Analysis of Promotion, Pre-Registration, and Attendance Data for Seventh-day Adventist Evangelistic Events

Larry D. Witzel

School of Communication & the Arts, Liberty University

March 3, 2024

Author Note

Larry D. Witzel https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7192-6191

I have an ownership stake in the commercial enterprise described in this paper that provided the dataset for analysis.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Larry Witzel, SermonView Evangelism Marketing, 4221 NE St Johns Rd Ste F, Vancouver, WA 98661, United States. Email: lwitzel@gmail.com

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the historical pre-registration and attendance rates of participants in a group of Seventh-day Adventist evangelistic events, measuring the variance in these rates between different marketing communication channels used. This quantitative research-based essay explored a dataset of pre-registrations and attendance at 119 of these events. It found that people who put forth more effort into the pre-registration process attended at higher rates than those that required lower effort, matching the expectation of Cialdini's persuasion principle of commitment and consistency. This helps to increase our understanding of how making a commitment to attend through pre-registration varies based on the difficulty of the pre-registration process. By using this data of the registration and attendance rates, church marketing practitioners will be better able to diagnose issues in the marketing funnel and measure how any future modifications to this funnel impact these registration and attendance rates.

Keywords: Cialdini's consistency, foot-in-the-door technique, Seventh-day Adventist evangelism, event pre-registration and attendance

Analysis of Promotion, Pre-Registration, and Attendance Data for Seventh-day Adventist Evangelistic Events

Seventh-day Adventist churches continue to use evangelistic events as the primary driver of church growth (Anderson, 2014; Burrill, 2018; Walter, 2018; Parker & Charvat, 2019), even as many other denominations and non-denominational churches have abandoned this methodology (Whiting, 2022). However, the recruitment of participants for these events has become increasingly difficult as people spend more and more time in the digital space (Ball, 2023a). Historically, direct mail has been the primary marketing tool to attract an audience, but response rates have dropped precipitously over the last 2 decades (Rester, 2022, 2023; B. Corbett, personal communication, July 12, 2023). Social media advertising has proven to be an effective channel for generating event pre-registrations, but anecdotal evidence suggests that these individuals attend the event at lower rates than those who pre-register from direct mail and other marketing communication channels (R. Walter, personal communication, October 26, 2023). This quantitative study will look at pre-registration and attendance data from 119 in-person evangelistic events over the last 3 years, to better understand the source of pre-registrations and attendees at the actual event.

Problem Statement

There is data that suggests individuals are more likely to register from social media advertising (Ball, 2023b), but anecdotal evidence suggests these individuals attend the actual event at much lower rates than those who register directly on the pre-registration platform website (R. Walter, personal communication, October 26, 2023). However, the problem is that the actual registration and attendance rates are not known, making it difficult to diagnose and

impossible to measure how any modifications to the funnel might impact these registration and attendance rates.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to determine the historical pre-registration and attendance rates of participants of Seventh-day Adventist evangelistic events, and measure the variance in these rates between different marketing communication channels used.

Biblical Perspective

Evangelism is at the heart of Christian faith and practice. Jesus' final instructions to his disciples before leaving earth were, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to follow all that I commanded you" (New American Standard Bible, 2020, Mt. 28:19-20). The Apostle Paul preached to both Jews and Gentiles in Antioch, speaking to "almost the entire city" (New Living Translation, 2015, Acts 13:13-49), and the biblical record indicates when he evangelized in Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens, he varied his evangelistic methods and message, depending on the context (New Living Translation, 2015, Acts 17). In his first letter to the church in Corinth, he wrote, "I have become all things to all people, so that I may by all means save some" (New American Standard Bible, 2020, 1 Cor. 9:22), adding, "I do everything to spread the Good News and share in its blessings" (New Living Translation, 2015, 1 Cor. 9:23).

Significance of the Study

For event-driven evangelism to be effective, participants must make the effort to leave their homes, drive to the event location, and walk through the doors of an unknown environment. It is a significant commitment. Cialdini's (2021) influence principle of *commitment and consistency* suggests that by making a small commitment to pre-register, participants are more

likely to actually attend in order to maintain their self-image of consistency. “Once a stand is taken,” he wrote, “there is a natural tendency to behave in ways that are stubbornly aligned with the stand” (Cialdini, 2021, p. 303).

Researchers have studied Cialdini’s commitment and consistency principle in a variety of settings. For example, Gracini et al. (2013) found that making a commitment as small as subscribing to an email newsletter led to increased rates of compliance. Hickson et al. (2013) noted the importance of small commitments by potential customers to subsequent sales success, pointing out that “in today's world, asking for a customer's e-mail address is a primary means of seeking that first level of commitment” (p. 38). Goss et al. (2021) applied the principle to the use of social media by sports enterprises, suggesting making a public commitment on social media increased the likelihood of subsequent participation in a sporting event. Rahmani (2023) described the underlying motivation to maintain a positive self-concept as the key driver for why commitment and consistency lead to subsequent compliance. Adam et al. (2021) and Jiang et al. (2022) each described new artificial intelligence technology used in chatbots with anthropomorphic design cues to increase compliance by simulating a public commitment. And Whitty (2023) explored how the principle of commitment and consistency was used by financial criminals to induce scam victims to willingly comply with requests for cash.

This study expands the understanding of this persuasion framework by quantitatively exploring the differences in difficulty of pre-registration, comparing that with the subsequent follow-through in actually attending the event.

The Dataset

The dataset for this study was provided by SermonView, a church marketing company that specializes in advertising evangelistic events. Over the last 15 years they have handled more

than 6,000 marketing campaigns for over 2,500 churches throughout the United States and Canada (SermonView, n.d.-c). This company has developed an online pre-registration platform, giving those interested in attending a way to reserve a seat and receive reminders by text message and email leading up to the event (SermonView, n.d.-b). In addition, they offer an online customer relationship management (CRM) program designed specifically for churches, called InterestTracker, with an optional module to track attendance at multi-session events (SermonView, n.d.-a). Marketing campaigns that utilize SermonView's event registration platform can be set up to automatically import each pre-registration into the church's InterestTracker account.

