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Rebranding Religion: What Does it Take to Do God's PR?

Parker Brown

When I was growing up, I was told to not refer to myself as a Mormon – that was only a nickname, and people could get confused. “I belong to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” I was told to say, and I can still recall the proud face of the woman that told me that.

Now I'm a journalist, and the church's official style guide tells me the same thing: “Please avoid the use of Mormon Church,” it says. But I've never quite bought that, because if we're going to be technical, technically there is no Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

It was dissolved by the federal government in 1887 because its leaders refused to stop performing polygamous marriages. Its assets were seized and it was disincorporated, and, in the United States, it still operates without being incorporated. What replaced it are two corporations: one for holding real estate, and one a “sole corporation” with the president of the church as its only member. Neither is named The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Like all powerful and influential corporations, these corporations have spent a lot of money on public relations. And they've done it all in secret. The church gives aid, holds meetings, administers to people, does all of the things a traditional church does. But they also have teams – and sometimes entire departments – devoted to research, branding, conducting surveys, working with focus groups, hiring lobby groups, and doing a whole lot of marketing.

And they've done all of this to fix a single problem: When Americans are asked how they feel about certain religions, more than half have a negative opinion of Mormonism. Only atheists and Muslims scored lower. And when the church recently hired a couple of top-notch New York advertising firms to find out what words people most associated with Mormonism, “cultish,” “secretive,” “sexist,” “anti-gay,” and “controlling” topped the list.

This story is about God-vertising — of what happens when the age-old traditions and theology of religion collide with public relations and marketing – and how a religion can craft its image using the tools of the modern world. I wanted to find out if the church could use these tools to change opinions and establish a renewed and refreshed American Zion. Could the church fix its problems by fixing its PR?

The Mormons aren't the only religion to have PR. In fact, all institutions and religions have PR, said Ken Foster, who lives in Utah and is a counselor in the stake presidency, more or less like a Catholic diocese. He's also got forty years of public relations and marketing experience, and is a professor of communications at the University of Utah.

“If these institutions don't communicate their point of view, someone else will do it for them,” said Foster. But he said the LDS church hasn't been aggressive enough in addressing misunderstandings. “They probably should have gotten into it a lot more fervently and a lot earlier, but they didn't,” he said.

But this isn't for lack of effort.

The church has tried doing research and sending out surveys. They set up the Research Information Division to survey people, “monitor key trends”, and provide research information to church leaders, according to a job opening they recently posted. One member of the church told me he hadn't been going to church for three years and lying to his mother about it when he received a survey in his inbox. The Church wanted to know why he wasn't coming anymore. They wanted to know why he left, what he thought of the church now, if he was utilizing the church's media -- its websites, magazines, and social media. But the church wouldn't talk with me about the division. “There's not a lot that the church has said or will say about the Research Information Division,” said Eric Hawkins, a public affairs representative of the church. “So that is a non-starter for us.”

They've tried focus groups. Another member of the church, a bond trader living in Seattle, was recently called in to test four different brands the church was working on. The church officials told him they were trying to create a "master brand" to roll out across the world. He and a small group of Mormons ranked the brands, eventually deciding on a picture of sunlight streaming through the branches of a tree underneath the caption "Experience the Transformation that Comes from Following Jesus Christ."

They've tried hiring the largest PR firm in the world, Edelman's. When the church asked Dan Edelman, the founder of the company, how a Jewish man would feel about representing the church, Edelman responded, "I've long seen our religions as kindred souls, having to wage the same battles over intolerance and misperception. As a Jewish man, I would be honored to fight those battles alongside you."

And they've also tried marketing. They've done TV ads, starting with the emotionally raw ads of the 1980s, to the polished ads of today. The church has its own communications branch, called Bonneville Communications. And, to get an edge on the competition, Bonneville has its own patented marketing technique called HeartSell, which is "strategic emotional advertising that stimulates response," according to their website. Casey Jones helped get the creative part of Bonneville off the ground in the early 90s. "HeartSell was a term used at Bonneville when I joined them," he said. He's since been the president of Grey SF, one of the world's leading advertising firms, and is now the CEO at Heresy Films. "The Bonneville team is a group of very, very well intentioned people," Jones said. "Very few people understand what they are doing, why they are doing it, or why it works."

