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Precious Lord, Take My Brand: Consumer Analysis of Branding Effectiveness of First Hattiesburg

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PRECIOUS LORD, TAKE MY BRAND:
CONSUMER ANALYSIS OF BRANDING EFFECTIVENESS OF FIRST
HATTIESBURG

by

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Abstract

This study provides insight into consumer perception of First Hattiesburg's image strategy, physical space/environment, and personnel/human factors and how they have enticed the community to attend and even become partners at First Hattiesburg. Furthermore, this study provides a unique look at integrated marketing communication (IMC) in a religious organization. Results of this study indicate that First Hattiesburg's branding style, particularly the consistency of its IMC, contributes significantly to members/attendees' positive view of the church. Because First Hattiesburg's branding is so different from most southern Baptist churches and the church is currently experiencing a season of growth, it can be inferred that the image strategy, physical space/environment, and personnel/human factors of First Hattiesburg play a major role in its growing numbers. The results of this study provide theoretical insight into our understanding of church marketing as a whole and strengthen the credibility of practical branding tactics that, paired with other factors, could lead other churches to similar success.

Key Words: church, branding, advertising, marketing, integrated marketing communication (IMC), First Hattiesburg, Venture Church

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Introduction

"Retaining current members, attracting prospective members, and reactivating dormant memberships remain fundamental marketing tasks for building and preserving a healthy, thriving church" (Joseph & Webb, 2000, p. 19).

Churches first turned to advertising in the 1970s and 1980s when membership began to rapidly decrease. Although many churches are still underdeveloped in the marketing department, churches like First Hattiesburg, located on Lincoln Road in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, have developed sophisticated branding systems. In fact, First Hattiesburg was ranked 20th on *Outreach Magazine*'s top one hundred fastest-growing churches in America in 2012, one of only two Mississippi churches (Stetzer, 2012). The non-traditional Baptist church, led by pastor Jeff Clark, has experienced a 45% increase in weekend worship attendance since 2012 and averages 110 first time guests each weekend (Golden, 2012). What makes this church so successful when the rest of the South is reporting plummeting attendance quotas from generation y? This study analyzes consumer response to three aspects of First Hattiesburg's branding: image strategy, physical space/environment, and personnel/human factors.

According to Gilgoff (2009), "the number of Americans identifying themselves as members of mainline denominations, including Presbyterians and the United Church of Christ, has slid from nearly 19% of the population to under 13% since 1990, a loss of 3.5 million people" (p. 1). He remarks that young adults under the age of thirty-five perceive the church as, "judgmental, hypocritical, and insular," and an uninviting atmosphere of which they do not wish to be a part. Churches across America are beginning to catch on. For example, The United Methodist Church began a $20 million advertising campaign in

2009 in an attempt to invent "a different concept or experience of church" (Gilgoff, 2009, p. 1). Creating an atmosphere relevant to the next generation is a task not easily accomplished, but one that First Hattiesburg has embraced with open arms. "Few ever challenge the way things are because few have ever been given permission to think about church differently, but that's exactly what we have done at First Baptist Church of Hattiesburg," says Clark (2012), who feels a call to be an agent of change in his generation and the ones that follow. This study provides insight into what works—which factors of branding have enticed the community to attend and even become partners. With the information gathered in this research, churches with a background similar to that of First Hattiesburg—those stagnant or declining in membership—could learn how to brand themselves and pull themselves out of the slump.

First, background information about the church and its journey from tradition to modernity was collected through interactions with current church staff, and a review of literature uncovered existing research on church marketing strategy. Furthermore, to collect information about what people do and why they do it, one must study people and retrieve firsthand reasoning for their actions and behaviors. Through the use of a survey among its members/regular attenders, this study analyzes the branding style of First Hattiesburg and reveals the aspects of the church to which consumers positively and negatively respond.

Literature Review

History of First Hattiesburg

To understand First Hattiesburg's current state, it is important to note its origin and history. Founded in 1884, First Baptist Church Hattiesburg was originally located on

North Main Street and moved several times to Buschman Street in 1901, West Pine Street in 1953, and finally its current location, Lincoln Road, in 2009. Little evidence of the church's history prior to the 1980s could be located. Primary sources of the church's history after this point include Jeff Clark, Senior Pastor since 1986, and Jeff Powell, Director of Worship Programming since 1998. The church began and operated for many years under a traditional style of leadership.

Clark (2012) calls attention to the church's central placement in Hattiesburg and its members' excessive control over its operation. "We were a church built by rich people for rich people while a growing population of outsiders surrounded our church" (p. 11). Powell (2012) gives a more vivid description of the traditional church atmosphere. "It was very traditional; stained glass windows, chandeliers, starched collars, Sunday best, all those kinds of things. It was very 'church culture,' if you will."

At a pivotal point in 2009, Clark began to feel a calling that the church was not effectively accomplishing its mission and needed a change. He decided to challenge consistency and tradition and redefine the church's mission based on the Great Commission: to go and make disciples of all nations. Changes to the worship structure, music, leadership structure, teaching style, and technology were vital to the success of Clark's plan. Clark (2012) attributes the church's stagnation to its inward focus. The change in mission required a change in location. According to Powell (2012), the old facility was built around the way church operated in the 1950s and 1960s during the "Golden Age of the Southern Baptist Church." While the current building had more square footage, a move was necessary to implement the changes desired by Clark and the

church staff. Although much was at stake, Clark felt that the risk of losing a few members for the sake of the church's mission was worth the effort.

