Faiths' ad campaigns chase after the great `I Am'

by Peggy Fletcher Stack
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(RNS) To many viewers, the "I'm a Mormon" ad blitz from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints seemed hip, refreshing and original.

The campaign, launched last year in nine U.S. cities, generated a lot of national buzz. Its short videos featured regular folks talking about their lives as doctors, skateboarders, tax attorneys, environmentalists, surfers or former felons before announcing that they are Mormons.

Turns out, lots of other faiths take a similar tack.

Scientologists, with longtime connections in Hollywood, have produced personal-story videos for a marketing effort known as "Meet a Scientologist." The Episcopal Church has an "I am Episcopalian" series. A Muslim agency links modern believers with their founder in an "Inspired by Muhammad" push.

Catholics reach out to lapsed members in their "Catholics Come Home" drive. Methodists seek the younger crowd by redefining what church is.

The styles and motivations for all these campaigns vary --some clearly are proselytizing; others are correcting mistaken impressions. But all of them follow the "I Am" national trend in advertising.

As Americans became less religious, they began to look to consumer goods for their identities, explained Mara Einstein, a professor of media studies at Queens College in New York. They saw themselves as the person who used a "PC" or a "Mac," drove a Volkswagen or a BMW or sipped

a Starbucks latte.

That personal approach eventually circled back to spirituality. Religious groups began trying to tell potential members that theirs was a faith for someone who looked and acted like themselves, Einstein said.

The message of these ads is not just that we -- Mormons, Methodists, Muslims -- are normal, said Einstein, who wrote "Brands of Faith: Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age." It's that "we are you."

Scientologists

The Church of Scientology International launched its "Meet a Scientologist" series in the early 1990s, putting personal descriptions on T-shirts, brochures and magazines.

The movement started by devotees of science fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard claims more than 8 million members but has faced stiff criticism in several countries, in the media and by some former followers.

In 2008, the church posted video profiles on its own YouTube channel. Today, the site features more than 200 Scientologist testimonials, including ones from educators, teens, skydivers, a golf instructor, a hip-hop dancer and engineers, Scientology spokesman Tommy Davis said. They tell their stories, what attracted them to the faith and how it has helped them.

The church is not motivated by bad press or critics, Davis said. "To the degree that there's any sort of misunderstanding of Scientology, it comes from ignorance and lack of firsthand experience."

Since the videos began airing in 14 U.S. markets, the number of people wanting more information about the church has skyrocketed.

"Frankly, (our) interest is in proselytizing," Davis says. "We want people to see what Scientology does and the tools for people to use to improve their lives."

Episcopalians

The Episcopal Church, meanwhile, has been around for centuries and believes it has much to offer religious seekers. But, like many mainline Protestant churches, its numbers are shrinking. Plus, it has no marketing budget.

"We are seen as a normal, old denomination and kind of forgotten," said Anne Rudig, the church's director of communications. "I wanted a way to show that even though we have an ancient liturgy, our church is pretty contemporary. We are relevant."

She reasoned that the best way to spread that message would be to hear from longtime members such as Gail Bennett, who likes the church's emphasis on justice and peace, or new converts such as Diane Caruso, who finds beauty in the faith's music and liturgy.

"It's a place where I really could talk to God," Caruso says in a video.

The campaign started in 2000 with dozens of testimonials. So many Episcopalians logged on to the site it nearly crashed. The effort took off from there, with many members filming themselves and sending their videos to the New York headquarters.

"I still get e-mails from people who say, `I had no idea the Episcopal Church was like this,"' she said. "It's not all old white men."

Now, Rudig says, if she only had a marketing budget as big as the Methodists.

United Methodists

The United Methodist Church took a different branding path -- describing what it does, not who is in it.

The $20 million marketing push began in May 2009 and targeted 18- to 34-year-olds, many of whom have rejected organized religion altogether. Creators dubbed the campaign "10,000 doors" to suggest the myriad ways to become engaged with the church.

"Whether it's helping to provide an anti-malaria bed net for a child in Africa, volunteering to help in the community, or joining a church's recreation league, we want you to feel welcome," the Rev. Larry Hollon, chief executive of United Methodist Communications, says in a news release. "There is a doorway through which you can approach The United Methodist Church."

The effort, part of a grander scheme known as "Rethink Church," uses "nonchurch language" and "positive land mines" to attract young people by inviting them to look at the faith with fresh eyes, Einstein writes in a forthcoming essay, "The Evolution of Religious Branding." "These `land mines' are issues like Darfur, theology of ecology, homelessness and so on."

Some of the messages, sprawled across billboards, asked questions such as: "What if church were a literacy program for homeless children? What if church considered ecology part of theology? What if church could bring sides together? Would you come?"

Muslims

Muslims in the United States and Britain clearly have faced perception problems and misunderstandings -- if not outright hostility -- of their faith. Hoping to counter such negativity, a group known as the Exploring Islam Foundation created an ad campaign for subway walls and taxis in central London, as well as video interviews on its website, inspiredbymuhammad.com.

The spots contain messages such as: "I believe in social justice. So did Muhammad; I believe in women's rights. So did Muhammad; I believe in protecting the environment. So did Muhammad."

British values are "synonymous with Islamic values," Remona Aly, the foundation's campaigns director, said in a release, "those of being committed to social justice, caring for the environment, of mutual respect and tolerance, and contributing positively to your society."

In other words, they say, Muslims are us.

Mormons

The Mormon effort sprouted from research, too, showing that many Americans either know nothing about the faith or harbor stereotypical, even false impressions.

Several recent studies, including one by the authors of "American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us," rank Mormons among the least liked U.S. faiths.

To modify that impression, producers of the "I'm a Mormon" series sought members who were atypical, articulate and photogenic.

"Mormons are doing an impressive job using new media to reach people and connect with individuals in a way that ... works for them," Catholic blogger Matthew Warner writes at National Catholic Register.

The Latter-day Saints were "smart in their approach," he writes, building on two basic facts: lots of people think Mormons are weird, and once people get to know a Mormon personally, that impression changes.

Warner believes the campaign will be effective "for actually improving the public perception of Mormons for many people," he said in an e-mail.