Source of the Dataset

This dataset includes records from two different databases, with data from in-person events during the 2020-2023 time span. (SermonView's systems are also used for online events, as well as hybrid events with both an in-person and online option. However, for this study only in-person events were included in the data.) The first dataset is the event pre-registration platform database, which provided individual registration records for 119 campaigns for which matching attendance tracking data was available. The second dataset is the InterestTracker database, which provided individual interest records of those who attended at least one session for these same 119 campaigns. Registrations that are automatically imported in InterestTracker from the event registration platform include a record ID, allowing individual records from both databases to be matched up.

Contents of the Dataset

There were 9,510 records in the event pre-registration platform that met the criteria, out of 89,478 total registration records in the database. Each record included a record ID, event ID,

two fields related to registration source, and registration details such as name, phone number, email address, and street address. Of these 9,510 records, there were 3,314 matching records in the InterestTracker database.

The InterestTracker database provided 11,631 records that met the criteria, out of 158,913 interest records in the database. These are records for individuals who attended at least one session for one of these 119 events that met the criteria. Each record included a record ID and event ID. It also included data from the event pre-registration platform, such as the event ID of the corresponding event and the record ID of the corresponding registration. In addition, each record included contact details such as name, phone number, email address, and street address. Of these 11,631 records, there were 3,314 matching records in the event pre-registration platform database.

Data Collection Methods

For the event pre-registration platform, data is collected in three different ways. First, some marketing communication points to the online registration page for the event, where the guest enters their data into a website form that is then recorded in the database. Second, some marketing communication points to a phone number specifically for the event, where people can use an automated phone system to reserve a seat. Each of these responses is then manually entered into the event pre-registration platform database by a staff member through a special URL, which flags the entry as a phone response. Third, social media advertising on the Meta platform, which includes Facebook and Instagram, utilizes an on-page form that is prepopulated with the user's information, making it quick and easy to register for the event. This is imported into the event pre-registration platform through an application programming interface (API) link, and flagged as having come from a Meta ad.

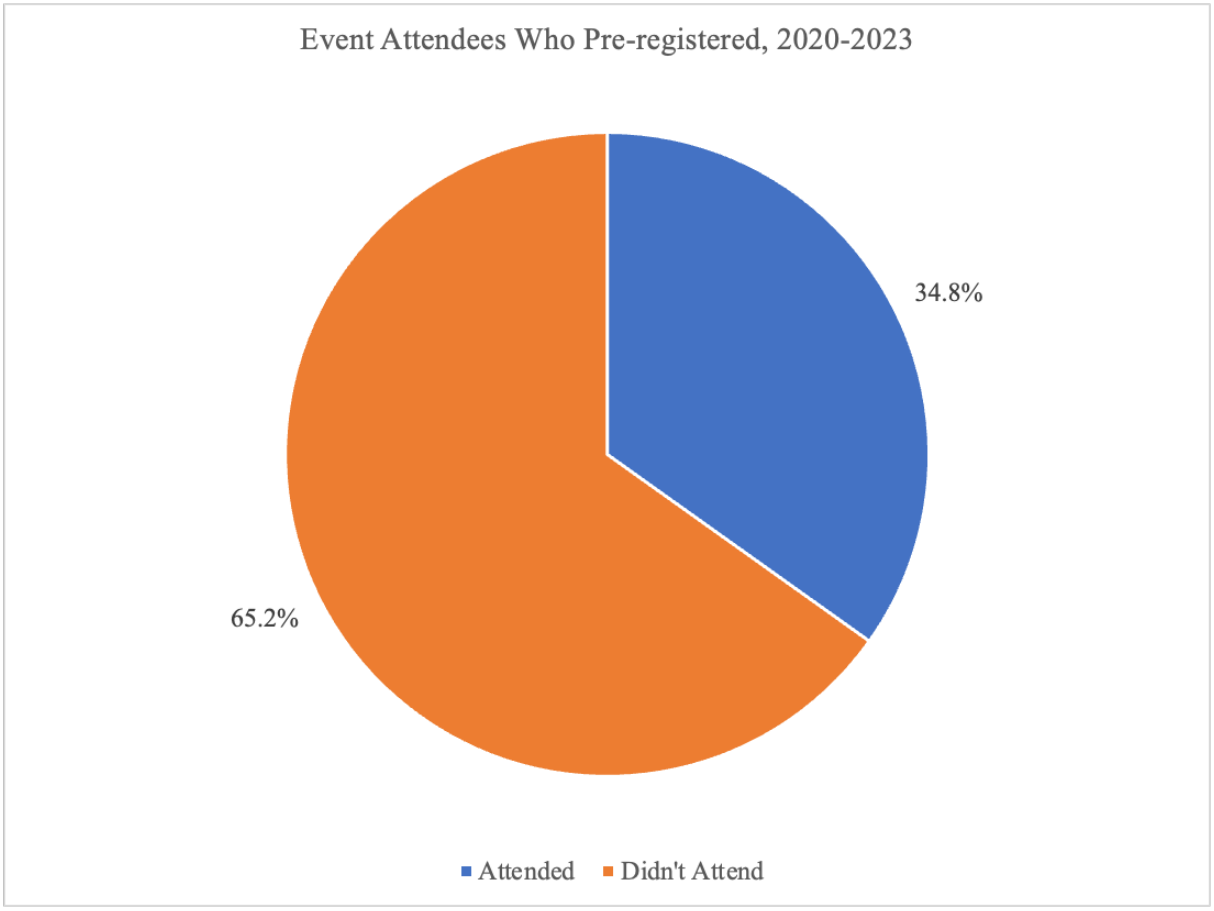
For InterestTracker, each pre-registration is automatically imported into the database via an API link. In addition, on-site staff at the event hand-enter contact information into InterestTracker for individuals who did not pre-register. Each attendee is then checked in to each meeting by either using a bar code scanner or marked by hand on a meeting check-in screen in the CRM.

