

## **A Market Researcher's Guide to Christian Ethics**

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## How Christian Ethics Can Save Marketing

In the eyes of many everyday citizens, marketing has a bad reputation. Much to the chagrin of industry practitioners, marketing *in many cases* has itself to blame. People harbor these negative feelings against the business function for a wide array of legit reasons. For some, promotional activities can be *extremely* annoying. Whether it's frequent and unwanted telemarketing calls, constant and irrelevant sales messages, or pesky pop-up ads, people have grown tired of hearing thousands of sales pitches each day. Consumers want to surf the web, watch TV, or read a news article without interruption. But, sadly for them, that's quite rare in today's age. Besides dealing with regular bombardment and information overload, many customers have experienced high levels of *dishonesty* in brand communication. Too many products fail at delivering on their promises. And finally, other consumers may feel uneasy about marketing because of the unescapable ploys of corporate giants to collect their personal information. So, how can marketing, as a field, improve its reputation by reversing these negative trends? And, how can Christian marketers impact their line of work for the glory of God and the betterment of their neighbors? The answer is an ethical, research-based approach. Now, there is no other standard for Christian ethics outside of the Holy Spirit-inspired words in the Bible. And while the words "marketing research" are not explicitly mentioned *anywhere* in the text, there are many truths that offer guidance to *every* area of life — including occupations and career choices.

## Building business ethics on the book of Proverbs

The first step in formulating a Christlike approach to marketing research is

understanding the Bible. God's Word will successfully lead marketers into a right understanding of business ethics. In the Bible, there are many genres of literature; historical accounts, poetic writings, laws, prophecies, and epistles just to name a few. But one biblical genre provides endless, practical advice to anyone looking to conduct their research more ethically. This ever-important genre is called *wisdom literature*, which is mostly found in the book of Proverbs. In Proverbs, Solomon provides a great deal of life applications and general principles for living in a godly manner. Right in the first chapter of Proverbs, the purpose for this collection of pithy sayings is explained. "To know wisdom and instruction, To discern the sayings of understanding, To receive instruction in wise behavior, Righteousness, justice, and integrity" (Proverbs 1:2-3, NASB). Clearly, this book of proverbs will supply a wealth of knowledge and understanding, which are two things that all marketers want. Consequently, there are countless proverbs that indirectly inform a correct approach to marketing research.

A primary lesson for market researchers is taught in Proverbs 25:17 which says, "Let your foot rarely be in your neighbor's house, Or he will become weary of you and hate you" (NASB). According to this verse, it's not a good idea to keep pestering someone for information. If your research team calls the *same* phone number every day asking to conduct an interview, the recipient will increasingly become *less* welcoming of your attempts. For the same reason, members of your mailing list should *not* be sent an overwhelming amount of surveys and questionnaires in their email inboxes. Marketers should be well acquainted with the contact preferences of their audience, as "sending the right number of emails is

critical for the firm's profitability, especially since most customers tend to complain about the large number of emails sent by firms" (Zhang, Kumar, Cosguner, 2010, p. 3). No matter how many studies are conducted and no matter how many people answer depth interview questions, marketing researchers will never know the target consumer perfectly. In fact, God will always know the ideal customer better than the corporation.

"O Lord, you have examined my heart and know everything about me. You know when I sit down or stand up. You know my thoughts even when I'm far away. You see me when I travel and when I rest at home. You know everything I do. You know what I am going to say even before I say it, Lord" (Psalm 139:1-4, NLT).

Clearly, God knows *everything* about each specific consumer, and even with unremitting amounts of research, no one can match His knowledge. Vexatious attempts to acquire personal details can *only* drive customers away; accomplishing the exact antithesis of a wise marketing goal.

Another pertinent proverb is verse 5 of chapter 21. It reads, "The plans of the diligent certainly lead to advantage, But everyone who is in a hurry certainly comes to poverty" (Proverbs 21:5, NASB). This verse should serve as an encouragement to actually do the research. Do not expect marketing information to reveal itself. Instead, put in the needed hours of research! Whether it's conducting new experiments or looking through a library for secondary data, marketing endeavors must be built on strong research. Doing otherwise would be irresponsible and wrongfully stewarding time and resources. In other words, skipping the research process is a surefire way to lose your employer lots of money.

Proverbs 14:15 is yet another insightful passage on completing work wisely. "A naive person will believe anything, but the shrewd person discerns his steps" (NET). Similarly, Jeremiah 17:9 explains: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (ESV) In marketing research, firms must be careful to bar presuppositions from overriding actual, statistical findings. A new television commercial needs more approval than that of the in-house team who created it. And a restaurant cannot serve a new dish solely because the chef likes it. Instead, in both cases, hosting a few focus groups will provide better information on the effectiveness of an ad or the popularity of a menu item. Additionally, brands must never assume that their target market behaves a certain way. Not everyone will think like the marketer. Not everyone will consume content or gravitate to the same messages as the marketer. And what the board of directors finds unappealing the target audience may find incredibly tasteful. (Marshall, 2019, para. 9). Therefore, marketing dollars cannot be spent based on feelings and notions, but rather on tangible evidence.

