

# Making Memories Last... and Spread

*Reprinted from Camp Business Magazine, May 2006*



**W**hen summer is over, some of your campers will ask their parents to sign them up again for next years. And some of them won't. What's the difference? Some parents tell all of the friends about your camps, and others don't. Why?

It's easy if it's because the kids just didn't like your camp; or their parents were put-off by your staff being unprofessional or your bathrooms being filthy. But if not that, what?

Did you see any of the TV news reports about college kids giving up their spring breaks and spending the week along the gulf coast doing hot and dirty work repairing ruined homes? They all said it was the best spring break they'd ever spent; they'd learned more than a whole year at school. My son overheard me talking about what camp memories are the most likely to stick, "You know dad, one of the best camp memories I have is when it rained on our cabin's overnight campout and we all 'rescued' each other!" His memory, and the story, was still strong 6 years after the fact.

Our best vacations are the ones that give us stories to tell our friends when we get home. The midnight chocolate buffet on the cruise ship that "was over 80 feet long!" The local family we met that was so amazingly friendly. The lost luggage, crazy drivers, and narrow roads that lead to... "the most beautiful thing I've ever seen." A great vacation is an adventure, whether it be to a beach, a city, or a mountain. Adventures, unlike theme-park rides, are relived in our imagination again and again. But they really come to life in the retelling.

"It's the story, stupid." That's the message of Seth Godin (author of the best selling marketing book of the last 10 years, *Purple Cow*). In his newer book, *All Marketers are Liars*, he focuses on the mechanics of word-of-mouth marketing.

You *have* to start with a good product, Godin says. Customers may be talked into trying something once, but they won't tell their friends about it if they don't think it's of value. But nobody recommends and "average" movie to a friend, or steers them toward a "so-so" restaurant. In order to be worthy of telling our friends, there has to be a story to tell.

You don't see a lot of advertising for Starbucks Coffee. You don't have to, because lots of people who have been there have enjoyed not just the coffee, but the whole experience of getting it. So much so that they tell their friends, even urge them to join them. Dunkin Donuts makes a darn good cup of coffee, too, but you don't see the kind of word-of-mouth that you hear for Starbucks.

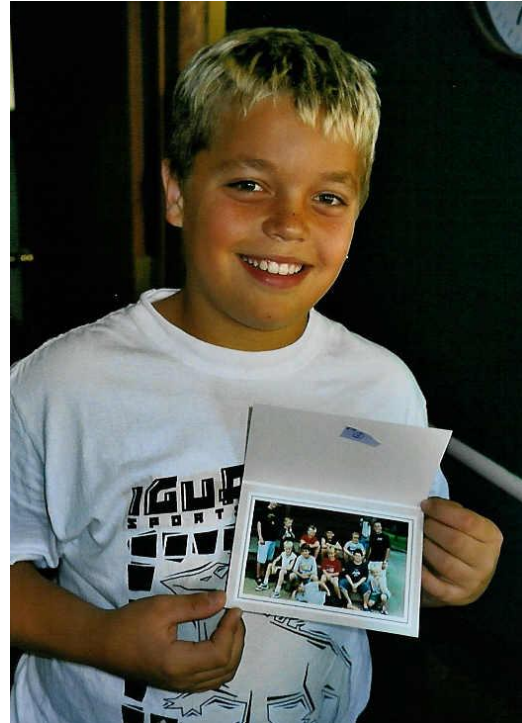
How does this relate to camps? Do we need to serve better coffee? (In my opinion, yes, but that's a different story.)

Those camps that have a high return rate give their parents and campers experiences that translate into stories. Stories that can be told to mom on the way home in the car, that can be told to grandma on the phone, that are repeated at recess at school, that are embellished in the produce aisle at the grocery store.

To start with, most camp web sites and brochures don't look like the jumping-off point for an adventure. They look like playgrounds full of clutches of smiling kids. Smiling *unsupervised* kids in most of the photos. No action, no story. Go look at the best web sites for vacation destinations. They *invite* you into the plot line. There's an empty lounge chair looking out at the view, a balcony waiting for you, a buffet with people loading their plates, and people creating memories... doing things you don't do at home, things you could be telling your neighbors about.