The church moved five miles from its previous location on Pine Street to a new patch of land on Lincoln Road, which was originally inaccessible except for helicopter or all-terrain vehicle. Soon after, by coincidence, the City of Hattiesburg built a road leading to the property (Powell, 2012). Although the move provided a fresh start to accompany Clark's vision, unavoidable and unforeseen obstacles were prevalent. Prominent members of the church, in disagreement with Clark's vision, became frustrated and went elsewhere (Clark, 2012). Powell (2012) estimates that five hundred to eight hundred people left First Hattiesburg during the transition.

Not only did a large group of members stop attending, but they also stopped giving, leaving the church recharged but financially vulnerable. Staff members were so determined that they volunteered to take a pay decrease for the sake of moving forward (Clark, 2012).

After overcoming much loss and opposition, the church, shortening its name to "First Hattiesburg," rose from the ashes and began a new season with its remaining members. Clark continues to lead the church as his vision continually becomes a reality. First Hattiesburg emerged with a new identity. "We are not here to condemn. We are not here to point fingers. We are not here to tell you to talk a certain way, dress a certain way, or anything like that. First Hattiesburg exists for those who—rightfully or wrongfully— have been accused, judged, or cast aside. Our church is a place where people can come to find refuge, forgiveness, and love" (Clark, 2012, p. 79).

Issues in the Southern Baptist Church

A study conducted by the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention revealed that nearly seventy percent of America is functionally un-churched. In other words, "church is not a regular, consistent part of their lives" (Clark, 2012, p. 84; Guenard, 2012, p. 43). Recently, after the emergence of studies producing disappointing statistics, the implementation of marketing strategies into nonprofit organizations, including churches, has become significant (Vokurka & McDaniel, 2004). According to *Christian Century*, "Southern Baptists reported five percent fewer baptisms in 2010 than in 2009—332,321 compared to 349,737. Total membership was counted at 16,136,044, a drop of 0.15% and the fourth straight year of membership losses" (Allen, 2011, p. 16). Because of traditional Baptist churches' loss of appeal in the eyes of a younger generation, many issues often arise that hinder their marketing success. According to Joseph and Webb (2000), marketing issues facing churches today include issues such as membership decline, ineffective recruiting, the inability to promote consumer satisfaction without distorting values, lack of program ineffectiveness, lack of diversity in ministry, decline in member involvement, ineffective fundraising, and unsuccessful communication. These authors indicate that in order for a church to market itself successfully, it should focus on bettering its personal referral network, mass media recruiting, church publications, and use of broadcast media.

Church Marketing Strategies

In order to discuss modern strategies for churches, one must understand that the terms "branding" and "marketing" cannot be used interchangeably. The American Marketing Association (AMA, 2013) defines branding as, "a customer experience

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represented by a collection of images and ideas; often, it refers to a symbol such as a name, logo, slogan, and design scheme. Brand recognition and other reactions are created by the accumulation of experiences with the specific product or service, both directly relating to its use, and through the influence of advertising, design, and media commentary." Hence, branding can be ultimately understood as the process and methodology of creating a brand. As stated in de Charnatony and Dall'Olmo Riley's study (as cited in Stride & Lee, 2007), although many aspects of branding are concrete, the process also contains "an emotional dimension that reflect(s) buyers' moods, personalities, and the messages they wish to convey to others" (p. 108). A good balance between branding and goals is crucial to developing a timeless brand (Koby, 2012). Furthermore, Stride and Lee (2007) emphasize that although branding carries an emotional element, effective branding must be accompanied by empowered design. Many times, consumers will remember a visual element of branding more than an emotional element.

On the other hand, the AMA (2013) defines "marketing" to be "the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large." It can be inferred that where branding has a more personal, conceptual definition, marketing is more monetary and business-oriented. Vokurka and McDaniel (2004) state that although the strategy of one church is not always best for another, analyzing successful elements can be useful to a church seeking improvements. Previous studies indicate that churches are in favor of using marketing to reach members. In a study conducted by Joseph and Webb (2000), "eighty percent of respondents reported using publicity tools and seventy

percent had used advertising. Significantly, all of the marketing techniques were viewed positively by the clergy surveyed" (p. 24). This study also leads to the conclusion that churches that are constantly changing will better attract members.

Vokurka and McDaniel (2004) call attention to a book entitled, *One Size Does Not Fit All*, and restate the importance of catering marketing techniques to individual churches, however. The same technique may not be effective in every church. To support this hypothesis, they collected survey results from 247 Southern Baptist churches and determined that special programs and worship services are two distinct elements that categorize church marketing strategy. They developed the following taxonomy of churches based on their data: "1) 'Traditional' churches; 2) 'Program-oriented' churches; and 3) 'Worship-oriented' churches. Each of the three church types differed in program emphases, marketing communication methods used, location, and growth rate" (p. 144). Although Vokurka and McDaniel's research divided churches based on marketing strategy types, they reached one basic conclusion: "Baptist, Catholic, Lutheran, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, non-denominational, or any other kind of church, should be able to achieve numerical growth through the following activities: 1) Survey the people, 2) Adopt a 'programs-orientation,' 3) Communicate" (2004, p. 145).

Additional research by Vokurka, McDaniel, and Cooper (2002) indicates that newspaper display advertisements and Yellow Page listings were churches' most-often-used advertising techniques but were not necessarily highest on the effectiveness scale. Most effective were direct mail, radio advertising, and television advertising. These researchers also highlighted that Internet advertising was in the middle of the most-used scale, but e-mail and Internet communications were not being used to their greatest

capabilities. Vokurka, McDaniel, and Cooper agree with Joseph and Webb's conclusion that there is no single particular method of marketing communication that is "most effective."

An accurate measure of church marketing success is the measure of church growth. A study conducted by Hadaway (1991) revealed a great amount of useful information concerning factors that enhance church growth. Hadaway concluded that elderly churches were less likely to experience growth than younger churches, small churches are more likely to grow than large churches, and optimism and belief in growth leads to growth. Hadaway also calls attention to "following up" with visitors as an effective method of church growth.