Findings from the Data

A number of conclusions could be reached from this dataset. First, the data show that about two-thirds of pre-registered guests (65.2%) do not ultimately attend the event, while about one-third do attend (34.8%). This is visualized in Figure 1.

Figure 1

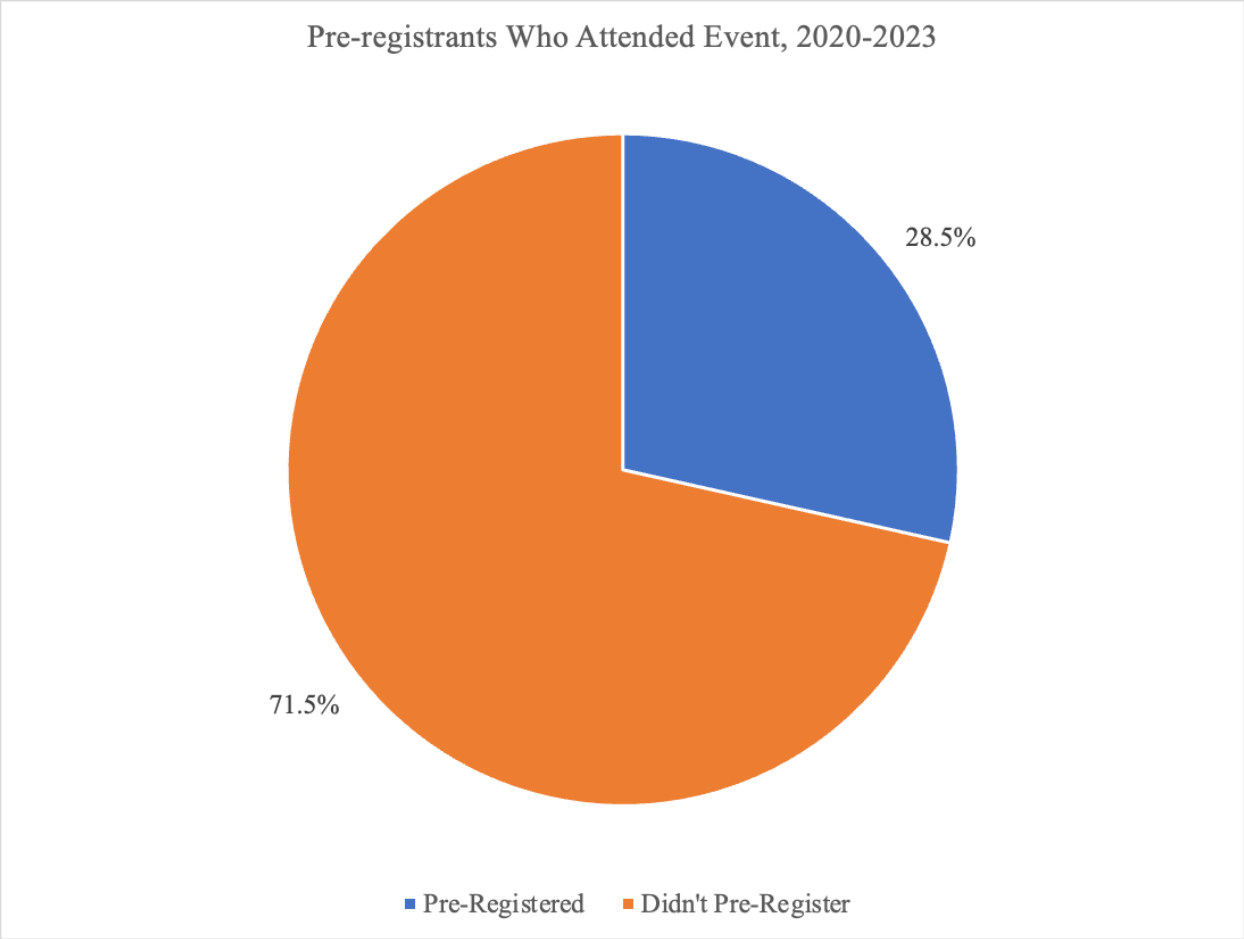
Proportion of Pre-Registered Guests Who Subsequently Attended the Event



The data also show that a significant number of actual attendees to the event did not pre-register. Across the 119 events, 71.5% of people who attended at least one meeting of the event did not pre-register, while 28.5% of attendees did pre-register. This is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

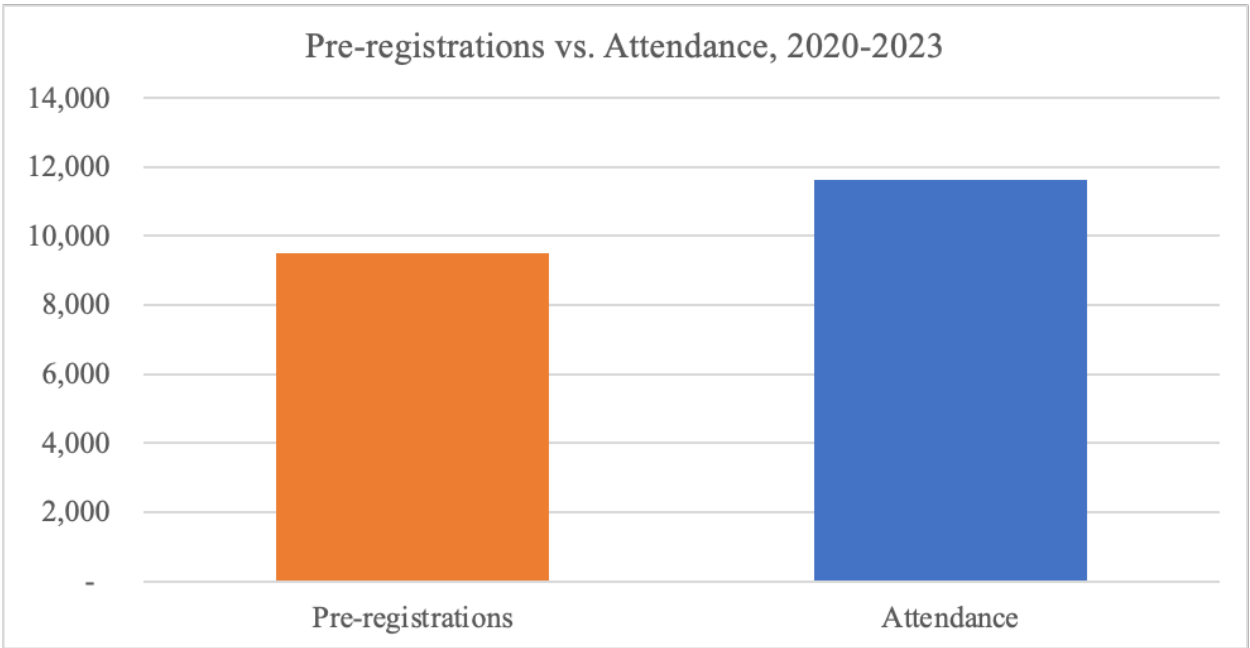
Proportion of Attendees Who Pre-Registered



