner 2001).

Also in New York City, the Rev. James Burns, rector of the Church of the Heavenly Rest, an Episcopalian congregation, decided to reach out

to both existing and new parishioners. His marketing efforts were not out of desperation, but rather, constituted an attempt to better serve the congregation’s mission. “We are not trying to bring in new members for the sake of growth or to raise money. We are trying to feed the spiritual hunger, doing what God told us to do: proclaiming the good news” (Brozen 1998).

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints has also recognized the importance of marketing techniques, such as demographic market research. The church conducts extensive surveys of existing and potential members. “We look at household composition and factors like fertility—age of birth of first child, number of kids...” according to Kristen Goodman, a research analyst with the church (Spiegler 1996). Armed with this data, some Mormon congregations have developed programs targeting the needs of specific demographic groups such as families and older people (Spiegler 1996).

Not all congregations have been as enthusiastic, however, in the adoption of marketing techniques. One religious denomination that seems to be a bit more reserved in its adoption of marketing is Roman Catholicism. Some experts have suggested that this dampened enthusiasm may be due to the more hierarchical nature of the church, with many decisions being made at the diocese level. According to Mary Priniski of the Glenmary Research Center, many Roman Catholic dioceses do not have strategic planning professionals in place to consider marketing planning issues (Spiegler 1996).

There are some signs of a Roman Catholic awakening, however. Specifically, a major priest-recruiting campaign in Chicago enlisted the support of executives from Chicago ad agency DDB, who counts Anheuser Busch as a client, and WMAQ, Chicago’s NBC television affiliate (Copple 2000). More recently, the St. Louis archdiocese announced that “marketing and development have become essential activities for everyone who is committed to the mission of Catholic education,” and the

Cincinnati archdiocese introduced a new logo and website developed with the help of focus group market research (Cooperman 2004).

### OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

Against this backdrop, the present study attempted to provide a basis for marketing efforts by a local Roman Catholic congregation in the Eastern United States. The primary objective of the study was to measure attitudes toward the primary church-going motivations among current members of the congregation. Secondary objectives were to measure attitudes toward other parish issues, such as the parish school, contributions, and volunteerism, to solicit helpful suggestions, and to gather relevant demographic information about parishioners.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In preparation for the present study's quantitative phase, initial qualitative research was conducted in small focus group settings to identify the primary motivations to be measured. After a series of meetings and creative brainstorming, a list of 15 alternative motivations was developed.

The list of motivations is generally consistent with existing religious-oriented research literature. Specifically, Colson and Vaughn (1992) suggested that the number one motivation for church attendance was "fellowship," followed by a range of other responses such as "good sermons," "the music program," "youth activities for the kids," and "it makes me feel good."

A *USA Today* survey found a similar result, indicating that 45 percent of American churchgoers do so because of the motivation that "it's good for you," while 26 percent said they were motivated to attend church because it provided them with "peace of mind and spiritual well-being" (Colson and Vaughn 1992).

Other studies of churchgoing motivations have relied on the religious orientation literature stream. This body of research is anchored by the work of Allport and Ross (1967) that developed a research tool known as the Religious Orientation Scale. Using this scale to measure a variety of populations, researchers found that motivations generally grouped into two basic groups: intrinsic and extrinsic. An intrinsic orientation generally refers to those deeply-held individual attitudes toward religion. Maltby et al (1995) summarize these types of motivations as an individual "living their religion." On the other hand, an extrinsic orientation generally refers to the more outward manifestations of participation in religious activities, including the provision of protection, consolation, and social status (Maltby et al 1995). This orientation is summarized by Leong and Zachar (1990) as "using religion for more personal reasons."

Subsequent work in this research stream has refined the Allport and Ross scale, suggesting that the extrinsic orientation really consists of two subsets of motivations. The first, "extrinsic personal," could be summarized by the sentiment "religion offers me comfort in times of trouble and sorrow" while the second, "extrinsic social," could be summarized by the sentiment "I go to church because it helps me make friends" (Maltby 2002).

