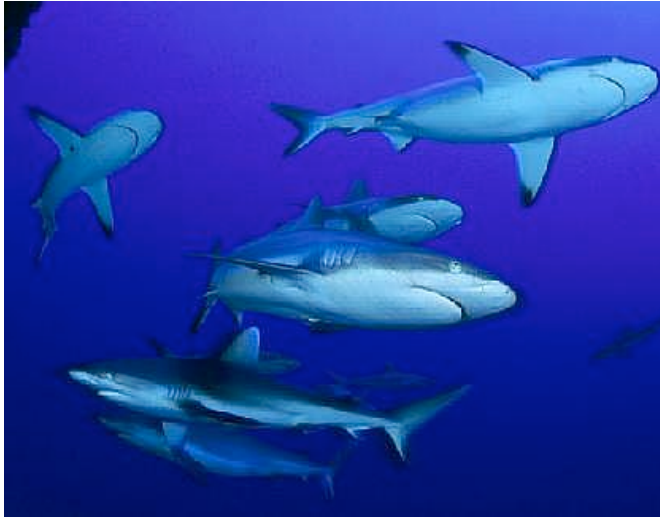


What if Churches Became Like Sharks?

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In 1975, I was in New Orleans for a high school leadership event. One afternoon, during our free time, I decided to step around the corner and see the new movie, "Jaws." It freaked me out. I didn't like ocean swimming before that day, and I saw the movie as divine affirmation of my decision. Even today, I prefer flying giant kites on sandy beaches to swimming in the surf.



Peter Benchley, who wrote "Jaws," later wrote in his 2003 book "Shark Trouble" that his characterization of sharks was not a good one. "We knew so little back then, and have learned so much since, that I couldn't possibly write the same story today. I know now that the mythic monster I created was largely a fiction." Since 1975, I have been fascinated by sharks. The Great White shark is an apex predator (the absolute top of the food chain) and it is powerfully focused on accomplishing its

Earthly mission: Eat, swim, breed.

So, in 2003, when I sat down to help one of my sons with a class project on sharks, we examined some of the characteristics of sharks. What if churches became like sharks, I thought? What if churches became so focused on helping people discover Christ that these churches reached the apex of the cultural food chain. What would that church look like? My ministry, using communication filters, is designed to help that transformation. Check out the characteristics of sharks and my dream for churches.

Sharks maneuver well in their environment. They can react, turn and swim from many different angles. Is your church locked into a church newsletter and a bulletin as its primary communication sources? Or, are you beginning to maneuver in a variety of ways - through e-mail, websites, targeted direct mail, advertisements, publicity, bulletin boards, and through community networks?

Sharks can be aggressive. When the environment dictates it, they can turn things up a notch. Is your church watching its neighborhoods? Does your church have strategies to connect with guests, new community residents, and church prospects? Are you proactive or reactive in your response to people?

Sharks are deliberate. Sharks are capable of bursts of speed up to 23 miles-per-hour, but

they have a cruising speed of 6 miles-per-hour. Does your church have a consistent 12-month communication strategy (your cruising speed) with scheduled bursts, perhaps around strategic ministries in the life of the church? You should be as deliberate in planning a communication calendar as you are in planning a budget. (The communication plan should precede the budget).

Sharks are flexible. Sharks do not have bones; they have cartilage, which makes them very flexible. Is your church exploring new strategies (or shaking the dust off old ones) to reach market groups within the community? Is your church looking beyond its walls? Is your church open-minded about change, but smart enough not to change just for the sake of it?

Sharks are smart. Sharks have large, complex brains like those found in more advanced mammals and birds. Sharks are at the apex of the oceanic food chain. Sharks can even be trained. Is your church exploring opportunities to learn more about its community? Is your church in a position to learn from culture in order to reach it more effectively for Christ?

Sharks must be moving or they sink. And, some species may even die (drown) if they aren't moving. Is your church engaged in communication efforts with your church family, your prospects and your community - all the time? Are we moving forward in our efforts to communicate the Gospel, to communicate discipleship, to communicate the benefits of church involvement? Are we moving or are we sinking?

Sharks have good vision. Sharks have vision that is seven times stronger than man's vision. If a man and a shark were both in the dimmest light possible, a shark could see 10 times better than the man. Church vision is a phrase that is often over-used, inappropriately used, and misunderstood. God has the vision for the church because it's His church. It's our responsibility to partner with God in discovering that vision and then to pursue it with Him. The church's vision is to be so partnered with God that we can see clearly His Great Commission plan for our church. Does your church have that kind of vision? Can you see and communicate effectively what God wants the church to be doing for Kingdom growth?

Sharks are unique. There are more than 350 species of sharks therefore 'a shark is not just a shark.' Neither is a church just like every other church. Your church is unique because it was born of the Holy Spirit. God has a unique vision for your church. That vision comes within a Great Commission context to 'go, make disciples, baptize people and teach people about Jesus.' And, your church will need to organize itself and always be effective communicators toward that goal.

Last, sharks are bold in their mission. They swim, eat and reproduce. They are efficient at what they were created to do. Churches - a collection of Christians - were created to carry forward the love and grace of Jesus Christ - to be about missions, evangelism, and disciple-making. Our goal should be to intentionally and efficiently pursue those ends, and that can only happen when we are about strategic and tactical communication. <^><