And that, that's the problem: Nobody really gets the Mormon church. In 2011 the Broadway show "Book of Mormon" mocked the religion, and during the 2012 presidential election it was called a cult. Recently, the church tried to be transparent about its history and released a series of essays about polygamy. The media relished the details: Joseph Smith had 40 wives, one as young as 14. Even when it tried to do what it thought was the right thing, people still didn't get them.



In 1622, Gregory XV established the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda, the Catholic church's first advertising agency. It had been years in the making — Gregory XIII had already assembled the staff. He'd hired Cardinal Santorio as president, and one of thirteen rotating cardinals were put in charge of the finances. Cardinals Caraffa and Medici came on as interns.

It was Santorio who ran the weekly meetings for one of the Congregation of Propaganda's special project: getting the Oriental Christians — Slavs, Greeks, Syrians, Egyptians, and Abyssinians — to join the Roman church. The meetings were held in the Pope's palace, and about twice a month they'd relay their progress to the pontiff.

But the Congregation's main purpose was to regain control of the missionaries, which had fallen under the political grasp of Spain. They were really hurting the Church's image, and the Church wanted the situation cleaned up.

To propagate the faith, it needed its missionaries. But to get its missionaries, it needed to incur Spain's wrath. "Rome was trying to make sure that the missionary activity was primarily missionary activity, and not political activity," said John Rao, an associate professor of history at St. John's University. "It was awkward."

The Congregation still exists, but its name has been changed to the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. They're no longer involved in politics, but they still do advertising.

When Edward Bernays wrote "Propaganda" in the 1920s, the p word had already taken on a sinister meaning. Bernays was the nephew of Freud and the father of public relations. He promised to shape society with the power of marketing and public relations; in 1929 he launched a campaign to rebrand cigarettes as Torches of Freedom that would help women attain "equality of the sexes and fight another sex

taboo.” He was so effective that, across the nation, thousands of women took to the streets, cigarette in hand. His wife started smoking a pack a day before her doctor told her that unless she stopped her legs would be amputated.

In “Propaganda,” Bernays acknowledged that churches came before him. “The churches have developed church advertising committees, which make use of newspapers and the billboard, as well as of the pamphlet,” he wrote. “Many churches have made paid advertising and organized propaganda part of their regular activities.”

Church propaganda has influenced modern branding tactics significantly, said Mara Einstein, a professor of media studies at Queens College and the author of “Brands of Faith”. “In fact, marketers stole it from religion, and not the other way around.” Brands talk about “converting” users, and try to get their customers to become “product evangelists.”

Einstein says that religions shouldn’t be afraid to compete in the marketplace like corporations. “It’s not something they can help in the current environment,” she said.

And churches have been propagating their brands recently. When “Passion of the Christ” came out, churches used their extensive networks to get people to watch the film. It grossed an astounding \$370,27,604 in the United States.

And in 2014, Christians didn’t have to climb any mountains or go to church to worship, because God met them in the movie theaters.

“Son of God” graced theaters in February, grossing almost \$60 million. It was a re-edit of the History Channel’s series *The Bible*, minus a few characters. Satan, for one, was missing, because people felt like the actor that played him resembled Barack Obama. “Thankfully the Christ story has never been about special effects,” said Matt, from Matt’s Movie Reviews. “Its true grandeur comes from the words spoken and the feelings they evoke.”

“Noah” was next, grossing more than \$100 million. It eschewed all mention of God but was still banned in several Middle Eastern countries. “An emotionally realistic Biblical epic,” said Scott Mendelson for Forbes.

“Heaven is For Real” — the story of an out-of-body trip to the afterlife — came in April, grossing more than \$90 million. “A wide-eyed 4-year-old makes a fairly convincing case for the existence of an afterlife in Heaven is for Real,” said Claudia Puig from USA Today.

Finally, “God’s Not Dead,” at around \$60 million. “The film is slickly produced,” said the Hollywood Reporter.

Exodus, with Christian Bale as Moses, will come out later this year.

