

Incremental Improvement

A deliberate philosophy of frequent, small improvements to keep your campers and guests delighted with your concern for their well-being.

by Gary Forster

In 1978 I was hired as the summer camp program director for Camp Tecumseh YMCA in Indiana. Tecumseh suffered from the same fate as most camps in the 70's – dwindling enrolment, deteriorating facilities, and crippling deficits that predicted eventual demise. The board took a “one last noble effort” stand and hired visionary leaders in Richard “Dick” Marsh and Dave Wright with the goal of creating a “world class camp”... or else. We're talking serious motivation here.

The major shortfalls in facilities were the cabins (former tent platforms that had been boarded-in and would be poor excuses for chicken coops), and the bathrooms (urine-soaked concrete block bunkers.) Dick and Dave's vision was to create a pioneer themed experience to play off the natural beauty, the Native American history, and the unavoidable rustic-ness of camping. Log cabins would replace the old shacks, eventually with attached bathrooms. Great photos of smiling kids in the summer camp program, along with slick renderings of the log home company's pre-packaged cabins made it relatively easy for the outgoing Marsh to find sponsors for the cabins.

We made one mistake in executing the plan. With the very first donation, we built a “model” cabin with the intention of showing parents and donors how our future plans would look. First, donors seldom made the trip to camp, and weren't giving to the “cause” as much as they were giving to Dick, the person whom they felt a personal commitment. And for parents and groups it was disastrous. Anyone who got to stay in the new cabin was thrilled. Everyone else had never known how *really* bad they had it until they now had something to compare it to. They all wanted to know why they couldn't have the new cabin.

Why had we singled them out for bad treatment? Shouldn't they get a discount for having to stay in the “shacks?” Many groups said “we'll just skip next year. Call us when the new cabins are done.”

That was the final straw. We changed plans so all the cabins could be constructed at once, instead of spreading it out over three years. We temporarily relocated the old cabins so they could be used during construction of the new ones, and between one summer and the next, replaced every cabin in camp. (Every cabin except the returning teens that really didn't care where they stayed; and in fact most liked the prestige of “roughing” it in “their” old cabins.)

Fast-forward 5 years. I've been hired as the executive director for Camp Jewell YMCA in Connecticut, mostly because of their dire need for facility renovation and my degree in architecture. The board's plan was familiar: renovate one of the worn-down old cabins into a fully completed “model cabin.” It was a hard sell, but I convinced them of a different tact.

In addition to being hired to renovate the facilities, I was told my other key job was marketing. The summer camp was only ¾ full, and the cabins, though heated, were seldom all booked the rest of the year.. The most interesting statistic I asked for was the return rate. For off-season groups, it was only 25%. That meant for all the effort that went into attracting and serving a group, 75% of them weren't satisfied enough to come back! All we had to do was increase the return rate and the current (admittedly minor) sales effort would be more than sufficient.

So what would get the people to return? We asked them. I asked at the coffee pot before breakfast (when they first came up from their bad night's sleep). I asked them at their tables as I ate each meal with a different group. I asked them in an evaluation form just before they went home. Quickly we painted a picture of their priorities, and with my past experience, realized that any changes we made to one cabin we needed to make to all of them. We had very little money, so we had to pick the biggest "bang for the buck."

Many camps choose the path of doing nothing, waiting for that "one grand capital bail-out" that will replace everything. But in the meantime, thousands of children have to put up with pitiful camp facilities, and thousands more never come to camp because dissatisfied adults have spread the word: "stay away." So I chose, and would choose again, the path of constant incremental improvement; every year surprising our guests with a few much-needed changes that they all could enjoy, building an expectation of positive change and a reputation for creativity, quality, and customer service.

Here's our sequential list of our "incremental improvements." The idea was to pick the things that either bothered the guests the most (remove their biggest complaint), or would delight them the most by making their experience more unique. Because of the initial run-down shape of the facility, it was far easier to find the former than the latter! If we could have found a huge pot of money to do it all at once, that would have been great. But what I did have was a modest amount of operating money I could re-invest into the facilities each year and a few small donations for specific projects that I could get from board members and alumni.

