

Five Smart Marketing Moves to Build Enrollment

by Julie Wassom



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Building enrollment is not as easy as it used to be. Higher parent expectations, more competition, and the incredible power of reviews have made it essential that early care and education managers and administrators understand what I call “The Four Rights of Effective Marketing.” For your marketing to be most successful in generating inquiries from qualified enrollment prospects, it must be the...

- *right message* to the
- *right target audiences* at the
- *right time* through the
- *right venues*.

Assuming who your target audiences are and where they come from is not good enough. Knowing very clearly who



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and where they are — demographics, psychographics (lifestyles), and geography — will help you know what kind of message will appeal to them and where to put it. For example, working parents will respond to a different message than stay-at-home moms. Parents who jog to the center pushing a runner's stroller will have different lifestyles — and thus child care needs — than parents who quickly drive up, drop off their children, and head for the train to their city job.

Understanding when prospects are most likely to notice your marketing messages and where they will look for them (venues) can be the difference between a successful marketing campaign and one that yields far fewer inquiries than you had hoped. A campaign timed when parents are seeking to register for the school year will attract more attention than one released at a traditionally less decisive time of year.

Should you allocate your marketing resources to search-engine optimization or to ads in the local parenting magazines or to generating publicity? How do you figure this out? A very good start is to ask this question of every parent who contacts you: “What are the ways you heard about us?” Track

their responses, and you will soon have an idea of the best venues for your marketing messages.

When I ask directors what ways their prospects heard about them, most who track it say word-of-mouth is still the most common. However, today's parents are extremely tech savvy. Some sources indicate that over 75% of millennials have a mobile device nearby at all times. This alone begs the question, “If they pay more attention to online marketing than traditional methods, shouldn't your marketing move beyond relying on word-of-mouth to creating what I once heard industry tech expert, Chip Donohue, call *word-of mouse*?”

So what matters in your marketing program? Here are five smart marketing moves that will give you a measurable return on your investment.

■ Do a website marketing audit.

Conversion-centered landing page design is an Internet marketing term that indicates the ability of a website to create experiences that guide the visitor toward completing a specific action. In early childhood education, that action is to convert from website visitors to enrollment prospects. Many ECE sites provide a

lot of information, yet do very little to call the web visitor to action. What should that action be? If you want your site to be a strong marketing tool, the action should be for the visitor to request more information or to schedule a center visit. Does your website make it easy and obvious for the prospect to do that?

Take a look at your website from the prospects' perspective:

- Is it mobile friendly?
- Is it easy to navigate?
- Is it visually appealing enough to keep them there?
- Does it create urgency?
- Does it have design elements that lead them to the desired action without too many click-throughs?

■ **Make immediate, personalized follow-up part of your protocol.**

When today's prospects inquire, they expect an immediate response that provides the requested information. The more personalized the response, the better. For inquiries submitted from your website, a response by the end of the business day says to the prospect, "You matter, and I want to help you with this important decision for your child and family." In the work I have done researching parents' perspective on optimal response times, I have learned that if you wait much more than 24 hours to get back to enrollment prospects, you have lost them to one of your competitors.

If you are using an inquiry form or prospect profile, whether a printed version or one prospects have submitted online from your website, the form should include a section where you can request the prospect's specific interests, needs, and

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concerns. With this information, you can then personalize your follow-up beyond child's age, classroom, and days needed. You can briefly indicate features of your center that will meet parents' expressed needs. As parents proceed from initial investigation to consideration, this personal attention can be a deciding factor that can put you on their short list of centers to visit.

- **Develop a strong parent referral program.** Parents referring other parents remains a significant source of inquiries for most centers. Do an analysis of where your parents are getting referrals. Is it solely by talking face-to-face with other parents? Probably not. In addition, they are reading online reviews, checking licensing websites, asking their pediatricians, and talking to staff. What are you doing to request, promote, acknowledge, and thank referrals in each of these categories of opinion influencers?

If you do not already have a parent referral program, now is the time to develop one. Ask your current parents what would be the most valuable thank-you gift. For many, it is a tuition credit for both the referring family and new family, after a certain period of enrollment. For others it is something else the parent values, such as tickets to a local amusement park or a monthly pass on local mass transit. Once established, promote this program to existing families in your newsletters, on special reminder cards, on your website, and in conversation.

Include staff in your enrollment referral program. They can be valuable sources for new prospects. Develop partnerships in your community where you cross-refer, such as with pediatricians, children's dentists, and hairdressers, to name a

few. For these opinion influencers, gift cards and personal thank-you notes can help keep the stream of referrals coming. Without a strong parent referral program, you are missing out on a smart, low-cost marketing opportunity.

- **Make your email marketing content rich.** Just because young parents prefer to communicate via email does not mean they will read every one you send them. However, if you begin to use content marketing in those messages, they will start to recognize them as containing information of value. Value in making this important family decision, value in engaging in your school and with other families there, value in being a better parent. It is then that you will capture their attention and their inquiries.

Though adding a new prospect to the event notices you send other parents is a nice gesture of invitation, it is not content marketing. Sending a link to an article about separation anxiety to a prospective parent concerned about leaving her child is content the parent will see as personal and valuable.

Larger scale email campaigns must attract attention, be well-branded, hold readers long enough to communicate key messages, and give qualified prospects an incentive to respond. If your email marketing supports your position as the knowledgeable, helpful, professional resource your prospects can trust, they will be more likely to inquire to determine what your center's environment feels like for their child and family.

- **Use a customer relationship management system (CRM)** to track prospects from inquiry to registration and enrollment. This marketing tool can also help assess strengths and challenges in the conversion pipeline, and manage the effectiveness of marketing campaigns. For many directors, the task of tracking inquiries and following up is still being done on Post-it Notes® or in a spiral notebook or lead log. Far more efficient and cost-effective is to use available software to make this task easier and the center more competitive in attracting and retaining prospects in the search process.

Fortunately, owners and managers in the child care field can now choose web-based CRM software systems that are both customized to the industry and will integrate into several of the most commonly used management software programs. The reports a good CRM system generates can give small to large ECE companies valuable information for avoiding enrollment prospect loss, developing conversion training, determining lifetime value of customers, and achieving higher rates of return on marketing campaigns.

Conclusion

Smart marketing, like the actions above, will not only generate more qualified inquiries for your center, it will help make enrollment building a more comfortable, easy-to-manage, and yes, even fun part of everyday life in your center.

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