

Marketing When Your Creativity is High and Your Budget is Low

by Silvana Clark

Early childhood centers frequently look for easy ways to promote and market their facilities and programs. Often the day-to-day logistics of scheduling teachers, ordering supplies, and communicating with parents leaves little time for formal marketing, so creative ideas are needed. Directors, possibly you, hold back, waiting for a bigger budget or more time to market, yet possibilities arise every day to let people know about your facility.

An ad in the yellow pages and a few flyers posted at the library may get some results, but there are numerous other ways to let the public know about your center. Marketing opportunities abound. When the bank teller asks about "Sunshine Fun Center," it's a great opportunity to tell about your child care programs and leave a business card.

You do have business cards, don't you? Many early childhood programs overlook this basic low cost promotional tool. Business cards convey a quality image, letting people know you consider yourself a professional. Some centers provide all employees with personalized business cards. For many entry level teachers, it may be the first time they have received a business card. Their enthusiasm helps market your program as they show people their cards.

As prospective parents consider placing their child in your program, your center stands out if they have one of your business cards. Rather than trying to remember the name and phone number of each place they visit, parents can easily refer to your card. Business cards reflect your philosophy and management style. Invest in two color printing and distinctive graphics to have a first class image, emphasizing your first class program.

Plan a community event such as a garage sale or children's concert. Make signs to inform people that you are the sponsoring group. It's surprising how many people will come to your facility for a garage sale and say, "I live right down the street, but I never knew this was a preschool. My neighbor is looking for a program for her three year old. I'll be sure and tell her about this place."

One child care center sponsored a children's toy exchange that over 200 people attended. All adults received a colorful brochure about the child care program. In addition, photographs of daily activities were in full view. After the event, three new children enrolled.

Another center received publicity when their students went "Pumpkin Caroling" in costumes. Many early childhood programs visit nursing homes at Christmas, but caroling at Halloween is a unique activity that merits newspaper coverage.

Contact local Rotary and Lion's clubs, volunteering to be a guest speaker. They appreciate knowing the services you provide to the community, especially if you offer reduced tuition or other programs for children with special needs. These clubs look for speakers on a weekly basis, so you stand a strong chance of being invited to make a presentation before community leaders.

Practice ahead of time to present yourself in a professional manner. People who are excellent at fingerplays and storytelling sometimes freeze up in front

of a group of adults! The impact of a well delivered presentation can boost recognition and attendance at your facility. To help ease stage fright, bring a few props such as samples of artwork or slides of children engaged in regular activities. Props add visual interest and give you something to do with your hands rather than fidget. If your speech is punctuated with “ums” and “ya know,” take a tip from the Toastmaster’s Club. They fine speakers five cents for every “um” or “ya know.” Pay a teenager to listen to your speech. They will be happy to point out any mistakes you make.

Exchange information with another early childhood program across town. When parents ask for information about other programs in a different location, you can refer them to your “marketing partner.” Simply providing parents with the name of another quality facility is a marketing tool. It gives parents the feeling you care enough to serve *their* needs, not just your own.

When parents compliment your program, ask them to put it in writing. These statements can be used as testimonials in future brochures.

The 1993 January/February issue of *Small Business Advisor* ran an article entitled “15 Ways to Promote Your Business.” Among the ideas listed, three interrelate. They suggest you offer a free trial, provide a sample of your service, and use coupons. These marketing tips are adaptable for early childhood programs. When trying to attract children, try offering a free morning at your center. If a parent registers afterwards, offer a coupon for a small discount on the first month’s tuition. Children sampling the program and enjoying their time

with you results in increased enrollment. Most centers simply invite parents to visit. If you offer children a chance to have an extended visit, your program will be distinctive from others.

When prospective parents visit your center, they usually ask a few questions and take home a packet of information. Rather than simply waiting for them to call back, actively follow up on their interest. When parents are deciding between several programs, a personal touch can sway their decision. After a parent visits, place a brief call, asking if they have any further questions. Include the child’s name in the conversation. “I’m sure Samantha would enjoy our preschool program, especially since her class begins swim lessons next month.” A short postcard after the parent’s visit also lets them know you acknowledge the time they spent observing. One child care center has a postcard that states, “Now that *you* have seen us in action, we’d love to have your child join us in all our fun activities.” If a parent has visited four similar centers and you are the only one that followed up with a call or letter, it gives you a distinct advantage.

What impression do people receive when calling your facility? A recent survey of CEOs found that 87% of how they perceived a business was determined by the way the phone was answered. If possible, phone the center yourself and objectively determine how the phone is answered. Do staff sound cheerful? Bored? Harried? A person’s tone is more important than what they say. Professional telemarketers frequently post a sign by their phone saying, “SMILE!” A smile on the face helps convey a warm, friendly person.

Post a standard, prepared introduction by the phone to ensure continuity by all staff. “Thank you for calling Happy Times Preschool. May I help you?” makes a better impression than “Hello.” Prospective parents calling your facility usually ask standard questions. Again, post answers to the most commonly asked questions by the phone. Include hours of operation, staff to child ratio, directions to the facility, and fees. A parent calling several child care programs became discouraged when staff answering the phone couldn’t answer basic questions: “I hesitated to set up a visit when the staff couldn’t even tell me what the fees were for part-time care. Other times I was told the director would return my calls, but she never did.” If numerous employees answer the phone, provide adequate information so all questions are answered in a professional manner.

Use a simple walk through the neighborhood as a marketing tool. As you walk, ask children to observe what they see. Is there litter everywhere? Does the entrance to the park look especially nice with flowers and trimmed shrubs? Upon returning to the school, discuss the observations and compose a letter to the editor of the newspaper. One center wrote a letter commenting on how nice it was that the sidewalks and curbs were accessible for one of the children in a wheelchair. Another center wrote about the need to pick up litter around the local park. When the letter is published, your facility receives recognition as a caring center that is involved in the community.

Having trouble filling a certain class or schedule? Some programs find a change in title produces higher

enrollment. A center with a low turnout for the three day per week afternoon class tried various ways to advertise. Notices in the library, newspaper ads, and distributing extra brochures had little effect. They decided to change the focus to “an enriching experience for preschoolers with an emphasis on science fun.” The session soon filled and now has a waiting list. The program offered a unique difference from their other general classes, resulting in new interest from parents. Another facility saw a decline in enrollment during the summer. By changing the name to “Little Tykes Summer Camp” and stressing outdoor activities, enrollment soared. A few changes in class titles can produce dramatic results.

Fancy brochures and Madison Avenue type advertising is beyond the budget of many early childhood programs. Instead, use a little creativity to let people know what your program has to offer.

Silvana Clark taught preschool for five years and then supervised a preschool for ten years. Presently she is a speaker and author on the subject of marketing for small businesses, and helping people find their creative potential. Her five year old daughter keeps Silvana up to date on developmental stages during early childhood.