New Mattresses. The old ones were fabric-covered, many over 20 years old. Each one was covered with a pattern of overlapping circular stains in yellow, white and brown, that displayed the history of every bodily excretion that had happened on each over the history of

the camp. Giving the mattress a smack with your hand would raise a cloud of spores from ancient thriving fungus colonies. Our guests number one concern: they didn't want to catch "cooties" from a night at our camp. So we replaced every mattress in camp, not just with the cheapest we could find, but with 5" thick foam with a nice colored cover that looked less institutional than the standard white with blue stripes.

Paint. If you had wanted to leave your name on the wall of a Camp Jewell cabin in 1984, you wouldn't have been able to do it. There wasn't *room* for your name, as every square inch of the walls, bunks, and ceilings was covered with magic marker or toothpaste lettering. Asked why it hadn't been painted over, the camp board's answer was "you can't paint that! That's real wood!" But heroic attempts to sand off the graffiti just left ugly white blotches on the old yellowed or smoke-stained wood. It just wasn't possible to sand every square inch of a building, especially as deep as the magic marker had seeped. I went ahead and started to paint. (The embarrassment of the horrible graffiti was just too much to stand!) But even using a stain-killer wouldn't cover over that magic marker. It just bled right through, even after two or three coats.

So we called up the Sanford Marker Company and asked them how we should get rid of *their* product from our walls. Their chemist was very familiar with the problem and had a simple solution: aluminum paint. It's actually made with flakes of aluminum that block out the marker, and then wall paint covers perfectly.

Here's my warning: don't use volunteers or amateurs to paint your camp. We've all seen good buildings ruined by sloppy paint jobs, with damage to ceilings, fixtures and floors that can never be repaired. So hire a professional. Shop around, give them lots of work and lots of flexibility, and you find someone who is very willing to fit you into their slow season

(usually after holidays) at bargain prices. Use just a few different colors, and always keep those colors on hand. There will be almost no graffiti on a well-maintained wall. But if it does show up (usually by a bunk or in the bathroom stall) a quick touch-up with a spray stain-killer and the matching wall paint puts the cabin back to perfect before the very next group checks in.

The result was overwhelming. With our returning groups, you would have thought we had built all new cabins. “They’re so clean and bright!”

Artwork on the walls. Even cheap motel rooms have paintings on the walls, yet most YMCA camps are complete devoid of any “personal” touch that you would hope to find in a “cabin in the woods” if you were renting it for a vacation get-a-way. We got all the staff and volunteers involved in looking for the right “stuff” to decorate with. Old western prints by Remington and Russell, antique tools and harnesses from yard sales (and the camp maintenance shed attic!), and my favorite: we took the original paste-up pages of our summer camp yearbook with great photographs of special events (like Frontier Day and World Service Carnival) and put them in cheap poster frames. Cross-selling programs! Everything was then screwed directly to the walls with drywall screws. The most important addition to each cabin was the bulletin board with all the important guest information. How to get help in an emergency. How to adjust the thermostat (and no, we do not lock up our thermostats. Would you stay at a hotel where you couldn’t adjust the heat yourself? Didn’t think so.) A Map of camp and trails with a list of fun things to do and destinations for a hike. Meal times. How to use the fireplace (and a request to conserve resources by building small fires.) All in lettering easy enough to read without a magnifying glass.

New Bunks. Each cabin had a collection of rusty, squeaky, broken army bunks: hard to climb, easy to fall out of, noisy as heck,

uncomfortable as hell. Returning summer parents would arrive hours early to make sure their children could avoid the worst ones. Adult chaperones would stand hunched-over at the coffee pot each morning as they shared their horror stories of fitful nights from sway-backed beds and the constant noise of squeaks and groans. We built our own bunks from OSB (wafer board) and 2x4’s, and instead of standing them on the ground hung them from the rafters by the ladders we made from 2x3’s and wooden dowels. No more bunks moved from cabin to cabin, no more squeaks, no more sags, and no more falls thanks to guardrails. And to make them attractive, we covered all the exposed 2x4’s with 1x6 native oak boards, finished with a golden stain. Every cabin. The kids especially liked the bunks being hung from the ceiling and the nifty ladders – “Look dad! It’s like a tree-house!”

