

Do They See What You See?

Marketing to a new generation of child care buyers

by Julie Wassom

More and more, I hear directors and owners make statements like, *"For years, our marketing efforts have drawn parents to our center. We have enrolled them fairly easily, and they have usually stayed. Now, it's not as*

easy to generate inquiries, or to persuade parents to come in for a visit and enroll. And even though we provide quality care and education, families don't seem to stay like they used to. I know the economy is sluggish and there's more competition, but we have always been able to overcome those obstacles in the past. Not so now."

If you are saying something similar, consider this. Yes, the economy is stressed

and the competition is fierce. But what you may not have considered is the difference in how today's parents of young children make buying decisions. Today's primary target market for early care and education services is unique in how they perceive your image and marketing message, and in what causes them to act on that perception.

Not everyone sees through the same eyes or hears through the same ears. As prospective parents read your ads and brochures, visit your web site, and talk to you on the telephone and during a center visit, each prospect sees and hears your message differently. Their perceptions and urgency to act on that impression, vary according to a number of buying influencers. One of the most powerful to be studied recently is generational diversity. It influences how your prospects see their world, and more importantly, how and when they buy your early care and education services.

Generational differences

There are four generational groups in America today — Matures, Boomers, Generation X-ers, and Millennials. They each see through different eyes and hear through different ears. No one perspective is right or wrong. It's just that each generation sees it differently. Members of each generation are linked through shared life experiences in former years. Those shared experiences cause them to view the world — and their buying decision process — in unique ways. Since the prospect's perspective is the reality from which they make buying decisions, understanding their view is essential to making them feel comfortable enough to buy from you. A closer look at two of these groups —

Boomers and Generation X-ers — reveals valuable insight into why old marketing approaches are no longer as effective, and what changes you need to make to appeal to the majority of today's early care and education buyers.

Boomers

This generational group includes those born between 1946 and 1964, making them currently 39 to 57 years old. A whopping 78 million strong, Boomers are some 29% of the population and 48% of the labor force. Their size and influence has caused this group to have a major impact on media, education, politics, consumerism, and communications. Though Boomers have been the primary target market for child care for several years, fewer and fewer of them now have children young enough for you to serve.

Early life experiences that helped form the Boomer perspective include growing up in relatively secure times of economic expansion with the proliferation of television and technology. The Peace Corp was established, John Glenn orbited Earth for the first time, and Civil Rights laws were enacted. However, they also experienced the adversities of the Cuban Missile crisis; the assassinations of President Kennedy, Robert

Julie Wassom is president of The Julian Group, Inc., a training and consulting firm with a specialty in



child care marketing and enrollment building. She is the author of *The Enrollment Building Success Library* of print and audiotape learning programs, and the free weekly e-zine, *Wassom's Child Care Marketing Wisdom*. Julie can be reached at (303) 693-2306, or by e-mail at julie@juliewassom.com or www.juliewassom.com.

Kennedy, and Martin L. King; the riots at Kent State; and the Vietnam War. In their formative years, Boomers got information from newspapers and magazines, radio, and television.

Most married Boomers live in dual earner families. As a group, they are better educated than their parents and will trust you more. They tend to be impulsive buyers who often make decisions based on emotion as much as fact. ("This center is gorgeous, your teachers seem so nice, and it looks like my child will have fun here. We'll go ahead and enroll.") They are busy, hard workers who value convenience. However, most children of the youngest of the Boomers are now school-age or older.

Generation X-ers

Those Americans between 23 and 38 years old fall into the generational group coined Generation X by author Douglas Copeland. There are some 44 million X-ers who now make up about one third of the labor force. Because so many more parents of young children fall into this age group versus the Boomers, Gen X-ers are now your primary target audience of prospects for enrollment.

Markers that link and distinguish this generation include their exposure to Watergate, recession and layoffs, and double digit interest and inflation. Many watched on television as the Challenger exploded, the Exxon Valdez oil spill spread across ocean waters killing innocent wildlife, and reports confirmed the fall of the Berlin Wall. In addition to television, this group grew up using computers and pagers for communication.

