

Save the Best Till Last: Retaining Enrollment Through Exceptional Customer Service

by Julie Wassom

You have done everything right to market your center and build enrollment. Your near capacity enrollment level is proof of that. It's time to relax your marketing efforts and conduct business as usual, right? Not so.

The parents whose children are currently enrolled in your center are your most important asset and most cost-effective marketing resource. How they feel they are treated by you and your staff can cause them to become loyal customers, or drive them into the waiting arms of your competitors. Developing these parents into customers who are not just satisfied, but enthusiastic about your center, is an ongoing process I call relationship marketing.

Relationship marketing begins the moment you secure the enrollment. It is the last step in successful enrollment building. After parents have made the emotional decision to place their child in your care, they need to feel confident it was the right choice. They need to be able to trust that you will truly deliver the quality education and loving care and family services you said you would. They need to know they will be included in what happens at the center. They need to feel sure that not only are their child care needs met, but their child will be happy. They need peace of mind. No brochure or beau-

tiful center or persuasive advertisement will give them that feeling. Only you and your staff can communicate those messages by providing exceptional customer service. Relationship marketing is all the ways you do that.

Retaining parents isn't as easy as it used to be. They are more educated about child care, they are pursued harder by your competitors, and they can be more demanding than ever before. You can no longer distinguish yourself as the best child care available merely by offering a quality program and a friendly hello at the front door each day. In the parents' perspective, any good child care provider should do that — and does. You must provide exceptional customer service along with a top notch program if you want to create customers who wouldn't think of leaving and who refer your center at every opportunity.

The following relationship marketing techniques can help you become a master at the exceptional customer service that is the cornerstone of rela-

tionship marketing.

Ethically Deliver

When parents enroll in your center, they have read or been told about a number of the services you say you provide. Yet, in their minds, you are still on probation. Will you truly deliver what you said you would?

Do what you say you're going to do. If you promote a quality program, illustrate that quality to the parents. Make it evident through bulletin boards, newsletters, outlines on the parent communication boards, projects the children bring home. Go one step further and send home a note asking the parents to help the child answer a question, practice a skill, or bring in an item related to the curriculum topic. The parents will feel involved and be better focused on what you're teaching their child.

Part of ethical delivery is attention to detail. If the calendar you gave to parents says the preschoolers are going on a field trip to the library on Friday, and your plans change, notify them before they get to the center and have to leave a disappointed child. If you say you're going to change the sign-in book pages each month, do it in a timely

manner. If you don't take care of the details of providing the service you promote, parents will notice and wonder what else isn't being taken care of.

Remember, many parents are looking for reasons to validate their own guilt and anxiety about leaving their children in child care. Ethical delivery can turn that worry into confidence and peace of mind.

Be Open Minded

Flexibility is a password in today's changing workplace. As parents attempt to balance their lives with flexible work schedules, job sharing, and telecommuting, their child care needs may not be traditional or consistent. If more and more of your parents are requesting scheduling changes for their child's care, consider flexible programming of your services. Be open to options to retain those good customers. Discuss it with your parent advisory group. Keep in mind that if you can accommodate them, not only will they stay, they will help you market by telling many others how your services make their lives easier.

Let your staff know how powerful they are in the parents' eyes and how important it is to have an open mind in their relationship with parents. Many times what seems like a picky little parent complaint is really a plea for help from a parent who needs to be empowered by her child's teacher.

"My little Melissa said Billy is hitting her. Is he picking on her?" may really mean "I'm not as aware of normal social development as you are. Can you help me deal with this?" Or "Have you lost her mittens again?" may really mean "I can't get her to put her boots on at all, so why is it you can get her and all her classmates to put theirs on? After all, I'm the mother."

In *Sharing the Caring*, by Amy Dombro and Patty Bryan, a teacher says, "I've had the experience of being cast in the role of savior, the expert. It is easy to be seduced and soothe the parent. But when I'm at my best, I reflect back to parents what they say. My goal is to empower parents — not just give information."

Parents don't expect your staff to be Barry Brazelton. They expect them to acknowledge the parent as the child's most important teacher, and to help them to be better parents. Make it part of your relationship marketing program to teach your staff how to listen to parents, express understanding, and respond with an open mind.

Practice Parent "Attention" Techniques

I like to say parent attention causes retention. Parents want to feel welcome, appreciated, special. It's the combination of little things you do to make your parents feel important that adds up to big value to them.