Hadaway further emphasizes the disadvantages of becoming dependent on building a church with the children of members. Reliance on this demographic produces a stagnant church. Churches must not only preach the gospel, but they must also preach the gospel to the right people: the unchurched. Hadaway concludes that certain churches have advantages over others. These advantages include smaller size, younger members, and better location. His research ultimately supports that churches must focus on goal setting and outward evangelism to achieve success.

Previous Studies of First Hattiesburg

Two previous studies have been conducted on First Hattiesburg. The first, an honors thesis conducted by Guenard (2012), examined ties between the world of entertainment and the Christian Church. The research also included a case study of First Hattiesburg, which showed that First Hattiesburg incorporates "secular communication and entertainment strategies" into its functions and that this incorporation has produced

positive results. Guenard's research concluded that the worship structure of First Hattiesburg was deliberately adapted to contain secular elements, and while the church is still a worship space, its digital communication expands its abilities to reach the unchurched.

The second study on First Hattiesburg, taken from an honors thesis by Kendall (2012), quantitatively examined First Hattiesburg's communication and consumers' overall satisfaction, commitment, and participation within the organization. Staff members and interns were also studied to determine the effectiveness of communication between superiors and subordinates. Results concluded that there is no difference in communication satisfaction based on attendance frequency and level of volunteer activity. There is a difference in satisfaction between regular volunteers, interns, paid staff members, and none of the above. Participants more closely tied to the church were more satisfied with its communication strategy. Females were more satisfied with the church's communication than males. There was no difference in satisfaction between staff members with subordinates and members without subordinates, and staff members who were satisfied with communication also showed high identification with the organization as a whole. Attendees at First Hattiesburg were more satisfied with its communication than members who no longer attend. The primary focus of Kendall's study was to determine relationships between general communication satisfaction and church commitment rather than examining consumers' individual preferences in response to church branding and marketing.

This study not only further expounds upon the research of Guenard and Kendall but also examines consumer response to First Hattiesburg's branding and marketing by

surveying current members and attendees and determining which elements have attributed to success and perhaps which elements are perceived negatively. Consumer research of this kind is recommended by Vokurka, McDaniel, and Cooper (2002) to determine the effectiveness of marketing communication methods in churches. While Guenard's results were qualitative and internal, the results of this study are quantitative and external. Guenard only interviewed staff members at First Hattiesburg, while this study also solicited members or attendees. While Kendall studied consumers' general sense of satisfaction and how it correlates to their attendance and commitment, her study was quantitative while this study included open-ended questions, allowing respondents to further explain their perceptions of First Hattiesburg.

Research Questions

Three categories of branding were studied: image strategy, physical space/environment, and personnel/human factors. The choice to examine image, physical space, and personnel is based on the four P's of marketing: product, price, promotion, and position. According to Bowen (1998), product is the good or service that appeals to consumers, price is the tradeoff of revenue for the good or service, promotion is the method of communicating the product to consumers, and position is where or in what medium that communication takes place. Judd (2001) further suggests adding a fifth P, people, to the marketing mix because most organizations are focused on consumer satisfaction and depend upon people for business.

In this study, product represents the intangible service that the church is marketing. Place is represented by this study's examination of the church's physical environment and atmosphere. Promotion was studied by analyzing the placement of

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advertisements around the church and the city. Since the church does not make a profit from consumers other than voluntary tithing and donations, price is not included in the analysis, but people are certainly a definitive focus of this research. The following questions were addressed:

RQ 1: How do members/attendees perceive First Hattiesburg's image strategy?

> *RQ 1a: How do members/attendees perceive First Hattiesburg's overall image?*

> *RQ 1b: How do members/attendees perceive First Hattiesburg's advertising messages (logo, theme, design)?*

> *RQ 1c: How do members/attendees perceive First Hattiesburg's media strategy?*

RQ 2: How do members/attendees perceive First Hattiesburg's physical space/environment?

RQ 3: How do members/attendees perceive First Hattiesburg's personnel/human factors?

Furthermore, this study provides a unique look at integrated marketing communication (IMC) in a religious organization. The American Marketing Association (2013) defines IMC as, "A planning process designed to assure that all brand contacts received by a customer or prospect for a product, service, or organization are relevant to that person and consistent over time." This study analyzes the efficiency of First Hattiesburg's IMC by assessing its efforts to extend advertising past the traditional boundaries of print and digital media. The following questions were used to assess First

Hattiesburg's IMC:

RQ 4: To which branding/marketing factors have members/attendees responded positively?

RQ 5: To which, if any, elements of branding have members/attendees responded negatively?

Methods

Sample

The sample for this study consisted of 110 members or frequent attendees of First Hattiesburg. Frequent attendees were defined as those who attend church at First Hattiesburg at least three times a month. First time guests or those who attend less frequently than three times per month were not solicited. Respondents could be male or female, age eighteen or older. A purposive sampling method was used because this study focused on members of the church.

Procedure

First, the researcher obtained permission to collect data from human respondents through the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Once permission was granted, a survey was created through Survey Gizmo, an online survey generator. An informal pretest was conducted and the survey was tested and reviewed by several staff members of First Hattiesburg. Staff approval was granted, and no changes were made. Members and attendees of First Hattiesburg were then solicited for responses via social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter and via phone calls, text messages, and email. The researcher also asked respondents to participate face-to-face. The sample was collected

based on convenience and willingness to volunteer. The survey launched on November 13, 2013, and closed on December 16, 2013.

Measurements

The survey, developed specifically for this study, contained a total of forty questions that revealed members and attendees' overall perception of First Hattiesburg's image strategy, physical space, and human elements. The questions were developed based on three of the four P's of marketing: promotion, place, and people.

