

CONDUCTING OUTSIDER INTERVIEWS

A GUIDE FOR YOUR CHURCH



WHAT IF EVANGELISM IN OUR TIME
IS MORE ABOUT
LISTENING?
THAN SPEAKING ■

Jim Henderson in *The Outsider Interviews*

**Wondering how to start conversations with outsiders in your own community ?
Want a way to show them that you value their opinions and insights ?**

Maybe it's time to start doing Outsider Interviews in your own church.

We think Outsider Interviews could become a regular part of church life. Just imagine the impact—on both insiders and outsiders—if you conducted an Outsider Interview three or four times a year. Insiders would receive some much-needed insight into outsider perceptions of your faith, and outsiders would come to know your church as a place where people actually listen to their thoughts and concerns. We also think these would become great meetings for people in your church to bring their own outsider friends to.

FINDING YOUR OUTSIDERS

Perhaps the most daunting task in conducting your Outsider Interviews will be finding willing outsider participants *Here are a few ideas to help you in your search:*

Relationship is everything: If you've read *The Outsider Interviews*, we hope you understand how important relationships are to outsiders. If you want to conduct Outsider Interviews in your church, it's vital to seek outsiders *you truly care about* and not to merely view them as part of an impersonal focus group. The reverse of this is also true: seek outsiders who are open to relationships with Christians, even though they may be skeptical about our beliefs. A hostile outsider who simply wants to spill hateful venom for a half hour won't make a good interviewee. Instead, look for an open person with honest and thoughtful questions about Christianity.

Start with what you have: Chances are, some members of your church already have good relationships with outsiders. They might be someone's co-worker, neighbor, or best friend. Ask church members to contact you if they know someone who might be a valuable participant for your Outsider Interview. But don't simply collect names and start making cold calls to outsiders. Instead, challenge church members to *extend their own invitation* to outsider friends and to serve as the church's contact point as you hammer out the details of the event.

Include young insiders: Help young Christians find their voice by inviting them to participate in your outsider interviews as well. We found that a panel of two young insiders and two outsiders created a good environment for dialogue among our panelists. It's also a powerful way for the older members of your church to demonstrate a willingness to listen and a desire to learn from the next generation of Christianity.

Keep it small: Try to keep your interview panel to four or less people. You want your group to be small enough that you can easily focus some individual attention on each person. Otherwise, you run the risk of participants feeling like their voices were never truly heard.

BACKSTAGE

Having some sort of pre-interview meeting with your outsiders is essential. You want your interviewees to meet the person who will actually be conducting the interview and to build some camaraderie with the other interviewees as well. While it's not essential, we've found that sharing a meal together creates a nice, relaxed environment for this pre-interview meeting. Whether you decide to meet at a "neutral" neighborhood restaurant or you invite outsiders to the church building for a nice home-cooked meal, encourage the church members who initially invited them to the interview to attend this meeting with their friend.

Your panelists will most likely feel a little nervous about the Outsider Interview; this is the time for you to put their minds at ease. Get to know them a little bit. Ask some questions about their life. And then take a few minutes to explain how you plan to run the interview and what kind of questions you plan to ask. If time allows, you might want to show a clip from *The Outsider Interviews* DVD as an example of what you're hoping to achieve. Make sure you give your panelists the opportunity to ask any questions they might have as well.

THE QUESTIONS

If you've watched *The Outsider Interviews* DVD, you should already have a good feel for what kind of questions to ask at your own Outsider Interview. **Here are a few broad categories you may want to cover with your panel:**

Personal background: Every other discussion topic may be optional, but don't skip this part! Give each of your guests the chance to briefly share a little bit about themselves: their job, school background, family history, etc.

Experience with Christianity: What kind of experiences have they had with the church? Have their relationships with Christians been positive or negative, and why?

Perceptions of Christianity: What do they think of when they hear the word "Christian"? What are some of the impressions they have about church? Would they agree that Christianity has an "image problem"? Why or why not?

Politics: Do they think Christianity has become too politically involved in our culture? Do they appreciate Christian involvement in politics, or are they concerned by it? Do they feel pressure from Christians to adhere to one political party versus another?

Social issues: What is their perception of Christians' views on issues such as homosexuality, abortion, the environment, poverty, and so on? Do they feel that Christians pay too much attention to any issues? Or not enough attention to other issues?

Service: How do they feel about serving others? What social justice issues are they passionate about? Do they see the church as a positive influence when it comes to service opportunities?

Words of wisdom: If Christians would really listen, what would they tell them? What words of advice would they offer about the way we live out our faith?

THE INTERVIEW

Once you have your interviewees and your questions, you're ready to go! We recommend setting a time limit for the interview. Respect your outsiders' time by finishing the interview on time. As the interviewer, you'll want to have some idea of how much time you want to devote to each question before you move the conversation forward to something new. You might also want to leave a little bit of time at the end of your interview for people from the audience to ask questions of their own.

As you go through the interview, be open to the feedback and questions you are receiving from your panel. Remember, though, this isn't the time to start offering counterarguments or explaining your own set of beliefs, no matter how tempted you may feel to "correct" some of the ideas you hear. **Your primary goal as the interviewer is to amplify the voices of the outsiders.** So keep asking questions and encouraging them to share more about their perceptions and beliefs, even when you don't agree with them. And when you conclude the interview, don't forget to say a big thank-you to your outsiders for their vulnerability and willingness to share.