

Is God a Marketing Strategy?

By [MP MUELLER](#) August 9, 2011, 7:00 am

An insider's guide to small-business marketing.

Recently while searching online for a new refrigerator, I came across a Web site for a local appliance store that featured the Ichthus, or Christian fish symbol, in its logo. The personal side of me that grew up watching Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker tearfully separating people from their money on Sunday television hesitated. The marketer side of me wondered if companies that invoke religious symbols are simply sharing their values — or trading on the intrinsic values of the brand that is the Bible? Lots of businesses align themselves with religion (without going through any kind of certification process from a higher authority).

Brad Harmon, founder and editor of Marketplace Christianity, poses the question in his blog post "[Are You a Fish Slapper?](#)" He asks if those who attach the Christian symbol to their ad materials are over-commercializing their faith or just sharing it. [Forever 21](#), the American chain of stores selling trendy, value-priced clothes for young women has a Bible verse, John 3:16, on the bottom of its plastic shopping bags. West Coast-based [In and Out Burger](#) features the same verse on the bottom inside rim of its cups.

Perhaps this kind of branding is shorthand for "we're a good company, trust us." Do others have the notion that capitalism and religion should be mutually exclusive? Are consumers more inclined to do business with companies who align with a religion or does a company risk alienating audiences? With more questions than answers, I contacted several business leaders whose companies stress their religious affiliations.

Forever 21's marketing director politely declined. But Josh Wall, vice president of development at [Christian Brothers Automotive](#), told me the story behind the name and mission of the franchise of automotive repair centers. Mark Carr, the company's founder, had been working in Houston in 1982 as a graphics sales person. "Feeling there was something more God intended for him, he literally got down on his knees and said, 'God, I know you made me different, please send me a business to lead,'" Mr. Wall said. "The very next day, a mechanic came up to him at a birthday party and asked Mark to help him start an automotive repair business. Mark looked up toward heaven and said, 'Wow, God, you move quick.'"

In searching for a name for the business, the two visited with people in their Sunday school class and moved toward "brothers and sisters in Christ glorifying Him through automotive repair." Their Web site has their mission and purpose with a passage from the Bible, but other than that, Mr. Wall said they don't proselytize or do any advertising using Christian art or symbolism. "We have heard from fellow Christians that some might take offense to the brand name. We certainly consider that and try to be as sensitive to not using that in advertising." A few of their franchise owners will put a copy of the Bible in their waiting rooms or some inspirational poetry or Bible verse that is encouraging.

Today, the Houston-based franchise has 87 operating stores in 11 states and another 33 in development. Mr. Wall said the company has customers of all faiths and backgrounds. Are there downsides to faith-based branding? Most people who come across the brand, Mr. Wall said, actually don't connect the dots: "Most often people think it's a company run by two brothers with the last name of Christian. We are just trying to be a light in the world. Love our neighbor as ourselves, treat them the way we want to treat our family. Those who don't

get to know our brand better may question or be cynical about our motives. That's okay, we welcome that. We just want the opportunity to show people what excellent automotive repair is about."

Lisa Spitzer said that Google and her 96-year-old mother are responsible for the genesis of the [Jewish Attorneys Network](#). A social worker with a Jewish background, Ms. Spitzer, who is chief executive of the network, began working in attorney referral before the Internet and stumbled upon the Jewish attorney niche only in the last year. "Google loves niches for searches," she said. "I watched the analytics and saw that the search for 'Jewish lawyer' goes neck-in-neck with 'Spanish-speaking attorney.' An old marketing person once told me you don't create a need, you find a need and fill it. We've found a way for lawyers to network with their peers, get help from their peers and separate themselves from the glut on the Internet."

Ms. Spitzer said she dispenses referral information along with straightforward Jewish mother counsel that is based on years of listening to people with legal woes at the lowest points in their lives. "People who call are clueless, scared and vulnerable," she said. "They have no clue about the legal system, no clue about how to speak to a lawyer, so I coach them."

Based in Boca Raton, Fla., the network gets a surprising 75 percent of its inquiries from African Americans and only 5 percent from Jewish people, most of them Orthodox (it even has Arab clients). "I was kind of surprised myself," Ms. Spitzer said. "I always ask callers, 'Why a Jewish lawyer?' They feel that the Jewish community, because of the agonies and past history, can relate to what they are going through, what it's like to be an oppressed minority. They have a sense that a Jewish lawyer will stand up and not be afraid. They will tell me they remember the M.L.K. marches and who stood up behind them then."

So is her company's religious positioning a successful strategy? "Sometimes it's a limited niche and sometimes it's a good niche," Ms. Spitzer said. Would a business like Christian Brothers Automotive, I asked her, attract her or keep her away? "I would go to them," she said. "If someone has the gumption to put their ethnic in their business, they probably have self pride and are probably proud of their work and will do a good job."

When you consider the strong, built-in emotional triggers, God can certainly be a compelling marketing strategy. That is my marketing side speaking. My personal side knows that values of fairness, trust and good service aren't exclusive to businesses that have a religious foundation.

What do you think?

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