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RELIGIOUS MARKETING – A MEANS OF SATISFYING
PARISHIONERS' NEEDS AND DETERMINING THEIR LOYALTY

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Abstract: Religious marketing is a process of making decisions related to what should and should not be done so that the church could fulfill its mission and serve the parishioners. Religious marketing focuses upon the way the parishioners behave and their satisfaction, because these aspects are very important so that the Orthodox Church could fulfill its mission.

A small number of active parishioners is usually interpreted as a sign of incompetence to attract and keep the existing members. Considering this aspect, it is necessary to do the analysis of perceived quality, perceived value and the expectations of the Orthodox related to the religious services. These factors determine the level of their satisfaction and the active involvement in the activities of the church.

Motivating and determining the orthodox parishioners to become loyal to the Orthodox Church would be a great advantage for the fulfillment of its mission, but in order to achieve this it is necessary to know a few marketing elements.

Key Words: Orthodox Church, quality, satisfaction, loyalty, religious marketing, parishioner.

The intersection between marketing and religion

Some clerics and laics may be reluctant to the topic of religious marketing, being afraid that the revealed faith, which shares indissoluble truths for the salvation of the human soul and spiritual life, will be somehow turned aside for gaining financial profit¹. People are considering an important question: whether implementing marketing instruments within the Orthodox Church could lead to the loss of the sacred character of its mission or determine the Orthodox Church to adapt to the contemporary social context². Everything written so far in marketing literature is about “how to do something” or “why it isn’t done this way”. Still, we are witnessing a great deal of objections about applying the marketing philosophy within religion, especially the Christian one. In the magazine “Christianity today”, there was an article called “Jesus is not a brand”³ which showed the negative aspects related to the use of marketing by the church. Some people believe that promoting the church leads to its distortion⁴. Another criticism related to the use of religious marketing is that the clerics should concentrate on transmitting the holy message of God’s Word and not on filling the churches with members and attracting funds⁵. Still, something should be done in order to strengthen the position of the Orthodox Church! It is not enough that 86% of the Romanians have stated to be Orthodox (according to the population and housing census in 2013), yet the churches are empty during the week.

Starting from the 1990s, there has been a surprisingly wide expansion of the religious cults from America or the ones related to the Asian mystical experiences. The development of these trends are influenced to various factors, but mostly by the sophisticated marketing strategies used by these churches: marketing research, segmenting and positioning strategies, advertising, marketing communication, distribution strategies, etc. The question is how marketing could and should be used in this field⁶.

Berger is the first supporter of religious marketing. He made a comparison between the old religious traditions that could be imposed and the ones from the present which have to be promoted. Sherman and Devlin say that using religious marketing has become a necessity for the church, taking into consideration our society.

Every organization has to turn towards the needs of its consumers, including the church. Of course, this does not mean that the priest should neglect his main goal, which is to preach the Christian-Orthodox truth, but he should try to meet the spiritual needs of his parishioners by using specific religious activities and programs. If the church will pay proper attention to marketing strategies, she will succeed in identifying the spiritual and emotional needs of its members, will be capable of answering

to these needs by using specific programs and activities and will influence in a positive way the rise of the active involvement of its members⁷.

The satisfaction of the parishioners – definition and interpretation

According to the Bylaw, for the organization and functioning of the Romanian Orthodox Church, the Church confesses God within the Trinity, The Father, The Son and The Holy Spirit, on the basis of The Holy Scripture and The Holy Tradition. Its mission is to get close to God and achieve human perfection, namely holiness. The mission of the church includes pastoral, spiritual-cultural, educational, social and philanthropic activities. The marketing of religious services offers support to the activities included in its missionary work. The marketing of religious services has the purpose to coordinate the missionary activities of the church in order to fulfill its purpose. The main objective of religious marketing is developing the communicative and promoting techniques.

On the one hand, the church preaches to the parishioners the indissoluble truths revealed by Jesus Christ⁸ and, on the other hand, people are trying to satisfy their spiritual needs.” How can the church answer these needs? How can this satisfaction be fulfilled?”, both clerics and laics have been asking themselves for a long time⁹.

