

click, click, click . . .

“Good management begins with good people”

by Dennis Vicars



Dennis Vicars is presently CEO of Human Services Management Corporation (HSMC) and Executive Director of the Professional Association for Childhood Education

Alternative Payment Program (PACEAPP). Dennis has guided both organizations' growth to where the Professional Association for Childhood Education (PACE) is now the largest early care and education association in California and HSMC has become a significant child care management company. In his career, Dennis Vicars has served as a child care corporate executive, preschool company founder, and advocate on both the public and private side of early childhood education. Dennis has a unique understanding of early childhood education and has experience in every area of the profession. Dennis has been a speaker and workshop host for various organizations including the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the National Child Care Association (NCCA), PACE, and the World Forum on Early Care and Education. Dennis is presently a featured writer in *Exchange* magazine, which is the most recognized early childhood magazine in the world. Dennis has assisted and been a consultant on numerous early care and education advisory boards including Blue Ribbon Commissions in Maryland, Virginia, Oregon, Washington, and Arizona. Dennis served on California's Master Plan for early childhood education and was recently chosen by Governor Schwarzenegger as his representative on the 13-member Early Learning Quality Improvement System Advisory Committee.

Dennis is presently involved in Sacramento County's Superintendent Preschool Committee and participates on PACE's Public Policy Committee and is President of Child Development Policy Institute (CDPI).

In case you did not know, that last click you just heard was a would-be parent client that bypassed you because:

- Your web site was boring and not inviting.
- Your web site was confusing and not user-friendly.
- Your web site did not easily display the needed information.
- Your web site was incapable of responding to parents' questions.
- All of the above.

The Internet has put immediate information at the fingertips of anyone who can drag and click a mouse (everyone under 35 years old can do this in their sleep). This immediate access to information provides consumers and businesses an instantaneous and inexpensive opportunity to create a relationship. This opportunity for your school/center, not unlike the first five seconds of a greeting when your telephone is answered, will invite a parent to learn more about your operation and offerings or will motivate them to click away faster than they could hang up a telephone.

Your web site, not unlike your business card, is an invitation for a prospective parent to learn more about your services and gives them numerous ways (offer at least three): e-mail, phone, fax, etc.) to reach you and the school/center. People in their twenties, thirties, and forties (those having babies) do not use yellow pages. (I doubt if they have traditional yellow pages). That same demographic is made up of visually-oriented people who have little time or patience for a web site that is not inviting or cannot quickly link them to the desired information within three clicks. The effective site is not an online brochure, but more a marketing/business tool that generates inquiries by offering information and visuals that are child-friendly but professional. An effective web site sequentially leads the parent to you directly for more information and to a tour (potentially virtual), which leads to the eventual enrollment.

A few key considerations for an effective web site are:

- Determine who you are trying to reach: Who is your audience?
- What problem(s) are you solving for your target market?

- Can a site visitor figure out your site immediately?
- Your site should be interactive with links to other pages that offer the visitor something useful and unique (e.g., download your e-newsletter, schedule a tour, sign up for a mailing list, etc.).
- Keep your site current (get old events off your site at least on a monthly basis).
- Make sure your homepage offer links and resources that a parent can use.
- Have a clear call to action beyond “Contact Us.” Use solid keywords such as “Sign up for our Newsletter” or “Book a Tour Today.”
- Make your messages quick and succinct. When in doubt, edit to be more clear with less words.

In addition to these web ideas, it is equally important to find out what your rate of response is on each web page. Those pages that are receiving fewer hits should be re-evaluated as to why. The same tracking should occur for the various links on your site to assure that parents are utilizing you as a positive resource for their parenting/family needs. Frequently updating and changing links draws parents back to your site repeatedly. Also, consider printing your web address and e-mail on every piece of paper and all promotional materials that leave your school/center. Your web address and e-mail address should be on all business cards, brochures, letterhead, envelopes, and newsletters. Driving parents to your web site should be a separate goal within your overall marketing plan.

When combined with a solid traditional marketing program, a unique, focused, compelling web site can be a vehicle that draws prospective parents to your school/center. Web site marketing is an essential tool in reaching young parents. These parents expect you to speak their language, know what’s important to them, and communicate in a manner that holds their attention. A school/center without a web site will quickly be marked off their list. A school/center with an outdated or boring web site won’t last much longer. In today’s world, having a professional web site is the equivalent to showing up on time for the interview — it’s the bare minimum that gets you to the next step in the evaluation process.