



The 10 Commandments of Television

The 10 Most Important Steps for Starting an Effective Television Ministry

By Phil Cooke

Ministries Today magazine has always searched for the most effective and cutting edge principles and techniques to make your church and ministry more successful for the Kingdom for God. Recently, we've seen a dramatic increase in the number of churches and ministries involved in the mass media - specifically television outreaches. As technology brings the cost of video equipment down, more and more local churches and ministries feel that reaching their communities through media is more cost-effective than ever, and what seemed impossible just a few years ago has now become reality. So we sought the advice of one of the most experienced and creative Christian producers in the country – Phil Cooke. Based in Santa Monica, California, Mr. 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 him about the most important elements to keep in mind when beginning a media outreach, and he gave us what he refers to as his “10 Commandments for Effective Christian Television Ministries:”

Popular culture has become the pulpit of the secular world. When I was a child in the 50's growing up in the South, 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. Because 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 television programs and films - over the years I've also had the opportunity to help various churches and ministries begin media outreaches. From weekly television programs, to one-hour specials, to television 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?”

“What about used equipment?”

These questions are important, but I've discovered over the years that they aren't nearly as important as 10 fundamental areas I call:

“The 10 Commandments of Television.”

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, I can guarantee you're heading for trouble. But if you'll take the time to explore these 10 critical areas, then you might be ready to step out and begin an effective media ministry.

Commandment #1 - Understand The Power of Telling a Story – As I mentioned before, 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*. A simple story about how God chose to become one of us and share His eternal plan with people who didn't deserve it.

That's it.

As we enter the digital age of this new century, let's spend more time learning how to tell a story more effectively. It doesn't matter the program format – *preaching, music, documentary, variety, drama, whatever* – every program is telling some type of story, and until that story is told most effectively, the audience is never going to be interested.

This coming 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 just about 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, let's 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 television production and equipment. Television is probably the most expensive outreach your church or ministry will ever encounter, and poor decisions regarding financing can literally destroy an entire ministry organization. I always recommend that you have six months of funding in the bank before you ever began a media outreach. On most cable systems today, there are a minimum of 70 plus channels, so it takes between 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 – *they simply need time to find the program!* Therefore, it's 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 the Current Culture – I find 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 that 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 win the audience with interesting and fascinating programming - *then present the gospel*. A few years ago, an informal survey with people that had recently accepted Christ, indicated that they had been presented with the gospel message an average of seventeen times before they made a final decision. That means people think about it, mull it over, and need time to contemplate their decision. Therefore, let's make more programs that *plant the seed* – and don't feel the necessity to "hit them 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 who 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 - An advertising executive once said "*Creativity is like shaving - if you don't do it every day, you a bum!*" 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 that anyone can be more creative – it just takes practice, and a willingness to forgo the "easy" way 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 television program. Just like a light bulb isn't a candle you plug into a wall, a car isn't a horse with wheels, and a television isn't a radio with pictures, an effective television 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, you can see the emotion and intensity of the speaker, and you can 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" ten or fifteen feet away. You're probably also having a meal, talking with friends, or reading a book or magazine. *Believe me, it's not the same experience.* 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 are 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, it's filled with movies, episodic dramas, and situation comedies – there's not a

preaching show among them. The reality is – the secular networks are not biased against Christians – they just want to make money (and would probably sell their grandmother 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 prime time. But they know the power of story based programs, and fill the television 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 make-up? 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 television 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 television 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? And 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 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 television ministry. Where do you find them? Contact professional organizations like the *National Religious Broadcasters* in Manassas, Virginia. Ask a church or ministry with a television outreach you admire. Inquire at Christian colleges – they often have Communication 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. Not only can they help you save money and time, they can also make a dramatic difference in the success of your media ministry.

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 you to do something else that I believe is absolutely critical for a media ministry – *the need for prayer, and to seek the wise counsel of others.*

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 multi-million dollar ministries that succumbed to these and other temptations, and it destroyed what in some cases were powerful, global outreaches.

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, he or she has 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, they

short-change 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. (*Ever notice how they always bring on the prosperity preachers to host the telethons?*)

But there is never an excuse for incorrect or abusive teaching of the word of God. Remember, false or inaccurate teaching to a congregation of a few hundred is bad enough, but that influence can be multiplied by hundreds of thousands or even millions on television.

Regard your ministry outreach as a profound calling, and take every step as if it was one of the most critical decisions you will ever make. If you will stay near the heart of God in your decision making, and seek the help and counsel of both Godly men and women, as well as experienced media professionals, your chances of success will be greatly increased.

Important Resources for Starting A Media Ministry:

Book Resources:

Successful Christian Television - *Making Your Television Ministry a Reality* - By Phil Cooke. Available from local book stores, amazon.com, or nrb.org.

On a Shoestring and a Prayer - *How to Start a Television Ministry on a Low Budget* - by Doug Smart. Available at www.nrb.org

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). Available at www.nrb.org.

The Abundant Speaker - *A Handbook for Christian Communicators* - by Nancy Epperson. Available at nrb.org.

Other Publications:

The National Religious Broadcasters magazine - Call 703-330-7000

Technologies for Worship magazine - Call 905-830-4300

Church Resource Directory - Call 800-338-8928.

Church Production Magazine – www.churchproduction.com

Internet Resources:

www.cookepictures.com - The internet website for Phil Cooke Pictures, Inc. It contains resources with numerous free documents such as budget worksheets, and tips for lighting, sound, and location shooting.

Have you signed up for the Cooke Pictures e-mail newsletter? It's a monthly journal filled with media research, creative concepts, production resources, and great ideas.

Sign up today at <http://www.cookepictures.com/resources/newsletters/>

<http://www.tfwm.com> - Online media resource for churches and ministries.

<http://christianfilmmaker.com> - A resource site for Christian filmmakers.

<http://www.nab.org> - The National Association of Broadcasters

<http://www.nrb.org> - The website of the National Religious Broadcasters

Organizations and Conferences:

The National Religious Broadcasters - The national organization of Christian radio and television 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 in Dallas in February, 2001. I'll be personally conducting a "Christian TV Bootcamp" - an intensive, one day seminar on producing TV programming at the February conference. 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 for information.

Biola Media Conference - Held in Los Angeles, Denver, Phoenix, Dallas, and other cities as well. Sponsored by Biola University and 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 more 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 an entire 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 television staff and crew for up and coming media ministries.

Some outstanding programs include:

East Coast - Regent University, Virginia Beach

West Coast - Biola University, La Mirada, California

Midwest - Oral Roberts University, Tulsa Oklahoma