I once had a friend tell me that value had very little to do with money. He said value is giving people more than they expect when they least expect it. And they'll stay where they perceive they get the greatest value.

"Little things aren't little things. Little things are everything," says Harvey MacKay in his best seller, *Swim With the Sharks*. Brainstorm with your colleagues and staff to come up with a list of little things you can do for your parents, especially when they least expect it.

One center in Minneapolis surprised parents one morning by taking a Polaroid picture of each parent and

child as they came in. Before the parents left, the director gave them the developed photograph in a precut construction paper frame that said, "Happy Parents' Day! I love you." This unexpected little gesture sent parents off to work feeling special about themselves and the center!

Parent attention activities can be as simple as helping them pack up their children's belongings to hosting an event-filled parent appreciation week. Keep these activities parent-focused, easy to implement, and a little step beyond what your parents might expect.

Ideas from other centers include sending a thank you note for timely tuition payment, offering a fun creative course for parents at the center, putting up a "Business Connection" board, having the children create a "Parents Are People, Too!" book, posting a commuter map, holding a Parent's Night Out, posting a welcome sign acknowledging new children and their parents, having the teacher call a new parent within their first six weeks at the center to discuss the child's adjustment and the parent's satisfaction, and providing a "Best in Town" list for families new to the area.

Obviously, the ideas are endless. If you implement even a few parent attention activity ideas, you will distinguish your center from your competitors who may not be providing such exceptional customer service.

Communicate, Communicate, Communicate!

How many times have you put a notice about the family potluck in the newsletter, by the sign-in book, and on the parent boards in each room only to ask Johnny's mom, "Are you coming to the potluck dinner tomorrow?" And her response is, "What

potluck dinner?"

Today's busy parents, already bombarded with more information than they can possibly absorb, need you to take the initiative in getting your messages through to them. You cannot overcommunicate with the parents in your center. But customer communication serves a higher purpose than just getting the word out about what is happening in your center.

What is often equally important to parents is how you and your staff communicate and how often. Do they get a daily note about their child's day? Does the teacher always acknowledge them and their children with a smile and friendly greeting? Are problems handled quickly and in a professional manner? Do the director and teachers communicate as though they really care?

Child care professionals have the unique opportunity to come face to face with their customers every day. In their book, *Service America!*, Karl Albrecht and Ron Zemke call these times when the parents make contact with you or your staff "moments of truth." They are a premiere opportunity for you to make a positive impression that leads to satisfied, enthusiastic parents who remain your customers.

A survey on "Why Customers Quit," cited in Michael LeBoeuf's book, *How to Win Customers and Keep Them for Life*, says 68% of customers who leave do so because of an attitude of indifference toward the customer by owner, manager, or some employee. Yet the average business spends six times more to attract new customers than it does to keep the old ones. How you and your staff communicate with your parents is far more than an element of exceptional customer service. It is a marketing discipline that can contribute to

increased customer retention, reduced marketing costs, and sound business management.

Ask What They Think

You can't improve on the value you offer your parents until you know what they like and dislike about the job you're doing now. The most important question to ask a parent after they have enrolled is, "How are we doing?" And after that, ask, "How can we get better?" Learning the answer to these two questions gives you the parents' perception of the quality of your child care services and what you can do to improve that perception.

However, monitoring what the customer likes and dislikes is not enough to ensure retention. It is also important to make a regular and systematic effort to identify what your parents *expect* of you. In these rapidly changing times, it is naive to think that parents' expectations will remain constant.

There are a number of ways to ask your parents about their perception of your services. One method is to periodically ask parents to complete a written questionnaire that is returned to the center or company office. Another is to use customer comment cards or a suggestion box. Some centers invite small groups of parents to meet in focus groups to assess how they are doing. Others use telephone surveys, withdrawal letters, or mystery shoppers.

You will get the most valid information if you vary the methods of determining customer perception, do it often, and communicate the planned improvements to your parents and staff. Once parents know you really value their opinions, they will become more serious about making sure you get them.

Kaizen is a Japanese concept which

means continual improvement. The thought is that major advancements occur in small but consistent steps. Relationship marketing is a forever undertaking. You can't turn it on and off, because your parents are in your center every day, expecting you to give their children and them your best. If you commit to a program of continual progress toward exceptional customer service, you will find that minor changes will be all you need to keep it active and effective. And you will find your enrollment retention at its highest level ever.

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