According to Robert Wendover, managing director of The Center for Generational Studies, "X-ers learned to challenge authority in order to accomplish an objective, that it was okay to

break the rules, and that 'No' didn't always mean 'No.'"

Because most X-ers grew up with uncertainty, they tend to be less trusting of what they hear in an enrollment interview. They are resourceful and well educated, so they will do more comparative investigating. A Boomer may look at your ad and say, "The children in this ad look happy, the environment looks colorful, the ad offers a special, and I think I will give them a call." An X-er looking at the same ad might say, "Are those children really enrolled in that center or are they models? They probably touched up these photos to make the colors pop out, and the special looks inviting but I think I'll check several centers' web sites before deciding which ones we should visit." Because X-ers will tend to plan and save until they can buy the best quality they can afford, they take the time to investigate, compare, and discuss their findings with others.

Buying influencers

Value consciousness, ease of purchase, and perception of use are three strong buying influencers that impact how prospects receive and respond to marketing communications messages. Knowing how your target groups use these influencers can help you adjust your marketing efforts to communicate your benefits in ways most meaningful to them.

Value consciousness

Boomers tend to live somewhat vicariously, and place value on the emotional benefits of their purchase. They may be influenced more by an intuitive sense that the center feels good than by the information you give them about your curriculum and teacher training. Generation X-ers, though quite possibly skeptical of what you say, will focus on quality and value. As a parent, they will

look for the program with the best combination of education and fun, and will tend to talk to several others before making an enrollment decision.

Ease of purchase

Though all enrollment prospects will respond positively to your efforts to make it easy to register and enroll, Boomers may want more flexible payment terms. If an X-er is your prospective buyer, he or she will be willing to pay top dollar, but will demand highest quality. They are used to paying with credit and will be receptive to using a card for your tuition payments, too. Both groups like guarantees.

Perception of use

Though Boomers are interested in your educational program, they want to know their children will be happy, that they themselves will enjoy being a part of the center's family, and that it is convenient and easy to use your services. Ancillary services appeal to the busy Boomers. For X-ers, however, good answers to the questions, "How is that curriculum taught?" "What is required to register and get my child started?" and "Is it really going to be as easy to be enrolled here as it says on your web site?" could strongly influence them to say "Yes," when you ask them to enroll.

Marketing to multiple targets

So how do you adapt your marketing efforts to attract the growing group of X-ers whose younger children can fill your preschool and infant rooms while still enticing those Boomer parents with school-agers? In advertising, for example, you can use these techniques to appeal to, influence, and call to action each target generational group.

- **Mix the message** — Use subheads and bullets for both X-ers and busy Boomers. Color and emotion in photos and taglines will also appeal to Boomer prospects. The third party endorsement of testimonials helps assure wary X-ers.
- **Mix pictures and graphics** — A mix of pictures or graphics, carefully designed, will grab the attention of prospects in both generational groups. For example, include a photo of a Boomer center director with a happy school-ager, and at least one picture of a teacher engaged in activities with young children, a graphic of your accreditation certificate, and perhaps a photo of a parent event.
- **Cut to the benefits on bullets** — Bullets make your message quick for busy Boomers to read, and specific for the inquisitive X-ers. Though the theme of your advertising can be more emotional, the bullets need to suggest a serious, yet fun approach to early education to capture the X-ers' attention. Be sure your bullets communicate what *the prospect gets*, not just what *you have to offer*.

Generational marketing is a new way of thinking about how to become more effective at marketing your center and building enrollment. Because the primary target market for early care and education services is changing from a predominance of Boomer parents to mostly Generation X-ers, marketing with messages meaningful to both generations helps increase the pool of prospective enrollees. It's another way of thinking in the prospect's perspective. When you do that, you have a better chance of turning more of your prospects into enrollments.

Reference

The Center for Generational Studies,
Robert Wendover, managing director,
(303) 617-7207, (800) 227-5510,
www.gentrends.com.