

Should I Buy from Non-Christians?



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Last month we discussed [AJAX](#) in the most technical article I've yet written for *Christian Computing*. If it was too programming-centric for your tastes, don't worry, this month I'm tackling a topic which may be the least technical I've yet written for this magazine.

Where Do You Shop?

This series is about the lessons learned in launching *Hschooler.net*. We characterize it as an online ministry/business and we describe it as "a social network for Christian families." It's run by Christians and it's our hope that Christians would want to use our service rather than secular equivalents such as Facebook or MySpace. That would imply that I think Christians should buy from Christians rather than from non-Christians.

And yet, throughout this series, as I've talked about the decisions we've made, I don't think I've ever said that "we chose *x* over *y* because *x* is a Christian company and *y* isn't." Is that hypocritical of me?

I'm guessing my buying criteria aren't dramatically different from yours. I'm a busy professional having to live within a budget. From the products and services I buy I need excellence and value. I need excellence because if what I buy doesn't work as advertised, at the very least I waste time making it work the way I need; and at worst its failures reflect poorly on me and on my ministry/business. I'm too busy to have to overcome the failings of the products and services I buy. They also need to reflect good value – a fair price for what is provided because of the budget constraints within which I must operate.

That being said, my hope would be to have choices in the marketplace for the products and services that I buy that are top-notch quality at an excellent value and that are provided by Christians in business. Unfortunately, that's not often the case. In some categories (e.g. Church Management Systems, Bible Software, Church Website Design), by the nature of the product or service, it's going to turn out that the best quality/best value offers are likely to come from Christian businesses. But for products and services that appeal to a broad market it is much harder to find top quality and best value from explicitly Christian businesses.

Sometimes there will be a "Christian business" offering a solution, but the quality isn't as high as the market leader's, or the price represents a significant premium over the competitive market price. When should we be willing to settle for lower quality or to pay the premium?

In my (admittedly, not formalized) vendor selection process, I've developed four questions that I apply in evaluating whether or not to buy from a non-Christian business:

1. Does doing business with this company represent a spiritual risk to me or my constituents?
2. Does doing business with this company create a ministry/witnessing opportunity?

3. By supporting this business, am I supporting activities that are counter to the Glory of God?
4. By supporting this business, am I supporting activities that further the Kingdom?

Spiritual Risks

In Matthew 10:16, when He was sending out his twelve apostles, Jesus told them “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” (ESV)

The most important question to ask is whether doing business with a given company introduces unnecessary temptation to sin for you or for those that will be exposed to them by your choice. As with any risk, we need to consider the likelihood of the risk becoming a failure and you need to consider the opportunities to mitigate the risk – are there things you can do to eliminate or minimize the risk.

Each of us has our areas of weakness. Most men are liable to the temptation of lust, but only some men are tempted to drink excessively. You must recognize your own weaknesses and make appropriate choices. If doing business with a certain company will expose you to an area of weakness for you, you should be very cautious.

However, in some cases, there are ways you can mitigate the risk. As a simple example, cable television networks carry a wide range of programming. Some of it is quite edifying

for believers. Much of it is not, and some of it systematically attacks our defenses against sin. However, there are a variety of steps you can take to mitigate the risks. For starters, I wouldn't recommend Christians subscribe to channels like The Playboy Channel. For some cable systems, you can also block certain channels so they don't even show up in your program guide. Either through the cable set top box or through your TV you probably can also block programming based on the content rating system. You can also take non-technical steps to mitigate risks, such as choosing to never watch television alone if you feel you are particularly vulnerable to the temptations represented by television content. If you feel the risks are too great and the mitigation steps are insufficient, you may choose to use a Christian provider like Sky Angel instead of cable, or you may choose to bypass television entirely.

However, when we think about our ministry or business, we need to think more broadly than ourselves and our specific temptations. We must recognize that our constituents, most likely, are subject to every temptation known to man. In choosing a particular vendor, are we causing our brothers and sisters to sin? Are we exposing them to risks and threats unnecessarily?

Witnessing Opportunities

Jesus sent his apostles to be in the world, but not of the



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world. So it is with us. If we are in the world, we have the opportunity to represent Christ to those around us by our actions and sometimes by our words.

In considering a particular non-Christian supplier, I often ask whether, by doing business with them, I will have the opportunity to witness to them, either through representing un-worldly integrity and grace, or perhaps even have the opportunity to share the Gospel with them.

To be honest, most of the companies that I do business with these days do not provide this opportunity. I fill out a form online to initiate the relationship and have an automatic debit against my credit card each month for payment.

Supporting the Ungodly

As I consider non-Christian vendors, I try to discern what other activities they participate in and whether I want to be supporting, with my payments, those activities.

For example, when considering hosting companies, I look at the companies they list as references. I also carefully read their terms of service. Do they allow their services to be used for pornography or gambling? Do they list as reference accounts tobacco or alcohol companies (and by doing so, promote these businesses)?

Promoting the Kingdom

On the other hand, as I consider vendors, is a Christian supplier taking some of his proceeds and directly investing in the advancement of God's kingdom? By spending my money with that vendor, is my business contributing to that work?

Balancing it All Out

Having considered those four criteria, it's unlikely that any single vendor selection process is going to result in one clear-cut winner. Some vendors will represent higher quality. Some will represent better value. Some may represent a witnessing opportunity. Others may be investing to advance the Kingdom. Balancing all of these factors out to choose one supplier may not be easy.

Thankfully, we aren't alone in making hard decisions. This is when we turn to prayer and seek the Spirit's leading to make a wise decision, and praise God that he is really the one in control of it all.

Russ McGuire is an executive for a Fortune 100 company and the founder/co-founder of three technology start-ups. His latest entrepreneurial venture is Hschooler.net (<http://hschooler.net>), a social network for Christian families (especially home-schoolers) which is being built and run by four homeschooled students under Russ' direction.



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