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## Marketing strategies for building enrollment

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# How to Be Bullish on Marketing Child Care in a Challenging Economy

by Julie Wassom

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*It's 1992. The economy is stressed, at best. Some of your parents have fallen into the pool of rising unemployment, forcing them to seek alternate forms of child care. The competition continues to invade your potential market share, particularly the government sponsored and public school programs. Bad press raises parental anxiety and child care service expectations. It seems that enrollment has never been tougher to get and keep. "For profit centers and independent non profit centers, centers primarily dependent on parent fees, are experiencing the most serious enrollment problems" ("Dateline Child Care," **Exchange**, January/February 1992). In today's challenging marketplace, how do you market your school, maintain high enrollment, and continue to provide high quality care at an affordable fee?*

*Even in a challenging economy, some child care companies emerge as leaders. They have not merely been lucky, or discovered the magic elixir for enrollment building success. There is no magic, and the days of filling your child care center without really working at it are over. A common thread of success among all the child care leaders is that they employ the following five specific marketing directives for building enrollment in the 90's:*

- **Focus**

Now is the time to segment your market more than ever before. Decide exactly whom you are serving, whom you want to serve, and how you want to do it. Look first at the family of parents you are

currently serving. What are their ages, income levels, professional positions?

What is the geographical draw radius of your center? Get a map enlargement of your local area. Use pins with colored heads to locate

exactly where your children come from, and what your geographical draw radius looks like. Has competition forced you to expand that radius? If so, how can you provide a unique service or program that will attract new parents? As you examine your new draw radius, look for major employers who may be interested in child care assistance for employees. Or perhaps there is a private elementary school that has no kindergarten and you do. Or a nearby Head Start program interested in leasing building space? Be open to options.

Then look beyond demographic characteristics to lifestyle, or psychographic, information. What are your parents' preferences for leisure time, reading materials, the way they live? What do they believe about academic versus nonacademic early childhood development? Since many parents want their children cared for by a child care provider who has similar values to their own, it is imperative that you know what those values are. Only then can you adjust your program and child care service to truly be the best choice for the markets you want to serve.

Whether you obtain this information through casual observation, parent

surveys or focus groups, or other research methods, it provides excellent current data upon which to build a more focused marketing communications program. Develop a tightly targeted marketing message, communicate it through the channels that reach the highest number of your target audiences, and track which methods generate the most qualified enrollment inquiries.

Remember, most people are exposed to over 1800 commercial messages a day! For that target group of parents you want to enroll, your message has to hit the bulls-eye!

- **Positioning**

Positioning is the impression created in the minds of your customers and prospects by the image you communicate. Sometimes that impression has no real base in reality. For instance, a major airlines learned in a customer survey that passengers who found the tray tables dirty immediately assumed that the engines were not well maintained. In a feelings-based business like child care, your parents want to feel they can trust you. To enroll or remain as customers, they need to believe that you will do what you say you will.

What can make the difference between how you and one of your competitors are positioned in your prospect's mind are often not the big things like convenience, staff tenure, or program. Look carefully at the little things around your center. Does it smell good when parents first walk in? Are enrollment or special program banners left hanging for weeks with one corner torn and flapping in the breeze? Is someone always up front to greet parents at regular pick-up and drop-off times?

You, as the director, can distinguish your center, if you position yourself as not only the manager of your school, but as a helpful professional expert. A center in Las Vegas was looking for unique positioning in its increasingly competitive marketplace. The director decided to run a *Child Care Hotline* column in the monthly newsletter she distributes to parents, prospective enrollees, and local businesses. In each issue she publishes the center's number, hotline calling hours (when she knows she'll be there to take calls), and her response to a question she received the previous month. This technique markets her as a professional expert, an available child care resource, and a manager in touch with her market's need. That's good positioning! And the benefit to her is that, with almost every hotline call, she has a chance to subtly market the services of her specific center.

- **Urgency**

As you develop messages to generate enrollment, think urgency. When parents become confused by the wide variety of child care options available or the capabilities brochures that all sound the same, they often respond well to a marketing message that gives them a reason to take immediate action. And for a potential enrollee, what is that action? Usually it's a telephone inquiry call.

Take a look at the action-oriented messages used by other successful service businesses and see if an adaptation would be appropriate for you. United Airlines does not say, "We are the friendliest airline in the sky." Instead, they create urgency by saying, "Fly the friendly skies of United."

I recently drove by two similar looking child care centers, each with

an enrollment banner posted near the front door. The banner on the first center said, "Now Enrolling. Quality Child Care." The one on the second school read, "Enroll Now. Limited Space Available."

Thinking in the perspective of a prospective parent anxious to make the best child care decision, yet faced with little time to do it, it was easy to choose which center I would call first. The second banner created a sense of urgency in me that said, "That program must be filling fast. I'd better investigate it soon." Whether it would actually be the best program for my child or not remains to be seen. However, the urgency in the marketing message is what generated that important inquiry action.

