

Magnet Marketing

by Julie Wassom

If you hold a powerful magnet near a cluster of paper clips, an amazing thing happens. The force of the magnet draws to it not one but most of the paper clips. If you remove the clips, then hold the magnet near them again, almost all of them return to the magnet.

If you develop a powerful marketing program for your center, you will draw not just one but many prospects to you again and again. I call this magnet marketing. With each new encounter, you have another opportunity to secure an enrollment.

Marketing, specifically marketing communications, is defined as all the methods used to communicate your image to all your target audiences in a manner that leads them to take action. This includes everything from your center's brochure, to a booth at a local festival, to the way you answer an inquiry call. Regardless of what you do to communicate the image of your center and its services, the key to achieving magnet marketing is to make those messages *creative*, *consistent*, and *continual*.

Creative

If you were selling roofing materials, it might be hard to market creatively. But child care is an industry where creative marketing is welcomed and readily accepted by target audiences. So how do you creatively communicate your center's marketing message?

I agree with professional speaker Joel Weldon, who says, "Look around you at what others are doing and do . . . something else." Take

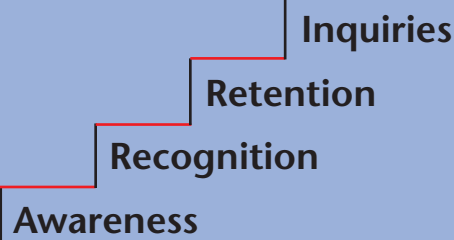
note of how other child care providers around you are marketing and determine how you could communicate your center's image in a way that is unique and different.

Tom and Marty Clark, heads of Riverfield Country Day School in Tulsa, Oklahoma, use numerous creative approaches to give their school positive exposure. One example is that they encourage their faculty to be workshop presenters on the local, state, regional, and national levels. In addition to creating workshops for other child care professionals on topics such as classroom management, the Riverfield staff speaks to general audiences on topics ranging from music to marketing. The school even puts on its own conference as a fundraiser, offering CEUs



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Marketing Steps to Inquiries



from a local college to attendees from the community.

Have efforts like this helped Riverfield reach its marketing goals? Tom reports that he recently received a call from a prospect moving to Tulsa who had heard about the school from a friend who said, "It is the most creative school in Tulsa." The prospect scheduled a center visit. Mission accomplished.

Most people are exposed to 1,800 to 2,700 commercial messages a day. Some of those will undoubtedly be from your competitors. If you want prospects to notice your center, you must do what the marketing industry calls *intrude through the clutter*. To do that, you have to be creative.

Creativity generates *awareness*, an essential first step to generating inquiries and referrals. You still need to have a solid mix of marketing activities; but the more creatively you do them, the more likely you will be to draw prospects and referring customers to your center again and again.

Consistent

The second magnet marketing key is *consistency*. This means you create an identifiable image that is recognized no matter where your message is communicated. It requires

that you use the same look, type style, colors, logo, etc. in all your printed marketing materials.

A logo is a visual image that identifies you. Whether it's a giant teddy bear mascot or a red bell tower on buildings and business cards, your image must be easily recognizable to your target audiences. You want them to see it and immediately connect it with your center.

McDonalds is a company that has mastered consistency with a very simple image — yellow arches. Wouldn't you agree it's a logo that is unique, you'd recognize it anywhere, and it draws people back repeatedly? No doubt about it! In recent figures of annual sales, they outsold Burger King more than two to one.

If you have a tag line — and I recommend you do — use it every time your center's name appears anywhere. A tag line gives your audiences a brief phrase that draws an image in their minds of who you are and what is unique about you.

"Quality Childcare At Work" is Bright Horizons Children's Centers' tag line. It identifies what they do and how they want to be positioned in the minds of their prospects and referral sources.

Consistency isn't limited to printed

collateral, broadcast, or even internet messages. Does everyone in your center answer the telephone with a consistent greeting? Does your van have your center's name and telephone number painted on it? Does your newsletter reflect the delivery of your marketing messages? Can your customers feel comfortable referring you knowing the quality of care in every room is consistently high?

Consistency creates *recognition*, the second step in generating inquiries and referrals. Be clear on what your unique marketing messages are, and deliver them consistently in all the methods you use to draw target audiences to your center.

Continual

Jay Conrad Levinson, in his book *Guerrilla Marketing*, tells us "People forget fast." He's right. Unless you continually communicate your marketing messages, your prospects — and your customers — forget you. When that happens, they are most vulnerable to the messages they receive from your competitors.

If you want to draw prospective enrollees to your center, they must remember you. Spaced repetition is the key to retention. Complete this phrase: "You're in good hands with _____." The reason you know it is "Allstate" is because you have heard or seen it repeatedly. The more times and places target audiences get your marketing message, the more likely they'll be to remember you when they need to use or refer child care services.

The most efficient way to market continually is to use a mix of marketing methods on an ongoing basis. Called *layering*, this gives you the most opportunity for broad reach and frequency of the delivery

of your center's marketing message. Your marketing action plan should include activities in advertising, public relations, community involvement, and customer relations.

Remember to include your staff in your marketing efforts. The interactions they have every day with parents, children, and prospects ARE communicating a marketing message about your center. If you want that message to be consistent and continual, it is important to enlist and empower your staff as marketing partners.

Continual marketing creates *retention* of your center's image and messages. It gives you prime positioning in the minds of your prospects, customers, and referral sources. And when the child care need arises, the force of that positioning draws them to you like — you guessed it — a magnet.

Creative, consistent, continual marketing will give you the awareness, recognition, and retention that lead to more inquiries and referrals. The more times you can draw prospects to your center, the more chances you have to secure enrollments. Practice these techniques and your marketing will be magnetic. And may the force be with you.