



A Producer's Perspective on *The Ethics of Technology*

by
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What in the world does technology have to do with fundraising, finances, and ethics?

Plenty.

When questions of financial impropriety and ethical shortcuts surface, we normally think of a fallen church or ministry leader, the way money is mishandled, or the questionable executive perks at the upper levels of management. But the fact is, *there are many more ways financial and ethical errors happen, and quite often, they revolve around technology.*

Radio, television, motion pictures, computer technology, and multi-media are all technology driven. While each tool can be wonderfully artistic, they aren't traditional art forms like painting, writing, or sculpture. For instance, without a power source, technical equipment, batteries or plug, it's rather hard to sit on a mountaintop and create a masterpiece like you can with a pencil, paper, and paint. Therefore, from time to time it's a good idea to take a look at the technology that surrounds us everyday and re-evaluate the ethical decisions we face, in light of that technology.

Does technology have moral implications by itself? No. It's *the way we use the technology* that raises moral questions. When you check the dictionary for the definition of "ethics", you find the words, *rules, standards, and moral choices*. You don't have to be a ministry or church leader to struggle with those issues. Especially in television, the creative, production, management, financial, technological, and spiritual aspects all

overlap from time to time, and as a Christian, who is also an independent producer of programs, I wrestle with that potentially explosive mixture everyday. From the perspective of *technology*, the following areas are places where I find many potential financial and ethical problems lurking.

1) Television and radio are generally the most expensive types of ministry outreaches in the world. More money is spent on building and staffing facilities, buying equipment, producing programs, and purchasing air time than any other evangelistic endeavor.

That alone should give us pause.

Is the money worth it? Are we paying attention to audience information supplied by market researchers like George Barna and others? Are we properly focusing our resources on the most effective types of programming? What about follow-up for new converts won as a result of our programs? Are we duplicating what other stations, ministries, and churches are already doing? Does our program have a clear-cut purpose and how can we do it better?

2) How much time do we spend finding exactly the right equipment and personnel?

I know TV stations, churches, and ministries alike who have all purchased vast amounts of equipment costing hundreds of thousands of dollars without the proper research, questions, and planning. Sometimes, they were swayed by a smooth salesman, in others, they bought on an impulse, and still others were just ignorant. Take the time to talk to the right people about your upcoming equipment rental, lease, or purchase. Evaluate the equipment in terms of the type of program you're doing, and talk extensively to people who are already doing it. I have nothing against salesman, but you need to get other perspectives before you make such a significant purchase.

And remember, sometimes *saving* money isn't always best. One of my greatest frustrations in consulting with churches and ministries is discovering they "saved money" by purchasing an unknown and untried new product. More often than not, it either

doesn't work, or doesn't work the way they expected it to. Sometimes, new products are fantastic, but quite often, they're a flash in the pan. Before I make a decision, I want to look at less expensive models, but I also want to look at the industry leaders - the products that have a proven track record and will be around for years to come.

Finding the right staff is even more important. How often have we seen stations, churches, and ministries pay a bundle for equipment, and then hire people for peanuts. A video camera is just a bundle of metal, plastic, and glass until it's picked up by a person with talent who knows what to do with it. Start spending time finding people with that rare combination of passion and creative talent - someone who will help you achieve your dreams in unique, innovative, and compelling ways.

If you're a pastor, evangelist, teacher, or program host reading this, remember: *the production staff you hire are people who will have the responsibility of presenting you and your ministry to the waiting world.* Take the time to find the people who will present you with integrity, creativity, and professionalism. It will transform your effectiveness on camera.

Never forget that wasting precious financial resources on poor equipment purchases or bad hiring practices is a serious compromise of our ethical responsibilities.

3) **Let keep our claims in check.** In producing the fundraising elements of programming, one of the greatest areas of abuse I encounter are the claims we make about ourselves and our products.

"This new audio tape series will dramatically change your life!"

"When you send that love gift, God is going to transform your circumstances!"

"This is a man who has preached to more people than any man alive!"

"His ministry is literally bringing nations to their knees!"

"I know today's program is going to be a great blessing in your life!"

"Government leaders are personally asking him to come!"

"This book is changing America's cities!"

Have I hit a nerve yet? I know from experience producing secular infomercials, the government is really cracking down on questionable claims made about products and services advertised on television. Many secular producers have been hit with stiff fines, and some have been pulled off the air entirely. And yet, I still hear Christian programs making many of the above claims nearly everyday.

The danger here is that the claims are usually not outright lies... *just pretty extreme exaggerations*. Therefore, it's easy to rationalize it in your mind - especially when you're trying to increase your impact. But the fact is, we should be the industry leader in integrity, honesty, and propriety. Let's have faith in God's ability to accomplish His will, without having to resort to outlandish and extreme claims.

4) How often do we evaluate that fine line between *business* and *ministry*?

The media world is an expensive world, therefore we are called to be financial stewards as never before. That means we need to be aware of the critical business techniques that will help keep us financially healthy. On the other hand, we need to also remember that we're Christians, and should be reacting to situations and challenges from that perspective as well.

O.K. Everyone knows that. But do we put it into practice when dealing with other ministries? How often have we tried to "out bid" another ministry for a prime television or radio slot - driving up the cost for everyone? How often have we talked of "burying" another ministry with our new marketing program or television show? How often have we lured another station or ministry's top employees away without talking to the station or ministry first? How often have we stolen clients away from other companies, or taken unfair advantage of our competitors when we had the chance?

Are any of these things illegal? Probably not. Are they unethical? It might depend on the situation. But the point is, we need to *constantly* be reevaluating those very questions.

5) If we keep a balanced viewpoint on ethical issues, we won't be afraid to explore new technologies.

In the last two years or so, our company has had the opportunity to produce music videos on 16mm film, television commercials on 35mm film, television specials on most videotape formats, a motion picture in the new high definition video format, and now we've created a worldwide web site on the internet at **<http://www.cookefilm.com>**.

During each project, we ask all the above questions from section #4 and more. We've learned that we can be compromised at every phase of the production process and struggle with each step: *the product offer, the promotional segments, the interviews, the format of the show, the presentation of the ministry, the equipment selections, the music selections, the visual treatment of the program, etc...*

Only when we have faced the trouble spots can we feel confident to push ahead both creatively and technologically.

And when that happens, we are capable of producing the type of programming that really does have the potential to change lives.

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