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Despite the fact that people’s lives are becoming more complicated, that we seek adventure and experiences to a greater degree, and the notion of success and significance motivates many people, the life outcomes that portray us as “successful” are surprisingly few in number. According to the results of a new survey by the Barna Research Group, of Ventura, California, most people’s view of success can be narrowed down to one of five substantive outcomes.

Defining A Successful Life

Nearly one-third of all adults (32%) said that their life would be a success if they were able to have a strong family unit, a solid and lasting marriage or if they had done a good job of raising their children. Naming family life as the primary success factor was most common among Catholics (38%) and people with children under 18 (44%). This factor was least likely to top the list among African-Americans (19%) and people associated with non-Christian faiths (21%).

Not far behind was some indication of tangible accomplishment during one’s life. Mentioned as the primary reflection of success by one-fourth of the population, this most often entailed financial accumulation, educational achievement or making a difference in the world. This view was most often held by adults under age 35 and by people associated with a faith other than Christianity.

One out of every seven adults (14%) stated that success was due to personal emotional fulfillment. This was most often reflected in obtaining a prestigious job or achieving a state of happiness or satisfaction with life. Emotional fulfillment was generational in nature. Baby Busters (adults 37 or younger) were twice as likely as Baby Boomers (i.e., adults 38 to 56 years of age) and three times more likely than Elders (people 57 or older) to cite emotional satisfaction as their yardstick of success. Faith views also impacted this outcome, as evidenced by 27% of atheists and agnostics citing emotional fulfillment factors, compared to just 8% of evangelical Christians.

Similar and smaller numbers of people said that success was a result of spiritual experiences or development (7%) or experiencing good health (8%). Catholics were twice as likely as Protestants or people of non-Christian faiths to cite good health as their measure of success. Spirituality was most frequently cited by evangelicals. In fact, nearly half of the evangelical group (43%) equated spiritual development with success – six times the national norm.

Also of significance was the finding that one-quarter of the adult population has no idea what would make their life successful. This lack of clarity regarding success was most prevalent among people 55 or older and among individuals who had never attended college. Such a viewpoint was least common among evangelicals.

Faith Impacts Success Definitions

The study revealed that different faith groups had significantly divergent views of success. For instance, family health, faith development and making a difference in the world combined to reflect the success factors of nearly nine out of ten evangelicals (86%). That dwarfed the figures associated with non-evangelical born again Christians (47%), self-described Christians who are not born again (40%), atheists (33%), and people aligned with a non-Christian faith (29%). Similarly, about half of all Protestants (49%) and Catholics (47%) indicated that this parcel of factors would fit their concept of life success.

One clear pattern was that the younger a person is, the less likely they are to identify their spiritual condition as the determinant of success. Baby Busters were only half as likely as Boomers and just one-third as likely as Elders to identify spiritual development as the key to personal success.

Implications for Churches

This research was conducted in preparation for a day-long seminar that will be conducted for church leaders by researcher George Barna. The *Leading Your Church Forward* seminar, which he will lead in 24 markets around the nation starting in January 2003, will address four significant issues facing churches, regarding worldview development, ministry to children, cultural and spiritual trends and leadership challenges. In relation to this research, the author of 33 books noted, “Americans are interested in spiritual matters and invest time and money in religious activity, but it’s shocking how few of those people make the connection between spiritual wholeness and life success. The fact that a mere 10% of the non-evangelical born again Christians define success in relation to faith suggests that what’s missing is more than better sermons, more comfortable sanctuaries or a greater number of professional staff at the typical church. People continue to divorce their faith from their self-image and their assessment of personal significance.”


Barna is completing nearly \$500,000-worth of primary research that will serve as the basis for the seminar presentations. He stated that when the success data are placed in context, the results are disappointing but not surprising. “Most people do not come to church to develop a worldview, most churches are not focused on providing one, and most individuals draw their worldview from cultural sources without even realizing that they are being impacted in such a foundational way. Given that, it’s no wonder that only 7% say success is related to our relationship with God and how we use the talents He gave us to experience and affect the world.”

Nevertheless, Barna indicated that the survey findings provide a ray of hope for church leaders. “If we understand how people view success, then we have an opportunity to ask questions that may cause people to re-think some of their assumptions. In this case, we can certainly be pleased that family or world impact is meaningful to so many people, and can then build on those foundations to help people think through why those factors have any significance at all. Ultimately, the importance of such factors relates to their spiritual foundations. Recognizing the status of such issues gives us entrée to talk about things that people already perceive to be of significance, and to add true value to existing notions.”

Research Methodology

The data described in this report are based on a national telephone survey among a random sample of adults (age 18 or older) living within the 48 continental states. The survey was conducted in October 2002 among 1004 adults. The maximum margin of sampling error associated with the aggregate national sample is estimated to be ±3.2 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. (The sampling error for subgroups may be higher because the sample size of those segments is smaller. There are other types of error besides sampling error that may also be present in surveys.) All of the interviews were conducted from the Barna Research Group telephone interviewing facility in Ventura, CA. The distribution of the survey respondents coincided with the geographic dispersion of the U.S. adult population according to Census Bureau estimates. Multiple callbacks were used to increase the probability of including a reliable sample of adults.

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Related Research

Survey Shows Faith Impacts Some Behaviors But Not Others

People's faith affects some aspects of their behavior but not all of it, according to a new survey released by the Barna Research Group (Ventura, California). The nationwide study examines 25 behaviors in seven different dimensions of life. The findings also pointed out that of the seven dimensions examined - economics, influence, technology, service, lifestyle, health and morality - the areas in which the greatest differences were found related to morals and service.