

Contemporary Christian Design

Christianity is the world's largest religion—but often its design is lacking. Here are designers and firms who are reinventing the way design and marketing is used for the Christian audience.

By Lisa Baggerman Hazen

When you think of progressive, innovative design, the Christian church is unlikely to be the first niche that leaps to mind. You're more likely to think of clip art doves, crosses, and praying hands. Dusty leather-bound bibles. Power-Point slides done in the default text and fliers and church programs designed by the church secretary.

But more churches and faith-based groups are discovering that design is essential to their message and that marketing isn't a sin. There's a passionate group of talented designers who are reinventing the look of Christian design. They know that effective marketing and design is integral to telling their story. And that unless church institutions, publications, and faith-based groups turn their attention to design and self-promotion, their message may get lost among competing voices contemporary culture—particularly when it comes to the culturally savvy youth.

LOSING THE STEREOTYPE

The idea of marketing and self-promotion doesn't always sit well with many churches. Brad Abare, founder of the Center for Church Communication, thinks churches need to get over that. He started a site named churchmarketingsucks.com, a blog designed to help churches change the way they think about design and marketing.

“The church is all about spreading the greatest story ever told,” says Abare. “We have a problem when that story is lost to poor communication methods, marketing gimmicks and inauthentic ways of connecting with people. The creation of the blog was a way we could help church leaders without them having to hire out our services. Our mission is to frustrate, educate, and motivate the church to communicate, with uncompromising clarity, the truth of Jesus Christ.”

Abare maintains that marketing isn't sleazy—it's just another way of getting the word out. “Marketing is simply thinking through what you do and why you do it,” says Abare. “It's being intentional. You can certainly do marketing poorly—either so sloppy it doesn't work or so slick it turns people off. Both suck, and both are at odds with your religious values.”

MAKING CHRIST RELEVANT

Relevant Media Group is responsible for creating and publishing some of the most progressive design for a Christian audience. This Orlando, Florida-based company publishes Christian books, a Web site, and a print magazine targeted to a demographic of a group of racially diverse men and women, aged 18-32.

One of the most notable things about Relevant is how it integrates popular culture with religious message. In the magazine, you're likely to find reviews of films like *Nacho Libre*, and on the site, a link to the latest viral YouTube video. But you'll also find articles about why many young people are leaving their faith and an exploration of the role of the church in times of crisis.

Finding a way to express the ideals of Christianity alongside more contemporary topics provides a unique challenge for Relevant's design team. "The Christian audience is smaller, and within the group, there are preconceived ideas," says Jeremy Kennedy, Relevant's Senior Art Director. "Many things seem too edgy to the traditionalists and conversely too boring to the indie kids or design savants. Other challenges come in how to interpret stories with very abstract ideas of God and spirituality into some type of visual representation, without using the usual 'Christian' imagery, like kneeling at the cross."

"Just like any design project, there are limitations, and you have to learn to work within them," adds Alastair Sterne, Relevant's Creative Director. "When it comes to representing Christian spirituality, you have to know that you don't have clear visual images to go with them. You need to look beyond the obvious and find a way to represent Christianity in a more creative way."

Although Relevant is progressive with the topics and the design approach, there are obviously some taboo subjects. "We're not going to use sex to sell our magazine," says Sterne.

But in general, the designers don't fear being provocative with their publishing. "We offend some people in the Christian realm with our content," says Sterne. "But you have to remember that Jesus was counter cultural. He offended people. Now, I don't think that you should intentionally offend people. But you should present issues that are true, relevant, and worth hearing."

MODERNIZING THE MESSAGE

Mattson Creative is an Orange County-based design studio specializing in brand and identity development. The firm serves a wide range of clients from Coca-Cola to Maroon5, as well as many faith-based groups. Principal Ty Mattson has found that occasionally more education is necessary when working with these clients. "Sometimes churches and faith-based organizations lack a sense of sophistication when it comes to brand design," says Mattson. "There is an initial mentality we run into with many of our clients that branding is only for large corporations. The realization that your church or organization is a brand with a reputation to manage is a new idea."

Mattson has taken on a wide range of interesting work, including the Web site for the best-seller, *The Purpose Driven Life*, and the branding and Web design for the International Justice Mission. But where Mattson's work really sings is when designing for a young audience. "I tend to be attracted to doing design and marketing that is more youth-driven," says Mattson. "You can do edgier and more progressive work."

