

The 10 Commandments of TV Ministry

Phil Cooke Ministry Facilities - Multimedia



Want to take your message to the masses? Here are the 10 most important steps to launching your media ministry successfully.

Editor's Note: Ministries Today has always searched for the most effective, cutting-edge principles and techniques to make your church and ministry more successful. Recently, we've seen a dramatic increase in the number of ministries involved in the mass media--specifically TV outreaches. As technology brings the cost of video equipment down, more and more local ministries are delving into an arena that seemed unreachable just a few years ago.



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So we sought the advice of Phil Cooke, one of the most experienced Christian producers in the country.

Based in Burbank, California, Cooke has spent the last 25 years producing some of the most creative and effective Christian programs in history. His office is filled with awards from both the Christian and secular media industries. He is a board member of the National Religious Broadcasters and a contributor to Ministries Today. We asked Cooke about the most important elements to keep in mind when beginning a TV outreach.

Popular culture has become the pulpit of the secular world. When I was a child growing up in the South in the 1950s, the moral climate of the country was decided in the pulpit. But today, the moral climate of this country is decided in movie theaters, through popular music and, mostly, through television.

While strong preaching will continue to be a hallmark of the church, the influence of the pulpit on the secular world seems to be eroding on a daily basis. Simply put, if Christians don't have a strong presence in the media, the church will have very little impact as we enter the 21st century. That's why it's so critical that churches and ministries embrace media and learn to use it as a vehicle to fulfill the Great Commission.

And the timing couldn't be better. Now more than ever, technology is advancing, prices are dropping and equipment is becoming more affordable. That's why--aside from directing and producing numerous TV programs and films--I've also had the opportunity to help various churches and ministries begin their own media outreaches. From weekly TV programs to one-hour specials to commercial and advertising campaigns, I've worked with all types of Christian organizations, helping them take a message of hope to a culture desperately in need.

In most cases, when I receive a call from a pastor, evangelist or other ministry leader, their primary concern is usually about equipment: What equipment should I use? Should I lease or purchase? Should I videotape my Sunday service or use a local studio?

These questions are important, but I've discovered that they aren't nearly as important as 10 fundamental areas I call "The 10 Commandments of TV Ministry."

If you feel God is calling you into some type of media ministry, then I urge you to consider these areas first. Without a keen understanding of these particular issues, you're heading for trouble. But if you'll take the time to explore these 10 critical areas, you will be more ready to step out and begin an effective media ministry.

Commandment #1: Understand the power of telling a story. Most churches want to begin with equipment, but I always prefer to begin with how to tell a story. Ultimately, no matter what communications medium we choose, that's all we're doing--telling a story. That's it--a simple story about how God chose to become one of us and share His eternal plan with people who didn't deserve it.

We need to spend more time learning how to tell a story more effectively. It doesn't matter the program format--preaching, music, documentary, variety or drama--until that story is told most effectively, the audience is never going to be interested.

This Sunday, thousands of pastors will step up to the pulpit without telling a single story. And yet, when you study the life of Jesus, that's almost all He ever did. He rarely lectured or preached. He mostly told stories--stories that touched people and changed their lives.

The great Swedish filmmaker Ingmar Bergman said, "Facts go straight to the head, and stories go straight to the heart."

As we begin a new millennium, we need to make a new commitment to storytelling and understand that unless we can tell a

powerful story, our chance of reaching an audience is terribly diminished.

Commandment #2: Make sure your financing is in place. Most Christian producers are plagued with a lack of funds for production and equipment. Television is probably the most expensive outreach your church or ministry will ever encounter, and poor financial decisions can literally destroy an entire ministry organization. I always recommend that you have six months of funding in the bank before you begin a media outreach.

On most cable systems today, there are a minimum of 70 channels, so it takes six months to a year of broadcasting before your program begins to establish itself with your audience. That means it could be a year or more before you receive any prayer or financial support from your audience. Therefore, it is critical that you be able to fund your program during that first year, or your media ministry will never have the chance to make an impact.

Commandment #3: Be in touch with current culture. I find that a remarkable number of pastors, evangelists and church leaders are out of touch with today's culture. Christian producers often don't keep up with current programming and graphic styles, and I'm amazed at the number of Christian media professionals who never even watch television. If we're going to make an impact in this culture, we have to understand what makes it tick.

Just as Paul in Acts 17 used his knowledge of Greek literature and culture to establish a common ground with the philosophers at Mars Hill, we need to understand the music, literature, films and television this culture creates. Otherwise, they will continue to believe that our message is irrelevant and unimportant.

Commandment #4: Don't feel everything has to be explicit. Don't feel the obligation to tell the entire salvation, healing and deliverance story with each program. Learn to be subtle and to win the audience with interesting and fascinating programming. Then present the gospel.