Satisfaction is a positive feeling occurring when an efficient response has been achieved, but it will disappear when the goals or wishes have not been achieved¹⁰.

According to Fornell et al., the satisfaction of the consumers is a very good indicator connected to the performance of the services. Satisfaction can be interpreted as a goal, but also as a marketing instrument¹¹. The recognition of the importance of the concept of consumers’ satisfaction has risen considerably during the last years, becoming one of the most known research topics. In the marketing literature there are certain differences related to the definition of the concept of satisfaction, but most definitions are made up of three common elements¹²:

1. The consumer’s satisfaction is an “answer” (a cognitive or emotional one): satisfaction is the consumer’s fulfillment¹³. Satisfaction is a feeling. It is a short-term attitude which easily changes according to the circumstances¹⁴. Also, satisfaction can be considered a feeling of joy which a person has in the moment when a goal has been reached, when a wish or motivation has been achieved¹⁵. A special definition is the one stated by Howard and Sheth, which presents satisfaction as the cognitive state of being adequately or inadequately rewarded for the sacrifices that have been made.

2. The response is a variable depending on expectations, product, consuming experience, etc. Satisfaction represents the minimum level expected by the consumers¹⁶. A person feels satisfied when the offer exceeds expectations and unsatisfied when expectations exceed the offer¹⁷.
3. The response depends on a “starting phenomenon”, for “a different period of time”. Boonlertvanich notices that the determining factors which influence the beginning of the feeling of satisfaction are the perceived value and the quality of the service. Also, an achievement, experienced by a person or a group which has fulfilled expectations can lead to satisfaction¹⁸.

The level of satisfaction/dissatisfaction depends on the level of interpretation which every person makes about the difference between expectations and achievement. If performance exceeds expectations, the consumer is very content¹⁹. Thus, churches should be preoccupied about the feeling of satisfaction of their parishioners and about its level. Shawchuck et al. have identified three types of satisfaction:

- Very satisfied – when the achievements exceed a person’s expectations;
- Satisfied – when the achievements coincide with a person’s expectations;
- Unsatisfied – when the achievements do not exceed a person’s expectations.

Still, Shawchuck et al. notice that the members of a religious community interpret the existing results as being valuable performances or they admit that they have set their standards too high; these minimize the minuses that have been felt and they don’t feel dissatisfied. On the other hand, other people who are disappointed will magnify, even exaggerate the low level of achievement, tending to reduce or stop the connections with that religious institution²⁰. Thus, the level of satisfaction that someone feels depends also on oneself, the contemporary Christian, and on his willingness to really come closer to God in such a way that all the values harmonize together “in an unitary vision”, according to religious values²¹.

Unfortunately, the majority of people declare that they are Christians, but most of them are Christians only by name, without actively participating to religious services. Still, these members who do not come to church are not indifferent to it, they just don’t get involved into its activities for various reasons; one of these reasons is determined by the feeling of dissatisfaction experienced after religious practice.

There are six hypotheses within the theory of the behavior of the consumer²² on which the ethical dimension of religious marketing is based. They have the purpose to eliminate any suspicion regarding the efficiency of the implementation of the marketing strategies:

