Flash Marketing – How New Restaurants (and Churches) Get Noticed

I was speaking at a pastor's conference recently and a pastor from Miami had a great question: *"How do certain trendy restaurants open up and become what seems to be an instant success? Almost immediately, celebrities are standing in line to get in the door. How do they do that?"* He wondered if the same techniques could be applied to a local church plant. In other words, how could we accelerate awareness for a new church or location? So I asked some experts in marketing to check their response. Their answers were wide ranging and interesting. Here's what they had to say, and then I'll give you a few thoughts at the end:

Denise Lee Yohn is a branding expert who wrote the book, "What Great Brands Do:"
I think they first provide an excellent experience that compels people to share. Then they focus on social media and reviews – doing things that are highly visual and very "share-worthy." For churches, that means big stages with lights/props, videos (explainer and otherwise), shareable quote cards, etc. They can also consider doing "stunts" like holding highly visible events (e.g., community clean-up days) and/or partner with a local charity to generate buzz and attract local media coverage. Here's a couple pieces I've written that might help:
https://www.qsrmagazine.com/denise-lee-yohn/how-spark-conversation

Dawn Nicole Baldwin is my first call for brand strategy with churches and ministries:
"Fads are hard to predict, plus didn't someone famous say an overnight success typically takes 10-15 years? Perhaps instead of promising instant success, the goal is to provide a proven, consistent formula to generate buzz, based on best practices. (Under promise, over deliver.) That way, you're able to do what you said you'd do, because it's within your control versus setting an expectation that's outside your control. The results also start with the quality of the product. A turd covered in powdered sugar doesn't equal a donut, no matter how pretty the packaging is."

Jonathan Bock, founder of Grace Hill Media and producer of "Let Hope Rise: The Hillsong Movie" was more direct:
"Simple: Instagram."

From my perspective, one important factor we rarely consider is that many of the instant, hyper-successful restaurants are celebrity chef driven. In other words, the chef or owner has a reputation among customers (many of whom are celebrities) so the minute he stakes out a hot new claim, everyone wants to try the restaurant. *You can't over emphasize the power of publicity.* Having a publicist getting interviews, announcements, and other stories in local media is incredibly important. Here in Los Angeles, those "hot, trendy" restaurants always seem to get on the radar with a big story in Los Angeles magazine or a similar publication right before they open. Trust me, that's not by chance. Never forget that a feature story in a local magazine or website carries a lot more credibility than an advertisement.

That's one reason a local pastor should be involved in the community outside the church. And it doesn't mean you have to become a "celebrity." Just get involved in community activities, outreaches, leverage the power of local influencers, and as much as possible, develop relationships with the local media.

Then, as everyone said above, the social media factor is huge. Generating excitement by having people talking, sharing, and posting on the new restaurant (or church) is critical. Hillsong churches around the world have become brilliant at staking their claim to a new location via social media.

What do you think? Obviously there are big differences because the motivations and purpose of a local restaurant are different from a local church. However, can many of the same techniques that make a "hot" restaurant go big overnight work for a church plant?

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