Image strategy. Image strategy was broken down into three categories: overall image, meaning the church's mission, vision, and core values; advertising messages, relating to the content of print and digital advertisements; and media, meaning location of internal and external advertising. Survey questions eight through eighteen pertained to image strategy (see appendices).

Physical space. Questions about physical space provided insight into members' perception of things such as architecture, music style, and use of technology. Survey questions nineteen through twenty-seven regarding physical space were posed to respondents (see appendices).

Human elements. Finally, the personnel/human factor questions examined First Hattiesburg's ministry on a personal level through outlets such as guest services, Next Step (the pathway to partnership), growth groups, Club FX and 252 (children's programming), and Impact (youth programming). Some questions allowed respondents to answer by simply rating a particular element, and others encouraged respondents to freely answer questions about First Hattiesburg's branding in their own words. Survey questions

twenty-eight through thirty-nine regarding human elements were posed to respondents (see appendices).

Open-ended questions were used in each section to allow respondents to describe their perception of First Hattiesburg's image strategy, physical space and human elements; and to identify strategies they thought were effective. Once this data was collected, the researcher reviewed the data to determine any general trends by analyzing the quantitative results and categorizing the qualitative results based on positivity and negativity of key words.

"Positive," for the purpose of this study, is defined as any response including the word "yes," or containing words/phrases indicating support of First Hattiesburg. "Negative," for the purpose of this study, is defined as any response including the word "no," or containing words/phrases indicating opposition to First Hattiesburg. Frequently used terms were also noted. "Frequently used," for the purpose of this study, is defined as any word or phrase appearing five or more times in response data. Analysis and conclusion of these factors took place over the spring semester of 2014.

Demographic variables. Age groups were divided into four categories: eighteen to twenty-four, twenty-five to thirty-four, thirty-five to fifty-four, and fifty-five and over. The eighteen to twenty-four range was chosen because eighteen is the youngest demographic allowed for survey research based on IRB regulations. The next range consisted of twenty-five to thirty-four year-olds, while the thirty-five to fifty-four range was chosen due to the low number of respondents between ages forty-five and fifty-four. Finally, the fifty-five and over category is broad due to First Hattiesburg's tendency to attract a younger audience.

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<center>**Results**</center>

Participants Profile

A total of 110 complete survey responses were obtained through email communications, social media promotion, and word-of-mouth promotion. The survey launched on November 13, 2013, and closed on December 16, 2013, allowing participants a little more than one month to submit responses. The majority of respondents (58.2%) were female while 41.8% were male. Most respondents aged between thirty-five and fifty-four years (see Table 1). Next in line were respondents between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four (32.7%), ages twenty-five to thirty-four (24.6%) and lastly, age fifty-five and older (5.5%).

Half of the respondents claimed they attend First Hattiesburg four times a month exactly. 16.4% attend fewer than four times a month, and 33.6% attend more frequently than four times a month (see Table 1).

When asked by which medium they heard about First Hattiesburg, the majority of respondents (69.1%) selected word of mouth. The next most popular media were other, television, and email (see Table 1).

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Table 1

Participants Profile

Variables		Percentage
Gender		
	Male	46 (41.8%)
	Female	64 (58.2%)
Age		
	18-24	36 (32.7%)
	25-34	27 (24.6%)
	35-54	41 (37.3%)
	55+	6 (5.5%)
Attendance Frequency		
	Fewer than 4 Times/Month	18 (16.4%)
	4 Times/Month	55 (50%)
	More than 4 Times/Month	37 (33.6%)
How did you hear about First Hattiesburg?		
	Word of mouth	76 (69.1%)
	Television	13 (11.8%)
	Email	7 (6.4%)
	Direct Mail	3 (2.7%)
	Billboard	3 (2.7%)
	Radio	2 (1.8%)
	Poster/flyer	2 (1.8%)
	Other	33 (30%)

Image Strategy

The first research question (RQ1) concerned how members/attendees perceived First Hattiesburg's image strategy. In their responses to the open-ended question, "Do you feel that First Hattiesburg effectively encompasses its mission to lead people to know, love, and follow Jesus in every aspect of communication," the majority of respondents (86.4%) used words or phrases implying "yes." When asked to "describe their perception of First

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Hattiesburg's image in one sentence," the following terms (or similar words) were used

most frequently (see Table 2):

Table 2

Frequently Used Terms: Image Strategy

Word/Phrase	Number of times used
Unchurched	36
All-inclusive	22
Passion for Jesus	12
Relevant	10
Welcoming	9
Home/Family	5

Note. "Frequently Used," for the purpose of this study, means five times or more.

Few respondents indicated neutrality or opposition to First Hattiesburg's image

strategy in closed-ended questions; most were in support of its advertising messages and

media placement (see Table 3).

