

Using Your Basic Competitive Advantage to Increase Enrollment

by Julie Wassom

In our industry filled with acronyms like DAP and FTE, I created one called BCA. “What do you mean by BCA?” you say. Your BCAs are your Basic Competitive Advantages — those unique features of your early care and education program and services that make you stand apart from your competitors. In general sales terms, these are called USPs, or unique selling propositions. Your BCAs should distinguish you from the other choices your enrollment prospects have available to them.

When I ask directors, “What are your Basic Competitive Advantages?,” many respond with features such as a high-quality program, a state-of-the-art facility, caring staff, brain-researched curriculum, good parent communication, long-tenured teachers, and so on. Yet when I ask, “How do these compare to your competitors?,” many cannot tell me other than to smile and say, “We

hope they are better.” *Hope* is not a marketing strategy.

Many child care choices can seem similar when parents see ads, receive mailings, and investigate companies online. Learning what truly differentiates you from those other competitive options — and then how to communicate your BCAs in a manner that is meaningful to your prospects — can mean more enrollment conversions and higher capacity utilization in your center.

There are three steps that will help you use your Basic Competitive Advantages to increase enrollment.

Step One: Determine your specific BCAs

Step Two: Define the benefits of your BCAs

Step Three: Articulate your BCAs in benefit statements

Step One: Determine Your Basic Competitive Advantages

It’s important to get a realistic view of what differentiates you from other child care options your enrollment prospects might investigate and select to visit. There are three ways you can do this. I recommend doing all three.

1. Make a list of your key features.

With your management team and select staff, first list all the features of your center, curriculum, staff, philosophy, and service delivery that you feel helps you deliver the kind of quality you profess. Expect their responses to give you the more general assumptions, such as quality program, long hours of operation, convenience, caring staff, etc.

Then take this another step by going through each feature listed and really dig for what makes each of these features truly special or unique to you. For example, if your team tells you one key feature is your quality program, ask, “What about our program makes it high quality?” or “What does our program give children that they may not get elsewhere?” This will help your team focus on what really differentiates you. Perhaps they will say you are the only accredited center within your draw radius, or your lead teachers all have a high level of professional development, or you believe in children learning through play, or your curriculum is nature-based. Note these responses by each originally-stated feature, because you are now getting to the heart of what your actual BCAs are.



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2. Do competitive shops. How can you know what your enrollment prospects are seeing, hearing, and experiencing at other centers if you have not done so yourself? Shop three aspects of each competitor — website, telephone inquiry, and center visit. Website and telephone inquiry can be anonymous. However, I recommend you schedule competitive center visits as a professional colleague versus visiting as a mystery shopper. To do this, you either schedule the visit or just drop in, introducing yourself as the director of your center and location, requesting a brief tour of their center, and inviting them to schedule a time to visit yours.

Shop no fewer than three and no more than five competitive programs in your area. Your goal for these shops is to determine your center's BCAs. Here is a great technique for doing that, but it requires that you take off your center director hat and approach these shops from the parent's perspective. Remember, a key strategy for successful enrollment building is to think in the prospect's perspective. Their perceptions, not yours, influence their buying decisions. So, are you ready for the technique? For each shop — website, telephone, or center visit — look for three features that center appears to provide as well as you do, from the parent's perspective. Then note three things each one does not do as well as you do. And last, look for three things each competitive center does better than you currently do, at least from the parent's perspective.

Be brutally honest. Here's an example in each category for competitive shops. Same as you . . . A competitive center may have a website with many of the same features as yours. Not done as well as you . . . When you call them in the role of a prospective enrollee, you are not asked to sched-

ule a specific time to come in for a center visit, nor are you asked for permission to follow up with you. (You consistently do both on each qualified inquiry call.) Could be perceived as better than you . . . When you stop by to visit the competitive center, you notice the entry is very clean, welcoming, and has a table with coffee and neatly-arranged materials about the center or of interest to parents. (Your entry could use some sprucing up.) When your shops are complete, review your lists of competitive features and use them to analyze what will be perceived as your BCAs by the enrollment prospects investigating all of you.

3. Conduct a post-visit survey. By emailing a carefully crafted, three-to-five question survey to those prospects who have visited your center, you can learn what they noticed to be the primary differences between you and other centers they visited. Which specific centers they visited in addition to yours is not as important as what they perceived about yours. Make sure your survey reaches these enrollment prospects within the first few days after their center visit. Also make it easy to complete and submit. Constant Contact and Survey Monkey offer easy-to-use surveys. Even though it is unlikely all of the surveys will be returned, if you structure the survey questions and attached message well, you will get enough responses to see patterns of what your prospects view as your BCAs.

Take the information you gathered from each of these efforts and compile it. What will emerge are the key features of your center's program and services that prospects perceive to be your Basic Competitive Advantages.

Merely knowing your BCAs is an important first step. However, it is not enough to assure they will positively impact

your conversions and retention. Taking your knowledge of features two more steps can make a world of difference in the influence these BCAs have on maximizing your enrollment. Here's where we move to Step Two.