- **Perceived Value**

A trainer colleague of mine once told me that value had very little to do with money in the minds of my customers. When I asked him to clarify that, he said, "Value is when your customer receives more than they expected when they least expect it."

In the child care business, it is easy to add value to the wonderful things you do for children and the services you provide parents. The key to doing so is in how you personalize your enrollment interactions and your customer relations.

Let's say that during an inquiry call from a prospective parent you arrange to send them some information about your school. Instead of closing the conversation by saying, "If you have any questions, feel free to call," say instead, "I'll give you a few days to look over this information. Then I'll give you a call to see what questions I can answer for you at that point. Would Wednesday or Thursday afternoon of next week be a better time to call you?" You have

initiated the follow up, and this gives you a valid reason to recontact that prospect. To gain perceived value for your service in the mind of that prospect, make the follow-up call as scheduled. Acknowledge the importance of the child care decision, and ask the parent what help you can give her now. If she has not yet set up a scheduled visit, this may be a good time to do so.

Because so few center directors really do this, it is the call itself that gives that prospect more than they expected when they least expect it. It makes that parent feel you care, you are attentive, you ethically do what you say you will do, and you are a true child care professional. If you add value to your relationship with your parents and prospects, they will believe that you will give it to their children.

Other ways to add perceived value include giving parents a small appreciation letter or gift when they become your customer or when they have been with you for a year. Being flexible with a parent who has a scheduling problem can generate good feelings and loyalty. Again, it's the small things that will distinguish you as the most personal, caring, and professional.

The cost to you for adding perceived value is primarily time and that extra call or face-to-face conversation and smile when you're exhausted. The payback is parent retention, increased enrollment, and more referrals from impressed parents and opinion influencers.

### • **Cost Effectiveness**

I am often asked what percentage of total child care company revenue should be spent on marketing. My answer is, "That depends." Although there is a range that a child care marketing budget usually falls

within, the amount you allocate depends upon a number of factors specific to your situation. The age of your school, the impact of competition on enrollment, the vehicles you choose to communicate your message, and what you categorize as a marketing expenditure are just a few of the determinants of how your marketing dollars are spent.

What is consistent about marketing budgets in a challenging economy is that those dollars must achieve maximum cost effectiveness. In the maze of marketing choices, what do you do to get the most return for your investment?

First, have a marketing plan. Make sure it includes an analysis of your current situation, potential growth markets, and an action plan. Your action plan should be your working blueprint — complete with specific activities, personnel responsible, timelines, budgets, and evaluation systems. There is truth in the adage, "If you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there."

Next, build *reach and frequency* into your existing marketing activities and tools. Determine how you can reach more of your target audiences more often without dramatically increasing expenses. The TenderCare Learning Cooperative in Tucker, Georgia, purchased a 4 'x 8' lighted reader-board along a highway near the center. Every week, the 30,000 people driving by see the name and telephone number of the school and a new message, such as "This week's sign brought to you by the letter Q, for Quality" or "Preschool education begins a lifetime of success." Eighty percent of the school's inquiries say they saw the sign.

Put a Guest Register in the entrance of your center, and request that all visitors sign in as a safety measure. Later, mail these visitors a newsletter

or center event invitation with a brief personal note attached.

Make sure everyone in your center has business cards. For staff, have cards printed with a blank line at the bottom, so each member of your faculty can have a personal set of cards to sign and hand out. Thoughtful distribution of business cards can make them your most cost-effective marketing tool.

Keep your advertising copy consistent. The same ad copy could be used in the Yellow Pages, a newspaper ad, and a corporate newsletter, with minimal additional production cost. Consider advertising in a child care supplement or with other local non-competitive providers, then negotiate a better media placement price.

Publicity is often more cost effective than advertising in communicating your center's image. An article or photo covering a unique, timely event at your school can generate good will and understanding about your child care program that would be very difficult to attain through advertising. The *third party endorsement* good publicity gives you helps build the trust that parents and prospects want to have in their child care situation. If public relations and community involvement are not currently an active part of your marketing program, you are missing one of the most cost-effective methods of marketing in the 1990's.

Even the most successful marketing program will not generate enrollment. Marketing generates inquiries and referrals. People generate enrollment. Most parents want to begin to develop a relationship with the director, and sometimes their child's teacher, before they enroll. A critical step in maximizing your marketing dollars is training your director (and any staff responsible

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for helping to build and retain enrollment) in a personalized but consistent enrollment building process.

If your marketing methods generate inquiries, but those calls and visits are not converted into the highest number of enrollments possible, training on enrollment building may be the most cost effective marketing move you make.

Taking the bull by the horns to market your child care services in a challenging economy is far from impossible. Thoughtful preparation, careful consideration of these marketing directives, and attentive follow through will help you and your center emerge as a child care leader and the provider your parents and prospects choose for their children.

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