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marketing your program

by Susan Anderson

When most early education directors and family providers hear the term *marketing plan*, they cringe. But those words don't need to scare you! In fact, developing a plan is easy and this article will take you through the basic steps of developing a marketing plan for your program.

What is a marketing plan?

A marketing plan outlines the specific actions you intend to carry out to interest potential customers in your service and to persuade them to buy the services you offer. In other words, a marketing plan defines what your organization will do to interest new families in your facility and encourage them to enroll their children in your program. Even if your program has a waiting list and maintains steady enrollment, having a marketing plan is still a good idea — as you'll learn in the next section.

Benefits of a marketing plan

A marketing plan allows you and your team to:

- learn what makes your program unique and special; its selling features
- capitalize on your strengths when recruiting families

- create a unified message that everyone can use when speaking to families
- develop stronger relationships with staff, families, boards, and community stakeholders
- allow your organization to maximize resources when promoting your organization
- maintain a consistent presence in your community
- insure your marketing goals are met and sustained
- celebrate your success as you achieve your marketing goals

Having a consistent message and being able to use your resources wisely are very important in helping your organization remain focused rather than adopting a hit-or-miss approach to marketing. Let me offer a personal example of how marketing plans help you prioritize and create short- and long-term goals.

While developing the plan for our facility we wanted to promote the fact that our center offers free lunches. One of the ways we wanted to promote this message was by printing and distributing placemats at local family-friendly restaurants. The marketing plan allowed us to develop a timeline for obtaining the funds to cover printing costs, as well as a date for distribution.

Clarifying your message

Before you can begin to spread your message you have to know your message. Why do you want to market your program and — more importantly — what do you hope to accomplish? Each program will answer these questions differently, but here are a few possibilities:

- increase enrollment
- promote name recognition
- announce new services
- advocate for issues affecting young children and families in your local community
- maintain a waiting list
- or a combination of the above

Now that you know what you hope to accomplish with your marketing plan, take a few moments to write your vision



Susan Anderson has worked in the early childhood field for more than 25 years. She directs the Jefferson DeFrees Early Learning Center in Warren, Pennsylvania, a Keystone

STAR 3 center with a Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts classroom. In addition, Susan volunteers with Warren County Penn State Cooperative Extension conducting "Better Kid" Care child care training. She is a CDA advisor and enjoys helping other early childhood educators further their training, skills, and knowledge within the field.

down. Congratulations! You've completed the first step to developing your marketing plan. And time for another example:

In developing a marketing plan for our program I knew we needed to increase enrollment in our preschool classrooms and to be seen as a leader on early education issues within our community. These two goals became our marketing vision. This simple statement insures that our message is always on target and allows us to use our resources in ways that build on our marketing plan.

What makes you special?

Once you've defined what you hope to accomplish with your marketing efforts, the next step is to define what makes your program special. This can be as simple as listing your organization's strengths and weaknesses or as elaborate as developing a strategic plan. Input from families, staff, board members, community partners, and/or school-age children enrolled in your program through a one-page questionnaire is a useful way to learn more about your program and any overlooked strengths.

We recently used a parent questionnaire to gather feedback on our school-age program and learned that having a designated homework time was viewed as a strength by our families. When talking with the children we learned that they, too, liked having one-on-one homework help. Without their input, we never would have recognized this part of our program as an asset to promote.

When reviewing your program it's helpful to answer the following questions:

- What expertise does our program bring to the array of early education services currently available to families?
 - Is our program accredited?
 - What does our organization want to be known for?
 - What makes our program different from our competitors? Is it our facility, staff, community partnerships, or programs?
 - What makes our facility special? Is it conveniently located near businesses or schools? Does it have a pool, gymnasium, outdoor play area, computers, or tight security?
 - Why would a family choose to send their child to our program as opposed to another program?
- This is a great exercise, whether or not you are developing a marketing plan, because it allows you to see your program from different perspectives and learn what makes your program special. If your program has enjoyed success, this part of the plan will re-inforce why. If your program has become stagnant, this process will help you identify areas for growth. Now that you know your marketing goals and what makes your program special, it is time to identify your target audience.

Target audience

There are times when marketing to a large audience — such as your community — is useful. However, identifying smaller populations that need your services allows you to maximize resources. These populations are referred to as target audiences. These groups of people need your services, and your marketing plan will help them learn why. The first step is identifying who they are:

- Think about your marketing goal.
 - What did you want to accomplish?
 - Did you want to expand enrollment in your after-school program or infant classroom?

- Using your goal statement as a reference, begin to think about groups that focus on the ages of children you serve.
- Brainstorm ideas for each marketing goal you identify. This is a great activity to do at a staff meeting. Write your marketing goals on a white board or large sheet of paper taped to the wall. Allow 15 minutes per marketing goal and let the brainstorming begin! A wealth of ideas will be generated in even a brief brainstorming session.

For example, my goal was to increase preschool enrollment, so we focused our brainstorming session on places preschool families frequent or visit. Our idea list included:

- pediatrician offices
- grocery stores
- libraries — does your library have a bulletin board or children's story hour?
- hospitals for new baby baskets (perhaps the newborn has an older brother or sister)
- community centers
- elementary schools
- human resource managers for businesses in your neighborhood
- preschool gym classes
- Young Mothers' clubs
- community events geared towards young children, such as a Children's Fun Fair

- Once the list has been developed have the staff rank which three strategies they believe would be most effective.
- Keep every idea and suggestion regardless of how silly or impossible it may seem. Each idea holds the potential for achieving your marketing goals. Once you have developed your marketing plan, review your list of ideas from the brainstorming session every six months to keep your marketing fresh, on track, and always headed in the right direction.

With a few short steps you can identify your marketing goals, describe what makes your program special, and define your target audience. Next we will take a look at one of the most important factors in making your marketing plan succeed — consistency.

Consistency is key

In marketing, consistency is key, whether you are marketing a product, a service, a can of soup, or a magazine. We all know that we often can recognize a brand before we read the label because of consistency in colors, lettering styles, and logo placement. One symbol can and does speak volumes about a product. This is why thinking about consistency before marketing is vital. Here are some tips to keep in mind:

- Make sure to spell your organization's name the same way and use the same abbreviations each time.
- Choose a color and font and stick with it whenever using color printing. For example, our color is light blue and it is used on our brochure, letterhead, flyers, parent newsletters, and t-shirts.
- Consider how you want people to perceive your organization. Is it a fun, happy place for children and families or traditional, trustworthy, and dedicated? Keep these words in mind when picking colors and fonts. There are so many fonts available that you want to be sure that the one you choose conveys your intended message. And once you've chosen a font continue to use it on everything from letterhead to business cards.
- Consistency is also about a unified message. This involves making sure that everyone in your organization is aware of the goals and key points that make your program unique. This way, no matter who is talking about your program, the message is the same.

Putting your plan together

Now you have the tools to develop a successful marketing plan for your organization! You've identified your marketing goal, described how your program is special, and defined your target audience. You've also learned the importance of consistency when marketing.

Resources

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