There has been a historic assumption that the number of pre-registrations is an accurate predictor of attendance at the event. In other words, although some who pre-register do not attend the event, this is counter-balanced by people who attend without pre-registering. In fact, across the 119 events, the actual attendance was 22% higher than the number of pre-registrations. This is illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3

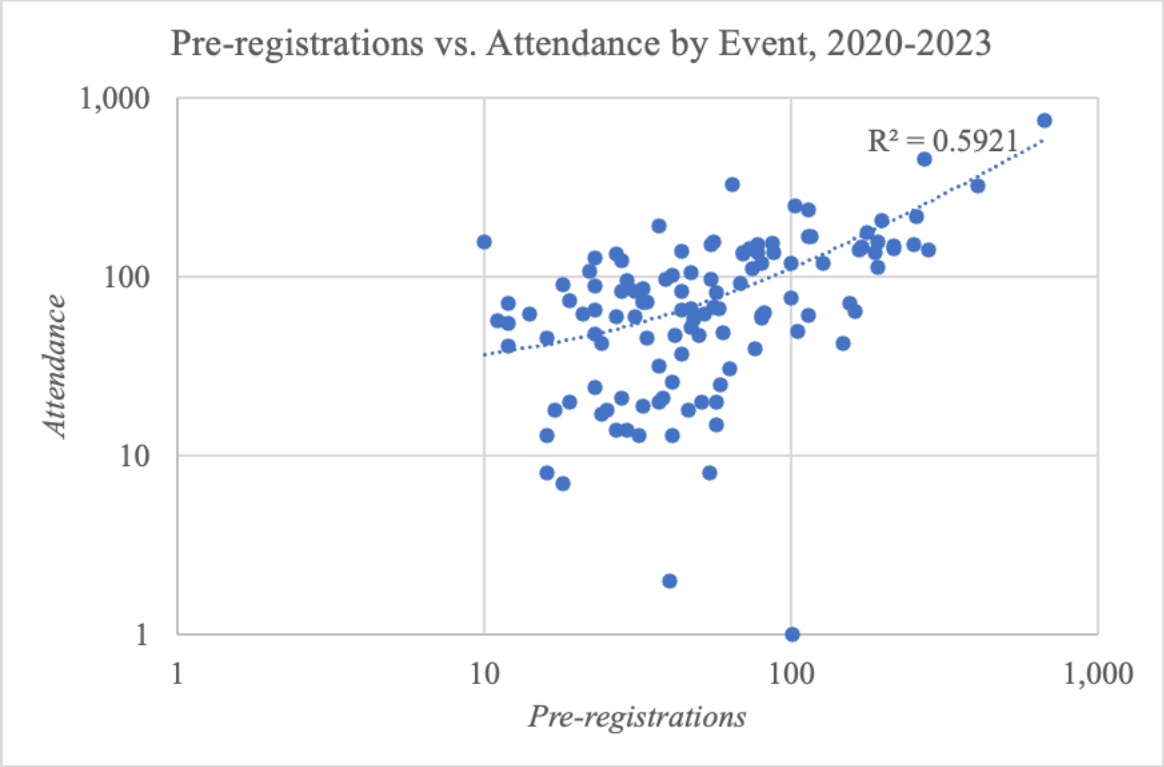
Pre-registrations vs. Attendance, 2020-2023



Of course, there is considerable variance among the 119 events. Figure 4 shows a scatter plot comparing pre-registrations with attendance for each event. The R-squared for the trendline is 0.59, suggesting a moderate to strong correlation between pre-registrations and attendance. However, there is considerable variance between events, with only 45% of events having attendance between 50% and 150% of the number of pre-registrations.