New floors. The original tongue-and-groove wood floors had been warm down all the way to the tongues, so sanding was out of the question. A new hardwood floor would be incredibly expensive, and require the same constant maintenance that the old floor had never received. Vinyl tiles require constant waxing and buffing to prevent them from shrinking, and although easy to sweep like a wood floor, feel cold and gritty to bare feet in the morning no matter how often they are cleaned. (Cabins feeling cold in the winter was a complaint, too.) I’d faced the same dilemma with the brand new concrete floors in our log cabins at Tecumseh. There we used commercial-grade carpet (with a fire rating) directly glued down. (Pad isn’t used under commercial carpet as it actually reduces the life and often causes large wrinkles). We initially hoped that the carpet would last 10 years before replacement. In fact it lasted 20 years! It was a minor expense to buy a \$70 vacuum cleaner for each cabin (kids actually enjoy using a vacuum much more than a broom).

My warning: look hard to find a commercial carpet with a large pattern in it. Solid colors show dirt and stains too easily. That’s why

restaurants always have wild, garish patterns. Now when campers, and most importantly adult chaperones, the real decision-makers, jump out of bed in the morning, their feet hit the carpet (which feels warm and clean, even if it isn't!). And as a wonderful side benefit, the acoustics are much better, as the carpet absorbs all the echo and much of the noise, making it much more like a night at home, instead of a night in a locker room.

Curtains. A constant complaint was “No place to change clothes -- people could see right into our cabin at night when we were in our pajamas.” It's not a petty complaint when so many people make it. And curtains are easy to make from bargain cloth, and surprisingly cheap ready-made from discount stores. Curtain rods are a pain in the neck, though, because they just aren't strong enough. I've often just stapled curtains up over a window and pulled them back with “ties.” I've also used closet rods to make indestructible curtain rods that can double as chinning bars or towel-racks!

Outside Lighting. Most of our guests are from the city, and both the kids and adults get scared in the dark at night, not to mention the safety hazard of trying to blindly find your way back to your cabin at night. (After all it was light when you went to dinner, and light when you went to the last activity, so why would you carry a flashlight for all that time?) We wanted subtle lights on each cabin that lit the path to the cabin, the cabin number, and the front steps. The easiest solution was to use low-voltage garden light sets that include a few 12 volt spotlights, wire, and a transformer/power box with a photo cell and timer. So for about \$50 per cabin we had lights that lasted for thousands of hours, went on at dark, and turned off automatically 6 hours later when everyone was asleep.

Bathroom floors. Our cabins had bare concrete floors that looked like a garage and held urine smell like a diaper. Vinyl is the cheapest choice, but VCT (vinyl composite

tiles) are a very poor choice as they always shrink and come loose if they aren't constantly waxed and buffed. Sheet vinyl (like your home's kitchen) is too slippery and won't hold up to constant traffic. But there is *solid* sheet vinyl available in 6' widths that has a slight texture, and color and pattern that go all the way through like VCT. But without the need for waxing. This is a good choice over wood floors. Some people like a poured-on, “seamless,” layered epoxy flooring. It's designed for warehouses and institutional kitchens, and wears like iron. But it costs the same as ceramic tile, and it isn't nearly as attractive. So over concrete there's nothing better than ceramic tile. It's what people expect, and it can last forever.

Warning: installation prices can differ by as much as 100%, so shop around. The old time standard for institutional kitchens and hallways was the un-glazed “quarry tile,” most often a deep red color. Almost indestructible, but it can get very slippery, holds grease and oil if not regularly sealed with silicone, and shows dark spots when wet. (“Non-slip” quarry tile is a disaster: rips mops to shreds.) Glazed ceramic tiles use to be pretty smooth, so the trick to being non-slip in bathroom applications was using very small 1” tiles, so the grout-lines created a very safe no-slip floor. But now-a-days ceramic tile comes with a great no-slip surface in a wonderful array of colors. You see it in every commercial application from shopping malls to airports. Most common is the 6”x6” or 8”x8” tiles because of the ease of handling and variety in patterns you can create. But 12”x12” are becoming more common, and my favorite is a “staggered” sizing that resembles random sized slate. The colors are warm, look historical, and hide *lots* of dirt! (The last thing you want is a plain solid color like white that will show every single footprint).