One of Mattson's projects was the development of a series of interactive trivia games called PowerPlay designed for use by church youth groups. Created as visual ice-breakers, the trivia integrates a variety of topics from popular culture, including celebrities, cars, and even bathroom humor. "These games were designed to be visually engaging and fun to play." says Mattson. "There is so much mediocrity out there when it comes to the visual expression of Christianity. My goal is to create design that is original, inspiring and relevant."

Humor is a tool that Mattson integrates into his work when appropriate, especially when designing for youth. "Humor can disarm people," says Mattson. "When you're working to undo a stereotype, or negative portrayals, humor can be a great tool."

One challenge Mattson Creative has run into when it comes to is educating faith-based clients is the issue of originality. "I have no idea why this is so prevalent, but we see it all the time," says Mattson. "A church will launch a campaign or program that is a direct imitation of a brand in popular culture. For example, I recently saw a church promote a series called 'God's Extreme Heart-Makeover'. They recreated the logo from the TV show and everything. It was terrible! Not only is this plagiarism, it sets up a relationship where the church is taking cues from popular culture. I'd love to see it be the other way around."

INNOVATE THE FORMAT

The ways people receive information is changing. This is one of the things that inspired the team at Grandville, Michigan-based nonprofit Nooma. This firm produces a series of short films that address a variety of different Christian-oriented with a conversational voice and a contemporary look and feel.

Why did they select video as the medium? "Media is oriented to becoming a more virtual format," says René DeHaan-Canetti, Executive Director of Nooma. "The team at Nooma wanted to create a way of delivering our message that would engage a variety of people on a different level. We came up with the idea that short films on multiple subjects would provide viewers with an individual perspective they could tap into when they are going through a particular challenge."

The film's subjects deal with many subjects already familiar to Christians—God's love, personal loss, and prayer. The films are artfully shot and contemporary music is integrated into the shoot. But most importantly, the tone is positioned to be conversational and provocative.

"Through our films, we are trying to portray a conversational scenario between the narrator and the audience," says DeHaan-Canetti. "It's not someone telling someone else what to do—it's a conversation. We like to say that we have the first word, not the last word."

In addition to the DVDs, Nooma has also created a Web player that they use on our MySpace page to play clips from their short films. The player also allows users to add clips to their own MySpace page, or even other blogs or Web sites.

“We’re always looking for new ways to make Nooma available to people,” says DeHaan-Canetti. “One of the things that’s beautiful about new technology is the ability to deliver on demand.”

Nooma further integrates its message with its identity by using a very clean aesthetic with sans serif type and bright blue in all of its design. “For me, it was essential that the content be intertwined with the visual elements,” says DeHaan-Canetti. “We tried to visually reflect the language that we used and the way we see things. You can’t separate the design from the content. If it’s not consistent, it’s detrimental. From the color palette to every single word in our films—we make sure that it is a reflection of our choices.”

NEW CHRISTIAN PUBLISHING

The most conspicuous place where Christian design has evolved is in the design of the *Bible*. Formerly exclusively available as a sober, austere tome, the *Bible* now comes in seasonal colors inspired by the fashion industry, backpack sized bibles with designs like ladybugs on the cover. To appeal to the tween market, there is a line of Faithgirlz Bibles, that integrate the text with quizzes, and a guided journal space. There’s even a sports devotional bible that connects Bible stories to sports metaphors.

It all started by reconsidering the *Bible’s* cover. “Zondervan’s Bible design team changed the Bible publishing industry with our innovative duo-tone covers,” says Joe Vriend, Vice President of Creative Communications for Zondervan, a publisher of the Bible and other Christian books. “Where almost everyone had Bibles in black, navy, and burgundy bonded leathers, we changed all that with fashion-related designs and colors that appealed to women, the core Bible purchaser.”

But why tinker with such a sacred book? “Our culture is continually changing,” says Vriend. “People are engaging the *Bible* differently now than they were even five years ago. We wanted to give consumers a reason to buy a new *Bible* that is still the same at its core, but repackaged in a modern way. People want their *Bibles* to reflect who they are.”