Then there’s a darker side to propaganda, hidden from the spectacle and lights of Hollywood. Public relations and advertising can be used to promote any message, and sometimes it can be really good — what comes to Hollywood, for example, can bring a lot of people to feel like they’re coming closer to God. But it also takes up the causes of its parent institution, and those causes can be political

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria has a very effective media team; according to journalist Marshall Sella, they’re the Coca-Cola of the terrorist world. They have attracted hundreds of Westerners to join their cause, and — if the State Department’s numbers are right — about 12,000 foreigners have traveled to Syria to fight. They’ve got an online magazine, complete with infographics that would require the use of publishing software like InDesign. They’ve got a dating site that has lured at least one unsuspecting girl. And then they’ve got the videos.

The videos of the beheadings are unspeakably awful, but they’re undeniably effective. The video of the first beheading opens with A MESSAGE TO AMERICA in clean Trajan Pro font, all caps, and centered. They used two cameras during the beheading, but they know to black out for the worst parts so you’ll stay glued. When the screen fades back in, the victim is lying in the dirt, front-facing, his hands cuffed behind him. His head is strategically postured on his back.

When I went to Manhattan to watch “Meet the Mormons,” the first full-length film produced by the Mormon church, I slipped in the back and started counting heads. I wanted to see if this film marked a new era for Mormon marketing.

There were 20 people in the theater on a Monday night when it was screened. A twenty something in the middle row asked her date about four black girls in the back of the room. “Do you think they’re Mormon?” she said.

The film was at the end a five day run in Times Squares’ Regal Theater, where there’s no better place to get a sense of what the PR and marketing teams of religions are up against. Times Square’s billboard space is among the most expensive in the world: companies pay up to four million dollars a year for a single spot. And the owners of 1 Times Square, at the north end of the plaza, make \$23 million a year from the billboards adorning the building.

Regal Theater advertised itself with an enormous sign: “Ultimate Sight, Ultimate Sound.” On the day the film was showing on a sunny day in October, the NFL, Microsoft, Uniqlo, and a handful of TV shows were among the hundreds of billboards on the same street vying for attention.

The film opened with a Jenna Kim Jones, a comedian and former employee of *The Daily Show*, walking around Times Square. She told us that people think Mormons are weird and that there’s a lot of misconceptions out there. She asked people around her what they thought of Mormons, and got a lot of incorrect answers. They played a short clip of South Park where everybody is in hell, waiting to find out which religion was true, and they’re all let down because the answer is the Mormons.

Jones said the point of the piece was for people to meet different Mormons. The film was the story of six of these people, and as the film started it became clear to me that this was really just the mormon.org profiles of six people.

The mormon.org public relations campaign started in 2010 and made headlines when the church paid for a large video ad on Times Square. At the end of each profile, the singer, beekeeper, motorcyclist, surfer, or whoever was featured looks at the camera and says, “I’m a Mormon.”

There’s been 174 Mormon.org videos, according to Marie-Therese Mader, a teacher at University of Zurich’s Center for Religion, Economics and Politics. She analyzed the videos and found that a third were of people of color; 82 were of people from other countries. But despite the diversity, all of the Mormons are the same: they all lead family-centered lives, and there are no examples of people who are unhappy or struggle.

The “I am” idea isn’t original. The Episcopalians had done it, as had some Muslims. And Scientologists had been doing it since the 1990s, when they launched their “Meet a Scientologist” campaign.

In “Meet the Mormons”, only one of the “I am’s” took place in Utah. Another was from Nepal, where a man leaves to study engineering in Russia and gets baptized there. When he returned to Nepal, he had to convince his aging father that although he is no longer a Hindu, he’ll still perform its customs to show his respect.

One was from Costa Rica; she was a kick-boxer who gave up pursuing a professional career as a fighter so she could take care of her family. Another was a black bishop from Atlanta, sharing his experience of leading a congregation while holding down another job as a career counselor.

But the film was too slick. The kick-boxer made her choice to give up her career, she sat by her husband,

everybody all smiles. There were no moral conflicts, no drama. The black bishop is friendly, jokes with his congregation, but there's no mention of how he feels in a church that barred people like him from full membership until 1979. It was smooth and well-edited, but there was no heart.

The movie was a total flop: it grossed fewer than \$6 million, and for several weeks it had a 0% rating on the Tomatometer, a tool used to gauge critics' reviews on the site Rotten Tomatoes. When a reviewer from St. George, Utah, gave it a 'fresh' rating a couple of weeks after it was released, the film was bumped to 11%.