New Windows and Doors. The old ones wouldn't stay open in the summer, and keeping the place warm in the winter has more to do with preventing drafts than adding insulation.

So vinyl replacement windows never need painting (inside or out), are easy to clean, easy to install, keep the bugs out, and eliminate drafts. New doors have magnetic weather-stripping and seal tight.

Private Showers. Kids, and especially adults, hate gang showers. They always did, it's just now they are wise enough consumers to know that they don't *have* to use them. No parent chaparone wants to undress in front of the school kids. Few summer campers want to be seen by their peers. It's time we did something about it.

And many camps have. Almost all new facilities put in individual shower stalls. The most common (because it's the least expensive, easiest to maintain, and the warmest to the touch) are one-piece fiberglass units. Even more durable (but more expensive) are stalls fabricated from solid-surface material like cultured marble. Some architects still use ceramic tile, but the grout is tough to keep clean of mildew.

But we still are missing the boat on the private shower issue if we don't include a private changing cubicle for each shower. Just a 3'x3' space with a second curtain out front, a shelf for a ditty bag, and hooks for clothes and towel. Then nearby a bench or plastic stack-chair to sit on to put on socks and shoes. I can't begin to tell you the positive comments we received from something as simple as a wooden shelf with three coat pegs underneath just outside each shower. Imagine the pride the young maintenance worker gained from hearing so many compliments on his simple but well-done work.

Lighting. I've seen two major styles of lights in cabins: bare incandescent bulbs (illegal, garage-like, but a nice color of light); and 4' fluorescent (a harsh color that gives a locker-room feel to what should be a bedroom). Those cheap 4' fluorescent fixtures may be cheap to operate and inexpensive to buy, but would you *ever* put one in your *own* bed room?

So why would you do it to your guests? My suggestion is to spend a little more for better fixtures: in fact you may find that your local power company will give you a rebate for using high-efficiency 4' fluorescent fixtures so you can afford ones with nice wood trim. The most important thing: don't get the standard (least expensive) "cool white" fluorescent bulbs. Specifically request "warm white" bulbs to give a nice, homey, bedroom glow with all the same brightness, but without the cold harshness. (Try changing bulbs in one cabin. You'll be amazed at the difference.)

Electricity for hair dryers. Why play policeman to kids and adults who want to use hairdryers at camp? Aren't they the ones that pay us? Would you go to a resort that told you "if you blow the circuit breaker with your hair-dryer, we aren't turning it back on." Yet I've seen signs to that effect in dozens of camps. We just had additional outlets with separate breakers put in. Here's the best idea: don't put them near the sinks. Why have a person drying their hair take up sink space from someone who wants to brush their teeth? Put a separate set of mirrors on a blank wall, with the new outlets, and a shelf to hold their brush, maybe even a large round hole in the shelf to stick the head of their hair-dryer... now that's customer-friendly!

Lounge Furniture. Our cabins were designed with a central common room between two bunk rooms. A nice place for guest not ready for sleep to talk, play cards, or read. But all we had was rusty folding chairs and some ratty old sofas. We opted for the nearly-indestructible "crate-style" wood and cushion sofas, loveseats, and coffee tables. They've held up great.

Exterior Siding. Originally done in plain plywood, the cabins looked like barracks. To create a more memorable experience, we went with a "historic New England" look. Every building would eventually be sided with white cedar shingles in the "Cape Cod Style." The beauty of this material choice is that it can

easily be learned by volunteers with no skills at all. Whole families -- Mom, dad, kids -- could all work together on a volunteer work weekend and become terrifically proud of their finished cabin and the new friends they worked with. And every year they come back to see “their” cabin.

Other advantages of the cedar shingles: Relatively easy to care for (spray with a wood preservative every two years), and easy to repair (if one shingle becomes damaged, it can be removed and replaced.) And if someone doesn’t keep up with the maintenance, they even look good old and weathered.