Table 3

Participants' Perception of First Hattiesburg's Image Strategy

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Overall					
First Hattiesburg's image strategy gives me a positive feeling about the church.	1 (.9%)	1 (.9%)	2 (1.8%)	28 (25.5%)	78 (70.9%)
First Hattiesburg's image strategy motivates me to attend services/events.	1 (.9%)	3 (2.7%)	16 (14.6%)	34 (30.9%)	56 (50.9%)
I feel that First Hattiesburg effectively conveys its mission, vision, and core values to the public.	1 (.9%)	2 (1.8%)	3 (2.7%)	31 (28.2%)	73 (66.4%)
Advertising Messages					
I am familiar with the mission, vision, and core values of First Hattiesburg because of advertising.	2 (1.8%)	13 (11.8%)	29 (26.4%)	28 (25.5%)	38 (34.6%)
I feel that First Hattiesburg brands/markets itself in a way that is appealing to outsiders.	1 (.9%)	1 (.9%)	2 (1.8%)	27 (24.6%)	79 (71.8%)
I feel that the content of advertisements produced by First Hattiesburg effectively attract members.	1 (.9%)	0 (0%)	8 (7.3%)	41 (37.3%)	60 (54.6%)
I feel that the content of advertisements produced by First Hattiesburg effectively conveys its mission.	1 (.9%)	1 (.9%)	6 (5.5%)	46 (41.8%)	56 (50.9%)
Media Placement					
I feel that First Hattiesburg's media placement (newspapers, magazines, billboards, television, web, etc.) is effective for its intended audience.	1 (.9%)	1 (.9%)	18 (16.4%)	38 (34.6%)	52 (47.3%)

In their responses to a closed-ended question pertaining to First Hattiesburg's values, 94.6% of respondents indicated that worship was effectively promoted. The next most-promoted values, according to respondents, were lost people, family, service, and cultural relevance. Respondents included fellowship, missions, evangelism, prayer and biblical instruction less frequently (see Table 4).

Table 4

Participants Perception of Value Promotion

Value	Percentage (effective value promotion)
Family	92 (83.6%)
Lost People	95 (86.4%)
Cultural Relevance	74 (67.3%)
Evangelism	52 (47.3%)
Worship	104 (94.6%)
Missions	66 (60%)
Fellowship	69 (62.7%)
Service	77 (70%)
Biblical Instruction	45 (40.9%)
Prayer	50 (45.5%)

In general, respondents maintained a positive perception of First Hattiesburg's image strategy, specifically related to its advertising messages and media placement.

Physical Space/Environment

The second research question (RQ 2) investigated how members/attendees perceived First Hattiesburg's physical space/environment. In response to the open-ended prompt, "describe your perception of First Hattiesburg's physical space/environment in

one sentence," respondents used the following terms (or similar words) most frequently (see Table 5):

Table 5

Frequently Used Terms: Physical Space/Environment

Word/phrase	Number of times used
Inviting/Welcoming	41
Strategic	24
Open	21
Modern/Contemporary	20
Comfortable	15
Relaxed	10
Home	7
Clean	6
Unique	6
Big	6

Note. "Frequently Used," for the purpose of this study, means five times or more.

While describing "which element of First Hattiesburg's physical space/environment is *most* effective," respondents described the following elements most frequently (see Table 6):

Table 6

Most Effective Elements: Physical Space/Environment

Word/phrase	Number of times used
Atrium	27
Music	14
Coffee/refreshments	13
Production	13
Venue choices	11
Casual/laid back atmosphere	9
Chairs/couches	8
Contemporary architecture	8
Auditorium	7

Few respondents indicated neutrality or opposition to First Hattiesburg's physical space/environment in closed-ended questions. Most were in support of its use of unconventional furnishings, worship style, technical aspects, and dress code (see Table 7).

Table 7

Participants' Perception of First Hattiesburg's Physical Space/Environment

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Overall, First Hattiesburg's physical space/environment is congruent with its mission.	2 (1.8%)	0 (0%)	2 (1.8%)	32 (29.1%)	74 (67.3%)
Overall, First Hattiesburg's physical space/environment gives me a positive feeling about the church.	2 (1.8%)	1 (.9%)	5 (4.6%)	24 (21.8%)	78 (70.9%)
Overall, First Hattiesburg's physical space/environment motivates me to attend services/events.	2 (1.8%)	3 (2.7%)	10 (9.1%)	29 (26.4%)	66 (60%)
The physical features of First Hattiesburg (atrium environment, refreshments, fold-down seating, carpet, venue choices, etc.) make me feel comfortable/welcome.	2 (1.8%)	2 (1.8%)	3 (2.7%)	28 (25.5%)	75 (68.2%)
The contemporary worship style at First Hattiesburg positively affects my decision to attend/return.	2 (1.8%)	0 (0%)	6 (5.5%)	21 (19.1%)	81 (73.6%)
The technical aspects of First Hattiesburg (lighting, video, set, production) positively affect my decision to attend/return.	2 (1.8%)	1 (.9%)	13 (11.8%)	23 (20.9%)	71 (64.6%)
I have never felt pressured to dress/appear a certain way at First Hattiesburg.	1 (.9%)	1 (.9%)	3 (2.7%)	22 (20%)	83 (75.5%)

Most respondents maintained a positive perception of First Hattiesburg's physical space/environment.

Personnel/Human Factors

The third research question (RQ3) explored how members/attendees perceived First Hattiesburg's personnel/human factors. In an open-ended question, respondents used the following terms (or similar words) most frequently when describing "their perceptions of First Hattiesburg's personnel/human factors in one sentence" (see Table 8):

Table 8

Frequently Used Terms: Personnel/Human Factors

Word/phrase	Number of times used
Inviting/welcoming	26
Kind/friendly	17
Dedicated	15
All-inclusive	7
Caring	7
Intentional	6
Relatable	6
Comfortable	6
Home/family	5

Note. "Frequently Used," for the purpose of this study, means five times or more.

While indicating "which element of First Hattiesburg's personnel/human factors is *most* effective," respondents described the following elements (or similar elements) most frequently (see Table 9):

Table 9

Most Effective Elements: Personnel/Human Factors

Word/phrase	Number of times used
Greeters	23
Guest Services	21
Staff	20
Growth Groups	13
People	8
Jeff Clark (Pastor)	5
Volunteers	5

Few respondents indicated neutrality or opposition to First Hattiesburg's personnel/human factors in closed-ended questions; most were in support of its guest services team; communication efforts; and children's, youth, and adult groups (see Table 10).