1. People are aware of what they want and need in order to maximize their satisfaction- first of all these statement goes against the idea that marketing is manipulating; then, it aims towards the necessity of orienting the activities of religious marketing towards the satisfaction of the needs and wishes of the consumers. Generally, people want quality services. Thus, the quality of the religious service has an important role in the parishioners’ decision to attend church. The quality of the services refers to “all the particularities and characteristics of a service that have the capacity to satisfy the needs of the consumer”²³, such as chanting, the priest’s performance and sermon²⁴. The quality of the services comes from comparing the wishes of the parishioners related to the services offered by the Orthodox Church and the perceived performance of the services. In other words, the perceived quality depends on the level of the discrepancy between the perception of the consumers and their wishes²⁵.
2. People act independently in making decisions – it's not the advertisements or other means of communication that motivate the parishioner to go to church, but his personal spiritual needs. In general, believers do not consider that promoting the church would harm its image; they rather have a positive attitude towards its promotion²⁶.
3. People evaluate all the available information on the characteristics of the religious services depending on the satisfaction they feel – nowadays, people are more informed than ever and have more alternatives²⁷ at hand. Based on this information, the consumer evaluates the benefits and costs of a particular service. The more relevant the benefits are to the parishioner, the higher is the participation in programs and activities provided by the church²⁸. A benefit may be the “price” paid for the service you want, if it is less than expected²⁹; this difference tends to have a positive effect on perceived value. The total “Price” may include time, energy and psychological costs to attend religious services. The service consumer compares the total cost against total benefits, choosing those services that provide the most intense perceived value³⁰.
4. People choose according to their own values and on their own will. Boonlertvanich notes that, while any person wishes for his/her desires to be fulfilled, the feeling of satisfaction is triggered differently from one person to another, depending on one’s attitudes, values, education and situation. Due to the fact that the consumer evaluates differently existing services depending on personal preferences determined by different situations, the values vary over time together with the consumer experience³¹.
5. People feel the need to believe in an unquestionable truth – and the one who finds spiritual fulfillment will not be satisfied with the

experience offered by other competitors, such as sports, drugs, TV, Internet, gambling, etc. Therefore, the Orthodox Church must come to meet his expectations and make every effort to respond to the needs of the faithful. The expectations that a person has, can be different, depending on the context the person is in at a given time. On the one hand, these expectations are the result of a combination of past experience and the degree of influence of members of the family, friends or other associates; on the other hand, they are the result of the statements and promises of services providers³². Therefore, the expectations are directed from the past to the future³³, which is specific to consumption³⁴. The desires of the parishioners are the ideal standard in evaluating the performance of religious services³⁵.

Therefore, these assumptions sustain the theoretical and moral concerns of marketing researchers. However, Shawchuck et al. stated that marketing is not enough for an effective missionary work, but it greatly depends on the availability of the parishioners and priests to be witnesses of God's presence; however, we can safely say that marketing is an excellent approach to management.

The objectives of religious marketing

The marketing activity of the Church should pursue two objectives: increasing the number of active parishioners and maintaining the existing ones.

- Increasing the number of participants

For a church, to be able to carry out its mandate, some theorists and researchers³⁶ recommend that it should be attended by a large number of participants. Hougland et al. also state that the participation of a large number of church members has several advantages: the overall increase of parishioners' commitments, which will lead to a better performance of religious services, and also increases in the efficiency of the church in its activities.

Old church members will also bring new members, in other words, practitioners bring non-practitioners to church. We observe that while increasing the number of parishioners, the church can rely primarily on existing parishioners. Widening the participation is a "cure" for the church, although it may become a potential threat to the ability of churches to maintain some stability in their activities.

Having as many parishioners as possible is also important because the Church depends on the financial or material contributions of its members³⁷.

- Maintaining existing parishioners

It is equally important for the mission of the church to maintain the already existing congregation. This depends on their involvement in the

daily activities of the church, in creating stable and lasting relationships with them. A responsible organization directs its efforts into serving and meeting the needs and demands of its members and the public³⁸.

Determinants of parishioners’ loyalty

Shifting the focus of the Orthodox Church to satisfying the consumer aims to transform the relationship with the faithful from a “random” relationship to a long-term relationship³⁹, by converting visitors into practitioners. The most significant factor determining a continuous participation of the faithful is the satisfaction they feel; a high degree of participation depends on the satisfaction of church members and their commitment to church services⁴⁰.

The level of satisfaction of a person depends on establishing a solid relationship with that person, and without maintaining a long term relationship, only few “suppliers” resist⁴¹. Religious marketing considers that the number of practitioners attending religious services is not sufficient to fulfill the purpose of the church, but it requires developing long-term relationships with these practitioners, based on feelings of trust and security.

An important factor in triggering the feeling of satisfaction is the quality of services. This has a direct and positive effect on satisfying Orthodox believers (this statement has an effect on all the activities undertaken by the Orthodox Church). This is a relative concept, as it depends on the consumer’s perception; on the other hand, the quality of services represents the result of the performance of services that also determines consumer satisfaction and the beginning of a long term relationship with them⁴².