A few years ago, an informal survey with people who had recently accepted Christ indicated that they had been presented with the gospel message an average of 17 times before they made a final decision. That means people think about it, mull it over and need time to contemplate their decision. So, let's make more programs that plant the seed; don't feel that it is necessary to hit people over the head with every program.

Commandment #5: Always be open to change. The unexpected is often the most exciting and effective answer. In Hollywood, millions of dollars are spent every year on pilot programs, many of which never see the light of day.

The major studios and networks understand that audiences are always changing, so they aren't afraid to experiment and update programs and program ideas. But most Christian programs are doing the same thing they did 10-15 years ago. The most successful media ministries are ministries that aren't afraid to change, update and present a fresh, new approach to an ever-changing audience.

Commandment #6: Have a clear focus. Have a clear purpose and focus for each program you do. If you're producing a program on the theme of salvation, then every aspect of that program needs to point in that direction. The music, the greeting, the interviews, the message, the closing--even product offers and commercials. National advertisers understand this need and focus every aspect of their advertising campaigns on their theme. We can make a much stronger impact if we follow their lead.

Commandment #7: Don't forget creativity. Exercise those creative muscles--and do it on a regular basis. Don't take the easy way out, either in sermon preparation or program production. Personally, I don't buy into the theory that only some of us are born creative and others aren't.

I believe anyone can be more creative; it just takes practice and a willingness to forego the easy way out in order to be open to new and creative ideas.

Commandment #8: Don't let your vision stop at preaching. Preaching is a wonderful thing, and there will always be room on Christian television for good, solid preaching. However, keep in mind that a church service doesn't necessarily make the best TV program. Just like a television isn't a radio with pictures, an effective TV program isn't necessarily a church service that's been videotaped.

When you're in a church service or evangelistic event, you can feel the electricity of the crowd, and you can see the emotion and intensity of the speaker. You can also experience the live event with the enthusiasm and excitement of hundreds or thousands of other people. However, when you watch that same event on television, you're often sitting alone in a room, watching it on a glass box 10 or 15 feet away.

You're probably also having a meal, talking with friends or reading a book or magazine. It's simply not the same experience as the live event. In fact it's such a problem, advertisers call it "cutting through the clutter," which is the ability to create programming that cuts through all those distractions and makes an impact on the audience.

Also, don't forget other wonderful program ideas (that, unfortunately, seem to be remarkably absent from Christian television): documentaries, movies, children's programs, news, animation, music and other formats. Remember, the secular networks spend millions of dollars to find out what audiences will watch, and if you check the latest prime time schedule, you'll see it is filled with movies, episodic dramas and situation comedies--there's not a preaching show among them.

The reality is this: Secular networks are not biased against Christians; they just want to make money (and would probably sell their grandmothers to do it). The secular networks profit from selling advertising time, and if they felt preaching shows drew an audience, they would have them in the prime time lineup. But they know the power of story-based programs, so they fill the TV schedule with that format.

Commandment #9: Don't forget research. I'm convinced one of the most neglected areas of media ministry is research. Do you really know who's watching your program and why? That knowledge should greatly affect what you produce? Is your audience young or old? Educated or uneducated? Rich or poor? What about the racial makeup?

You don't have to spend millions and hire major research organizations for that information. It can be as simple as talking to your local TV station or cable network. They make a living selling TV time to advertisers, and they have to know who's watching at various times during the day.

Ask them about different time periods and find out who's watching. Then you can either create a program around that audience, or find the appropriate audience for the program you feel called to produce.

Commandment #10: Don't underestimate the importance of quality. Many Christian churches and ministries don't understand the need to produce high quality TV or radio programs. But today's audiences are more technologically sophisticated than ever and refuse to watch programs that aren't up to current standards of quality.

Remember my earlier comment about most cable systems having at least 70 channels? The 500-channel universe is not far around the corner. In that environment, it's just too easy to change the channel if the picture or sound quality isn't satisfying.

Always remember: Stewardship isn't necessarily just saving money; it's using money most effectively. Sometimes that means spending more money to purchase a better product that will help you reach your goals sooner and more effectively.

Many churches and ministries purchase cheap equipment in order to save money, but soon discover they should have waited until they could afford better quality. Don't let your desire to get on television push you into getting low quality or inferior equipment. After all, you can't reach the lost if they won't watch long enough to hear your message.

Quality not only involves equipment; it involves people as well. If you gave the finest computer in the world to the average person in your congregation, he or she still wouldn't be able to write a best-selling novel. You need to bring the best media professionals you can afford to help you with your TV ministry.

Where do you find them? Contact professional organizations like the National Religious Broadcasters in Manassas, Virginia. Ask a church or ministry with a TV outreach you admire. Inquire at Christian colleges, since they often have communications departments with majors in radio, television and multimedia.

Just because your brother-in-law loves your ministry, and is a loyal family member, doesn't mean he's the best person to help you build an effective and successful media outreach. Find godly people who have a genuine calling to reach the world through media. They can make a dramatic difference in the success of your media ministry.