Finally, Proverbs 25:2 declares, "It is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings is to search things out" (ESV). God knows everything in heaven and on earth; nothing can be hidden from Him. But He does not allow us to access every bit of knowledge in existence. Truthfully, this is one way that God blesses us. Imagine knowing the exact date of your death. Imagine knowing every time someone was stricken with disease. Imagine knowing about every lie that was ever told. For the human mind, it would be an *insufferable* curse to know everything. So, God hides or conceals some things from us. Our brains, and by default our businesses, are not

necessarily built to withhold every data set out there. The duty of omniscience is for God alone. "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us..." (Deuteronomy 29:29, NIV). Plus, some of the things that can be known, are difficult to fully comprehend. "...there are some things that are hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort..." (2 Peter 3:16, NASB). Marketers and firms may never achieve complete understanding for a segment's insistence on a specific brand of products, and they shouldn't be twisting information in order to do so. That information, which is necessary or beneficial to us, can be found through research, and according to Proverbs 25:2, making such discoveries is a noble activity. Therefore, we should do our research in a God-honoring way, recognizing that we will never know every single detail — and that's probably a good thing.

### **Moving past Proverbs**

The book of Proverbs is extremely practical for all areas of life. But the Bible has more to offer than these brief adages. For instance, God requires that every piece of information be proven by more than one witness. Deuteronomy 19:15 says, "A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime...Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established" (ESV). Jesus reiterated this commandment in John 8:17, "...the testimony of two people is true" (ESV). Paul continued these thoughts *multiple* times later on in the New Testament. "... Every charge must be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses" (2 Corinthians 13:1, ESV). "Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses" (1 Timothy 5:19, ESV). While these verses are

mostly geared toward cases of gossip, slander, and crime, the principles can transfer to other areas of life. A researcher should never build an entire case or recommendation based on one source of proof. One blogger's opinion piece should not be the basis for a marketing plan. Rather, multiple lines of credible sources should be used to support marketing actions and expenditures. Experienced marketers agree that "multiple sources can be used to strengthen market research projects" (Stewart, 2015, para. 3), and different reports offer different data (Stewart, 2015, para. 4).

### **Remaining ethical after the study is completed.**

Another ethical conundrum for many marketing researchers deals with post-study relations. For instance, should participants be filled-in on the details of a study after they have been observed? The condensed, biblical answer to this question is yes. For one, Jesus healed many people and provided an explanation afterward. In Luke 17, Jesus healed 10 lepers, but only one thanked Him. To this trusting participant, Jesus said: "Rise and go; your faith has made you well" (Luke 17:19, NIV). Jesus did a similar thing with a woman in Mark. "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease" (Mark 5:34, ESV). Often times, after Jesus had examined the faith of men and women, He gave them a public explanation of what had just occurred. While miraculous healings and market research are two totally different subjects, marketers can take away the value of transparency from these stories.

After the conclusion of a study, another question arises: should companies offer compensation for research participants? Again, the answer is typically yes. In

most cases, participants should be rewarded for their effort in providing data. At least three verses speak on a similar subject: "Pay your obligations to everyone: taxes to those you owe taxes, tolls to those you owe tolls, respect to those you owe respect, and honor to those you owe honor" (Romans 13:7, CSB). "...Pay them their wages each day before sunset...If you don't, they might cry out to the Lord against you, and it would be counted against you as sin" (Deuteronomy 24:15, NLT). "Masters, be just and fair to your slaves. Remember that you also have a Master—in heaven" (Colossians 4:1, NLT). While research subjects aren't slaves, they should be treated with dignity throughout the entirety of a study — including the aftermath. Any form of compensation that researcher provide to a participant does not have to cost an astronomical amount. Rewards can be something as small as a coupon, free entrance into a contest with a larger prize, or another token of gratitude. But, companies should *absolutely* consider providing something for these subjects, as they have provided useful information to the market research team.

### **Final Thoughts**

Research and marketing is performed best through a biblical lens and framework. The numerous verses, which were previously mentioned, can guide any profession (especially marketing) into an ethical style of practice. But the work doesn't stop there. The Bible provides endless opportunities for reforming business conduct, so managers and marketers can *continue* to search the Scriptures for codes of ethics and personal enrichment. If those verses are taken to heart, and become part of corporate missions and visions, it is possible for marketing to earn a much better reputation than it ever had before.

## References

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