Leong and Zachary's (1990) research provided research statements designed to exemplify these three different orientations. In an effort to demonstrate that the motivations for the present study are generally grounded, Table 2 below provides a side-by-side listing of the Leong and Zachar statements with those used in this study. As the table illustrates, many of the key motivations used in this study are consistent with those used in earlier research, although it appears that the present study is less inclusive in the intrinsic orientation area and more inclusive in the extrinsic-social area.

Other research into churchgoing attitudes also confirmed that statements generated in the qualitative phase of the present study are

**TABLE 1**  
**Comparison of Present Study Motivations with Previous Research**

| <i>Religion Orientation Scale (ROS) Area</i> | <i>Leong and Zachar (1990) Study Items</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | <i>Items Used in the Present Study</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Intrinsic                                    | 1) "I try hard to carry religion over to all dealings in my life"<br>2) "I lead a normal life"<br>3) "I've been aware of the presence of a divine being"<br>4) "My religious beliefs lie behind my whole approach to life"<br>5) "Prayers said alone are as meaningful as when said during a service"<br>6) "...I attend church once a week"<br>7) "Religion is important in answering questions about life's meaning"<br>8) "I read literature about my faith"<br>9) "Private religious thought and meditation is important to me" | 1) "It's a time to slow down and reflect"<br>2) "It's an obligation"<br>3) "It gives me personal spiritual fulfillment"<br>4) "It helps me give thanks for life's blessings"<br>5) "It helps me think about giving and sharing"            |
| Extrinsic Personal                           | 10) "Religion offers me comfort when sorrow and misfortune strike"<br>11) "The purpose of prayer is to secure a happy and peaceful life"<br>12) "The primary purpose of prayer is to gain relief and protection"                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | 6) "It gives me strength during difficult times"<br>7) "I like the liturgy and traditions"<br>8) "I like the message of the homily"<br>9) "I enjoy the music"                                                                              |
| Extrinsic Social                             | 13) "Church membership helps establish a person in the community"<br>14) "The church is most important as a place to form social relationships"<br>15) "Religion is interesting because church is a congenial social activity"                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | 10) "It's an opportunity to socialize"<br>11) "Makes me feel part of a community"<br>12) "I was born into the faith"<br>13) "The priests are friendly"<br>14) "The parishioners are friendly"<br>15) "Sets a good example for my children" |

grounded. For example, Barry and Gullledge (1977) conducted a survey of members of a Baptist congregation in North Carolina. They found that the most meaningful aspects of the respondents' churchgoing experience were the "sermon," "congregational singing," and "observance of the ordinances (rituals)" of the liturgy. This research also found that the least meaningful aspects were "scripture reading," "organ music," and "congregational response readings" (Barry and Gullledge 1977).

A more recent study (Mehta and Mehta 1995) surveyed the general public in Denton, Texas, measuring four major components of the churchgoing experience: "church environment" (including convenient location,

decorations, friendliness, quality of sound system, etc.), pulpit ministry (including quality and relevance of message, use of guest speakers), "music ministry" (including the choir and musicians), and "congregational participation" (including mediation, participation in communion, responsiveness, etc.). It found that respondents rated "pulpit ministry" as the most important, followed by "music ministry," "congregational participation," and finally "church environment."

With this previous research in mind, the present study attempted to incorporate existing learning while breaking new ground with a focus on a Roman Catholic congregation.

## METHODOLOGY

As noted, the population this study examined was Roman Catholic. The scope of the project was focused on a single Roman Catholic parish in Pennsylvania with a membership of approximately 971 households, including those living alone.

Also as noted earlier, the study adopted a two-step method. The first step was qualitative in nature. Lists of potential churchgoing motivations were generated in small group settings among members of the parish community. Based on input from this qualitative phase, a questionnaire instrument was developed for the second step, a quantitative survey of the parish population.