Figure 4

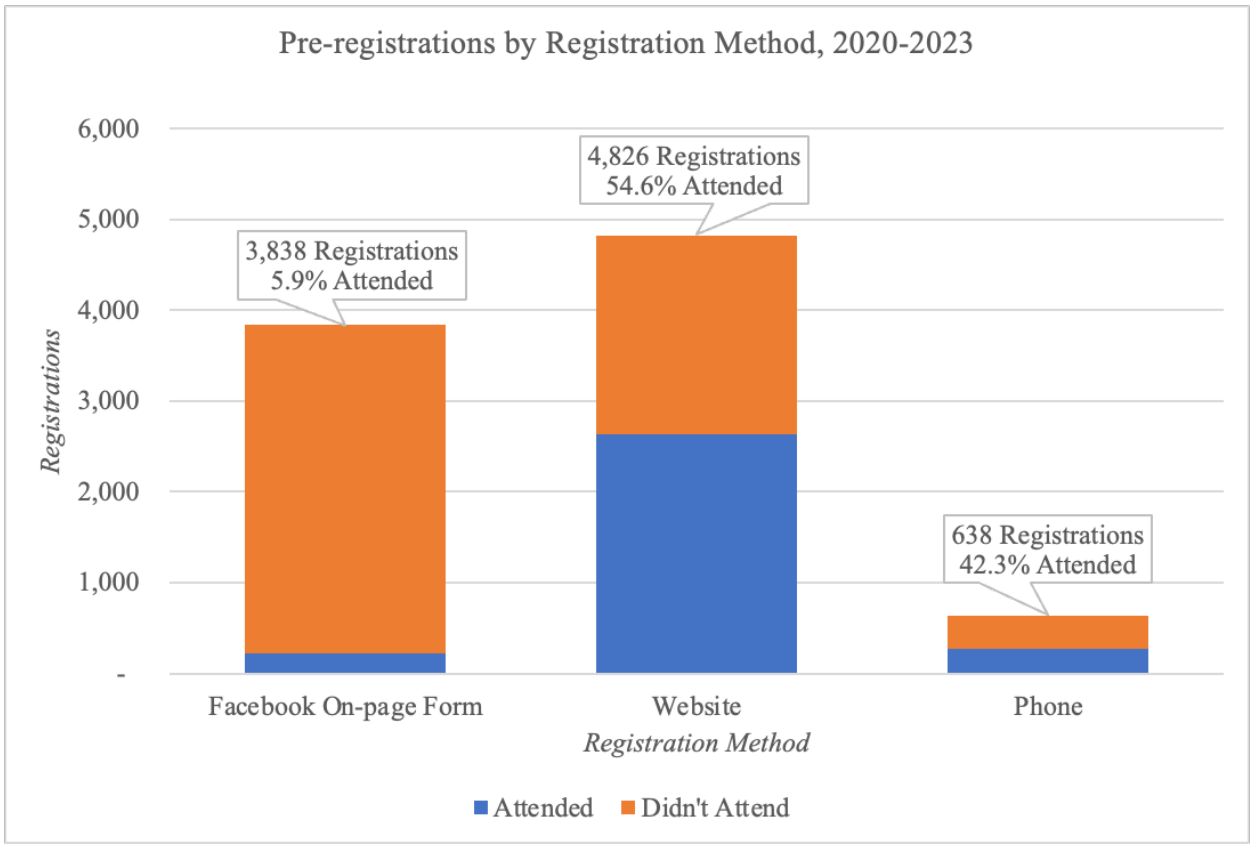
Pre-registrations vs. Attendance by Event, 2020-2023



There is also considerable disparity between pre-registrations and attendance when looking at registration method. Guests could register on the event website, by telephone, or using an on-page form on Facebook and Instagram with personal details already filled in. Figure 5 shows the number of pre-registrations by method, with the blue indicating those who attended the event and the orange indicating those who registered but didn't attend. Only 5.9% of people who registered using the Facebook or Instagram form attended, while this figure was 54.6% for website registrants and 42.3% for phone registrants.

Figure 5

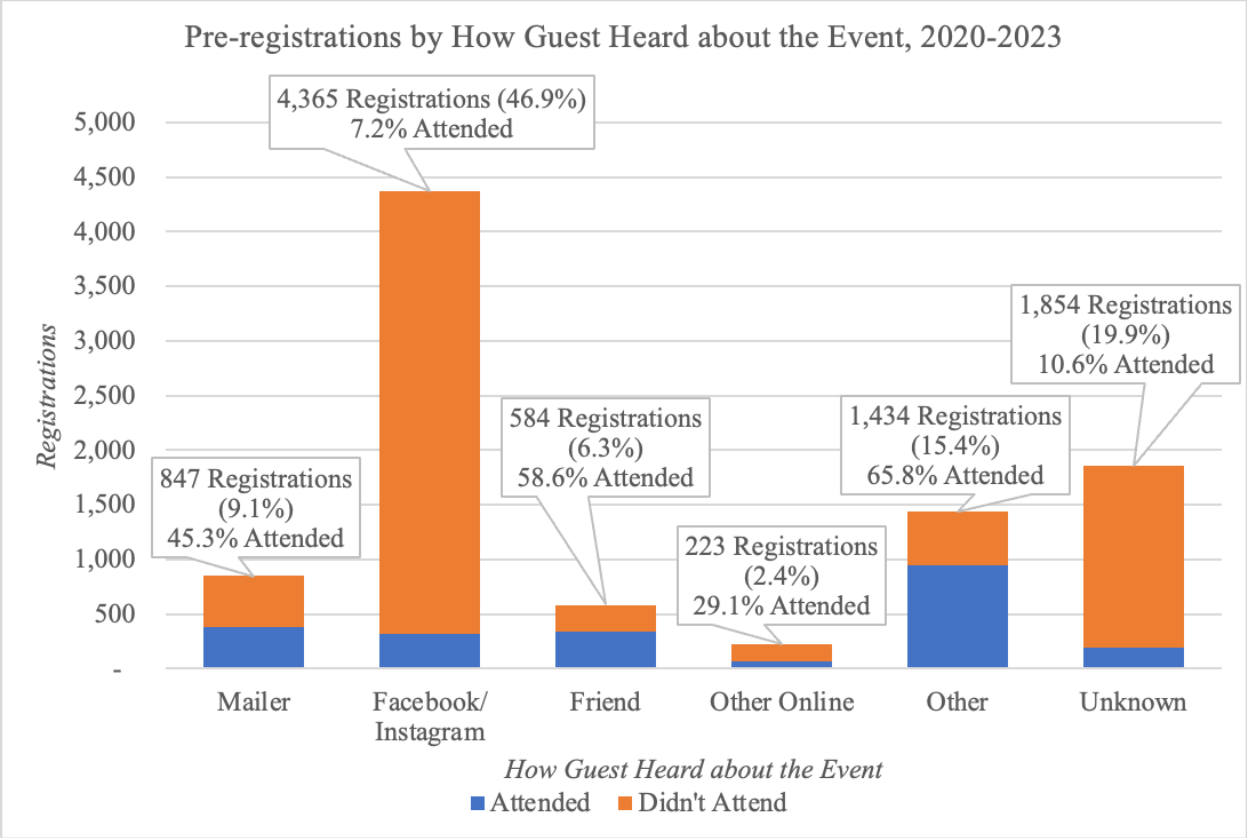
Pre-registrations by Registration Method, 2020-2023



When pre-registering, guests were asked how they heard about the event. Figure 6 shows pre-registrations broken down by how the guest self-reported that they heard about the event. This dropdown field included Mailer, Facebook/Instagram, Friend, Other Online (which included YouTube and Email), and Other. Of those who pre-registered, 19.9% of them left this field blank. Nearly half (46.9%) of the pre-registrants said they heard about the event from Facebook or Instagram, yet, because only 7.2% of them actually attended the event, this group represented a smaller number of attendees than those who heard about it from direct mail.

