

Effective Marketing for Small-Group Ministry

Four ways to get more people into small groups

Carter Moss

This article is excerpted from our resource [Market Your Small-Group Ministry](#).

Small groups are one of the greatest ministry tools we have. They provide opportunities for spiritual growth and discipleship. They provide an environment for real friendships to form, for relationships to build, for people to experience community—regardless of how big a church's weekend attendance grows. And they can provide a way for people to live out their faith on mission together in community rather than struggling to do it alone. I know this, and you know this. But how do we help the people in our churches know this? Because if they don't know it, believe it, and act on it, they'll never get to experience all that our small groups can provide—no matter how amazing our small-group ministry is.

As I talk to churches around the country about small groups, one of the challenges we *all* struggle with is figuring out how to get more people grouped. So the good news is you're not alone. The bad news is there's no silver bullet. But there are things we can do to make small groups such an integral part of the culture of our church, so easy and compelling to join, that we see more people connected than ever before. Imagine if small groups became the norm at your church—so much so that new and current people alike assume that joining a small group is integral to their faith, that they actually feel like they're missing out if they're not connected.

I believe it's possible. And even though achieving this is far more of an art than a science, there are some important and proven practices we can integrate that will help more people connect into small groups. So let's talk through the four Cs of effectively marketing our small groups to our churches.

Capitalize on Key Times

One of the biggest barriers to grouping people is that it's just plain hard to get people to add anything new to their schedules. Think about your own schedule: how easy is it for you to suddenly add a new weekly commitment that wasn't there before? It's really hard to add anything new. But it *can* be done. Just take a look at kids' sports: people are willing to add two weeknights of practice and a Saturday of games for their kids to join a new sport. They see enough value in the sport to rearrange their schedule. So how do we get people to see the same value in small groups?

One important fact for us to recognize (and stop fighting against) is that people already live their lives according to a natural rhythm. And, I hate to break it to you, but it's not your church's ministry or fiscal year. People generally tend to operate their schedules around the calendar year and the school year (regardless of whether they're in school or have kids). So the two times of the year that prove most effective to market your small groups are September (when the school year starts) and January (when the calendar year starts, and a new school semester starts).

So every September and January, do anything and everything you can think of to promote small groups. Put guides that list all of your small groups on every chair during weekend services. Talk about small groups from stage. Launch some brand new groups and highlight them. Have existing groups choose to start a new study so that new people can jump in at the start of something rather than in the middle. Capitalize on these natural times that people are rearranging their schedules.

The other key time to capitalize on is any time you have a brand new group starting. Some churches operate all groups on term schedules, so the start of each new term becomes their key time. But for those who have year-round groups, whenever you have a brand new group, advertise it. Let people know about this new opportunity. Besides the difficulty in making time in an overly packed schedule, many people are nervous about joining a group because they feel all the groups are already established and the group members already know each other well. If you let people

know about new groups they can join, they'll often jump at the opportunity to get in on the ground floor.

Be Consistent

While there are key times to capitalize on, the other important practice for effectively marketing our groups is consistency. People should hear about your small-group ministry more than a couple of times a year. How often is up to you. Churches range from a monthly focus on small groups at weekend services small-group highlights every single week. You need to choose what works best for your church's rhythm. But it's your job to push and fight to ensure that small groups do get some consistent focus.

Consistency doesn't have to be boring, though. You could have different small-group leaders on stage every week for a brief story about how their group is impacting them. You could also create a short video that shares a cool small-group story from the previous week. Or you could highlight these stories in your church e-mails, newsletter, Facebook page, or bulletin. Find a way to regularly share small-group stories. And don't be afraid of over-communicating. We have a saying here at COMMUNITY that if we feel like we've talked about something until we're blue in the face and are sick of hearing ourselves, that means we've *almost* communicated enough.

Be Creative

Here's where this whole promoting thing gets fun—you get to be creative in how you communicate about your groups. At COMMUNITY, we've done things like hanging big signs from the ceiling in our lobby showing different zip codes or neighborhoods, and then having the leaders who host groups in those areas standing under them, so that people can quickly find a group near them. We've had small groups give out hot chocolate or pancakes or cans of pop or anything we don't normally serve at weekend services, so it creates extra energy and buzz at a weekend service (which is a win for your pastor and the rest of your church, too). One great example of this is when a couple of our men's groups handed out Dad's Root Beer at services over Father's Day weekend. The group

members were visible and the fun connection gave them a talking point. That same idea works with other groups, too. Empower your group leaders to be creative and come up with a fun idea.

The point is to try different approaches, and take risks. You might even consider having people sign up for groups in a new way to see how people respond. We usually have people fill out a card in their weekend program or stop by our welcome center, but we've also tried having leaders walk around with clipboards and sign-up sheets, creating different flyers to place on every chair during service that they can fill out, and even having people walk to certain areas of the sanctuary *during* services to meet leaders and sign up. Let God ignite your imagination for ways you can connect people into groups.

Create a Culture

The biggest difference I've seen between churches that are able to effectively group a high percentage of their people and those that aren't is having a small-group culture. In other words, churches must make the decision not to be just a church *with* small groups (where groups are just one of many programs offered). Instead, they must become a church *of* small groups—where small groups are the core ministry of the church. To really get there, you have to create a culture of small groups, where they are the priority and the norm.

This is challenging but necessary. Start with your church's staff: Are all staff members involved in or leading a small group? If not, it will be difficult for others to see the value. We can't ask our people to do things that we're not modeling for them—leaders must go first. But getting involved in small groups isn't just about modeling. When your entire church staff is involved in small groups, you'll all have real, current, and personal stories to share with others in the church. These stories will come out in sermons and as people lead their own ministries. No matter where people are involved in your church, they'll be hearing stories of how small groups are impacting lives.

Next, consider how small groups are talked about in your weekend services. At COMMUNITY, we have at least three messages each year (often more) that are focused on the value of community and how God designed us to live in relationship. We promote small groups big-time on those weekends. But even when the weekend message isn't focused on small groups or community, the person teaching will share a story from their small group as an illustration, we'll feature a small group doing cool things in the community, or the worship leader will share something he or she learned in small group. These casual mentions about small groups are all part of creating a culture of small groups.

Third, track what you value. If we don't measure it, then it's probably not that important to us. What do you track in regards to small groups? At COMMUNITY, our goal is that at least 75 percent of our adults are connected in small groups. Some of our campuses hit that, some are at 50 percent, and some are 100 percent or more! But everyone knows it's our goal. And when we talk about it to the rest of the church, we tell them our goal is to have *every* person experiencing life in a small group, that their spiritual life will even feel incomplete without it.

Even though connecting people into groups will be a constant challenge (especially as your church grows), it's always worth our time and effort—*if* we believe small groups are as valuable as we claim they are. And because we're dealing with real people who are unique, we can't rely on a one-size-fits-all strategy to group everyone. The more we integrate ideas of capitalizing on key rhythms in people's lives, trying creative ideas, and being consistent to create a culture of small groups, the more people we'll connect into life-changing community.

—Carter Moss is a campus pastor and the small-group champion for Community Christian Church and an editorial advisor for SmallGroups.com; copyright 2013 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. What are the key times for your ministry? How might you capitalize on them?
2. How can you consistently talk about small groups in your church? What creative ideas can you come up with?
3. Are you a church *with* small groups or a church *of* small groups? What steps can you take in the next month to move toward having a stronger small-group culture?