The youth market is one of the most desirable niches in the Christian publishing. “We have a creative team dedicated to designing book for kids and teens who keep up-to-the-minute on trends, colors, what’s in and out, jargon, toys, games, fashion—everything kids are interested in,” says Vriend. “We often push the envelope with our designs so that our products attract and keep the interest of a young audience, yet will still be acceptable to bookstore retailers and parents. It’s a fine line and we try to educate our retailers and consumers along the way.”

One of the things changing the market is a move toward Bible sales in more secular markets. “Less than a fifth of churchgoers spend time in Christian bookstores,” says Mickey Maudlin, Vice President and Editorial Director of HarperOne, publisher of

spiritual and religious books. “We see a lot more religious product in more secular channels, like Costco, Target, Barnes & Noble, and Borders. I think one of the biggest trends is more distribution channels for religious books.”

Design has become extremely important in religious publishing in general. “Book publishing is so competitive,” says Maudlin. “Design is where you can stand out. This is especially true in the bible market. The interesting thing about bibles is that you can use the same product, in a variety of formats. For instance, there’s an entire line of bibles that are published in seasonal colors that take cues from the fashion industry. All publishers are doing this now.”

SPREADING THE GOOD WORD

When it comes down to it, the same rules apply when reaching the Christian audience that do for any other niche. “Understanding the church audience is just like understanding any other audience you’re communicating with,” says Abare. “We’re all people with heads and hearts, bellies and budgets, families and friends.”

And when it comes to spreading the word, there’s a term that churches certainly can embrace. “Some have argued that marketing is just another word for evangelism, suggesting that marketing is a way to spread the Good News of the Gospel, just as an evangelist would tell people about Jesus.” says Abare. Amen.

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CAPTIONS

PersonalBible_1.jpg and personalBible_2.jpg and ladybug.jpg

Once only available in burgundy, navy, or gray, the Holy Bible is now available in custom sizes like these Zondervan Bibles, inspired by contemporary fashion, or even playful designs, like this ladybug.

RELEVANT_Cover_March.jpg

Don’t expect Relevant magazine to just stick to Christian bands in its new music guide. It covered bands such as Bloc Party, Arcade Fire, and Mos Def.

RELEVANT_IJM.jpg

Type plays a significant role in the design of Relevant’s print magazine. Creative Director Alastair Sterne frequently experiments with phasing in new fonts to refresh the look of the magazine.

RELEVANT_lovedrug.jpg

The target demographic for Relevant is 18-32, which means that the design has to be fresh and contemporary for its audience. Or, as Sterne describes the demographic, “Christians who have grown tired of mainstream Christianity.”

noomaPlayer.jpg

The team at Nooma developed the Nooma player to allow their audience to play their videos on demand. This also allows people to post videos on their MySpace page, blog, or Web site.

pdl_01.tif, pdl_02.tif

Mattson Creative designed the site for the best-selling book, *The Purpose Driven Life*. It was intentionally crafted to not just be an advertisement for the book, but to engage the user a site that embodied the book's message.

games.tif

These screen captures show slides from PowerPlay trivia games that Mattson Creative created by use with church youth groups. Their design is playful and edgy, designed to appeal to its young audience.

churchMarketingSucks.jpg

Brad Abare started the blog churchmarketingsucks.com as a way to instruct and encourage churches to step up their efforts when it comes to marketing and design.

StillONE.tif, StillTWO.tif

For Nooma, the artistic composition of their Christian films is every bit as important as the message. The look is clean, contemporary and highly designed. "I try not to separate the message from the design," says René DeHaan Canetti, the Executive Director of Nooma. "That's where things fall apart for me."

Store_Cover.tif, SexGod.tif

The contemporary Nooma look is followed through in everything they produce, from the Web site to their logo, to the packaging of their DVDs to the design of their books. "If the message is not consistent, it's detrimental to the entire message," says DeHaan-Canetti. "We are trying to create something that is a reflection of what we're doing, down to every last word."

Brad Abare: www.churchmarketingsucks.com

Alastair Sterne and Jeremy Kennedy: www.relevantmagazine.com

Ty Mattson: www.mattsoncreative.com

René DeHaan-Canetti: www.nooma.com

Joe Vriend: www.zondervan.com

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