

Thriving in Tough Times

Keeping your enrollment boat afloat in low tide

by Julie Wassom

Are there days when you feel like your center is being attacked by the enrollment pirates? You may not see the Black Pearl sailing on the horizon, but if you take a look from the crow's nest of your center,

what's clearly in sight are some of these facts affecting enrollment:

- It's not as easy to enroll prospects as it used to be.
- There have been significant cuts in government tuition subsidies.
- Your competition is working harder than ever to woo your prospects and customers away.
- The length of your waiting lists, if they exist at all, is shorter than it used to be.

■ Program growth projections are trickier because of fluctuations in parents' needs for early care and education services.

■ Customers leave with very little explanation, and you scramble to replace them to meet your budget numbers.

Some business experts predict that a tight economy, intense competition, and demanding customers will become the norm for at least the next decade. To ride what may be rough waters in your target markets, your commitment to quality must go beyond a beautiful center, a recognized curriculum, and a well-trained staff. Your willingness to take necessary action now can be your life buoy for staying in business at the level you want or maybe even at all.

Here are some marketing tactics for surviving and thriving during hard times of enrollment building:

■ **Get tech savvy.** Make sure your company or center has a web site, and make it one that sells as much as it tells. Use traditional marketing techniques to drive prospects to your site. Give site visitors a way to inquire about your services or receive information about specific programs you offer. Capture the e-mail addresses of your prospects and customers, along with written permission to periodically e-mail them information of value such as center newsletters and notices of upcoming center events. Doing so will talk to them in a language most young parents value, and will make your communication job more efficient. Automate your inquiry tracking system and include a contact

management program. Train your center managers on using it for conversion reports, customer communications, and prospect follow-up.

■ **Tap existing resources.** Learn how to make your staff your marketing partners. The impression they make on prospects and customers has a significant impact on their decision to enroll and stay enrolled with you. Develop and actively market a referral program with existing parents, staff, and out-of-center referral sources. Their third party endorsement of your center's services is a strong buying influencer.

Go beyond the now commonplace referral program offering a cash or tuition reward for referring a new family that enrolls. Try something like this. For every referral you receive from customer, staff, or opinion influencer, put the name of the referring person into a monthly drawing for tickets to the local zoo or children's museum. Do this whether the family referred decides to enroll or not. Your referral sources cannot be responsible for another family's choices or your enrollment conversion skills; but if they are truly satisfied with your services, they will respond well to such a reason to spread the word. And when they do that, you'll feel like your head is above water in generating more inquiries.

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■ **Do it right the first time.** Being complacent in a competitive market is a passport to failure. One thing well known about most of today's Xer parents is that they are more skeptical and less loyal regarding services than the Boomer parents were. They will give you fewer chances to convert them as prospects and to keep them as customers. Invest in training that will help give you the skills to turn every qualified inquiry into a center visit and more visits into enrollments. And remember, once they are enrolled, it is important to have a parent relations program that will continually reassure them that enrolling with you was the right decision.

■ **Think outside the center.** Gone are the days when a Yellow Pages ad, a sign outside your center, and good internal marketing were enough to generate adequate inquiries. Now, it's more important than ever to learn how to connect with your community. Plan and conduct monthly marketing activities outside your center.

Develop a file of successful community marketing activities that do more than ask vendors to put out your fliers or brochures. Think about what you can do for them as much as what they can do for you. For example, instead of just taking your brochures to the nearby real estate office, take cards offering a free day at your center, then make the recommendation that they give one to each new home prospect to use on the day they are looking at houses in your area or on the day of the house closing. This way, you both can win. Remain visible through community partnerships and publicity generation. Think of these cost-efficient forms of marketing as the tug boat that pulls your center ship along through shallow waters.

■ **Innovate versus imitate.** Imitation may be the sincerest form of flattery, but it is often too little and too late for today's busy consumers. New innovative ideas implemented in all aspects of your center's business will attract the attention and recognition you need to catch

prospects and hold customers in a crowded marketplace. Once you're solid and successful in your basic marketing and enrollment building efforts, explore creative ways to enhance your relationships with prospects and customers. It may be a parent hotline for questions and comments, or a file filled with parenting articles for your parents to take and read, or it may be that you *initiate* follow-up instead of waiting for interested prospects to re-contact you. Remember the ad that said, "Unless you're the lead sled dog, the view is always the same"? Enough said.

By using these techniques to keep your center's enrollment afloat in tough times, you will be at the helm of your own success. Think of it as a marketing regatta. It's a challenging course of action, but it is worth the trip. And the high capacity utilization you will have because of it will keep the enrollment pirates at bay and your center sailing smoothly toward your goals.

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