

the \$17 investment

“Good management begins with good people”

by Dennis Vicars

In a recent *ExchangeEveryDay* survey, respondents identified 12 primary training needs for directors. Ten of the items fit under basic management issues,



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with two others as clerk/administrative tasks. The thing that struck my attention the most, and these items came from a large survey of participants, was not one mention of marketing.

As part of the training regimen for your team, especially the management team, how could the one item that brings attention to your school/center be left to chance? The days of “Build it and they will come” are long gone. Likewise, the fact that you have a top-quality early childhood education program with a star-studded staff, a great location, and a long history in the community does not promise success either. Unless people know you are there and you give them a reason to actively seek you out, sooner than later in this economic crisis, your wonderful — perhaps even accredited — program is going to be playing to an empty house. As early care and education marketing expert Julie Wassom once wrote, “Know Me or No Me.”

Marketing is everyone's job

In an earlier article, I stressed the fact that marketing begins with making it a priority with the entire staff. All staff need to be involved in marketing activities that are commensurate with their comfort level. Allowing staff to participate in a marketing plan that they

can take ownership in will continue to pay long-term dividends. The mantra for all must be, “Everything we do is marketing” — to parents who have yet to discover us and those we hope to retain. The director and assistant director must make marketing a prominent part of their job description and lead by example everyday.

The phone and Internet as primary marketing tools

The two places that absolutely and unconditionally need marketing attention is the telephone and the Internet. All the outside and inside marketing you do cannot overcome the negative feeling a person receives when the person answering the phone is impersonal or seemingly annoyed by having to answer the call. The same can be said for a ‘user unfriendly’ web site or one that is passive vs. interactive.

If inside marketing is everything the staff does, including reassuring parents that they have made a good buying decision (enrollment retention), then outside marketing is meant to do one thing: make the parent call you or go to your web site.

Most of the 20- and 30-somethings having children are primarily Internet-

driven (which we'll deal with in a later article), but the telephone is still your major lifeline. A number of years ago, we did a study to find out how much it costs us to make the phone ring. The accountants made a formula which basically took total financial investment in the center divided by number of calls in a year and to my surprise, it cost \$17 to make the phone ring. My entire attitude changed with that information! That ringing phone was no longer an annoyance, but one of the most expensive investments we had made.

Getting the family to visit your program

So my message to you is this: Never take your telephone for granted. The phone offers you the most positive return on investment you possess. For most inquiries, it is their first connection to your school/center and parents' judgment begins from the moment you or one of your staff say "Hello. Thank you for calling our center. My name is Mary. How may I help you?" What happens in the next two minutes is critical in realizing your goal of a parent visit, which is the entire reason you want the phone to ring. Here are some ideas to help you get that visit:

- Sell benefits not features. (Serving hot lunches is only a feature unless the parent recognizes it as something vitally important to them.)
- Ask for a center/school visit with an either/or choice of days and times.
- Ask how they found out about you (tracking) and drive them to your web site if they have not already visited it.
- Write down all pertinent information and thank them for their call.

The price issue looms large for most families. However, remember you are the professional, and most people do not understand the costs associated with a high-quality program. Your job is to educate and that might include extending an invitation to the family that insists they can't afford to enroll in your program. In inviting them to visit your program, you are helping them become educated about what their early education dollar will buy. The key is to get the parent to commit to a visit. The 'tour,' which is the goal of the \$17 call, is your opportunity to shine and secure that coveted enrollment.

- Every staff member is trained on the basic greeting and has a smile in their voice. (Staff also understand the \$17.00 investment.)
- A note pad and pen is by every phone for notes or call back information should the director or assistant not be immediately available.
- You cannot give the price until you know exactly what the parent wants and the programs/schedules you have available. If you explain this to them early on, a parent is more likely to listen to your pitch and not immediately create a price objection where listening stops.
- Probe for their 'hot button.' Price is only one of them.