

I realized the other day that I have a problem. Some might call it an addiction. Let's just say, I "have a thing" for Apple. Now this isn't exactly an earthshaking revelation to those who know me, but the other day my enthusiasm for all-things Apple reached an all-time high.

On this particular day, I had a lunch appointment with a friend – and our laptops. I don't remember what I ordered. The conversation was limited. That wasn't the point; we were there for a higher purpose. Hunched over our computers, sandwiches in hand, we sat in silence – eagerly awaiting revelations from Steve Jobs (Apple Founder & CEO), whose keynote address at a programmer's conference was being relayed line-by-line in real-time across the blogosphere.

Unwilling to wait for the keynote to be released on video or reported in the news, we sat there reading each line as it appeared, wondering at the possibilities. What would Steve Jobs announce today? A new iPod? More details about the iPhone? New ultra-portable laptops?

It didn't matter – we were glued to the screens. Looking back at this event in perspective, I first realize that I need help – but that's another topic for another time. Second, it makes me wonder why Mac-users (such as myself) are so devoted.

One of my unenlightened PC-loving friends claim that Apple's cultish following is purely the result of clever marketing. The line of thought goes something like this: *Macs are no better than PC's, they are just marketed more effectively.* I happen to think Macs are better than PC's, but I agree with him about Apple's marketing – Apple has more effectively marketed their products, and there's a lot to be learned if we will observe their approach.

First, let me establish a working definition of marketing. By marketing, I mean the promotion of goods or a service. Often when someone says marketing, we immediately think of design. But there's a lot more to marketing than design. Anything that an organization does that affects people is marketing. Marketing is about people as much as it is about products. As a rule, those who are best at marketing are the most in touch with the market (people).

There's a lot we can learn a lot from Apple's approach to marketing, but I'm going to focus on two things: **form and function.** Good marketing has both of these components at its core. If you are only offering one, you're not marketing effectively.

Form has to do with externals. Form is what you can see. It's how your ministry or event is tangibly packaged.

If you're all about form, your ministry will lack substance and the credibility of your brand will be diminished over time. As a result, your brand is cheapened and you find yourself having to make more spectacular and grandiose promises just to draw a crowd for an outreach.

Function has to do with experience. Function is about delivering on your promises. It's about living up to your image and exceeding expectations.

If your only concern is function and you dismiss form as superficial and unimportant, you are placing a lid on your potential effectiveness. You may have the most incredible program in the world, but if you don't promote it in a way that resounds with your target audience, the impact will be limited.

Often, we think of form and function independently of one another. We plan an event, have a volunteer in the group design some tickets and hope to God (literally) that everything somehow comes together to make some sort of noticeable difference.

But form and function are only powerful when they work together. They are like two sides of the marketing coin. In everything that you market, think about form and function. If you want a return on your marketing, you've got to invest in both. That's what Steve Jobs has done at Apple.

Apple's entire business model is built on a combination of form and function. As a company, Apple is unique in that they make their own hardware (form) *and* they make their own software (function). In addition to designing the best-looking computers (form), Apple writes software that makes them easier to use and more stable than the competition (function). Since all of Apple's devices run Apple software, they all work together seamlessly and consistently – so you can enjoy the experience (and look cool doing it).

One day, you'll most likely be able to contact your iMac from your iPhone and tell it to download a movie from Apple's online store and to sync it up with your Apple TV or your iPod. It will all be ready by the time you get home with the push of a button. Form and function.

Our ambitions are much greater; in fact, they're eternal. Shouldn't we give the same thought to form and function within our ministries that Apple gives to its products?

In youth ministry (as in life), we can fall into the trap of being extreme in one area to the neglect of another. It may be as much the result of a leader's personality as anything else, but there are some youth ministries that are so focused on form that the only way you can tell them apart from MTV is by their sizable budget difference. On the other hand, there are ministries that function well, but that are more-suited to the Primetimers than to teenagers. I would suggest that the enemy would be fine with either of these out-of-balance approaches.

Avoid the extremes. When an organization embodies both form and function, the result is synergy.

As you think about marketing within your student ministry keep in mind these lessons inspired by Apple:

1. Great marketing has less to do with creativity than it does with being in touch with people. The question isn't whether or not you or your leaders think it is cool. The question is whether or not it resonates with students. Is your service connecting with young people and are you giving them something that they need (spiritual leadership) or are you just entertaining or babysitting them? Is every minute of your small group rigidly scheduled or have you created a culture where relationships can flourish?

2. Think through the big picture first, then sweat the details. Before you get bogged down in planning that event or designing that website, think about the big picture. How does it fit in with your mission and where you're going as an organization? How will it connect students to the bigger picture of what God is doing in your ministry. After you've thought through the big picture, work on the details to get there. When it comes time to design promotional materials, pay attention to the details – not to micro-manage the look according to your preference, but to make sure that the materials communicate effectively.

3. As a rule, look for ways to simplify. Your goal should be to make it as easy as possible for students to invite their friends to an outreach or to register for camp or to get involved in small groups or discipleship. Evaluate what you're asking of your students to make sure it is user-friendly. Simplify the information on your tickets and

promotions down to the easy-to-read essentials. Be clear and concise in your verbal announcements. Done right, less is more.

By the time Steve had finished his keynote, we had finished our sandwiches. My friend and I had been changed by a common experience that enriched our lives and lunch hours. As we packed our laptops, I asked my friend about the next Apple conference, "See you in six months?". "See you in six months," he replied.