

Tips for Communicating Your Message

Community Marketing Made Easy

by Julie Wassom

Now be honest. On a scale of one to ten, how would you rate your comfort level with community marketing? When I've asked directors around the country this question, most of them rank it a five or below. They know community marketing is an important part of the marketing communications mix. They agree it's a cost-effective way to develop awareness of their centers and early care and education services. They admit there are ample opportunities to get involved in the communities around their centers. Yet they just don't do it very often, if at all. Why not? Most say they can't find the time, they don't feel comfortable doing it, or they just aren't sure quite what to do or say.

Community marketing means those activities you conduct, primarily outside your center, to help communicate your image and your marketing messages within your local community. It includes everything from being actively involved in your city's Chamber of Commerce, to co-sponsoring a community event, to participating in a local town parade. The opportunities are endless.

Think of community marketing like exercising. It takes more than knowing

it is good for you or having the desire to do it. It takes commitment. The hardest part is just getting out there. Once you're doing it, it doesn't seem as foreboding and can actually be fun. And, when you're committed, the results are usually well worth the effort.

If community marketing is tough for you, then, like exercising, start with easier moves and work up to those that are more challenging. Use the following seven ideas as a foundation to help make community marketing easier for

you and to create a community marketing action plan to which you're willing to commit your time and energy.

Make Friendly Visit Calls

An easy first step into community marketing is to visit businesses near your center, introduce yourself as another professional in the community, leave a business card and small token from your center (such as a bookmark made by one of the children), and invite the business owner to your center for a visit or upcoming center event.

Think in your prospect's perspective. Think not what they can do for you, but what you can do for them. What could your direct, daily contact with large numbers of parents and their young children mean to that business? The more you think in the prospect's perspective and communicate the benefits to them of knowing you, the more well-received you'll be on community visits.



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Conduct Mutual-Benefit Activities

Once you've determined an advantage you can offer a local business near your center, approach them with a way you can both benefit. For example, perhaps you offer to give your local beauty salon copies of articles on parenting preschoolers for clientele to read while at the salon (a good idea anywhere customers must sit and wait). On each copy you attach a sticker that says: Compliments of; Name of Your Center; and your telephone number. This positions you as the helpful expert to call regarding early care and education; at the same time it provides the beautician with reading material that will be of interest to her clients and becomes a value-added service of her salon. It's mutually-beneficial community marketing.

Exchange Services

To move that idea to another level, think about the businesses and organizations in your community for whom you could provide a service in exchange for a product or service from them that would be of value to you. Suppose the same beautician would agree to spend one afternoon a week at your center, providing haircuts for your customers and children. You would market the availability of the beautician's services, manage the sign-up list, and collect fees from parents. She would provide a discounted rate for the haircuts given in the center. It's easy business for her and a nice ancillary service for you.

You both benefit. You receive the residual benefit of referrals from the beautician talking to her other salon clients about your center and the haircutting services she provides there.

Co-Sponsor Events

What are businesses and associations in your area with whom you could sponsor

an event to benefit the community while giving you and the other businesses involved positive exposure to the marketplace?

A center in Virginia teamed up with the American Society for the Blind, a manufacturer of vision screening equipment, and a local media station to provide a weekend of free vision screening to anyone in the local community. The equipment was set up in the center and manned by society volunteers. Center staff provided drop-in child care while adults had their vision screened. The director was available to provide center tours to interested attendees. The media provided broad coverage both before and after the event.

This successful, well-attended event not only provided a useful service to participants, it gave positive exposure to each entity involved. For an expenditure of time and energy, each sponsor gained awareness and recognition that would have cost high marketing dollars to generate through traditional advertising channels. And the public-private partnership created by the joining together of for-profit and not-for-profit sponsors opened marketing opportunities for each and communicated good will and understanding to the audiences served by the event.

Speak for an Organization

Colleges, corporations, parent organizations such as MOPS (Mothers of Preschoolers), and local PTA's are always looking for knowledgeable professionals who are willing to share their expertise on the platform. Call and offer to make a brief presentation on a topic of interest, such as dealing with separation or what to look for in choosing quality child care. Do not pitch your center in your talk, but do provide the meeting planner with an introduction that briefly tells about your center and positions you as the helpful professional expert. Be

sure to have business cards and center brochures available for those audience members who want further information about your center and services.

Write and Submit Articles

Most local newspapers and magazines are receptive to short feature articles on early care and education topics that are of interest to their readers. Many larger companies publish an in-house newsletter, and might welcome a guest column on topics that could help their parent employees balance work and family life, and be more productive on the job.

Regardless of who you write for, stay brief and on topic with the information you provide. Put your name, position, center name, and contact information at the end of each article. (Refer to "Guess Who's in the News," Child Care Information Exchange, July 1996, for techniques on taking full advantage of this method of community marketing.) As an added benefit, these articles could help generate some good publicity for your center.

Network With Other Professionals

Though many of the professionals in your community may not ever become your customers, the majority of them fall into a target audience I call opinion influencers. They may not use your center's services, but they can influence the opinion of those who do. It is a good community marketing move to cultivate these referral sources in professional settings.

If you are not already a member of a child care industry association in your area, become one. In addition, join a business organization, such as your local Chamber of Commerce or a professional women's network. If you have the time and interest, get involved in a civic

group, especially if it draws a membership that includes parents of young children.

Take an active approach to these networking opportunities. Do more than attend meetings. Offer to hold one at your center, if local codes or company regulations allow. Get involved on a committee. Shake lots of hands. Susan Roane, author of *How to Work a Room*, says it well in Commandment Seven of her Ten Commandments of Connecting: "Make an EFFORT. Bring Your ENERGY. Exude ENTHUSIASM." And, remember to pass out your business cards freely. They are your most cost-efficient marketing tool.

Removing the Roadblocks

Well-executed community marketing, layered with other methods of marketing communications, can help you generate enrollment inquiries and referrals. It will be easier to get started with successful community marketing activities if you keep these three strategies in mind.

- **HAVE A GOAL.** Is your intent to generate recognition of your center and its services, to keep your center's name in the minds of prospects and referral sources, or merely to introduce yourself to other professionals in the community around your center? If you know your goal for each community marketing activity, your actions will be much more focused and effective.
- **SET AN APPOINTMENT WITH YOURSELF.** Plan at least one community marketing activity each month. After each month's activity, plan the next one and set an appointment with yourself to make it happen. If you merely have a vague notion about what you'll do

next, it's too easy for time to go by and other center happenings to take priority while community marketing slips through the cracks. Treat this like an appointment for a center visit with an inquiring prospect. Keep it or reschedule it for as soon as possible. No excuses.

- **MAKE IT FUN!** As I like to say, "The level of the success you reach depends as much on the altitude of your attitude as on the level of skill you possess." Think positive. Visualize community marketing as an easy, effortless experience. You'll be amazed at how what you think about, comes about.

One of the best ways to make community marketing fun is to have a marketing partner. Find a nearby, non-competitive colleague with whom you'll plan and carry out community marketing activities. Schedule a community marketing day at least once a month. Together, set your goals, plan your approach, schedule the activity, and do it together. When you have completed each community marketing outing, do something fun together to celebrate your accomplishments and to plan your next community marketing get-together. Whether it's going to lunch together, strolling through a mall, or buying each other flowers; knowing that you'll be rewarding yourselves can motivate you and your marketing partner to be more creative and accountable for community marketing.

If you practice community marketing using these seven ways to make it easier, you will not only feel more comfortable and confident with this method of marketing, you will likely see a significant increase in enrollment inquiries and referrals. Like exercising, it's a small price to pay for big rewards.