Table 10

Participants' Perception of First Hattiesburg's Personnel/Human Factors

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I feel that the guest services team positively contributes to the comfort of visitors.	1 (.9%)	0 (0%)	4 (3.6%)	22 (20%)	83 (75.5%)
I feel that communication by executive staff members of the church's current status, goals, etc. is effective.	1 (.9%)	2 (1.8%)	9 (8.2%)	40 (36.4%)	58 (52.7%)
I feel that the use of small group environments (growth groups, access groups, 252 bible study, etc.) is positive/beneficial.	1 (.9%)	3 (2.7%)	8 (7.3%)	21 (19.1%)	77 (70%)
I feel that children's ministry tactics/programming/groups are effective.	2 (1.8%)	2 (1.8%)	7 (6.4%)	21 (19.1%)	78 (70.9%)
I feel that youth ministry tactics/programming/groups are effective.	2 (1.8%)	0 (0%)	10 (9.1%)	22 (20%)	76 (69.1%)
I feel that adult ministry tactics/programming/groups are effective.	1 (.9%)	6 (5.5%)	14 (12.7%)	32 (29.1%)	57 (51.8%)
I feel personally invested in the future of First Hattiesburg.	2 (1.8%)	1 (.9%)	8 (7.3%)	23 (20.9%)	76 (69.1%)
Overall, First Hattiesburg's personnel/human factors are congruent with its mission.	1 (.9%)	2 (1.8%)	4 (3.6%)	4 (33.6%)	66 (60%)
Overall, First Hattiesburg's personnel/human factors give me a positive feeling about the church.	1 (.9%)	2 (1.8%)	5 (4.6%)	29 (26.4%)	73 (66.4%)
Overall, First Hattiesburg's personnel/human factors motivate me to attend services/events.	1 (.9%)	1 (.9%)	11 (10%)	29 (26.4%)	68 (61.8%)

Most respondents maintained a positive perception of First Hattiesburg's personnel/human factors.

Positive vs. Negative Responses

The last two research questions (RQ4 and RQ5) were to identify to which branding and marketing factors members/attendees have responded positively and negatively. Based on both quantitative and qualitative results from the data above, respondents were generally satisfied/pleased with First Hattiesburg's guest services, atrium environment, and comfortable, welcoming atmosphere. These conclusions were drawn based on their frequent appearance in respondents' answers. Very few negative responses were recorded; however, subtle references to a confusing layout, communication inconsistency, members' lack of involvement, image strategy communication failures, and distant personnel were mentioned in respondents' qualitative data. This will be further discussed in discussion and implications.

<center>**Discussion and Implications**</center>

Results of this study indicate that First Hattiesburg's branding style, particularly the consistency of its integrated marketing communication, contributes significantly to members/attendees' positive view of the church. Because First Hattiesburg's branding is so different from most southern Baptist churches, and the church is currently experiencing a season of growth, it can be inferred that the image strategy, physical space/environment, and personnel/human factors of First Hattiesburg play a major role in its growing numbers. The results of this study provide theoretical insight into our understanding of church marketing as a whole and strengthen the credibility of practical

branding tactics that, paired with other factors, could lead other churches to similar success.

Perception of First Hattiesburg's Image Strategy (RQ1)

The fact that word of mouth was the number one response for how members/attendees heard about First Hattiesburg poses a theory that traditional advertising may be losing momentum in the church marketing sphere. Research by Vokurka, McDaniel, and Cooper (2002) indicates that the most effective media for church marketing are direct mail, radio advertising, and television advertising.

This study reports that direct mail was only relevant to 2.7% of respondents, radio advertising pertained to only 1.8%, and television advertising reached only 11.8%. Although the amount and frequency of advertising media used by First Hattiesburg may vary from others of its kind, these results still provide insight into the effectiveness of various media in reaching today's churchgoing population.

If the majority of respondents feel that First Hattiesburg's media placement (newspapers, magazines, billboards, television, web, etc.) is effective for its intended audience, and the number one method by which respondents heard about First Hattiesburg was word of mouth, then it can be inferred that word of mouth is consumers' most preferred method of church marketing based on this study. Joseph and Webb (2000) indicate that in order for a church to market itself successfully, it should focus on bettering its personal referral network. Results from this study support their conclusion.

Because the majority of respondents (60%) were familiar with the mission, vision, and core values of First Hattiesburg because of advertising, advertising may be the most effective way for churches to convey their brand identities to the public.

Based on the results gathered from RQ1, churches can learn that effective conveyance of their mission, vision, and core values to the public through advertising ultimately leads to better communication and growth. If 94.6% of respondents feel that First Hattiesburg effectively conveys its mission, vision, and core values to the public, and First Hattiesburg is experiencing growth, then other churches could accomplish growth by the same means.

Perception of First Hattiesburg's Physical Space/Environment (RQ2)

Because 93.7% of respondents indicated that the physical features of First Hattiesburg (atrium environment, refreshments, fold-down seating, carpet, venue choices, etc.) make them feel comfortable/welcome, it can be inferred that the physical aspect of integrated marketing communication is incredibly significant to consumer satisfaction and loyalty. Other aspects such as use of modern, innovative technology, contemporary worship style, and even implied dress code can also affect consumers' decisions to return to a church.

Based on the results gathered from RQ2, churches can learn the benefits of an open atrium space, refreshments, and ample seating areas with chairs and couches for guests. These elements were mentioned the most by First Hattiesburg members/attendees as the most successful elements of physical space/environment.

