

How Comfort Can Steal Enrollment

by Julie Wassom

The director's voice had a frantic tone when she asked me how she could quickly regain enrollment she had lost when a company near her center closed its doors, causing several of her parents to leave unexpectedly. When I asked her what she had been doing to market her center, she replied, "Not much, because we have been full for awhile now." Big Mistake.

Another director, frustrated by prospects who came for what seemed to be good center visits yet decided to enroll with her competitors, said this, "I have been enrolling parents the same way for years. When they see our building and the kind of program we have, they have always registered. I have not needed to ask them to enroll." Really?

Lamenting an increasing withdrawal rate, a manager commented, "We do not do parent surveys or exit interviews. We know what our parents want, and the only reasons we lose enrollments are out

of our control, like moving away." Are you sure?

Those of you who have participated in my training know I say complacency is enrollment suicide. If you have been doing the same things for years to convert inquiries into enrollments and retain most of your customers, there's a good chance you have become too comfortable, maybe even complacent. If that is remotely true for you, let me ask you a few questions:

- Has your marketplace changed in the last few years?
- Are there more competitors?
- Are prospects investigating in different ways?
- Are parent expectations changing?

If you answered, "Yes" to any one of these, your complacency can cost you enrollments and revenue. And when that happens, it will cost the children you serve because those you lose will not get the kind of quality program you deliver. It's a lost opportunity.

Can you assume your prospects recognize you are too busy to answer the phone completely and professionally every time? Will the quality differences in your program be obvious to parents?

Will prospects automatically visit and enroll without your asking them to? The answer is a resounding "NO!"

What they do see with laser vision is any perceived indifference from you or your staff, any unresolved issues, any indication you are not delivering on your promises, any unattended building maintenance, and any perceived attitude of superiority. These perceptions impact their decisions to enroll and remain in your center.

A few focused, consistent actions can help you and your team avoid getting too comfortable and suffering the loss of enrollment and reputation it can cause. Here are five ways to make sure you don't get too comfortable.

Never stop marketing. Although everything you and your staff do communicates a marketing message, you need to plan and execute specific goal-directed marketing activities on a regular basis. Include a combination of internal, outbound, community, publicity, and online initiatives. People forget fast, and must have constant reminders to recognize your brand, remember your key message, and inquire or refer others to you.

Do a 'Sherlock Holmes Check' of your center. Imagine your prospects and cus-



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tomers looking at your center through a magnifying glass. What would they see, hear, smell? Dusty baseboards, leaves and sand on the rug at the front entrance, a loud command from a teacher to the children, or that torn banner may seem a low priority to you. However, your prospects and customers notice them and wonder what else in the center needs attention. That thought then becomes a question in their minds about your attention and care for their children enrolled with you. Make sure you are diligent about noticing and addressing the little things that make a lasting impression and influence enrollment and retention.

Stop TELLING and start SELLING.

During inquiry calls and center visits, ask as much as you tell. Ask about needs and desires. Use good benefit statements to articulate the unique features of your program that meet those needs. Then ask if they agree. Ask to schedule a center visit and then ask for their enrollment. Ask where they learned about you, why they chose you, and whom they might know that would also be interested in your services. When you ask as much as you tell, you communicate that the needs of your prospects and customers drive your business more than your own comfort. It expresses your genuine interest in helping them make the best decision for their family.

Find out what your customers really think. When Daniel Scoggins, as CEO of TGI Fridays, said, "The only way to know how your customers view your business is to look at it through their eyes," he knew the value of finding out what your customers really think about the services you provide. While a satisfaction survey is a good idea, it is only going to tell you the level of your customers' satisfaction. To keep from getting too comfortable, make sure your survey also includes questions about expectations your customers perceive as not yet met. In addition to a survey,

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periodically conduct a focus group of your parents to get their perceptions of the relationship you have with them, the quality of your services, and how and where they talk about you. If their answers surprise you, you are probably too comfortable.

Be open to change. There's a great expression about how the definition of insanity is doing things the same way, yet expecting different results. As times have changed, so has the early care and education industry. Even slow adopters have realized that some of the traditional methods of generating inquiries, converting them to visits and enrollment, and retaining a solid customer base are not as effective as they once were. To keep your own comfort from stealing enrollment, you must be open to change:

- Track how your prospects learn about you; then make sure you are marketing within those venues.
- Embrace the Internet and social media and what digital communication can do to communicate your message and help you engage with both prospects and customers.
- Do all you can to gather and post the good reviews. Your parents may now trust these even more than advertising.
- Note where changes are needed in your building, your program, and your staff involvement in marketing. Then follow a plan to implement those changes.

Here are three actions you can take right away to test your level of comfort and begin to make sure complacency isn't stealing your chances of building and retaining enrollment in your center.

- Call your own center and see how the telephone is answered. Is it with a rushed, incomplete, or unprofessional greeting? Remember, you never get a second chance to make a first impression. If you or your staff have become too comfortable answering or taking messages, this is an easy, low-cost fix.
- Learn how to articulate your unique benefits. Make sure you do it consistently and well everywhere — in calls, during center visits, in all electronic and print marketing.
- Make quality delivery visible and obvious. Bulletin boards that document learning, professionally designed newsletters, and parent programs that explain the value of independent quality rankings are examples of ways you can make sure you are actively focusing on fulfilling parents' needs for high quality.

If you want to maximize enrollment and minimize withdrawals, it is time to move out of your comfort zone. Do so and you will handcuff the complacency thieves and any threat too much comfort poses to filling your school.

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