It wasn't going to change anybody's mind, mostly because, as I found out a week later, probably very few non-Mormons watched it. Mormons don't go to the movies on Sunday, and *Meet the Mormons* suffered a 95% drop in revenue from Saturday to Sunday on its opening weekend. The only people meeting the Mormons, it turned out, were the Mormons.



Daymon Smith used to work at the headquarters of the Mormon church in Salt Lake City, Utah. There was one group that was promising to rebrand and repackage the church to appeal to a younger generation, and it wasn't the leadership. It was the graphic designers.

I asked Smith, who got his PhD in anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania and did his dissertation on Mormonism, if any of the strategies were working. Were dollar bills being converted into, well, converts?

Not really, said Smith. And polls back him up. Even during the 2012 presidential campaign, when Mitt Romney and Jon Huntsman's religion made daily headlines, 82% of Americans said they little or nothing about Mormonism. Yet most Americans still can't answer basic questions about the church's history or scriptures.

Smith was critical of the work the LDS church has done. "Who is the advertising addressed to?" asked Smith. "Does the marketing department really think anyone converts to the LDS Church because they like the people in an advertisement?"

I talked with Eric Gillett, who is the chair of the design department at the Mormon-owned Brigham Young University, about how one goes about rebranding a religion. It's not an easy thing, he said, especially when it comes to logos: they're difficult to design, and symbols can mean different things to different populations. "It's really kind of a complex stew that can't really be reduced down into a formula" he said.

All religions have logos. The cross is the most obvious example, but Christians also have the fish (the Greek acronym stands for "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior), the Star, and Christograms like the Chi-Rho, the first two letters of "Christ" in Greek, used on a flag by Constantine I, the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity.

Christians have the dove (from the baptism of Jesus) and an anchor. Then there's the Alpha and Omega, the Good Shepherd, a peacock, a pelican, and a lily flower. All of the saints have their iconography, like the Patron Saint of Unattractive People, the Patron Saint of People with STDs, and the Patron Saint of Comedians.

Even the anti-iconic religions, who try to take seriously the Old Testament commandment to not make any graven images, have icons. Jews have the Star of David, but there's also the lulav, the Lion of Judah, the shofar, and the menorah. Islam has the star and crescent moon, a sword, and the color green.

The swastika, as the symbol of luck, prosperity, fertility, and about a dozen other things, has been used by at least 16 groups, including the Christians, Muslims, Maltese, Tibetans, Chinese, Hindu, and Jainists. The Maori have the canoe.

One of Mormonism's symbols is Angel Moroni. In the Book of Mormon, Moroni had a vision of the future, compiled all of the prophetic writings into the Gold Plates, and buried them in a hill. He's also the guy – albeit an angel this time around – who Smith said appeared to him several times in the 1820s. When the Salt Lake City temple was finished in the 1890s, the president of the church thought it needed something extra to top it off, so why not Moroni? He turned to Cyrus Dallin, a non-Mormon sculptor known for doing the statue of Paul Revere on his horse in Boston and for his work on Native American subjects, the most famous of which is in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Dallin read some Mormon scriptures and the Angel Moroni it was, which can now be found on top of most of the church's 144 temples, trumpet in hand. The idea was the Moroni would signify the spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth and the ushering in of the second coming of Christ. Almost all of the statues face east, because Matthew wrote that as the lightning comes from the east, so shall the Son of Man.

“A guy with a bugle, it doesn't really say much,” said Gillett. I asked Gillett what he would do if he were in the head of design for the church: “It seems like it would be an exercise in frustration,” he said.

The church doesn't have a very recognizable logo; it uses a type logo of its name instead, which can have its own problems. It's in English, and the church is becoming more international every day. But what exactly is the logo supposed to be standing for? What's inside the package being sold?

Smith thinks it's a lifestyle, like a “Weight Watchers campaign without the comparison photos.” The Church is promising a new you – happier, healthier, more secure, like the people in its videos.

But the Church isn't *really* a lifestyle brand, at least not according to Matthew Norcia, who is the executive director of Brand Union, a global design agency and business consultancy in New York.

“A lifestyle brand has two elements: One is the product, the quality, how it makes me feel. Then there is how other people perceive me,” he said. And religions, well, people don't like to think of them in those terms.