Perception of First Hattiesburg's Personnel/Human Factors (RQ3)

According to Hadaway (1991), optimism and belief in growth leads to growth. Results from this study support Hadaway's theory; 90% of respondents indicated that they feel personally invested in the future of First Hattiesburg. Because of effective personnel/human factors, the majority of respondents have a positive feeling about the

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church. This implies that a definite connection exists between members/attendees'

positive outlook and the church's growth. Member/attendee morale is also positively

affected by First Hattiesburg's communication style, presentation of space, facilitation of

small groups, utilization of technology, and contemporary worship style.

From this data, churches can learn that effective communication by executive

staff members of a church's current status, goals, etc. is vital to growth. The

implementation of a guest services team and small group environments can also

contribute to members/attendees positive attitudes toward an organization. Lastly, it is

also extremely important that a church's personnel/human factors are congruent with its

mission. Consistency in integrated marketing communication can make or break the

branding effectiveness of a church.

Positive vs. Negative Responses (RQ4 and RQ5)

The majority of members/frequent attendees at First Hattiesburg responded

positively to all of its branding/marketing elements. This is to be expected, considering

that members and frequent attendees would attend elsewhere if they were dissatisfied.

Branding/marketing factors that other churches can implement include a guest services

team, open atrium environment, and comfortable, welcoming atmosphere.

As with any research, the results of this study were not absolutely unanimous.

Several negative responses were recorded from various open-ended questions. One

respondent expressed dissatisfaction with other church members' involvement in church

activities outside of weekend services. However, this complaint is not directly related to

the church's branding efforts and is directed more toward consumer response. One

respondent expressed that First Hattiesburg's image strategy is not effectively

communicated through advertising. Another mentioned that, at times, personnel seem distant and unapproachable. These views are pertinent to church branding but are not significant results because they only appeared once.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

One limitation of this study is that all respondents were members or frequent attendees of First Hattiesburg. This sample was chosen because of convenience and may not effectively convey the opinions of those who attend First Hattiesburg less frequently.

Secondly, respondents under age eighteen were not solicited due to IRB regulations. Approximately four hundred students attend Wednesday night activities on average at First Hattiesburg. Although this group was left out to ensure a mature sample, responses from this group of students could have impacted the overall results of this study.

Thirdly, only 5.5% of respondents were age fifty-five or older. The opinions of these few alone could not accurately represent the opinions of this age group as a whole. This also suggests that perhaps the marketing strategy of First Hattiesburg is more catered to those aged below this mark.

Lastly, this research only pertains to the branding success of First Hattiesburg. As stated by Vokurka and McDaniel (2004), what works for one church may not necessarily be effective for another. The success of a church is dependent on other factors besides church branding, and marketing is only one facet that can lead to church growth.

Future research might include studies on similar facets of church branding in multiple churches. This could establish trends in church marketing based on region, denomination, church size, media strategy, and other categories.

Future research on First Hattiesburg could include the collection of member/attendee opinions on the church's branding after First Hattiesburg's decision to change its name to Venture Church and expand to multiple locations in 2014. Subsequent data could be compared with the data from this study to determine any changes in member/attendee views on branding following these changes. Also, the sample could be broadened to include respondents under age eighteen and those who attend less frequently than four times a month.

First Hattiesburg, now known as Venture Church, employs integrated marketing communication techniques that extend its advertising past the traditional boundaries of print and digital media. Because of its creative presentation of image through its physical space/environment and personnel/human factors, it literally serves as an advertisement for itself and truly invites consumers to come and see.

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I. Introduction

Hello, and welcome to my survey! My name is Kelsey Walsh, and I am a senior Advertising major at The University of Southern Mississippi. I am conducting research for an Honors Thesis entitled, "Precious Lord, Take My Brand: Consumer Analysis of Branding Effectiveness of First Hattiesburg." Through the following survey, this study will analyze the branding style of First Hattiesburg. The survey will take between 15 and 20 minutes to complete, and you must be age 18 or older to participate. Participation is completely voluntary and may be discontinued at any time without penalty or prejudice. All personal information is strictly confidential, and no names will be disclosed. Any new information that develops during the project will be provided if that information may affect the willingness to continue participation in the project. When the study is complete, the data will be deleted. You will not experience any benefits, risks, inconveniences, or discomforts as a result of taking this survey. If you have any questions about my research before completing the survey, you may contact me at (601)-810-3854 or Kelsey.Walsh@eagles.usm.edu.

II. The University of Southern Mississippi Authorization to Participate in Research Project

1. Name

Consent is hereby given to participate in the research project entitled "Precious Lord, Take My Brand: Consumer Analysis of Branding Effectiveness of First Hattiesburg." All Procedures and/or investigations to be followed and their purpose, including any experimental procedures, were explained by Kelsey Walsh. Information was given about all benefits, risks, inconveniences, or discomforts that might be expected.

The opportunity to ask questions regarding the research and procedures was given. By typing my name below, I certify that I am age 18 or older. Participation in the project is completely voluntary, and participants may withdraw at any time without penalty, prejudice, or loss of benefits. All personal information is strictly confidential, and no names will be disclosed. Any new information that develops during the project will be provided if that information may affect the willingness to continue participation in the project.

Questions concerning the research, at any time during or after the project, should be directed to Kelsey Walsh at (601)-810-3854 or Kelsey.Walsh@eagles.usm.edu. This project and this consent form have been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board, which ensures that research projects involving human subjects follow federal regulations. Any questions or concerns

about rights as a research participant should be directed to the Chair of the Institutional Review Board, The University of Southern Mississippi, 118 College Drive #5147, Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001, (601)-266-6820.

You may print this page for your records.