Figure 1 – Determinants of parishioner’s loyalty

Source: adapted after Sauders, 1999

The above image, “Determinants of parishioner’s loyalty” highlights the pre-existing indirect link between religious service quality and parishioners’ loyalty, this relationship being mediated by their satisfaction. The quality effect on any consumer satisfaction is more important than any other component of the services⁴³. Hence, the more the parishioners feel a better quality of service, the higher their satisfaction is, and in time, this increases their loyalty. Moreover, it can be

seen that, in general, loyal consumers are not necessarily satisfied customers, but satisfied customers tend to become loyal customers⁴⁴.

According to Fornell et al., the first consequence of increasing consumer satisfaction is decreasing their dissatisfaction and increasing the loyalty to the service provider. An unhappy person will look for something else or wait for the problem to be solved by a representative of the church. As an exception, Shawchuck et al. noted that, in some cases when there is no competition or the request is too large and the faithful have no other alternative, they will continue attending the same church. Shawchuck et al. also identified the situation where, although participants are increasingly dissatisfied, attending a particular church can be maintained for a period of time because it became a habit.

Boonlertvanich defined loyalty as a consumer’s consent to continue requesting services from a particular provider, and this behaviour can be observed either by continuing to attend the institution or from having the same supplier as a first choice that comes to mind, in a given situation. Service loyalty occurs as a result of a positive attitude or a positive behaviour of a particular supplier. Church must use all missionary strategies for maintaining long-term relationships with its members, and the priest has the most important role in the mobilization and training of parishioners, even of those dissatisfied or non-practitioners. The most important aspects that determine the satisfaction of the practitioners are: ambiance, the priest’s sermons, chanting and the participation of parishioners⁴⁵. Long-term relationships are based on a process of exchanging values between the church and its members, which involves four steps:

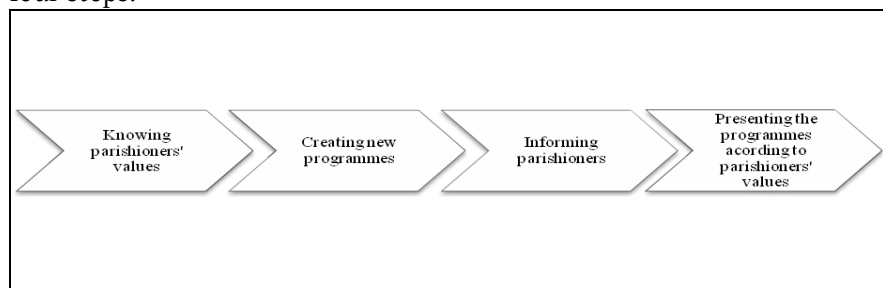


Figure 2 – Forming long-term relationships

Source: adapted after Coleman, 2002

The figure “The Formation of Long Lasting Relationships” is based on a permanent exchange between the church and parishioners, each part offering the other one something valuable. On the one hand, knowing the values held by the parishioners is very important for the priest in his mission and, on the other hand, involving the parishioners in new programs tailored to their values determines the occupancy of the feeling of satisfaction. By identifying the values of the parishioners, the priest can

draw conclusions on the market segment he is addressing, which in turn helps him adapt the programs according to the parishioners’ needs⁴⁶.

Kohler and Keller believe that the evaluation of the service’s performance depends on a number of factors, but the most important is the loyalty factor, that is, how loyal the service is within the relationship with the institution providing the services. The parishioners of a church are more tolerant toward the institution if they have established a good relationship with it. Nevertheless, the purpose of the church should not focus so much on having by all means an increased feeling of satisfaction, but more on transmitting a feeling of satisfaction, which is based on the understanding and acceptance of the indissoluble truths which the Orthodox Church stands for. This derives from the desire to avoid the dissatisfaction of the parishioners regarding the interpretation of certain truths held by the Orthodox Church, truths which have been kept in accordance to the Old Tradition and which cannot and should not be changed only to suit the parishioners’ tastes.