Most of us give kids a great experience at camp, but we leave mom and dad out of the fun. They assume they won't hear from their kids, and we oblige. But they would *love* to be able to peak in through a one-way mirror and watch, just like they do at swim lessons or karate class. Smart camps give parents ways to participate, through post cards home from counselors and web sites with updated story-lines each day.

The real place where we disappoint parents is when the campers are picked up. Mom is hoping to have a camper bubbling over with stories of new friends and adventure. At most camps we give her a camper who's tired out from so much fun, and ready to collapse in the back seat. Kids can be terrible marketers when we don't prepare them. It's not their fault, it's ours. We're the professionals after all, and we should be able to get this right. Mom and dad deserve it, the camper deserves memories that last, and most of all our camp depends on us increasing our return rate. Here are some examples:



#### **Artifacts from the Expedition**

It's always easier to tell a story with a prop. Remember show and tell? Kids need to go home with artifacts of their adventure. I'm crushed each winter when I visit camp craft lodges and see they're still full of the kids projects from the previous summer. Think of all the mothers who didn't have the joy of a gift from their child, and didn't get to hear the stories of how it was created and the new friends made in the process. How many of you still have a craft project you made at camp as a kid and every time you find it in your drawer it brings back memories of the people and the place? You can't expect it to happen by accident. Put planning into appropriate crafts for kids of specific ages, and especially into the friendship-building that happens when they are created.

Photos have become the most inexpensive way to start conversations between parents and campers. You can e-mail a digital photo to stores like Walgreens or Wal-Mart and have them ready an hour later for 18 cents each. You can even add your camp name and web address, so when they hang on the refrigerator they're ready to sell for months

to come. Photos of a camper's cabin group, handed out just as they go home, spark stories about each of the campers and counselors.

Souvenirs of special events remind kids to tell *those* stories, and act as memory aids to embellish the details. A piece of plastic junk may not be the best memento, but something that was found, created, camp-like, or earned will have special meaning for decades. "Look what I won!" is the start to a wonderful story.



If you have kids build things at camp, they'll learn new skills, make new friends, create valued memories, and have not only a story but a *place* to share with their parents. "Come see what we built!" It may look like a pile of sticks to you, but a fort that took days to build is filled with all the imaginary adventures that took place there, and parents will see it in their kids eyes as they explain every detail of how "I did this part over here!" Other great projects include a miniature golf course (that gets rebuilt every week), carnival booths, camp furniture, and even whole cabins for older campers.

Cooking is a great story to take home. A hobo dinner cooked in foil on a campfire seems like magic to kids. I hear stories from

parents all the time who said, "We had to stop at the grocery store on the way home to get the supplies so he could cook it for us tonight!" Imagine how much more likely that would be to happen if you gave every camper a copy of the recipe (so they're success rate might be higher!) and coaxed parents ahead of time to ask, "What did you cook on your campout?"

The results of all this plays out as campers retell their stories during the year. Mom knows they've never been to a place that's had such a positive impact on them, so she's eager to have them return. And just as important, she now has stories to tell her friends and co-workers about her child's adventures. You've given her a gift more valuable than gold (or even a new pair of shoes)... you've helped *her* have a reason to connect positively with others. We connect to each other with our stories.

Getting the idea? No doubt some of your staff have recently studied the art of the story in college. Ask them to put together a presentation during staff training on "The Hero's Journey" and how it applies to oral traditions, and even movie making. Plan your summer like it was a series of rich adventures, and there will be stories for campers to tell. And you'll attract more campers for *next* summer than all the marketing dollars you've ever spent.

*Gary Forster was the camping specialist for the YMCA of the USA for 8 years, past executive of Camp Jewell (CT), past program director of Camp Tecumseh (IN), and holds an MS in Management from Purdue University and B.Architecture from Kent State. Contact him at [campgaryforster@gmail.com](mailto:campgaryforster@gmail.com)*