

Five Ways to Economy-Proof Your Enrollment

by Julie Wassom

When customers are facing job loss or tighter budgets, prospects are attempting to negotiate tuition fees, and subsidies are being cut, smart child care managers are studying the essential moves directors must take to increase and retain enrollment despite the volatile economy. Instead of using a tough economy as a reason enrollment drops, they simply sharpen their focus, fuel their creativity, and become keenly observant and responsive.

No longer can success in early care and education depend solely on providing high-quality services parents view as excellent experiences for young children delivered by competent staff in a safe environment. Though all of this is important, sustainable success depends upon securing and retaining the maximum enrollment possible, despite a struggling economy. Without the revenue that enrollment generates, even the best child care managers find it extremely challenging to provide the level of program, services, and staff they need to support the quality they profess.



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helped thousands of directors and managers worldwide to build significant enrollment in their child care programs. Her Enrollment Building Success Library is the gold standard of enrollment-building training tools. She also authors the monthly e-newsletter, "Wassom's Child Care Marketing Wisdom." Subscribe or reach Julie at (303) 693-2306, julie@juliewassom.com, or www.juliewassom.com.

These five essential moves for generating inquiries and converting enrollments will help ensure that you reach your enrollment goals, succeed in maximizing your capacity utilization, and gain the financial freedom to provide the highest quality early education and care possible, no matter what the economy is doing.

#1 —

Source Inquiries

Defining the demographic and psychographic characteristics of your target audience is not enough to ensure that your marketing message will reach them and cause them to inquire. You must know where they search when looking for early care and education. Is it online, in print, from referrals, or a combination? What shapes their opinions and what causes them to inquire? According to Erik Qualman in his book, *Socialnomics* (2010), people trust digital referral word of mouth from their friends 70 percent more than advertisements.

Determining how your prospects found you will help you evaluate your marketing efforts. Ask every inquiring or visiting prospect, "What are the ways you heard about us?" Log their responses. By doing so, you will gain valuable information about where they search, which of your marketing efforts generate the larg-

est response, and what incentives lead to the most inquiries. Not only is this helpful in strategic marketing planning, but it will make your future marketing significantly more cost-efficient.

#2 —

Master Articulating Unique Benefits

What are the unique attributes of your program that matter to your prospects? What separates you from other options your prospective families are considering? Don't guess. Do an assessment of what your current customers value most in your service. If you have not called or visited your competition in the last six months, do so now.

Sell more; tell less. Once you have learned what each prospect needs and wants, you attempt to educate the prospect about the unique features of your program that meet those needs. If you say, "Our curriculum helps prepare children for kindergarten," you are *telling*, not *selling*. To sell your program over others, use benefit statements that give your prospects a clear understanding of what they will GET from you. "Here at XYZ Center, Emma will become well prepared for kindergarten, because the curriculum we use has been developed to give her practice with the skills she will need." In

this example, you are selling the benefit, not merely telling the feature. People buy benefits, not just features.

#3 —

Track Conversions

I call this “The Critical Three Numbers” in enrollment building. You *must* know, on a monthly basis, how many inquiries were converted to tours, how many tours converted to enrollments, and how many inquiries from all sources converted to enrollment. When all managers responsible for converting inquiries and tours are accountable for entering these numbers into a tracking system, you gain an invaluable perspective on three essentials in your child care business:

- The success of your marketing efforts in generating qualified prospects in the volume you need.
- The sales skill needs of your managers responsible for building enrollment.
- The patterns of higher inquiry volume that can impact your marketing focus and calendar.

When your conversion tracking system also includes notation of disenrollments, you will gain a much clearer picture of overall capacity utilization, and be able to more quickly address customer service issues affecting enrollment.

#4 —

Make Sales Training Mandatory

Okay, I am a little biased on this one. However, most child care program managers have had very little, if any, training in sales and marketing. Yet, you are responsible for securing and retaining enrollment, maximizing revenue, and executing marketing programs to generate qualified inquiries. Early care and education is a service that requires unique skills to sell successfully with comfort and confidence. Directors who receive enrollment conversion and

customer service training, and execute the skills well, consistently have higher enrollment than those who do not. Sales training for enrollment building is an investment with a high rate of return, and successful industry leaders know it.

#5 —

Follow Up, Follow Up, Follow Up!

I like to say, “The fortune is in the follow-up!” Timely follow-up that provides prospects with information of value will create credibility, believability, and more opportunities to convert enrollments. Use multiple forms of messaging at scheduled intervals. Periodically ask prospects for permission to stay in touch with them. Use a contact management system to help you practice the good time management that effective follow-up requires.

Follow-up inside your organization is as important as the contact you initiate with your prospects and customers. When field managers make sure their directors are well-trained, then hold them accountable to execute good sales skills and to track inquiry sources and enrollment conversions, it yields higher enrollment success.

Because enrollment levels can be significantly impacted by parents disenrolling their children, savvy directors know one key to customer retention is to communicate regularly with currently enrolled families. Jeff Bezos, CEO of Amazon, a strong advocate of customer service strategies that build long-term success, stated, “We see our customers as invited guests to a party, and we are the hosts. It’s our job every day to make every important aspect of the customer experience a little bit better.” With your staff, determine what specific things you can do to give your parents a great experience and to periodically show them how much you value and appreciate them. When you practice these five essential

moves, you will not only make your enrollment economy-proof, you will join the leaders in the child care industry who are enjoying success in filling their programs, generating revenue, and providing premier quality early care and education to their customers and communities.

References

Qualman, E. (2010), *Socialnomics: How social media transforms the way we live and do business*. John Wiley & Sons.