

YMCA Camping – Is Quality a Priority?

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The fact that anyone would even ask this question concerns me. You go into any YMCA that is having financial problems, and you can immediately see it in the facility and feel it from the staff: “This place has a quality problem.” We’re all consumers. We know that WE demand quality. But a lot of bad habits were learned at Y’s and camps during the 1990’s. The demand was so great the little things like low retention rates didn’t stand in the way of breaking even. Great camps didn’t have much trouble after 2001, or were able to quickly adapt. But when you look at others, you have to ask the question, “Is quality *even* a priority?”

Day and resident camping have been cornerstone programs, building character in such effective ways that our key community leaders often point back to their camp experiences as an emotional foundation. Has something changed? Why are some camps so spectacularly successful and others facing financial crisis?

I was recently doing a presentation to a group of a camp’s “stakeholders.” It included the full and part-time camp staff, the CEO of the parent agency, the camp committee, about 8 parents and 6 older campers. Using photographs and case studies, I described other camps that didn’t see their camper parents as their primary customers. A camp staff member remarked, “at least we don’t have to worry about that here, our parents love us.” I looked at the CEO with one eyebrow raised and he took the hint, asking, “We’ve got several parents here, what do you all think about this?” An uncomfortable pause followed. Finally, one mother said, “my teenage daughter’s here tonight and she’ll want to kill me for saying this, but the first time we went to camp to drop her off, I would have turned right



around and taken her home if my husband hadn’t insisted she stay. It just looked so unsafe and broken.” The daughter exclaimed “Moth-ther!” with her hands on her hips, drawing laughs from the group. But then other mothers chimed in, “It’s true, even though my son love’s it, I wouldn’t recommend the camp to my friends because I’m afraid of what they’d think about *me* when they first see the run-down facilities.” Ouch. It’s not good enough that a program is good for kids, it has to be good for parents, too.

The basic truths about camping

For the first two years, “Mom” is the customer. She fills out 95% of the registration cards and signs 95% of the checks. If she doesn’t believe the camp is safe and the staff are good role models, no amount of type in a brochure will change her mind. That’s why on average 85% of new campers come as a result of referrals from satisfied parents.

“Ah,” your camp staff may tell you, “but when we please the campers, they’ll come back for years and years!” Look at the

statistics. The median return rate for resident camping is 55%. That means of first-year campers at the “average” camp, less than half of them return for even a second year. On “average” then, we’re not pleasing *somebody*.

For many of our camps, we don’t focus enough on mom’s concerns when she calls our camp. Who would you say is the most important camp marketing person? Your camp director? Marketing director? They seldom get a chance to talk to a prospective parent on the phone. It’s your receptionist/front desk staff who must convince a concerned parent that your program is right for their child. Do a “secret shopper” call to your own organization and you may be alarmed to find out that on most shifts they don’t even know you have a camp.

What if you were going to buy a sofa; a couch for watching TV. If you were going to spend \$500, you’d go to several stores to narrow down your choices. When you find one you’re interested in you’ll have questions for the salesman: Is it durable? Is the fabric stain-proof? What colors can I get? How soon can you deliver it? You’d sit on it in every conceivable position. And all of this is reasonable because you’re parting with \$500.

So why don’t we give parents the same amount of time when they want to spend \$500 on something so much more important, the health and safety of their child? Shouldn’t we have lots of opportunities for them to see the camp, not just a single Open House? When they call the camp, shouldn’t the first person they talk to give an enthusiastic response? But even more important, when they have a question the receptionist *can’t* answer, shouldn’t they transfer the call to the person who can best provide the details... the camp director?

Retention: the measure of success

So let’s say that thanks to good word of mouth and good customer service, we get a

child to register for camp. How do we get that camper to return for additional years? (We’ve all heard the adage “It’s easier to keep a customer than to get a new one.” In financial terms, that’s absolutely true. It’s not uncommon for paid advertising to attract only enough campers to recoup the cost of the ads.) We’ve got two key variables: the Mom, and the Camper.

A camper returning for a second year depends first on Mom’s satisfaction. If she was left with haunting concerns for safety when she dropped off her child, those concerns can fester for the entire session and are easily reinforced by letters home and staff delays in responding to her phone-calls to camp during the session. At check-out the counselor’s attitude and her camper’s lost clothing, mosquito-bitten arms, and general non-responsiveness can reinforce her negative first impressions. Mom’s not likely to encourage her camper to return.

If all her pre-camp contacts had been positive, the mailed information was easy to understand, check-in day went smoothly and the staff and facilities made a positive first impression, the camp’s web site had new photos uploaded daily to show the quality of the camp activities during the week, and check-out or parents’ night showed off articulate counselors eager to talk with parents, then Mom’s question will likely be, “Honey, would you like to go again next year?” Arts and craft projects brought home as gifts, photos for the refrigerator, and a monthly newsletter keep the memories alive for both of them.

Success in camping isn’t a what, it’s a *who*

So does the *camper* want to come back? Many camps act like they are an amusement park: Keep the kids in lines and engaged in one activity after another. Our risk-management folks like this approach because a busy camper is less likely to “get into trouble.” But just like an amusement park, once kids have done all the “rides”

they're ready for someplace new. "Let's go to Six Flags this year!" Real amusement parks fight hard to counter this by adding new rides every year. It can work for camp too, if you have the resources to invest in program development every year.

But camps have another avenue that is too often ignored. Here's a hint: girls tend to have a higher return rate than boys. Why? They come back to be with the friends they make at camp. The most successful camps are the ones that focus their staff, programs, and facilities toward building new relationships. And it's not as easy as it sounds.

Most camps today are set up to keep kids busy in groups. In between they stand around and wait, (or in the case of too many day camps, the kids spend a lot of time sitting on the ground.) Most of the activities aren't conducive to conversations, so it's hard to make friends.

There's good news in all of this. When you know what you're looking for, you can see why successful camps work:

- The most important source of campers is *return* campers, followed close behind by word-of-mouth bringing in *new* campers. Both count on mom and camper being very satisfied. Spend some of your marketing money on helping nurture word-of-mouth: send each parent more than one brochure, keep in touch year-round, have a web site that's up-to-date year-round, accept registrations any month a mom wants to sign up.
- Make a great first impression on the phone. Train and reward those who are on the front line. Get good at

transferring calls to the camp director and program director.

- Make a great first impression in person. Your camp facilities don't need to be fancy, but they need to be clean and very well maintained (mom is using this to decide if she can trust you with her child). Bathrooms are the only facility that mom will actually use while she's at camp, so make it your first priority. The kids deserve it. Good signs that match are the easiest way to look good; followed by paint and new roofs
- Add equipment and facilities that promote relationship-building: enough picnic tables for every group to have its own. Four-square courts wherever kids have to wait, checker and chess boards, carpetball (go ahead, Google it!). Make sure the trails you hike on most often are wide enough for kids to walk two-abreast. Create an amphitheater and a stage.
- Re-tool your program to make room for making new friends. Train your counselors to talk with their kids, not just direct them. Many staff have a tendency to talk with each other unless they're giving directions. Teaching them to make friends with the kids (while still following child-abuse prevention guidelines) will make their jobs more rewarding, and give the character lessons they are teaching and modeling a more lasting effect.

Wait a minute. These things don't sound so difficult. How come *everybody* isn't doing them? You'd think it wasn't a priority.

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