The Guests’ Reaction

I’m know to say to our staff, “Our guests aren’t required to be understanding of the inconveniences we put them through because of breakdowns, repairs or renovation. They are only here for a few days, and expect the full value for their investment in time and money in us. So we go out of our way to make sure no-one feels shortchanged, even when we have to make major substitutions.” That’s part of doing business with today’s smarter consumers. (Smarter because they know they can spend their time and money someplace else, and will.)

But there is also something unique about serving more groups than a hotel or resort. With our high return rates, guests new to us for the first time can’t help but hear the comments of “old timers” applauding the positive changes they see for *this* year. There’s a verbal history that gets shared in the shower rooms and around the coffee pot. (This goes both ways! If there’s a tradition of bad food, cold water, or poor service, guests love to commiserate those details, too.) So the incremental improvements feed an expectation of things always being better than the year before. There will always be something new to expect. (Just be careful about making any promises until you’re absolutely sure you can follow through with them before they return! It’s better to be happy surprised than disappointed. Remember: under promise and over deliver.

Another thing we learned: watch out for the “bad neighbor” effect improvements can have. Just as with the negative halo a “model cabin” can have on surrounding buildings, a well-intentioned single improvement like painting the ceiling can, by the new contrast, make the walls look worse than they ever did before. That’s what creates a “money pit” out of most renovation projects. Once you get into something, you find many more things you hadn’t considered. My warning here, from many mistakes, is to take a little extra time to plan out a sequence of improvements to minimize the worst juxtapositions, and to plan in contingency money to handle the surprises like bad wiring, rotten wood, old plumbing and the like that you don’t discover until you start a project. Under promise and over deliver is good advice for working with your boss and the board of directors, too.

Incremental Fun

This same kind of positive expectations and word-of-mouth “buzz” works for program activities and other facilities as well. Here’s a partial list of the yearly improvement projects at Camp Jewell.

New View. Visual memories are some of the strongest, but many of our camps don’t have any “trademark views” that really burn into their campers memories. Jewell was like that, with so many trees you couldn’t even get an overall view of the lake unless you were actually on the beach. At check-in parents would ask “do you have a lake here?” So my first winter we cleared a view from the dining hall to the lake. It was a new breathtaking scene, made more exciting by the sledding we’d do on this newly opened hill in the winter. Now dirt poor but log rich, we had the trees cut into heavy log benches for seating at the top of this new view, in the chapel, and the next project: the council ring. (We traded half the wood to the sawmill in return for their services.)

Council Ring. A campfire program is a highlight of not only summer camp, but most

school groups and weekend groups too. But if the guests are uncomfortable and can't see, it can be miserable. So we bulldozed our old area into a bowl shape and brought in extra dirt to give it a nice rise from front to back. Using volunteers we built a stage and installed benches. We built a raised campfire area out of stones off to one side so the benches could be closer to the stage and the fire wouldn't get in the way of the activities.

Finally, we created a huge routed sign with the camp name and hung it over the stage. Almost every guest takes at least one picture here, and we wanted our name on every one of them!

Mt. Wood. In 1981 I built what I believe was the very first free-standing tower for climbing. Up until that walls were built for rappelling in a few places copied after the Army, and Project Adventure was promoting climbing walls in school gyms. Our tower at Tecumseh was unique, too, in that it was an interesting and attractive element in and of itself. It had a hipped cedar shake roof and looked like a western fort tower. Kids couldn't wait to try and climb it, because we placed it right out in the open where it acted as a magnet for kids all over camp. Activity does that; it draws inactive kids in. But only if they can see it, wander over, and get involved slowly by first watching. So building a tower at Jewell was a high priority, and doing it at the top of a hill (to make it seem tall, even if it wasn't), and highly visible (to invite kids to watch and join in, and to create great visual memories), made it work on so many levels.

Covered Bridge. People like to hike, but they need destinations to get them out, and a satisfying place to have "reached" before returning. If you can see an intriguing destination from afar, like a mountain top, a waterfall, or a bridge, it makes a magnet that's hard to resist. As a volunteer project we built an authentic covered bridge that could be seen across the lake from many places in camp. Once you get there you find a self-discovery learning display on the purposes, history and engineering of covered bridges, and you're

invited to hike back in time to an old mill site down the stream.