2. To sign electronically, type your name here.

3. Date

III. General Information

4. Gender

- Male
- Female

5. Age

- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-54
- 55+

6. How many times a month do you attend First Hattiesburg?

7. How did you hear about First Hattiesburg? (Select all that apply)

- Direct Mail
- Email
- Billboard
- Television
- Radio
- Poster/Flyer
- Word of Mouth
- Other (list)

IV. Image Strategy

The image strategy of an organization can be defined as how it aims to be perceived by the public. Elements of image in this study include First Hattiesburg's mission, vision, and core values. The mission of First Hattiesburg is to lead people to know, love, and follow Jesus. The vision is to be a church for the un-churched. First Hattiesburg's core values are family, lost people, cultural relevance, evangelism, worship, missions,

fellowship, service, biblical instruction, and prayer. (www.firsthattiesburg.com/about-us) Please provide your honest opinion when answering the following questions.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
8. I feel that First Hattiesburg effectively conveys its mission, vision, and core values to the public.					
9. I feel that First Hattiesburg brands/markets itself in a way that is appealing to outsiders.					
10. I feel that the content of advertisements produced by First Hattiesburg effectively attracts members.					
11. I feel that the content of advertisements produced by First Hattiesburg effectively conveys its mission.					
12. I feel that First Hattiesburg's media placement (newspapers, magazines, billboards, television, web, etc.) is effective for its intended audience.					
13. I am familiar with the mission, vision, and core values of First Hattiesburg because of advertising.					
14. Overall, First Hattiesburg's image strategy gives me a positive feeling about the church.					
15. Overall, First Hattiesburg's image strategy motivates me					

to attend services/events.

16. Which of First Hattiesburg's values do you feel are effectively promoted? (Select all that apply)

- Family
- Lost people
- Cultural relevance
- Evangelism
- Worship
- Missions
- Fellowship
- Service
- Biblical instruction
- Prayer

17. Do you feel that First Hattiesburg effectively encompasses its mission to lead people to know, love, and follow Jesus in every aspect of communication? Explain.

18. Describe your perception of First Hattiesburg's image in 1 sentence.

V. Physical Space/Environment

Physical space/environment includes physical features like architecture, furnishings, paint colors, etc.; sensory features such as sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and textures; and emotional aspects such as feelings and attitudes. Please provide your honest opinion when answering the following questions.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
19. The physical features of First Hattiesburg (atrium environment, refreshments, fold-down seating, carpet, venue choices, etc.) make me feel comfortable/welcome.					
20. The contemporary worship style at First Hattiesburg positively affects my decision to attend/return.					
21. The technical aspects of					

First Hattiesburg (lighting, video, set, production) positively affect my decision to attend/return.

22. I have never felt pressured to dress/appear a certain way at First Hattiesburg.

23. Overall, First Hattiesburg's physical space/environment is congruent with its mission.

24. Overall, First Hattiesburg's physical space/environment gives me a positive feeling about the church.

25. Overall, First Hattiesburg's physical space/environment motivates me to attend services/events.

26. Which element of First Hattiesburg's physical space/environment is most effective, and why?

27. Describe your perception of First Hattiesburg's physical space/environment in 1 sentence.

VI. Personnel/Human Factors

First Hattiesburg utilizes a team of staff and volunteers each weekend. Members of the guest services team serve coffee/refreshments, greet, usher, collect offering, distribute communication cards, and offer information to first-time guests. (www.firsthattiesburg.com/volunteer) Staff and volunteers in adult ministry, youth ministry, children's ministry, and preschool ministry work together to facilitate groups, host programs, and personally communicate with/minister to partners and guests. Please provide your honest opinion when answering the following questions.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
28. I feel that the guest services team positively contributes					

to the comfort of visitors.

29. I feel that communication by executive staff members of the church's current status, goals, etc. is effective.

30. I feel that the use of small group environments (growth groups, access groups, 252 bible study, etc.) is positive/beneficial.

31. I feel that children's ministry tactics/programming/groups are effective.

32. I feel that youth ministry tactics/programming/groups are effective.

33. I feel that adult ministry tactics/programming/groups are effective.

34. I feel personally invested in the future of First Hattiesburg.

35. Overall, First Hattiesburg's personnel/human factors are congruent with its mission.

36. Overall, First Hattiesburg's personnel/human factors give me a positive feeling about the church.

37. Overall, First Hattiesburg's personnel/human factors motivate me to attend services/events.

38. Which element of First Hattiesburg's personnel/human factors is most effective, and why?

39. Describe your perception of First Hattiesburg's personnel/human factors in 1 sentence.

40. If you would be interested in being contacted for a follow-up interview or being a member of a focus group, please provide your email address below.

VII. Thank you!

Thank you for completing this survey! I greatly appreciate your help as I gather information to determine consumers' perception of the branding of First Hattiesburg.

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
118 College Drive #5147 | Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001
Phone: 601.266.6820 | Fax: 601.266.4377 | www.usm.edu/irb

NOTICE OF COMMITTEE ACTION

The project has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services (45 CFR Part 46), and university guidelines to ensure adherence to the following criteria:

- The risks to subjects are minimized.
- The risks to subjects are reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered regarding risks to subjects must be reported immediately, but not later than 10 days following the event. This should be reported to the IRB Office via the "Adverse Effect Report Form".
- If approved, the maximum period of approval is limited to twelve months.
  Projects that exceed this period must submit an application for renewal or continuation.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: **13101502**
PROJECT TITLE: **Precious Lord, Take My Brand: Consumer Analysis of Branding Effectiveness of First Hattiesburg**
PROJECT TYPE: **Thesis**
RESEARCHER(S): **Kelsey Walsh**
COLLEGE/DIVISION: **College of Arts and Letters**
DEPARTMENT: **Mass Communication and Journalism**
FUNDING AGENCY/SPONSOR: **N/A**
IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: **Expedited Review Approval**
PERIOD OF APPROVAL: **10/31/2013 to 10/30/2014**

Lawrence A. Hosman, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board