Step Two: Define the Benefits of Your BCAs

Even though you now know what your key features, or BCAs are, you must convert them into benefits. Why? Because prospects do not purchase merely what you have to offer. They buy what those features will DO for their child and their family. So for each feature you now have on your BCAs list, you want to define what that feature MEANS to the prospective parent and child. What do they get from your features? This is the actual *benefit*. When you communicate your BCAs in benefit statements, it motivates your prospects to see what the true value of your services means to them compared to other choices. Sales professionals have long said, "People buy benefits, not features."

So how do you define the benefits of your BCAs? First, use the list of BCAs you have developed. For each BCA, determine what that feature means to the prospect. What will they get from you by having the feature you offer. For example, if one of your BCAs is long-tenured teachers, three benefits the child gets from that are stability, the teacher's knowledge of child development, and the higher level of early education a teacher with experience can deliver. List two or three benefits for each of your BCAs.

If this is hard to master, or you find you are still listing features (what you offer versus what they get), a tip I give managers when working directly with them on this topic is to ask yourself, "So what?"

For example, let's say one of your unique features is the use of the Reggio Emilia approach, which you describe as an educational system commonly recognized as one of the best programs for young children worldwide. Since you are the only one in your area using this philosophy, you have identified it as one of your BCAs. To define the benefits of this BCA, you might ask yourself, "So what does our using this approach MEAN to the child?"

The answer to that question will give you the benefits. For instance, your answer might be that the child-centered philosophy within the Reggio approach means the children use exploration and research to learn how to be creative and good problem solvers, which are skills you know your prospects want them to learn. That is what the child and family will GET; therefore, this is one benefit of your having the Reggio approach as a BCA.

So once you know the benefits for each of your Basic Competitive Advantages, how do you communicate them in statements that will present meaningful benefits to your prospects? This brings us to Step Three.

Step Three: Articulate Your BCAs in Benefit Statements

Mastering the enrollment conversion technique of stating benefits, versus features, is what I call 'the difference between telling and selling.' Features tell, benefits sell. So Step Three in using your Basic Competitive Advantages to increase enrollment is to learn to articulate your BCAs in good benefit statements.

Remember, these statements must tell your prospects what they get, or what your BCA means to them; not just what you have to offer or what the teachers and children do at your school. You want to communicate in such a way that

you create a word picture in your prospect's mind of their child in your school, causing them to feel a sense of peace of mind in the knowledge that they can get what they seek from your center.

For example, if you say, "The lead teacher is this preschool room has been here for seven years," you have only stated a feature, or fact, about your classroom. Even if this feature is a BCA, you have not yet communicated it to your prospect as a meaningful benefit to them. Your statement is all about you and does not include them. Nothing in this statement creates a word picture in the prospect's mind of their child being in this classroom.

If instead, you say, "The lead teacher in this preschool room has been here for seven years, so Aiden will have a great deal of stability and will get learning opportunities based on all her experience as a teacher of quality early care and education programs," you have made a good benefit statement. Why? Because you not only presented your BCA (long-term teacher), you expressed what that means to Aiden (the benefits of this BCA). The last phrase is the part that makes this a good benefit statement and will help this parent visualize Aiden enrolled in your school.

You may argue that your enrollment prospects are smart people and will know what your center's BCAs mean to them without you articulating what they get. Chances are, they will not. Even if they do, confirming that assumption in their minds by making good benefit statements will help them feel more confident that your center is the right place for their child.

Try these three techniques for articulating good benefit statements:

1. State the feature and add a phrase beginning with the word, "so . . .," to answer, "So what does that mean to the prospect or child?" The example above illustrates this technique.

2. Start with the word, "Because," then add the feature and finish your statement with the benefit phrase. "Because we open at 6:30 in the morning, it will be convenient for you to drop off Matteo on your way to work." Which part of this sentence puts the prospect in the word picture and tells them what they get? You're right! The final part.

3. Start your statement with the benefit phrase, "From us, you (or child's name) will get . . ." Then state the feature. "From us, Emma will get a wide variety of learning experiences and fun activities in her after-school program." There is a huge difference in prospect perception between this good benefit statement and stating this BCA as a feature only, such as, "We offer a wide variety of learning experiences and fun activities in our after-school program." The benefit statement describes what Emma gets from you. The feature statement tells only what you offer.

Articulating your BCAs in good benefit statements is all in *how* you say it. Go back to the benefits you developed in Step Two. Then practice using one or more of the techniques above to state the benefits when you describe each BCA, making sure your statement answers, "So what . . . does this mean to the prospect?"

When you have determined your Basic Competitive Advantages, defined the benefits of each BCA, and mastered articulating them in good benefit statements, you are well on your way to converting more prospect calls and visits into enrollments. Your potential customers will more easily see what separates you from your competition. They will clearly understand how your BCAs can address their needs and concerns. And they will appreciate your knowledgeable approach to helping them make the best choice for their child and their family. And you will never again think about "So what . . .?" in the same way.

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