Media ministry is a calling. Keep these "10 Commandments" in your office to remind you of your commitment to principles that will help launch your media ministry and keep you focused on your goal. But I couldn't write an article like this without urging something else that I believe is absolutely critical for a media ministry--the need for prayer and the importance of seeking wise counsel.

Radio and television are remarkable ways to reach the world for Christ, but they are also tools that bring along the baggage of ego, vanity, financial wrongdoing and a host of other temptations. Sadly, the history of Christian broadcasting is rife with multimillion-dollar ministries that succumbed to these and other temptations.

Another personal concern of mine is the lax approach to correct theology and doctrine exhibited by some Christian TV personalities. In some cases, a pastor or evangelist may feel the desperate need to be sensational to create more viewers.

In other cases, they have put their desire for celebrity above their desire to stay true to the Word of God. Some feel such a strong calling to begin a media outreach right away that they shortchange their theological education. In the worst cases, they continually push the limits of the "prosperity gospel" because that always gets the phones to light up.

But there is never an excuse for incorrect or abusive teaching of the Bible. Remember, false or inaccurate teaching to a

congregation of a few hundred is bad enough--but that influence can be multiplied by millions on television.

Regard your ministry outreach as a profound calling, and take every step as if it were one of the most critical decisions you will ever make.

If you will stay near to the heart of God in your decision making, and seek the help and counsel of godly men and women, as well as experienced media professionals, your chances of success will be greatly increased.

Phil Cooke is president and producer of Phil Cooke Pictures, Inc., located in Burbank, California. His most recent project was Millennium Chorus, a global TV special featuring Kathie Lee Gifford, Michael W. Smith, Bob Carlisle, Michael Crawford, Jennifer Holliday and many others.

Resources for Starting a Media Ministry

Don't get lost in the media maze--let the experts point you in the right direction.

BOOK RESOURCES:

The following books are available from the National Religious Broadcasters and can be purchased by calling (703) 330-7000:

**Producing Effective Christian Television Programs: Making Your Television Ministry a Reality by Phil Cooke.

**On a Shoestring and a Prayer: How to Start a Television Ministry on a Low Budget by Doug Smart.

**2000 NRB Directory of Religious Media. A comprehensive directory of Christian radio and TV stations, advertising agencies, production companies, studios, media buyers and much more. Available in book form or CD-ROM.

**The Abundant Speaker: A Handbook for Christian Communicators by Nancy Epperson.

OTHER PUBLICATIONS:

**National Religious Broadcasters magazine, (703) 330-7000.

**Technologies for Worship magazine, (905) 830-4300.

**Church Resource Directory,

(800) 338-8928.

INTERNET RESOURCES:

**www.cookefilm.com. The Web site for Phil Cooke Pictures Inc. It contains a TV production library with numerous free documents such as budget worksheets, and tips for lighting, sound and location shooting. To contact Cooke, call (818) 563-2125, or you may e-mail him at phil@cookefilm.com.

**www.tfwm.com. Online media resource for churches and ministries.

**www.christianfilmmaker.com. A resource site for Christian filmmakers.

**www.nab.org. National Association of Broadcasters.

**www.nrb.org. The Web site of the National Religious Broadcasters.

**www.my.treeway.com/pelon_films. An excellent Israeli production resource for shooting in Israel. Eitan Alon is an Israeli producer who has helped local churches and ministries shoot TV footage in Israel. He has produced full-length TV specials and feature films. If you want to shoot in Israel, this is an excellent resource.

ORGANIZATIONS AND CONFERENCES:

**National Religious Broadcasters. The national organization of Christian radio and TV stations and networks, as well as media ministries, film and video producers, Internet producers, agencies and media buyers. Their annual conference is a must-attend event and will be taking place in Dallas in February 2001. Call (703) 330-7000.

**Inspiration Conference. Focuses on church media such as lighting and sound, video projectors, drama, broadcasting and

music. Call (905) 830-4300.

****Christians in Media Conference.** Held in Los Angeles, Denver, Phoenix, Dallas and other cities. Sponsored by BIOLA University, it is known for workshops with major Christian media leaders from Hollywood and across the country.

Speakers have included Martha Williamson, producer of Touched by an Angel; Ken Wales, producer of Christy; and Ralph Winter, producer of Star Trek, Inspector Gadget and The X-Men.

These conferences are designed for Christians who want to make a difference in the secular media. Call (562) 903-4737.

COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES:

Christian colleges and universities are wonderful resources for media classes. You don't have to get a degree to enroll in individual classes that will teach you the basics of radio and TV production. Ask if the college has a communications department with an emphasis in radio, television, motion pictures or multimedia. Recent Christian communications graduates are also an outstanding source of TV staff and crew for up-and-coming media ministries.

Some outstanding programs include: East Coast--Regent University, Virginia Beach, Virginia; West Coast--BIOLA University, La Mirada, California; and Midwest--Oral Roberts University, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

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