

# Keys to Enrolling Those Hard-to-Fill Spaces

by Julie Wassom

Do you ever say things like...

“If I could just fill those T/Th spaces in the Three’s, I could reach my enrollment goal.”

“How am I going to replace those four-year-olds who left when the nearby public elementary school opened a pre-K classroom for less tuition and in the same location as their older siblings?”

“How can I compete with the neighborhood private school that tells parents the only way to secure a space in kindergarten is to attend their preschool?”

Parental preference, competition, and influential marketing tactics can make filling your school challenging. Rather than lament the loss of what used to be dependable enrollment, marketing-

savvy directors take a strategic approach to enrolling those hard-to-fill spaces. You hold the reins for influencing parents’ choices. This does not necessarily mean marketing harder or doing more of what you have always done. It means simply doing some things differently. Here is what works today.

## Identify “Why”

For those classes where you have space, identify the “why.” Let’s say your M/W/F preschool is full, but you still have plenty of room in your T/Th program. Why would a family want to consider this option when they really wanted M/W/F? Tap into your own early childhood development expertise. For parents of three-year olds, the following might be typical advantages of enrolling in a T/Th program:

- this age is a key time to learn self-regulation, a focus of your program
- higher positioning on wait list for M/W/F or FT program
- family gets more time for long weekends
- mom gets a needed sanity break

- eligible to attend parent events free or at lower cost

For this decision, you may also need to help the parent understand how hard it can be for the child to go from Thursday to the next Tuesday without being at the center, and that full time is a better option for the child. When cost is the issue, you may need to make them aware of scholarships or encourage them to investigate the possibility of their employers providing funds for child care within their benefit programs.

With this knowledge in your arsenal, you will position yourself as a helpful expert and be much better prepared to help parents make a good enrollment decision.

Ultimately, the business decision for you may be whether offering a T/Th program is the best way to maximize your capacity utilization, especially if you have enough market demand to limit that program to full-time only.

## Know Your Competition

Understanding your competition goes far beyond learning hours and prices. You cannot guess or assume you know

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how parents are perceiving your competitors throughout the enrollment selection process. Three places to learn more about how your prospects perceive your competition are:

1. Website—Though word-of-mouth is still a primary way parents hear about you, nearly all of them also investigate on the internet (coined, “word-of-mouse,” by industry tech expert, Chip Donahue). Big Commerce 2017 Online Shopping Trends found that parents spend 75 percent more time shopping online than non-parents. What about your competitor’s website engages enrollment prospects and encourages them to take action to inquire? Does it have a link to a short form they can complete and submit to get more information or schedule a visit? If you submit the form, how quickly do you get a response? How does that compare to *your* website?

2. Telephone—When you (or a parent volunteer) call a competitive center, does a person answer or do you get a voice mail message? If a person answers, what feeling or first impression do you get from the greeting? Are you asked personal questions about your needs? Are you merely invited to come in or asked to commit to a time to visit the center and told whom you will meet and what you will see while there? What follow up does the director tell you she will initiate to help you make this important decision?

3. Center visit—Whether you visit as a colleague or have a member of your staff or parent committee visit as a mystery shopper, an on-site visit to a competitive center can give you volumes of information about how you can make your school unique and appealing to parents. At a minimum, look for three impressions from a parent’s perspective:

- What appears to be nearly the same at this center versus your center?
- What is better at this competitor than at your school? It can be as simple as easier access off the commuter route or a longer-tenured staff.
- What might parents perceive is less desirable at this school than at yours? This could be hours, quality ranking, curriculum, teacher tenure, cleanliness, ancillary programs or parent events.

As you gather competitive information, note which features will be most important to parents of your hard-to-fill programs as they investigate options and consider a few schools to visit. What will be their key decision-making factors? For these, how would you rank in their perception?

### Know Your Basic Competitive Advantages

These are what I call your “BCAs.” They are those unique features of your center, staff, program, and service that families can only get from you. Take some time to clearly identify what is unique about you. Some you will already know, such as longer hours than the day school, or use of an app for parent communications that your competitors do not use. Your competitive research will help you identify others. You can also ask your staff and current families.

Next, take your list of BCAs and define the benefits of each one—what parents gain from them. Focus on those that really matter to the program you are trying to fill. For example, if long-tenured teachers give you a competitive advantage over the public school pre-K, three benefits the child gets from that are stability, the teacher’s knowledge of child development, and the higher level

of kindergarten readiness a teacher with experience can deliver.

