

Niche Marketing

Branding your early child care and education business without getting burned

by Julie Wassom

When I was a young girl growing up on a Midwest farm, branding meant the yearly task of burning our farm's symbol into the hides of our cattle with a brand-

ing iron. Though lots of other farmers had cattle, no other farm had a symbol exactly like ours, and every animal that displayed our brand could be identified as one of our herd.

Branding in the early care and education marketplace is very similar to branding on the farm. It refers to the specific image your company develops and promotes to make your services unique, recogniz-

able, and memorable in the minds of your prospects and customers.

In *The 22 Immutable Laws of Branding*, authors Al and Laura Reis, say, "A successful branding program is based on the concept of singularity. It creates in the mind of the prospect the perception that there is no product on the market quite like your product." In the giant soft drink industry, there is only one

"Uncola" — 7-UP™. "You're in good hands" with only one insurance company — Allstate.®

The more saturated with competitors an industry, or even your individual marketplace becomes, the more important branding becomes. In a saturated market, it is difficult for prospects to tell the differences between you and other early care and education providers whom they are considering. When the competition heats up, the good branding program can help you capture a niche that sets you apart from the rest in the minds of your target audiences.

You want to establish a niche that not only appeals to prospects, but holds their interest enough to make them want to contact you about the services you provide. Some businesses do this by developing a niche that has more to do with the customer service they provide than with claims about the quality of their programs, products, or services. For instance, in the overcrowded pizza industry, Domino's™ pulled away from the pack by developing a unique niche with only two words, "We Deliver." Pizza Hut™ and others quickly followed by promoting a similar service, but could not capture the Dominoes brand. Instead, Pizza Hut developed its own niche as the home of deep-dish pizza. Papa Murphy later entered this market and branded themselves as the place to get gourmet take-out pizza ready to cook at home.

Creating your business image

So how do you establish a niche, develop a brand, and market that unique image of your early care and education business?

The first step in creating your business image is to determine exactly which products and services you offer. Are you in business to care for children while their parents are away at work; to provide a quality learning environment for preschoolers and young children; to provide employer-sponsored child care services; to offer innovative, leading edge forms of education; or a combination? Is your environment more like a home or a school? Are you a child care center, preschool, an after school program, an enrichment center, or a day care? Do children enrolled in your center spend most of their time in educational or free play activities, key experiences, or something else? Is your philosophy of service delivery built upon education, unstructured activities, guided play, DAP?

Once you can define what you offer, the next step is to determine what sets you apart that is also desirable to your prospects. Start by writing down five things that are unique about you, your early care and educational services, and

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the way you do business. I call these your *BCAs* or *Basic Competitive Advantages*. Go beyond “quality program” and “caring teachers.” Managers in nearly every center say that, and though important, it is not unique in the prospect’s initial perspective. What do you have or do that is just a bit different, or more focused, or a cut above the norm? Once you have your list, circle the two or three that are the most true for you and will be important to the kinds of customers you want to have.

Using two or three key image phrases, brainstorm combinations of words that briefly define your niche. Doing so will create a unique image message, or tagline, for your early care and education business.

A tagline is a short phrase or motto that conveys your niche clearly and precisely in seven or fewer words. The tagline message should create an image of you in your prospect’s mind. That image has strong impact on their decision to investigate further and ultimately to enroll. Here are some examples of taglines and image messages for existing early care and education businesses. What niche do they claim to hold? How have they branded themselves?

- *Where Lil’ Minds Grow*
- *Excellence in Educational Child Care*
- *Care You Can Count On*
- *For the Love of Children*
- *Building a Foundation for Success*

Once you create your own tagline or image message, try it on some industry colleagues, then on friends and a few people who don’t know what you do. Ask them what image your message communicates to them about your business. What does it say you provide? More importantly, what do they think they could get from you if they were your customer? Does it make them want to learn more about you? If their response is what you want to hear, you are ready to begin marketing your niche or brand to potential buyers and referral sources.

Marketing your niche

How do you get your message out to all your target markets in a manner that leads them to inquire? You use traditional and some non-traditional marketing tactics to drive your brand right into the minds of your prospects and customers. Once there and authentically delivered, it is amazing how powerful it can be. Take Evian®, for example. It is just pure water, but it has been niched into such a powerful brand that many people pay more for a liter of Evian® than the same amount of milk, Coca-Cola®, or beer.

Put your tagline everywhere the name of your company appears. Put it on your letterhead, business cards, signs, premiums, and fliers. Include it in ads, brochures, and on your web site. Talk about your niche during inquiry calls, center visits, and community marketing activities.

- If your niche is the place that best prepares young children to succeed in school, make sure you have a variety of ways you illustrate that brand in your ads and in campaigns, on your brochure, in your center scrapbook, on your web site, and in your centers themselves.
- Write an article about the progressive new pre-K curriculum in use in your centers. Submit it to local papers and city magazines read by your prospective customers.
- Become known as a credible source for information on successful preparation for elementary school. One way to do that is to have presence in the venues where parents come to learn from the experts. That may mean speaking on this topic at conferences, corporate lunch and learn programs, or for groups such as MOPS (Mothers of Preschoolers). When you do that, always bring and distribute your business cards.
- Sit on the board of one of your local elementary schools.
- At community events that draw parents

of young children, have a booth with a banner that includes your name, tagline, and web address. Have activities for children of passersby that illustrate your curriculum. Give out business cards and take away materials with your center’s name and contact information on it. Have a map of your center’s location and inquiry cards available so you can book future center visits right there.

If developing and driving a brand or niche is not where your talent lies, seek the help of a professional marketer. As columnist and author Jeff Gitomer recommends, “Pay a marketing specialist an hour or two fee and bounce ideas off the person. I’d rather have \$200 worth of good advice than a \$200 ad that gets no response.”

I once heard another speaker say, “Find your niche and strike it rich!” He was referring to what Reis calls the Law of Singularity. Do not try to be what absolutely every potential enrollment buyer needs. Stake claim to a niche that is authentically yours, develop it into your own brand, then use marketing to drive that brand, so prospective customers and referral sources recognize and remember it when the time comes for them to investigate or refer early care and educational services.

Without a unique niche or brand for your early care and education business, your prospects may tend to view you as just another center in the growing child care industry. Faced with multiple choices, potential customers will gravitate toward those centers whose image they recognize and whose niche appeals most to them. Including a branding program in the marketing plan for your early care and education business can help you be one of those centers. Do it well and you’ll never get burned.

Reference

Reis, A., & Reis, L. (1998). *The 22 Immutable Laws of Branding*. Harper Business, 1998.