

Welcome Centers

*Providing information
through a front-line relational touch*

A Quick Bite Publication
Scott Vaughan Communications, LLC



Welcome Centers

Once, while traveling, my Vicki and I wanted to stock up on “traveling snacks” for the road. It is so much easier and less expensive to take your own snacks on the road. A friend suggested that we visit one of the “big box” buy-in-bulk discount stores, where we were promised to find lower prices and larger quantities.

We parked in the store’s parking lot and followed other shoppers inside the large store with no windows.

“It’s a warehouse,” I whispered to my bride. “I feel over-dressed.”

Inside, we just stood there, frozen. Before us were rows and rows and aisles and aisles of unfamiliar territory. Products were stacked to the ceiling.

“I know where to find the cookies in the grocery store,” I whispered again, turning to leave. But, she caught my arm.

“As long as we are here, let’s look around,” she said.

We took one step forward and met a customer service representative.

“Is this your first time with us?” she asked. Receiving our affirmative head-nods, she rattled away about “membership and one-time, annual costs” and then pointed us toward a customer service desk for a “guest pass.”

It was at the customer service desk that our questions were answered. We received answers to questions we didn’t know we had. And, I appreciated the employees there. They did not try to “sell” us on joining the store’s annual program. They answered questions, they provided a map, and they even pointed me toward the restroom halfway during the conversation. We were so intrigued by the focused helpfulness that, yes, we signed on for a one-year membership.

We bought a ton of cookies that morning.

What your church needs to know about guests:

1. Assume all of your guests are anxious, nervous, and a bit overwhelmed when they come to see you. Many, if not most, will come on their own initiative and, beyond a website visit, may not really know what to expect. If your church fails to make a relational connection you may never see that guest again. Assuming every guest needs some level of assistance will help prevent anyone from being untouched.

2. Assume all of your guests know nothing about your church. This prevents you from taking both the guest and the church for granted.

3. Assume you will be asked anything and everything about the church. Be prepared to know everything – even a bit of history.

4. The role of the Greeter is to make an initial, friendly, relational connection, discerning if the person before them is member or guest. If the person is a guest, the Greeter’s secondary initiative is to answer 1-2 quick questions, and then guide the guest to the Welcome Center for more information. The Greeter ministry feeds into the Welcome Center ministry. I often say the Welcome Center is HQ for the Greeter Ministry.

5. The role of the Welcome Center is to take as much time as necessary to build a relational comfort zone with the guest, answering questions, providing face-to-face assistance, gathering database information for intentional follow-up, and introducing the guest to members and staff. Welcome Center staff ultimately moves database information to the church office, and in some cases the Welcome

Center is part of the first-response to guests after the morning or service is concluded.

Churches are slow to understand the value of a Welcome Center.

Many Welcome Centers are planned and staffed by leaders and members, who rarely, if ever, have attended a church as a guest. It's difficult to understand the value of a Welcome Center if you've never had need of one or understand how beneficial it can be to long-term guest comfort. I always suggest the church's Greeter and Welcome Center ministries take occasional field trips to other churches just to see how good, bad and ugly the climate is across today's church landscape.

Even churches that have Welcome Centers rarely staff them or staff them well. I've seen Welcome Centers (Information Centers), where guests were forced to *welcome themselves* by selecting from pre-printed brochures and flyers on display at an unstaffed center. I've been in churches where Welcome Center volunteers were so engaged in conversation that I was never greeted. I've even seen the Welcome Center with a counter-top sign, reading, "Volunteer unavailable. Please call the church office on Monday."

A good Welcome Center is well-staffed for the entire Sunday morning experience. Welcome Center staff and Greeters are the first to arrive at the property and the last to leave it. Churches interested in connecting with guests toward Kingdom growth also understand that the Welcome Center is the best hub for helping guests connect with the church. The Welcome Center is an extension of the church office and in many ways is much more approachable than the church office.

Considerations for Welcome Centers

The Ministry. Bring your Welcome Center Ministry alongside your Greeter Ministry, positioning both under the umbrella of Hospitality. Greeter Ministry and the Welcome Center must work in tandem. A large pool of volunteers can be rotated among both responsibilities just to keep volunteers from growing stale in one assignment.

The Location. Locate your Welcome Center – and you may need more than one – at primary entrances to the property. Location is not about where you have available space for a Welcome Center. Location is about positioning near entrances with high traffic volume. I'm an advocate of actual traffic studies. At most sporting goods' stores you can purchase inexpensive (baseball) pitch counters that fit in the palm of the hand. On six Sundays, locate a leader at all of your property entrances. Have your counters record door traffic by the hour for the duration of the morning. Personally, I track both entrance and exit traffic. I also train these counters to look at age demographic. Are senior adults using a specific entrance more than median adults? I also record the weather just to see if weather somehow impacts traffic at certain entrances. After the study is complete, locate Welcome Centers in appropriate high traffic areas, but visible to doorways.

The Signage. Have exterior and interior signage that, in all parking lots and property approaches, advertises the location of Welcome Centers. Positioning your Greeters outside the property can also assist this navigation.

Your goal is for every guest – every single guest – to know you have a Welcome Center ministry and that it is accessible.

The Look. It is a myth that you need an expensive, professional counter with cabinetry as your Welcome Center. I've seen efficient Welcome Centers that were 4-foot tables with attractive table coverings. Whatever your decision, the center must communicate *"You are welcome at our church"* and *"We are organized to serve you."* The attractive Welcome Center must positively reflect the spirit of your church. When I go swimming at the beach, I see a Lifeguard stand even though I may not have need of it. The Lifeguard stand communicates that someone is there in case I have an emergency, and that someone is ready to help.