Figure 6

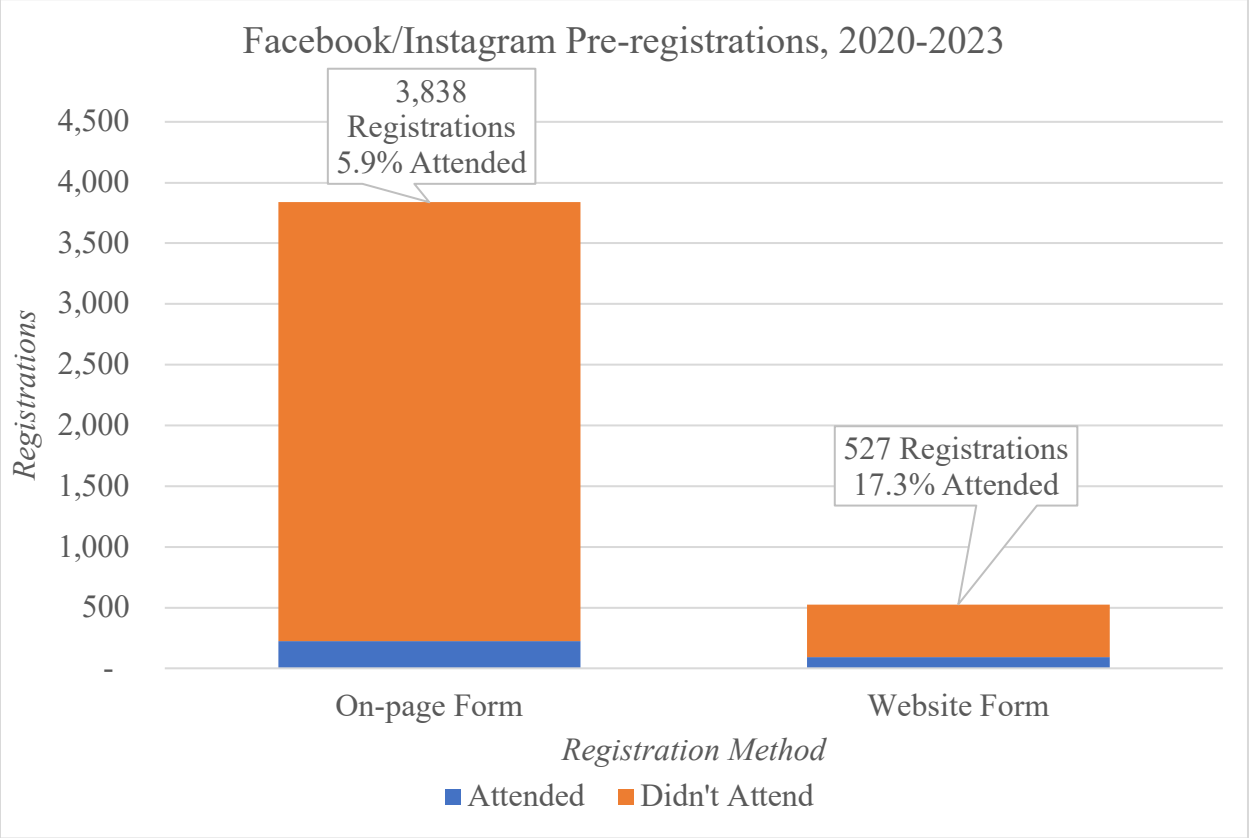
Pre-registrations by How Guest Heard about the Event, 2020-2023



There were a number of registrations that did not come from the Facebook/Instagram on-page form that indicated the guest heard about the event on Facebook or Instagram. Figure 7 shows all pre-registrations from people who heard about it on a Meta platform and compares attendance rates between people who registered on the website versus the on-page form.

Figure 7

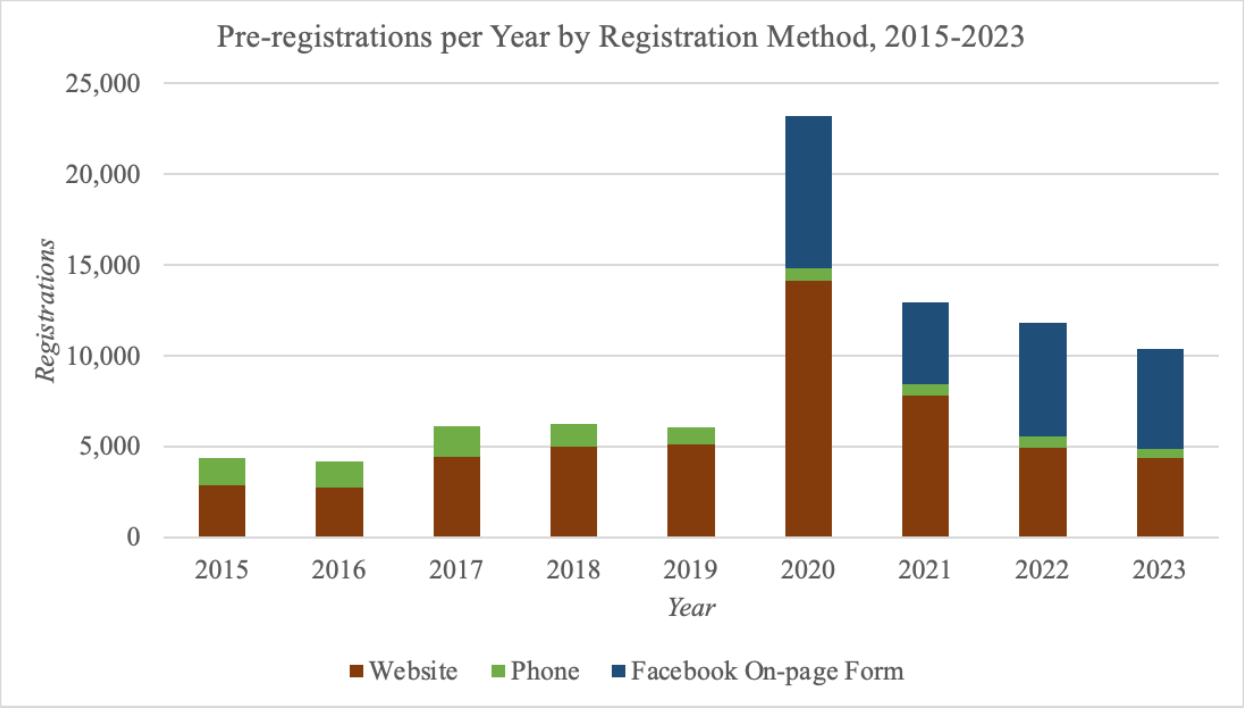
Facebook & Instagram Pre-registrations by Registration Method, 2020-2023



