

Off-Season Enrollment Building

by Julie Wassom

As winter settles in, the heaviest enrollment building season is over and new year inquiries have only just begun. You're probably advertising less and concentrating more on program delivery and internal operations. If you're in a colder climate, the walls of your classroom are lined with little boots and coats, removed and put back on several times daily by rosy-cheeked children in your care. Daily maintenance, staff development, and that postponed project or repair are your priorities now.

The winter months are an ideal time to take a good look at your marketing program, and to work on it a little bit at a time. If marketing is not your greatest strength, the whole idea of effectively drawing prospects to your center and then securing their enrollment can be overwhelming. It's easy to get a condition I call *marketing paralysis*, and simply not do anything. Or maybe you know you should work on marketing, and you plan to . . . when you have time. But that time never comes.

There's an old adage that says, "If you do what you've always done, you'll get what you've always gotten." If you want to get more enrollment in your center (and retain more of the customers you have), commit to spending a little time each week

throughout the winter refining your marketing. Use the following list to help you tackle marketing one piece at a time.

■ **Marketing plan** — Analyze and make note of the current state of your enrollment. Note the average number of inquiries you receive weekly and tally how many of those you convert to visits and then to enrollments. Determine what it costs you to generate each qualified inquiry. Examine your retention rate, by classroom and by center. Include a brief explanation of any enrollment incentive or referral programs you have in place, and evaluate their effectiveness in generating new customers. Set enrollment goals for the coming year. Assess the competitive situation in your area. Review recent marketing efforts and determine which

were most effective. This doesn't need to be a thick volume, but it will be the foundation from which you can create a more effective marketing action plan.

■ **Action plan** — This is the "To Do" list within your overall marketing plan. It is the blueprint of marketing activities that work together to generate inquiries and to give you more opportunities to secure enrollment. Begin with a simple list of each marketing action you will take, the timeline, the person responsible, the budget allocated to this effort, and the method of evaluating its effectiveness.

■ **Center or company identity package** — Lay out the pieces of your center or company identity package — letterhead, envelopes, business card, package label, postcard, notepad — and examine them carefully. Do they have a consistent look? Do they present the image you want prospects and customers to have? Is your package complete? If pieces are missing or outdated, make this the time you update your information and image in your print marketing collateral materials.

■ **Center brochure** — Design a brochure that communicates your uniqueness as well as your philosophy on providing quality early care and education. Make the look of your brochure consistent with the rest of your print marketing materials.

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Determine how and where you intend to use your brochure before deciding on size, paper, and your print run. (Check "Power Pack Your Center Brochure" in the August, 2000 issue of *Child Care Information Exchange* for additional tips.)

■ **Photos** — Get out your camera or hire a professional photographer and take lots of pictures in your center for use in brochures, fliers, and on your web site. Snap a few photos of your staff, your children, and activities in your classrooms and on the playground. Don't forget to take photos of your teachers helping a child or assisting a parent during a center visit or event. Using the best of these real-life pictures will speak a thousand words to your prospects.

■ **Web site** — If you have a web site, now is an ideal time to update it. Make sure the look of the site communicates a recognizable image. Add new photos. Revise copy so it not only educates visitors, but entices them to contact you to set up a center visit. Create traditional marketing activities that will direct prospects and customers to your web site. (Look at my article on web site marketing in the May/June, 2002 issue of *Child Care Information Exchange* for more ideas.)

■ **Advertisements** — Advertising can quickly eat up your marketing budget. Take some time now to determine where your ad dollars will be best spent. If you are responsible for your own print advertising, watch what publications come to you that also go to prospective parents in your area. Consider the best ways to reach the target audience for the specific early care and education services you want to promote. For example, if you want to increase your infant enrollment, include publications read primarily by new and expectant mothers in your advertising mix. Don't forget employer newsletters for reasonably-priced ad placement. Always check advertising

guidelines and deadlines for placement and artwork.

■ **Publicity** — Spend some of your marketing time taking the necessary steps to generate good publicity for your center. Invite local reporters to events at your center, especially if they include an activity that benefits a local non profit organization. Present them with article and photo opportunities that are unique, timely, and of interest to their readers or viewers.

■ **Voice mail message** — Pretend you are a new prospect and call your center's telephone number when you know you will get your voice mail message. Listen carefully. What information does your message give you about your center and its services? Listen not just for the words but for the professional tone of the message. If your voice mail message does not include at least the name of your center or company and your tagline, revise it. Doing so will remind the caller of where else they came across your name. Spaced repetition is a key to retention of your image and message.

■ **Direct mail marketing** — Is a direct mail campaign in your marketing action plan? If so, these are the days to put it all together and have it ready to launch on your kickoff date. Because this is not traditionally the heaviest enrollment-building time of the year, many of your competitors will not be mailing to prospect lists. If you do, you will stand out from the crowd. Even if you are currently full, the inquiries you generate now can be nurtured for summer and fall enrollment. (To get started with your direct mail marketing plan, review the recommendations in "Direct Mail Marketing — Ways to Make It Worth It," in the March, 2000 issue of *Child Care Information Exchange*.)

■ **Newsletter** — The winter months are an ideal time to develop or refine your center newsletter. If you already produce

a newsletter, carefully examine it from the prospect's perspective. Do the graphics and articles communicate the message you want? If not, consider new graphics, add photos, revise classroom news, and include a feature article of special interest. Soon you will have created a fresh newsletter you can send on a monthly or quarterly basis to every active prospect, existing customer, and opinion influencer in your database.

■ **Educate yourself** — Almost nothing is cozier on a chilly night than sitting under a warm blanket and reading a good book or closing your eyes and listening to an audiotape. Once a week, make that a marketing book or tape. Peruse Jay Conrad Levinson's book, *Guerilla Marketing*, for ideas you can adapt to help you make big profits from your small business. For child care-specific marketing techniques, listen to Basic Techniques for Securing Enrollment or one of the other programs from The Enrollment Building Success Library. Check out the marketing resources in the catalogue of *Exchange* publications at www.ChildCare-Exchange.com. Or check your e-mail for "Wassom's Marketing Wisdom," my free weekly e-mail tip on how to become a better marketer. (To subscribe to this opt-in service, e-mail me at juliewm@ix.netcom.com.)

Every week, do something that is marketing, even if it's only to make follow-up calls to interested prospects or to stop at another business in your neighborhood just to introduce yourself. By spring of 2003, you will feel prepared and confident about marketing for summer and fall enrollment from within your center and out in your community. Do it well now, and you'll be unstoppable in the new year. At the very least, you'll get more than you've always gotten.