The Volunteers. Certainly, Welcome Center volunteers ultimately make or break your Welcome Center's effectiveness. Training for these volunteers is important. I also believe in holding volunteers accountable. Periodic review of volunteer performance with praise and correction is appropriate. It may be necessary to "free" some volunteers from ministry if they are unable to serve or serve poorly.

It's important that churches select the best and brightest to serve as Greeters and as Welcome Center volunteers. These volunteers should be recruited for their outgoing personality, friendliness, hospitality, care ministry, and grace. It's important for your volunteers to make a good first impression.

I don't advocate asking for volunteers because you will get those who want to "hide" from worship or other ministry, you will get those who want to receive ministry ("here are all my problems") rather than provide it, and you will get those who want to socialize with other volunteers. I don't ask for volunteers. *I identify the individuals that I need and then I go recruit them.* As you recruit volunteers, it's also important to have a variety of age demographics and mix up their assignments.

When scheduling, don't allow two best friends to work together. Spouses can work together provided they are both in attendance. Sometimes, when spouses are assigned together – one spouse will begin "covering" for both. Put a senior adult volunteer with a young adult volunteer. Your guests will be impressed by this spirit of community. Make sure you have both men and women at each Welcome Center, and have a minimum of two volunteers at the Welcome Center at all times. Increase the number of volunteers based on traffic.

Provide training to help volunteers with prayer ministry and discussions of faith. I've heard Welcome Center volunteers tell stories of people approaching the center as a last gasp of help for a life crisis or for prayer support. Be prepared for your ministry to go much deeper than directional assistance or ministry promotion. Have a good interface between your Welcome Center ministry, prayer ministry, deacon or elder ministry, and staff.

Each volunteer must know the entire church campus without use of a map, including the locations of bathrooms. Providing a campus map at the Welcome Center is a great idea. It's a good idea to review your internal directional signs. A good sign system can help your Welcome Center volunteers.

Volunteers should have a mobile telephone and permission to contact 911 Emergency Services if and when necessary. It's good to provide CPR training for

your volunteers so that a few are certified. You must have a good First Aid kit at the Welcome Center. I also recommend having a wheelchair at the Welcome Center.

Purchase inexpensive but durable umbrellas for use by the Welcome Center. Have these branded with the church logo and website address. Loan them as needed, but don't plan for them to be returned. If people take the umbrellas consider it an advertising expense.

Do not provide candy to children. You are a stranger. Providing candy sends the confusing message that accepting candy from a stranger is sometimes okay.

Providing coffee and snacks at your Welcome Center is not a good idea. You will find your Welcome Center is overtaken by members, crowding out your guests. Also, you will discover your volunteers become too involved in food service rather than relational connection. If your church offers coffee service, please locate it far away from your Welcome Center as a separate function of the Hospitality Ministry. Do not allow volunteers to eat or drink at the Welcome Center. It's just not good form. Volunteers should always have their hands free.

Do not allow volunteers to locate behind counters. You do not want a physical boundary between your guests and your volunteers. A counter with volunteers behind it can look unapproachable. If you need a volunteer behind the counter locate two volunteers in front of it.

Do not allow volunteers to sit down while at the Welcome Center. If volunteers need a "sit down" break build that into the schedule. A guest will not approach a volunteer who is sitting for fear of interrupting a time of rest. Don't send the message that your volunteers are too busy or self-absorbed to serve.

Finally: Beware the paper.

Great Welcome Centers rely on great volunteers. Poor Welcome Center ministries rely on paper rather than volunteers. Volunteers, in the poor setting, pass out paper rather than make intentional relational connections.

Abandon the old idea of a welcome packet. Force your volunteers to be a *human* welcome packet. Churches that lead with a big packet of paper typically lose the personal touch, replacing it with the paper. A collection of paper will *never* draw people to your church and its Kingdom message – only people will do that! Keep in mind that most welcome packets are in the trash with 24 hours of receipt. The return on investment is poor.

I do believe it's acceptable to have these paper products: (a) Campus map; (b) A 4 x 6 "Welcome Card," answering five key questions and pointing people to the church website; and (c) A sample of the printed church newsletter. Train your volunteers to use these as part answering questions and providing information. Provide them upon request or as a need is perceived. Do not, however, have kiosks full of paper, including a tri-fold brochure for every church ministry. This looks cluttered and too dependent on paper.

Some churches provide a list of available Bible Study or Sunday School classes for those interested in attending a class. This is provided upon request or when a need is perceived. Providing this information is a great idea, but make sure you provide lots of information about the class – location (on the map), teacher name, and current course of study.

**No packets of paper.
How it all comes together.**

The guest arrives on Sunday and is greeted in parking lots or outside entrances by a Greeter.

Trained Greeters know to move guests toward a Welcome Center.

Welcome Center volunteers make the relational connection with a goal of immediate service and collecting contact information for an intentional follow-up system by volunteers or staff. <^><

Scott Vaughan was a 20-year newspaper writer, editor and publisher before entering vocational ministry as a church communication strategist. As a member of the media, he won awards in both the Georgia and South Carolina press associations, and served on the South Carolina Press Association's Executive Board. For nine years, he was marketing director for the South Carolina Baptist Convention, serving churches of all sizes, in all cultures, and of all ages. In 2003, he created his own ministry, Scott Vaughan Communications, LLC. He is active in his community, specifically supporting children and young people through youth sports. He and Vicki have been married 24 years and have four sons, ages 21-13.



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