

November 2009

Gary's Camping Newsletter

Continuous Improvement for Great Camp Leaders

(Additional free subscriptions for any staff or volunteer, visit www.garyforster.com.

Please send comments and submissions to: gary@garyforster.com .)

Step One: Quit Thinking You're So Smart – That's the lesson most useful to me *personally* after visiting 50 camps my first summer with Y-USA. I realized that I (and others) have spent too much time defending our own opinions, and not enough learning about others. Here's a great example. Mark Pooler, a CT camping genius (con-man or idea thief, depending on who you talk to!) collected a survey from 21 of the largest Y day camps in New England last month. Several questions were illuminating in the same way: "What is your number one program?" "What day camp programs are on the decline?" And "What is your number one facility feature?" All 21 camps responded, with *no answer given more than twice*. (Does that mean there are no best practices?) Amazingly, the answers to "most popular programs" at some camps showed up as "declining programs" at others, and vice-versa! So while Mark is still scratching his head and trying to make sense of it all, I suggest the REAL TREND is that we too often assume we know WHY something is happening, when in fact we haven't looked deeply enough at ourselves or others. And that's a life-changing lesson. (Oh, there was one answer that appeared multiple times: "Most popular camp store item?" Ice Cream. Now *that's* funny!) Reach Mark at mpooler@southington-cheshireymca.org

I Love Meeting Bright Kids – Bob Kahle and I were talking about clever marketing in CA last month when his teenage son offered, "Dad, remember that homeless guy who set himself up outside the San Francisco Giants ballpark so you could see him from the upper ramps? He had a sign that said 'Bet you can't hit me with a quarter!' Everybody did and he caught each one in his ball cap. People loved it." I asked, "Those quarters must have been really moving; couldn't he have been hurt?" Young master Kahle's wry response, "Not any more than life already had." Respect, caring, and a great line!

Treehouses are Still Cool – They've been a popular addition as hike destinations, a clever way to focus on nature, and a magnetic place for a campout. Two classic ones are at Camp Chingachgook (NY) and Camp Tecumseh (IN). Two new ones are underway by volunteers at Jewell (CT) and Flat Rock (IN). If you'd like to add a photo of yours to the "Treehouse" gallery at www.garyforster.com, send it to me! And here's more than a little inspiration for ideas: <http://www.treehouses.org/projects.shtml>

ConstantContact.com for Camp Newsletters – The difference between SPAM and an e-mail? SPAM isn't useful and isn't wanted. If your newsletter is nothing more than a nagging sales-pitch every month, then it's SPAM, no matter how you send it. Tim McElravy of Lake Wenatchee YMCA Camp spends the extra time to make his interesting. For instance this great story (and a good idea for you) about their local Home Depot's staff project with their camp:

http://www.lwycamp.org/index.php?cmd=staticpage&page_id=44 . To see a sample of Tim's newsletter go to: http://campaign.constantcontact.com/render?v=001_3wh4u6-fR9LapwmElAw5qVWtBI5Gk1AajUfoncXNJ8soE0QJDL3pVb2eGGAcM_CXJGkhtJLG3Tk3-MRQ4dgYnrE20opEwewLY5_7CItSBtECKK6LWl_vw%3D%3D

Working Smarter – Dave LeFevre, Technology Systems Director for Camp Tecumseh, writes "Can't afford to upgrade your software? Then you haven't heard about <http://www.techsoup.org/stock/>. Everything from multi-station Windows licenses to bargain-priced Adobe Pagemaker are all available at this industry clearing house for nonprofit use of their most popular business and design software, at nearly

‘donation’ prices.” -- Dave LeFevre davidl@camptecumseh.org 765-564-2898. (Dave is also an excellent resource for advice on camp registration software. *GF*)

Phone-a-thon “Back Office” – Todd Lennig is using and improving advice from last December’s Camp Fundraising Symposium (unfortunately not being held this year). “I really liked your part about the donation cards. We have been having our junior staff address our envelopes and then also sign the letters with a personal note like, ‘Thanks for donating so campers like me benefit from camp.’ It has helped with donations but also teaches our-soon-to-be-alumni how important and personally rewarding philanthropy can be.” -- A. Todd Lennig, todd@phantomlakeymca.org

Advocacy and Support for J1 Visa Issue – (forwarded from ACA) – “The US Department of State has issued proposed changes to the J1 Visa program. The proposed rule changes would have a negative impact on the camp community's ability to use international staff. For details of the proposed rule changes, summary of impact on camps, as well as 3 steps you can take (anyone have connections to Senator Lugar?)” – <http://www.facebook.com/1/08dd9;www.acacamps.org/publicpolicy/J1Visa.php>

Dam, That’s A Lot – Here’s an example of what “Google News Alerts” can send you automatically by scanning for “YMCA camp” – “ Tentative settlement for \$2.1 million between 350 homeowners and YMCA Camp Ockanickon, whose two dams were breached in the flood of 2004.” See the article at <http://www.courierpostonline.com/article/20091111/NEWS01/911110353/1006/NEWS01>. Learn lessons from others’ hits and misses, and what kinds of things get into the news. You’ll be surprised at how many GOOD NEWS stories get published.

Web Sites of the Month – the Ultimate Camp Resource (.com) inspired me to look further afield for model sites that should let *anyone* see for themselves if your Y is at a disadvantage web-wise:

- Top-of-the-line... Ever wonder what a \$500 a week day camp looks like? It looks like we ALL should look: www.campmh.com (Oh, and Michael Brandwein does a portion of their staff training every year.)
- A really useable site doesn’t need to cost much; simple is good: <http://www.ymcacampsloper.org>
- Your boss wants to look super-cool? Not a problem if YOU provide all the right information. Check out their pages, and a video that really helps parents understand *why* their child needs camp: <http://www.campchippewa.com> (Compare this to the ACA public service announcement that’s message is, “If you hope your child becomes a TV personality, send them to camp.”)
- Too Harsh? Look again at: <http://www.acacamps.org/becauseofcamp/> (The “Because of Camp” conference logo is a *falling* star. Coincidence?)