Obstacles and opportunities promoting the parishioners’ feeling of satisfaction

Currently, the Orthodox Church is being confronted with two major problems⁴⁷:

- how to combine its traditional, rigorous teachings and dogmas with the nowadays realities and its modern aspects;
- how to meet the expectations of the younger generations without compromising the fundamental rules and principles of the Christian-Orthodox religion⁴⁸.

A parish should have certain criteria for measuring the satisfaction of its members⁴⁹ such as:

Tracking attendance

- The increase or decrease of the number of persons who take part in the religious services and activities

The market quota

- The potential of the geographical area
- The number of parishioners in that geographical area
- The average number of church members and participating individuals compared to other parishes or religious cults
- The number of religious cults active in that geographical area

Attendance frequency

- The percentage of people who come to services at least once a week and the period of time in which they return to church
- The percentage of people who turn to the church for services such as weddings, baptisms, or funerals

The ratio between attendance and absenteeism

- The average number of people who participate regularly to religious services compared to the average number of people who do not participate regularly to religious services

Parishioners’ involvement

- The percentage of active members compared to the total number of parishioners
- The intensity of parishioners’ involvement in the church’s activities

The average amount of time dedicated to attending service

- The time allocated by the parishioners to the participation in the religious services and activities

Parishioners’ migration ratio

- Parishioners’ migration ratio to other religious cults

Parishioners’ mobility

- Parishioners’ availability to participate to the church’s services and activities

Figure 3 – Criteria measuring the parishioners’ satisfaction
Source: An adaptation of Shawchuck et al., 1992 and Herteliu, 2007

The figure “Criteria measuring the parishioners’ satisfaction” has four key highlights which can be used by a parish in order to measure its members’ satisfaction. Determining parishioners’ level of satisfaction is very important, but it is of equal importance to know the reasons which usually determine their satisfaction or dissatisfaction⁵⁰. This implies a continuous monitoring of the parishioners’ satisfaction by using evaluations which track the existence or the lack of benefits they perceive on the one hand and also the desired benefits on the other hand⁵¹.

The closer the Church will get to its parishioners, the higher their satisfaction will be. The easiest way to get into people’s homes in order to promote the truths of the faith is through the media. The role of religion and some of its functions may be taken over by the media⁵².

Communication through the media is a way to inform, influence and educate, which expresses reality through symbols. Symbolism is an essential component of human thinking⁵³. Nowadays, this has a great importance, whether we refer to radio, television, the press or the

Internet. To reach the target audience, the message should be sober, easily understandable and charismatic, with an educational and moral character. The Church should use the media to promote moral, spiritual and cultural values. Thus, there will be publicized churches and monasteries, interviews with bishops, great spiritual fathers and priests, church events and activities; there can be promoted religious music concerts, Byzantine music, carols, conferences, religious events.

Local newspapers and magazines (daily, weekly journals, magazines, prints, leaflets, brochures, booklets, guides, catalogs) external display (posters, banners, light panels) are primarily aimed to inform about church events and activities, they express the enthusiasm and gratitude of the Church for the involvement of the community in its activities. The radio is much more affordable, as well as MP3 audio distribution via the Internet. Instead television has the greatest impact on the audience. Also, you can use different objects: calendars, clothing items, stationery items (notebooks, pens, glasses, etc.); or via the Internet: websites, information portals and promotion of places of pilgrimage, monasteries and churches.

Angheluță et al. raised the question of whether or not the Church should turn to promotion techniques (advertising, public relations, sales force, sales promotions, direct marketing, word-of-mouth marketing), this involving a lot of controversy. Religious literature and Orthodox movies have a moral character, while commercial literature even if it refers to religion, it may contain elements that incite and send a negative message to the public. Sometimes the element that guarantees success is violence in attacking Christianity⁵⁴. Angheluță et al. concluded that each religious organization should choose its own marketing tools, based on moral and ethical principles⁵⁵.

Informative qualitative investigations have a positive effect on the development of a church⁵⁶. The best example is that of a religious community in Barrington, Illinois, that used the “door to door” promotion technique by asking residents what keeps people away from the Church⁵⁷. The results led to a major change in the organization and activities of that church. Another strategy, that has already been taken over, is communicating over the Internet with parishioners.