Once you know the benefits of key BCAs, learn to articulate them in benefit statements. Doing so can give you an edge in encouraging parents to visit your center and enroll. Rather than stating only features, such as “Our teacher in the four-year-old room has been here for five years,” articulate this BCA as a benefit statement by saying something like, “Since Miss Alexa has been teaching this class for five years, Bryanna will get a stable environment with a higher level of early childhood education to prepare her for kindergarten.”

If this is hard to master, or you find you are still listing features (what you offer versus what they get), refer to my Exchange article, “How BCAs Impact Enrollment,” for practical tips and examples.

### Offer Value-added Services

What do you know busy parents want or need beyond quality, reliable care and early education? Which of these needs could you fulfill to differentiate yourself from their other ECE choices? This might be parenting education or opportunities for family engagement. One of my client centers offers a series of parenting classes once per month. Only enrolled families are eligible to attend. They receive training, guest speakers, and additional practical tips throughout the month. Though attendance started out a little low, the word has quickly spread that these are really helpful and worth the time. Classes have grown and prospects see it as a unique advantage of enrolling there, even if it means they start with the Tuesday/Thursday program for their three-year-old.

What can you do to make yourself an invaluable resource parents can trust?

Because selecting child care is often a feelings-based decision, building this kind of trust and credibility can make eligible prospects feel you are the better choice.

### Run a Referral Program Incentive

For a short period of time, add an incentive to your existing parent referral program to increase referrals to classes where you have significant space. Then promote the incentive in multiple venues. For example, if your ongoing referral program gives \$100 in tuition credit to any referring family, your incentive to build kindergarten enrollment might offer a \$200 tuition credit to any family who refers a new family who enrolls their child in your kindergarten by (pick a date no more than two months out).

For this kind of incentive, some schools have found it beneficial to allow the enrolling family to also receive a perk, such as waiving the registration fee if registered by the deadline date.

### Market for Referrals in Other Channels Parents Use

Untapped opportunities for marketing for inquiries are everywhere, many of them in messages delivered electronically and on mobile devices. Where do you find the best places to attract the specific prospects you need? Begin by asking your parents and prospects.

Ask every prospect, "What are the ways you heard about us?" In classes where you need enrollment, ask current families where they looked for reviews and referrals. Go beyond the "From a friend" response to exactly where they learned about you. Was it from a neighborhood Facebook group, a Moms and Me event at the library, a local pediatrician, or a specific online newsletter? Log their responses into a tracking system or customer relationship

management system. Then use the data to select opportunities for generating inquiries from both inside and outside your center and community.

Perhaps you have a parent willing to post a notice in their private Facebook group about a bring-a-friend event on keys to kindergarten readiness, to be held at your preschool. Your event will feature your director and that long-tenured teacher (your BCA over the neighborhood public school pre-K). A local hospital newsletter may be willing to post your "coffee with the expert" event when the guest expert is their on-staff pediatric nurse or social worker. Check to see if there is a community website in your area targeted to families with young children, on which you can post upcoming events or parenting blogs that would appeal to parents with children the ages you need to enroll. With a little digging, you will find avenues beyond your own ads, website, and Facebook page that will reach the parents you need.

### Use Retargeted Marketing

Research from business consultant Sam Ovens indicates that only 2 percent of website traffic is ready to make a buying decision when they first visit your website. What happens to the other 98 percent? To help assure more of them continue to consider you, it is important to repeatedly stay in front of those visitors at various stages of their investigation cycle. "You must communicate your unique message in a relevant and compelling way for your target audience to come back," says Andrew Jones, founder of The Child Care Inquiry Generator, a digital marketing system that retargets messages to enrollment prospects who visit your site seeking specific programs, such as pre-K, with messages customized to them. This periodic retargeting personalizes your touch points,

keeps you top-of-mind, and can lead to more inquiries.

### Practice Effective Enrollment Conversion Skills

Inquiries for hard-to-fill spaces will only become enrollments when you use effective conversion techniques. Review your conversion ratios of inquiries to center visits and tours to enrollments. Brush up on skill areas where you could improve performance, such as handling objections or asking for the enrollment. Seek training and coaching to improve the techniques most challenging to you. Then practice, practice, practice!

Use these keys to be strategic about marketing differently to generate inquiries where you still need enrollment. When you do so consistently and well, your hard-to-fill spaces will become full classrooms and before long, you will reach your capacity utilization goals.