The survey instrument was designed primarily to capture measures of the key motivation factors listed in Table 1. The 15 factors were incorporated into the survey as 7-point Likert-type scale items with statements anchored by “not important at all” at the 1 end of the scale to “very important” at the 7 end of the scale. As noted earlier, the questionnaire also included items designed to measure attitudes toward other parish issues, such as the parish school, contributions, and volunteerism, to solicit helpful suggestions, and to gather relevant demographic information about parishioners.

A preliminary version of the questionnaire instrument was mailed to a small pilot sample of members of the parish council and other parishioners as a pretest. Based on a review of responses and suggestions from the pilot sample, the questionnaire was finalized and mailed to the entire population of the parish in an envelope with parish letterhead. The format did not ask for any personally-identifying information to ensure anonymity for respondents. The questionnaire form included a business reply feature that enabled respondents to return the document via mail free of charge.

## DATA ANALYSIS

A total of 369 completed questionnaires were returned, yielding a response rate of 38 percent of the total population.

The sample appeared to represent the population adequately. Demographically, the profile of respondents was similar in nature to the population of the surrounding zip code (used as a surrogate because demographic data is not updated regularly in parish records—or is unavailable, as in the case of household income). For example, household incomes were generally consistent with U.S. Census data, as well as household size, although there were fewer single person households in the sample versus the zip code.

There were two areas of significant difference between the sample and the surrounding zip code population.

First, the reported gender of survey respondents was 70.1 percent female; 29.9 percent male, compared to a U.S. Census-reported surrounding zip code ratio of 54.4 percent female to 45.6 male (U.S. Census Bureau 2000).

Second, the sample skewed much older than the zip code, with only 5.7 percent of respondents reporting an age of 18-34 versus 15.9 percent reported by the U.S. Census. Correspondingly, 38 percent of respondents reported ages of 65+, versus 23.1 percent reported by the U.S. Census.

## FINDINGS

Analysis of the data indicated that intrinsic motivation statements received three of top five mean scores, as indicated below in Table 2. The intrinsic-oriented statement “It helps me give thanks for life’s blessings” was the top-scoring motivation ( $M = 6.60$ ;  $S.D. = .779$ ), followed by the intrinsic-oriented statement “It gives me personal spiritual fulfillment” ( $M = 6.42$ ;  $S.D. = 1.014$ ). The intrinsic-oriented statement “It’s

a time to slow down and reflect” ranked fifth (M = 5.99; S.D. = 1.296).

Extrinsic motivation statements received the third and fourth highest scores. The statement “It gives me strength during difficult times,” representing an extrinsic-personal orientation, ranked third (M = 6.33; S.D. = 1.151). The statement “Sets a good example for my children” representing an extrinsic-social orientation, ranked fourth (M = 6.32; S.D. = 1.283).

The lowest-scoring motivations tended to be from an extrinsic-social orientation. Specifically, the statement, “It’s an opportunity to socialize” ranked last with a score (M = 3.03; S.D. = 1.811). Results of a paired samples t test indicated that this mean was statistically significantly lower than the next lowest ranking statement, “It’s an obligation,” (M = 4.23; S.D. = 2.278), representing an intrinsic orientation ( $t(346) = -8.671, p = .000$ ).

The three other lowest ranked statements all represented the extrinsic social orientation, “The parishioners are friendly” (M = 4.92; S.D. = 1.600), “I was born into the faith” (M = 4.94; S.D. = 2.079), and “Makes me feel part of a community” (M = 4.98; S.D. = 1.817).

## DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that the most important church-going motivations for this Roman Catholic sample of respondents tend to be more internal, deeply personal ones versus those that are more outwardly socially oriented. These findings are somewhat consistent with portions of the Mehta and Mehta (1995) study, which found that “pulpit ministry,” conceptualized as “the quality and relevance of message,” was the most important motivator for church attendance. Although Mehta and Mehta did not link their findings with the intrinsic/extrinsic literature stream described earlier, it could be argued that the “message” component of “pulpit ministry” would be more closely aligned with

