

2nd Opinion: Learning church from Shepler's

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Each week, I receive e-mail catalogs from three retailers—Dell, Apple and Shepler's. I stop what I am doing and read each one. Dell, because I look for computer deals. Apple, because I find their ultra-hip technology intriguing, even if overpriced. And Shepler's—well, that is the surprise.

Wichita, Kan.-based Shepler's is a 110-year-old retailer of Western wear that began back when the West was horses and cowboys. Shepler's grew into a chain of 19 stores and then discovered online retailing. Now, like other retailers, Shepler's seems to be shrinking its bricks-and-mortar side and pinning its future on Internet sales, backed by printed catalogs.

I find Shepler's fascinating for three reasons. First, I have my eye on another pair of boots. Second, two years ago, I didn't even know Shepler's existed, yet now I look forward to their down-home e-mails. Third, and most important, enterprises like Shepler's show the way forward for the Christian movement in America.

Churches began where Shepler's began—localized, bricks-and-mortar operations, serving niches in settled neighborhoods. This neighborhood-vendor model continued into the 1960s.

Then, in one generation, everything changed.

Malls and big-box retailers replaced neighborhood stores. In religion, some churches followed their people to the suburbs and grew large and less denominationally tethered; others, meanwhile, clung to inherited locations and facilities despite shrinking memberships.

Now everything is changing again. Malls and most big-box merchants are sagging, while online retailing soars. With attendance in decline, even suburban powerhouse churches face a wrenching choice—stick with bricks-and-mortar and predictable comforts, or follow the human heart to newer venues.

The conventional wisdom is that “virtual” can never replace “real.” Still, I’m surprised by how much value a deft online merchant can deliver. Interesting products, informative descriptions and videos, an appealing “look and feel,” availability on my schedule and easy shopping. Given the understaffing and understocking of most retailers, the live experience frankly doesn’t compare well.

The same is true of many churches. As “people places,” many congregations fall short. They aren’t all that friendly. They don’t know how to integrate strangers. And they tend to place a high value on perpetuating, not exploring. Moreover, with aging facilities demanding first claim on dwindling resources, staffing and programs are in peril.

Rather than fight emerging realities, maybe we should embrace them—and try to deliver fresh value in a fresh way.

I’d rather hear an excellent sermon online than endure something like the seminary class notes I heard recently. If my quest is to know God, I am not inclined to tolerate the quirks and coldness of the local congregation. If my quest is to serve, I’m not drawn to stuffing envelopes for yet another keep-the-building-open fundraiser.

Moreover, fitting into a church’s schedule seems less important to me than seeking God while he may be found.

The way forward is multichanneling. For Shepler’s, it’s physical stores, plus catalogs, plus a dynamic online presence. Together, they vastly expand the company’s reach. For a church, it would be a physical facility, plus home-

based ministries, plus online delivery of excellent content. The Sunday service wouldn't have to carry the entire load or serve all constituents.

The savvy congregation would serve as a "portal" to these faith explorations. Serving people, rather than facilities, would make the congregation more effective.

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