Rope Swing. Camp Tecumseh built a tri-pod tower to support a rope swing into their lake for what I call the "Mountain Dew" experience. It's at the same time retro (your grandparents did it) and extreme (ya-hoo!) At Jewell we used new utility poles anchored to concrete footings poured when the lake was lowered to create a structure that looks vaguely Native American. The insurance company loves it for it's high control and low entry (compared to diving boards).

Mini Farm (Petting Zoo). Kids love animals; it's another magnet. The real benefit here is that there's so much to learn once you've attracted kids and parents to the animals, and with the proper interactive, low-tech displays, they can learn even when there's not a staff person in sight.

Chapel. We'd always had a chapel, but for years it had only been used four times a summer on "middle Sundays." It had received the attention commensurate with four-times-a-year use. I'd grown up with daily camp chapel services, but knew in order to change the culture of this camp we'd need to show how important and meaningful it could be. It had to have a great view and comfortable seats so kids and staff would want to come early instead of straggling in late. We needed a stage to make it exciting to be asked to be a part of a thought-for-the-day. And it needed to teach spiritual lessons whenever someone happened upon it. As in almost every other project at Jewell, volunteers working side-by-side with top staff built the stage, the "Spirt, Mind & Body" icon, and the 36 concrete-based park benches. We chose the park bench for it's comfort (ahhhh... a back to lean against!) and its weigh (nearly impossible for vandals to move them around.) And the inspiration comes not just from the setting, but also the dedication plaques placed around the chapel that focus on inspirational verses and poems that cause visitors to pause and reflect.

Mini Golf. We'd always been good at providing good experiences on sunny days, but cold, wet, muddy days often left the guests disappointed. The miniature golf course is designed to be set up in an unused recreation pavilion on short notice. The nine holes are each built out of two sections that hook together with removable-pin door hinges. Each piece can easily be carried by two people, and even fit in the back of a minivan for transportation to family night activities.

Giant Slide. Sledding is very popular in our area, but unpredictable. Wouldn't it be able if kids could have the same fun year-round? I'd seen what we wanted at an elementary school once: a standard children's tube-slide like you'd find at a fast-food restaurant, but it was straight (so you could see no-one is still in it) and L-O-N-G. Eighty feet in fact, going from the school to its athletic field below. Perfect! Not inexpensive, but more affordable by using volunteer labor, it's been a non-stop attraction, doing more to tire kids out for a good night sleep (running up the hill between each speedy trip down) than any other activity. Maybe even more appreciative than the kids, are the parents who get to sit in the gazebo at the top and sip coffee, making new friends while they hear their kids screaming "watch this, Dad!"

Bouldering Room. The climbing tower has been the single most popular and memorable activity for 15 years now, but the requirement for trained staff to supervise climbing limits the amount of time any child can participate. Our "Boulder Basin" rock gym is basically a 24' x24' interior playground. Handholds don't get any higher than 7' off the ground, so with appropriate padding (we first used wood chips, then shredded tires because of cost, but there are padded floor tiles that are even better), even spotters are not necessary and it's considered playground equipment not "high adventure" by insurance companies. Just as great for after-school childcare as Y-Guides, young kids as well as teens, staff and adults. Just be sure to put in benches, too, so dads can sit and watch

(and talk), and kids can rest and talk with their friends until they are ready to try it again.

The new is for the old

Every year something new. Not for the new campers, because they'd be perfectly happy getting the experience their friends had told them about in order to get them to come to camp. In fact we didn't even change the brochure, except for the prices, for 8 years straight. Nope, the new stuff was all about return rate, and creating anticipation that even if we didn't get everything right, we were always trying. Always listening to what was on their "guest comment cards" and "camper-parent evaluations," and always looking for the most bang for the buck. Because it's easier to keep a customer than go find a new one, and it's easier being a staff member for happy guests than disappointed guests. And it's just plain fun to surprise people.

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