This strategy is very popular in other countries, enabling the promotion of the church and establishing new ways of communication between the priest and the parish and vice versa. Some churches have categories dedicated to questions put to parishioners about the performance of the church and about their satisfaction/dissatisfaction with its work, these being similar to retailers’ questionnaires⁵⁸. In general, in order to be closer to parishioners, priests appeal to those marketing activities that they are more familiar with or to those which are considered traditional, such as religious object stores or Christmas concerts⁵⁹.

There are some mistakes that the priest willingly or unwillingly makes:

- Priest's too high confidence that the church draws its congregation to church alone, without him needing to have a significant contribution;
- Priest's conviction that dogmas and traditions are indissoluble facts, without paying attention to how they transmit these to the church members (wooden language);
- Priest's way of communication imposes a barrier between church and parishioner;
- Monetization of religious services, suggesting the idea of a "service fee".

The church needs to build on some existing opportunities in order to develop and maintain a good position in the market⁶⁰:

- Urban and suburban modernization – the areas where religious communities have the highest proportion of development are the new suburbs of cities or the city center. In the new suburbs of large cities generally live young families, and a community of young members has greater hopes of development. Therefore, each church should consider its location and should establish a marketing plan.
- The church which distinguishes itself by spirituality, sharing emotion and enthusiasm has a greater hope of progress. McMullen believes that those religious services which have a “contemporary”, modern style, characterized by optimism and enthusiasm are preferred to those characterized through a rigorous attitude in expressing divine worship. Therefore, a good marketing strategy coupled with extended service on several levels, diversified programs dedicated to younger members and their families will support the development of a church.
- Avoiding conflict within a religious community – the emergence of conflicts can determine in a short time a decline in believers' frequency of attending the church.

Kolter and Keller emphasize the idea according to which a successful institution is always careful to determine consumer satisfaction because it is the key to keeping them close. A satisfied consumer will most likely remain loyal for a longer period of time. They will attend church regularly, not just on holidays or certain special events in their life (wedding, baptism, etc.) and they will witness to others about their experience. It is very important to communicate through “word of mouth” to parishioners, personal contact being the most effective way to convince them. “Newcomers” will feel a greater sense of satisfaction by creating moments dedicated to their welcoming, which will determine their return

to the church⁶¹. The priest must be careful to church environment as well, because it has a strong influence on the wellbeing of parishioners by inviting them to silence and meditation. An intense satisfaction results in better outcome and lower risk⁶².

Conclusions

The purpose of religious marketing is to help the Church fulfill its purpose – to enrich the spiritual life of its members and to meet the needs of the people belonging to a divine truth⁶³. In other words, religious marketing helps the church to serve people’s needs as effectively as possible and to survive in the current environment which is unfavorable to fulfilling the mission of bringing people to the “right belief”.

Analyzing the behavior of a church member requires special attention on the behalf of the Church because the believer adheres to this organization in the name of faith. Priests should continuously monitor the behavior of their parish members in order to meet their expectations and to maintain a close relationship with them. Among these expectations are identified: spiritual fulfillment, finding edifying words for the soul, inner peace, wellbeing, disconnect from daily stress, listening to spiritual and worldly problems, receiving advice for life, comfort. Most people expect the priest to be the right man in the right place and to perform religious and social service of good quality.

There is a link between satisfaction and loyalty; if the relationship is positive one, it means that the Orthodox Church has served its purpose, turning the unsatisfied Orthodox believers into loyal members. If the relationship is negative, not only are there new complaints, but keeping the Orthodox Christians close to the Church is becoming increasingly difficult. Therefore, churches are recommended to refocus on determining a stable relationship with the existing parishioners by offering quality services.

Satisfied parishioners are more receptive to the innovations and the implication of the Orthodox Church in other social and organizational areas. They favorably advocate for the ideas and activities of the Orthodox Church and do not pay too much attention to other denominations or competing institutions, being more understanding regarding the need for self-financing of the church. In addition, they get involved in church activities, providing solutions, opinions, financial or material help, and they draw to church other members among their friends, associates or relatives.

Notes:

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