Data on registration source is available going back to the start of 2015, and Figure 8 shows the pre-registrations by year from 2015 to 2023. For each year, each of the registration types is indicated in the stacked bar graph. (Prior to 2020, the only two methods for registration were website and phone.)

Figure 8

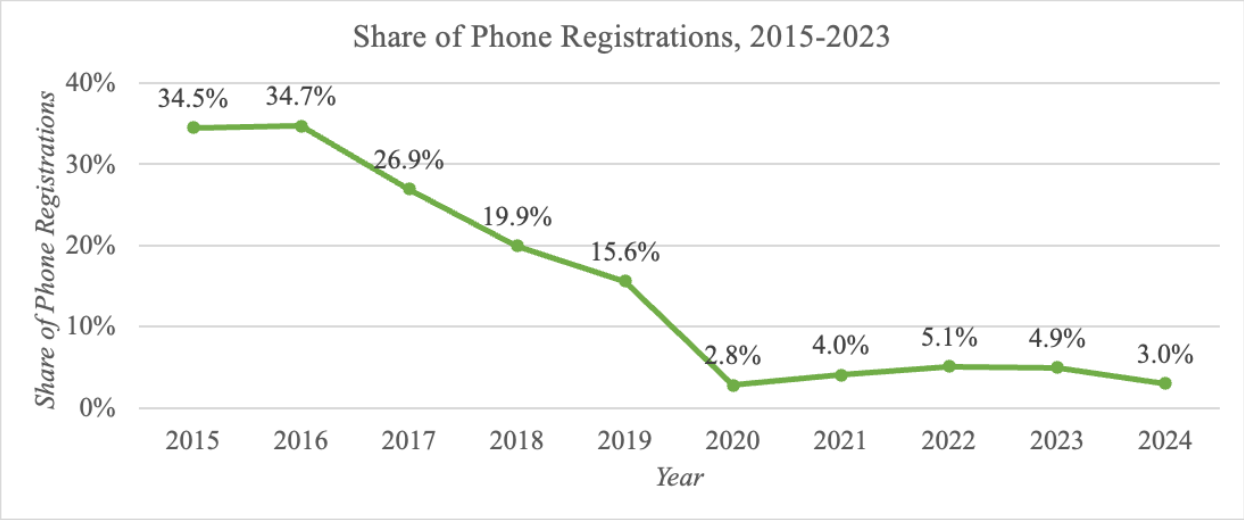
Pre-registrations per Year by Registration Method, 2015-2023



Drilling in specifically on phone registrations, the data show a downward trend in phone registrations between 2015 and 2019, as shown in Figure 9. The precipitous drop in 2020 was driven by the new on-page form on Facebook and Instagram, which caused a jump in overall pre-registrations.

Figure 9

Share of Phone Registrations by Year, 2015-2023



Discussion

The data show a significant difference in rates of attendance, based on the difficulty of the registration process. When someone receives a marketing flyer in the mail and wishes to reserve a seat, they must pull out an internet-connected device, type in the website, and enter their registration details. Those who register using the Facebook or Instagram on-page form, which automatically pre-populates the fields with the user's information, put forth significantly less effort. According to Cialdini's principle of commitment and consistency, this lower commitment should lead to lower rates of follow-through, and the data bear this out. Figure 5 shows that only 5.9% of those who registered using the on-page form actually attended the event, while 54.6% of those who registered using the event website registration form checked in to at least one meeting of the event. A small number completed their pre-registration by phone, which one would assume is an easier registration process for these guests than going to a website. Of these pre-registered guests, 42.3% actually attended at least one meeting.

In previous research, Witzel (2023) found that the median cost of a registration from events marketed only through direct mail was $538.89, while the media cost of a registration from events only marketed through social media advertising was $50.00. Using the attendance rates from this study, the cost per attendee who pre-registered from direct mail was $1,189.60 ($538.90 ÷ 45.3%), while the cost per attendee who pre-registered via the Facebook/Instagram on-page form was $847.46 ($50.00 ÷ 5.9%). This suggests that even though pre-registrations via the Meta on-page form attend at much lower rates, there is still value in including Facebook and Instagram in the advertising mix.

There were several limitations to the study. First, although SermonView has some data on over 6,000 evangelistic events, very few of these have corresponding attendance data. So while 119 represents the entire university of events with available data, this is actually a very small slice of potential data. Furthermore, the type of church using both the pre-registration platform and the InterestTracker CRM may have substantive variation from other churches who use one or neither of these tools. Finally, the event length and topic is likely to influence registration and attendance rates, as well as the clarity of communication of the value to potential participants. There is not enough data to slice this with any more granularity, such as by event length or topic.

