

2nd Opinion: Rebranding American religions

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The advertising wizards of Madison Avenue get paid millions to make sure we buy products and feel good about doing it. That's why we know Wheaties is the "Breakfast of Champions" and "With a name like Smuckers, it has to be good."

America's faith communities generally don't have the budgets for glitzy ad campaigns, but if they were to hire PR gurus to help them navigate these difficult times, I imagine the recommendations would look something like this:

- **Roman Catholics**

You have a time-tested tradition and brand name that has survived 2,000 years with a large number of clients (sorry, "faithful"). But you need to bridge the growing alienation between the consumers (err, "followers") and the Vatican and its local franchises (sorry, again)—the dioceses and parishes.

Focus groups frequently mentioned concerns about the clergy sexual abuse scandal, but the overwhelming majority of members want to stay with you. However, they want tangible evidence of—dare we say it?—"transparency" and "user-friendly" leadership from the top on down.

A suggested new catchphrase, courtesy of English poet Robert Browning: "Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be." It, like you, is old but good.

- **Mainline Protestants**

Let's be honest: You guys are facing serious problems—loss of "market

share,” aging membership, complaints of bland worship services and wide policy gaps between national leadership and the people in the pews.

One focus group called you the “General Motors of Christianity,” offering a wide variety of options but few sought-after “products.” Like GM, you once dominated American religious life with your “tall steeple” showrooms, but things went awry with two words—choice and decentralization.

Many Americans, facing a myriad of religious alternatives, want comforting churches with a progressive theology. However, our research shows you often come across as cold, self-righteous and a little too zealous in the quest to be “prophetic” and “cutting edge.”

Try this for a motto: “The church with the tall steeple still warmly welcomes people.”

- **Evangelical Protestants**

You had everything going for you—rapid growth, big-time media presence, political clout and lots of megachurches.

But membership has plateaued, prominent leaders are plagued by sexual infidelity and inappropriate politicking, and many of your most visible faces seem only interested in soliciting financial contributions. Meanwhile, many people think you ignore the environment, sexual and gender discrimination, immigration and sometimes even civil rights.

We suggest resurrecting your age-old commitment to church-state separation and repudiating the widely held belief that “GOP” stands for “God’s Own Party.” People care about critical issues in daily life and don’t always worry whether the Bible is inerrant or What Would Jesus Do?

New slogan: “We are not enslaved about being saved.”

- **Black churches**

Recent reports indicate many young people are abandoning the churches that were historically the center of your community's spiritual, political, cultural and social lives. Once standing-room-only services now attract only a handful of the elderly—mostly women—as some congregations merge or close altogether.

Focus groups want you to go beyond the signature sermonizing and stirring music. Don't weaken the tradition, but add vocational training, academic tutoring, professional affinity groups, seminars on aging and a host of other services.

A watchword? Try: "The black church, where it's still happening!"

- **Judaism**

Humor, food, music and saying, "I feel Jewish" only go so far in maintaining continuity. Focus groups want intermarried couples and their children to be welcomed and educated in synagogues. Today's ugly return of international anti-Semitism is old bitter wine in newly designed bottles, but you you've dealt with that for thousands of years, and you can do it again.

The survival and security of Israel is a key issue, but simply talking about historical Jewish rights, U.N. resolutions and the complexities of the endless "peace process" aren't enough.

Try this slogan: "Israel is real." Zero in on Israelis' personal lives, achievements, problems, needs and successes. Go back to the basics—the human story.

- **Islam**

Focus groups showed Muslims face a range of tough issues that often don't apply to other religious groups—widespread suspicion after 9/11, anti-Christian/anti-Jewish/anti-American sermons from some imams and an

uneasy transition into American life for too many Muslim immigrants.

Let's try this, with the caveat that turbulence lies ahead: "We're Also Mainstream, Part of the American Dream."

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