Lifestyle brands have “consistent touchstones”, ideals that lead to a certain way of life, that people buy into when they buy the brand's products, Norcia said. These products not only drive profit, but they give status and meaning to a consumer. Norcia said he wears a Panerai, a luxury watch made in Italy that can go for hundreds of thousands of dollars. Or, for those who want a cheaper option, the stainless steel Radiomir can be had for \$14,100 at the Panerai Botique on Madison Avenue.

“I have to wind it every day, which is absolutely the dumbest thing ever,” he said. But to wear a Panerai in his line of work is to belong.

Another lifestyle brand is Red Bull, even though the only product they sell is an energy drink. Red Bull is selling a type of experience; it sponsors people who jump from the stratosphere, or do extreme sports. Patagonia sells jackets, but they focus on those who care about the environment. To wear Patagonia means that you belong to a certain group that loves the outdoors and wants to protect it.

Then there's Louis Vuitton, which makes purses and bags. “It's just a bag, it carries shit,” said Norcia, who estimated that it costs LV maybe \$100 to make a bag. But they can sell for up to \$45,000. And that's low rent for the hedge fund wives who demand their Birkin bags, which retail for \$60,000 and up. The Hermes Birkin Bag Himalayan White Nilo Crocodile retails for \$127,700.

“Lifestyle brands have a purpose, a higher order, and a mission,” said Norcia. And so do religions, but religions usually lack the products to qualify. Though you can get mystical DVDs and \$18 boxes of candles at The Kabbalah Center, the Mormon church doesn’t market the handful of products they do have.

Unless, of course, the product is less traditional. “What is the product here, a self-remake? Increased Happiness? Your Family, remade?” asked Daymon Smith. “Are Mormons products?”



I was born a Mormon but didn’t stay. The records that my church keeps of me say BIC — code for “Born in Covenant”. I’m Mormon at least five generations back. My ancestors joined the church in its early stage, and several left their lives in Europe to go to the Mormon Zion in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Ann Horrocks Marsh, on my mother’s side, is a particularly venerated hero: Born in Lancashire, England, she was happily married and had three kids. She heard and believed what two Mormon elders taught her, but her husband never did. She waited patiently for her husband to change so they could emigrate to Utah, but in the 1860s, she took her three daughters, the youngest 11, to Utah and left her husband. She never saw him again.

I was also, to put it crudely, a marketer for the church: I went on a two-year mission to Canada. I talked with Jana Riess, a Mormon convert who has her PhD in religious studies from Columbia University, who told me that for the church, public relations and marketing *is* missionary work. “You can call it whatever you want to, but at the end of the day, if you are hoping that someone is going to change their life based on something that you’ve presented to them, that’s missionary work,” she said.

And even Mara Einstein, the Queens College professor, saw some theological significance to marketing. “I’m not a theologian,” said Einstein, “but I do believe that Jesus went to where the people were.”

As people go to physical churches less, religions need to devise ways to reach them wherever they are, Einstein said. And in this sense, why should marketing be shunned? If it can fashion community out of loneliness, bring identity to the forsaken, inspire to be better, then why not embrace it? It may be just a part of religion, with the same ends.

Which is part of the problem, and why nobody I talked with knew how to help the Mormons. I was told by brand consultants that they’d never take the job of helping out the church because it’s too fraught with difficulties. There was no ‘solving’ the problems of the church. I reached out to a dozen different public relations firms in New York City, and none of them wanted to go there. It’s a hard account because Mormonism is a hard thing.

To take up the Mormon account is to take up the parts of Mormonism that, in the 1800s, led to the church being exiled from their own country. To take up the account is to have the unenviable task of reshaping history under the skeptical eye of the public.

At 27, a couple of weeks after seeing “Meet the Mormons,” I sat down with my bishop, a volunteer leader of my local congregation, and told him I had been an atheist for a couple of years and would no longer be attending. I left the church.

Mormons aren’t supposed to have coffee, tea, tobacco, or alcohol, so that week I had my first coffee at Blue Bottle coffee — \$3.50 for a cappuccino I thought tasted as gross as it smelled. My first drinks, a Brooklyn Lager followed by a Stella Artois, followed a month later. Was my leaving a failure of the church to market to me? Perhaps. But the marketing message that I was most likely to resonate with — the one that Christ himself spread when he said that salvation lies with the weak and downtrodden of the earth, and when he said, “Let anyone who has power renounce it” — that’s a message that would be difficult for a large institution to pull off.