Two suggestions for further research are offered. First, some additional commitment step should be added to the registration funnel, particularly for those who sign up via Meta platform advertising. Cialdini's principle of commitment and consistency suggests that additional small commitments, with some type of public view, could improve compliance with the ultimate goal of attendance at the event. This could be done by incentivizing registered guests to post publicly on social media or share the event to their friends via email. For example, a book or printed study

guide could be offered to those who send an email to 3 of their friends, stating, “I’m going to this event, and I hope you will, too.” Attendance rates could then be compared between those who share and those who don’t.

Second, an alternative yet complementary approach would be to call each person, particularly those who registered using the on-page form on Facebook or Instagram. Even if the caller couldn’t speak to the guest directly, leaving a voicemail would alert the guest that a real human is aware of the commitment they made, raising the apparent weight of the commitment. The data for these events could then be analyzed to determine if this intervention increased the rate of attendance.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to determine the historical pre-registration and attendance rates of participants of Seventh-day Adventist evangelistic events, measuring the variance in these rates between different marketing communication channels used. This quantitative research-based essay explored a dataset of pre-registrations and attendance to 119 of these evangelistic events. It found that people who put more effort into the pre-registration process attended at higher rates than those who registered using methods requiring lower effort, matching the expection of Cialdini’s persuasion principle of commitment and consistency. This helps to increase our understanding of how making a commitment to attend through pre-registration varies based on the difficulty of the pre-registration process. By using this data of the registration and attendance rates, church marketing practitioners will be better able to diagnose issues in the marketing funnel and measure how any modifications to this funnel impact these registration and attendance rates.

References

Adam, M., Wessel, M., & Benlian, A. (2021). AI-based chatbots in customer service and their effects on user compliance. *Electronic Markets, 31*(2), 427-445. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12525-020-00414-7

Anderson, S. (2014). It still works: Why public evangelism remains essential to the church's witness. *Ministry Magazine, 86*(2), 6-9. https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2014/02/it-still-works-why-public-evangelism-remains-essential-to-the-churchs-witness

Ball, L. (2023a, June 9). Are mailings still Effective? SermonView Evangelism Marketing. https://evangelismmarketing.com/2023/06/09/are-mailings-effective/

Ball, L. (2023b, October 17). *Case study results: How does direct mail hold up against digital advertising?* SermonView Evangelism Marketing. https://evangelismmarketing.com/2023/10/17/digital-advertising-study/

Burrill, R. (2018, April 22). *Myths of public evangelism* [Conference session]. EvangeLead Evangelism Conference. Vancouver, WA.

Cialdini, R. B. (2021). *Influence, new and expanded: The psychology of persuasion.* Harper Business.

Goss, B. D., Rothschild, P. C., & Hutson, M. M. (2021). Applying persuasion theory to sport properties' digital media. *Journal of Managerial Issues, 33*(3), 237-258. https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A674746207/GBIB

Grassini, A., Pascual, A., & Guéguen, N. (2013). The effect of the foot-in-the-door technique on sales in a computer-mediated field setting. *Communication Research Reports, 30*(1), 63-67. https://doi.org/10.1080/08824096.2012.746223

Hickson, M., Jones, M., Morse, M. A., & Wilson, B. A. (2013). Foot in the door: A typology of salesmen. *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication, 14*(1), 35-43. https://doi.org/10.1080/17459435.2013.835340

Jiang, K., Qin, M., & Li, S. (2022). Chatbots in retail: How do they affect the continued use and purchase intentions of Chinese consumers? *Journal of Consumer Behaviour, 21*(4), 756-772. https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.2034

New American Standard Bible. (2020). The Lockman Foundation. https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-American-Standard-Bible-NASB/#publisher

New Living Translation. (2015). Tyndale House Foundation. https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-Living-Translation-NLT-Bible/#publisher

Parker, A., & Charvat, E. (2019). Adventist millennials' perceptions of traditional evangelism. In S. J. Kidder & G. Oudri (Eds.), *Reach out! Relevant youth evangelism* (pp.75-84). AdventSource. https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1085&context=cye-pubs

Rahmani, V. (2023). Persuasion knowledge framework: Toward a comprehensive model of consumers' persuasion knowledge. *AMS Review, 13*(1-2), 12-33. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13162-023-00254-6

Rester, H. (2022). *Developing and testing concise evangelistic videos for Millennials and Generation Z in Columbia, Missouri* [Doctoral dissertation, Andrews University]. Digital Commons at Andrews University. https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/dmin/771/

Rester, H. (2023). Social media ad-based video outreach. *Ministry, 95*(6), 6-9. Retrieved July 5, 2023, from https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2023/06/Social-media-ad-based-video-outreach

SermonView. (n.d.-a). *InterestTracker | Manage your interest list online.* InterestTracker. Retrieved February 18, 2024, from https://interesttracker.org/

SermonView. (n.d.-b). *See more people at your next event.* Event Registration Platform. Retrieved February 18, 2024, from https://eventregistrationplatform.com/

SermonView. (n.d.-c). *Together, let's grow the Kingdom.* Retrieved February 18, 2024, from https://www.evangelismmarketing.com

Walter, R. (2018). *Evangelism intelligence: Why Adventist churches grow differently.* Publisher Services: www.isbn-us.com

Whiting, D. (2022, January 9). Simple steps: Follow [Sermon video]. https://newheights.org/messages/watch-live/?sapurl=Lys0bXk0L2xiL21pLytxNzdodHM2P2VtYmVkPXRydWUmcmVjZW50Um91dGU9YXBwLndlYi1hcHAubGlcmFyeS5saXN0JnJlY2VudFJvdXRlU2x1Zz0lMkJqaGYyajRk

Whitty, M. T. (2023). Drug mule for love. *Journal of Financial Crime, 30*(3), 795-812. https://doi.org/10.1108/JFC-11-2019-0149

Witzel, L. D. (2023, August 13). *Channel complementarity in marketing communication for proclamational evangelistic events* [Unpublished manuscript]. School of Communication and the Arts, Liberty University. https://larrywitzel.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Channel-Complementarity-in-Evangelism-Marketing.pdf