**TABLE 2**  
**Motivations for Attending Religious Services**  
**7-Point Scale**

(1 = "Not Important At All"; 7 = "Very Important")

| <i><b>Motivation</b></i>                       | <i><b>Orientation</b></i> | <i><b>Mean</b></i> | <i><b>Std. Deviation</b></i> |
|------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|------------------------------|
| “It helps me give thanks for life’s blessings” | Intrinsic                 | 6.60               | .779                         |
| “It gives me personal spiritual fulfillment”   | Intrinsic                 | 6.42               | 1.014                        |
| “It gives me strength during difficult times”  | Extrinsic-Personal        | 6.33               | 1.151                        |
| “Sets a good example for my children”          | Extrinsic-Social          | 6.32               | 1.283                        |
| “It’s a time to slow down and reflect”         | Intrinsic                 | 5.99               | 1.296                        |
| “I like the liturgy and traditions”            | Extrinsic-Personal        | 5.75               | 1.369                        |
| “I like the message of the homily”             | Extrinsic-Personal        | 5.63               | 1.376                        |
| “The priests are friendly”                     | Extrinsic-Social          | 5.59               | 1.557                        |
| “It helps me think about giving and sharing”   | Intrinsic                 | 5.52               | 1.455                        |
| “I enjoy the music”                            | Extrinsic-Personal        | 5.07               | 1.815                        |
| “Makes me feel part of a community”            | Extrinsic-Social          | 4.98               | 1.817                        |
| “I was born into the faith”                    | Extrinsic-Social          | 4.94               | 2.079                        |
| “The parishioners are friendly”                | Extrinsic-Social          | 4.92               | 1.600                        |
| “It’s an obligation”                           | Intrinsic                 | 4.23               | 2.278                        |
| “It’s an opportunity to socialize”             | Extrinsic-Social          | 3.03               | 1.811                        |

the intrinsic motivations first suggested by Allport and Ross (1967), and, perhaps to some extrinsic-personal motivations as well. In another parallel with the Mehta and Mehta (1995) findings, the present study also found that the more extrinsic-social motivational statements such as “the parishioners are friendly” and “it’s an opportunity to socialize” rated lowest as did the Mehta and Mehta “congregational participation,” and “church environment” factors.

Several possible alternative explanations should be considered, however, in any discussion of the results. First, the high mean scores for the deeply-personal statements might be skewed somewhat by the overrepresentation of respondents in the older age groups, and the under representation of those in the 18-34 group. It could be argued, for example, that more mature adults might adopt a more retrospective view of their life implied in the statements “it gives me personal spiritual fulfillment” and “it gives me strength during difficult times” than younger individuals who may not have had as many life experiences. Further analysis of the data revealed that this possible explanation may at least be partially true. Specifically, an independent samples *t* test was conducted, splitting the total sample into two different age groups, 18-34 and 35+, and then comparing the means for each group’s rating of the motivation statements. No statistically significant differences were found between the two groups in their ratings of 14 of the 15 statements. A statistically significant difference was found, however, for the second-highest-ranking motivation statement, “it gives me personal spiritual fulfillment.” On this measure, an independent samples *t* test revealed that the mean rating of the 35+ age group” ( $M = 6.44$ ;  $S.D. = 1.01$ ), was significantly higher than the mean rating of the 18-34 age group ( $M = 5.95$ ;  $S.D. = 1.16$ ,  $t(350) = 2.140$ ,  $p = .033$ ).

Gender differences might also account for some alternative explanation for the results. As noted above, the sample skewed heavily toward female respondents. This indicates that the possibility exists for a gender bias toward some

of the most highly rated motivations, and perhaps against those that did not rate as well.

Another possible explanation, this time for the top-rated statement, “it helps me give thanks for life’s blessings,” might also lie in demographics. It could be argued, for example, that the sample, and perhaps the parish in general, might be more economically advantaged than the general population, and therefore have reason to be more thankful. As noted earlier, there were no wide discrepancies between the sample’s household income levels and the surrounding zip code. But how does this compare with the general U.S. population? Further analysis suggests that this alternative explanation may have some validity. Specifically, U.S. Census Bureau (2000) data indicates that median household income for the zip code surrounding the parish, \$37,810, is lower than the U.S. national median household income level, \$41,994, and the state (Pennsylvania), \$40,106, but higher than the county (Cambria) in which the parish is located, \$30,179. As a result, even though the respondents of the sample might not be advantaged versus their immediate neighbors, nor state and federal levels, they might perceive themselves to be more advantaged—and therefore more thankful—than the surrounding communities.

## LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

**Methodology.** A critical limitation, discussed above, is the age and gender discrepancies between the sample and the population. This problem may have skewed results of the study, and should be addressed in future research by more aggressive outreach efforts on the part of researchers to reach younger demographic groups. This could be accomplished by follow-up mailings and/or phone calls without compromising the anonymity of the respondents. Addressing the imbalance in the female-to-male ration might be a more difficult proposition, but perhaps could be accomplished through outreach to groups such as parish men’s clubs and to male-dominated religious associations such as the Knights of Columbus.

Another limitation is that the present study used motivational statements that were less inclusive in the intrinsic orientation area and more inclusive in the extrinsic-social area of the Religion Orientation Scale than previous research in the field, particularly Leong and Zachar (1990). Future research should adhere more closely to this well-established line of research in the selection of motivational statements.

One final, and perhaps most significant, limitation is that the present study's findings are representative of only one Roman Catholic parish in Pennsylvania. An obvious implication for future research should be its expansion to Roman Catholic parishes to different geographic and perhaps socio-demographic settings throughout the nation.

**Marketing.** In addition to methodological issues, there are several marketing-oriented implications. The first is in the selection of themes for church marketing efforts. The study suggests directions in this regard that seem, on the surface, to be in opposition to some of the approaches noted earlier. For example, the findings of this study seem to cast doubt on the effectiveness of some of the emphasis on new church facilities and services. While these initiatives may have been successful in the instances noted, the present study suggests that marketing efforts based on more deeply personal motivations might be more effective. These would include the "thankfulness," "fulfillment," and "strength" motivations that rated number one, two and three. While these statements may not appear to be trendy or hip, they may actually tap into the anxious inner selves of many in society. In the words of the Rev. James Burns cited earlier, "we are trying to feed the spiritual hunger..." (Brozen 1998). The Rev. Lee Strobel, a former atheist and now a minister at Willow Creek Community Church, also acknowledged that the core message of religion remains the most critical component, admitting "we merely created a safe place to hear a dangerous message" (Lewis 1996).

Another implication suggests that those motivational areas that received moderate scores, such as "music," "liturgy," and "friendly priests" are important to parishioners, and should certainly not be neglected. In a sense, they may represent the basic "product features" that consumers have come to expect from consumer products (such as airbags and antilock brakes in motor vehicles)—and also in their religious services.

A final implication suggests, however, that the addition of some highly targeted new services, particularly for key demographic groups such older people and families, might not be simply related to superficial motivations. It could be that "knowing your customers and meeting their needs" (Lewis 1996) is the real secret—and adopting this marketing approach, including the use of ongoing market research techniques. McDaniel (1989) confirmed that this use of market research, including the use of formal surveys for members, is seen as appropriate by both the clergy and the general public, although his study found that less than half of all congregations were currently using these tools. More widespread use of market research, and follow-up marketing efforts, therefore, could help to identify ways of motivating individuals not only at an extrinsic-social level, but perhaps extend deeper to the extrinsic-personal, and even to the intrinsic level. An example would be a new grief support program added for the spouses of recently deceased parishioners. Or a new program targeted at enhancing the personal spiritual fulfillment of young adults in the 18-34 age group.

## CONCLUSION

This study adds value to the field of marketing and religious studies because it builds two bridges from the existing literature. First, it uses market research techniques to link Religion Orientation Scale work to the direct measurement of churchgoing motivations. And second, it extends published market research efforts among the general public and among

other denominations for the first time to a sample of Roman Catholics.

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