Stump the Chump – Fixing Concrete Floors – If you occasionally listen to “Car Talk” on NPR, then you know that Click and Clack each month check in with a previous caller to see if their advice was “on the money” or “dead wrong!” Camp Mason (NJ) had a painted concrete dining hall floor that started peeling and wearing ever time it was re-painted. “It looks very unappetizing,” CEO Dave DeLuca said, wisely being more concerned with satisfying his campers and guests than continuing to enjoy the huge savings in food costs! Here’s word back from Dave on my advice to find local contractors to bid on grinding off the old paint and polishing the concrete to reveal the beautiful “cut pebbles” hidden under the surface; then finish with an acid stain in a “honey wheat” color (which you’ll see in almost every brew-pub and restaurant in converted old factories). It chemically changes the color of the concrete so it doesn’t wear off like paint.

Dave reports: “The dining room is just over 4000 square feet. We received three bids on the project, ranging from \$15,000 to \$30,000 (a range of double, just like you predicted). Our two lower bidders gave significant discounts because they’ve not had lots of work and wanted to keep their crews and machinery busy. As for time – it took a crew of 2-3 people about 10 working days to complete the

job. The work was slowed by the many layers of paint on our floor. Once they got down to the bare concrete the project went much more quickly. They used the dry-grinding technique and had a large commercial vacuum attached to the grinder. They also used some sort of soybean derivative to loosen the paint around the edges of the room. Now people can't believe our beautiful "new" floor has been hiding under years of wasted money and effort spent on painting! It looks like expensive stone. (If we'd had more money we'd have had shallow grooves cut in 2' x 2' squares to make it even more resemble natural stone slabs.)"

Fix Your Web Site – Otherwise just tell your boss next year's enrollment won't be any different than this year's. (See hints on how to sell it to him/her below). Can't find the money? Print less expensive brochures (ask me to mail you a sample). If you've never asked the following questions, and your camp is full, then skip this:

Most F.A.Q. of the Month – “We need to get into social networking... Legally, how worried do we need to be about Facebook, etc?... Can we use it to support our Y and camp programs?”

Disclaimer: I'm not an attorney, and I don't sell internet security products. So here's my researched views:

Let's start with kids photos on the web. Your Y has always printed a program guide and brochures for programs. Whose photos do they use in those? Your members. They LOVE to be featured. You have members (and parents) sign a release that says any photos taken during programs may be used by the YMCA for marketing and communication purposes. If a rare person refuses to sign, you just make sure everyone knows who that member (or that kid) is. Does a parent get angry when their kid's picture is in the paper for winning the city-wide spelling bee? Or being in the play? No. They're delighted. Why the big deal then? Providers or "web site security" systems that require individually registered user log-ins will tell you that it's against the law to have kids photos on line. (Go look at the www.disneyworld.com and see if that's true.) When camps or Y's get scared into that, they create this impenetrable barrier where only MEMBERS can see good photos, and POTENTIAL CUSTOMERS get a "you can't come in" message.

There is an internet child privacy law, and "20/20" and "Dateline NBC" have gotten everyone scared of identity theft and child abuse. But that's why you have the release forms, and that's why the photos you use don't have any kids names on them, (or at most first names), and no way to get in touch with them.

Which brings us to the key point:

Mom is the customer, not the kid. What % of your camp (or any youth program) registrations are signed by mom? 95%. Every Y. Mom decides if her kid is ready to participate and WHERE s/he will participate. We poll 5,000 camper parents every year. Of the campers new on any given year, 75% of moms said they got their initial introduction from "Word of Mouth." We asked "once you heard about the camp, where did you go to get more information?" The web site.

Yet 90% of daycamp web sites and 70% of Y resident camp sites are horrible. They make the camp look MUCH WORSE than how it was described through "word of mouth." So you lose many, many sales.

"We primarily use brochures." Yeah? I'm in a room of 100 adults several times a month, and ask "When's the last time any of you stopped in a travel agency to pick up a few brochures when you were considering a vacation?" Not a soul. Moms do all their travel and leisure research and purchasing online.

Is direct mail a waste? Yes, if you only send it out once a year. People buy in all different months, so you need to give them a reminder near the time *they're* ready to buy; a reminder that sends them to your web site (and some to the phone to get specific questions answered. Another place we're very bad at

customer service.) A few well-spaced mailings of beautiful photo postcards and photo-and-news-heavy newsletters are effective ways to help stimulate and support word of mouth, and steer parents to your web site. (One warning: there are some great instant post card companies on the web; and some nasty scams. Before you pick one, be sure to search their name, plus "scam" to look for complaints.)

"But we want BUZZ. We want kids talking to each other about us!" They already have the means to do that (Facebook, etc) much better than anything you could create. So use it. What you need are LEADERS and SNEEZERS to be the centers of these nodes of conversations. YOU don't have to be those nodes. In fact they trust you much less than their peers. A fast-growing practice by camps is to use Facebook's paid "per click" ads. It's similar to Google, except in Facebook you can actually pick the age and location of the people that are seeing your ads! (info that Google doesn't have... yet). It's often more accurate and cost effective than Google's key word search.

Don't waste another minute thinking about social networking through your own Y's web page. Delay your Facebook plans until you've read these two short books by Seth Godin: "Purple Cow" and "Tribes." They've changed the way all serious marketers look at everything, and you'll quickly understand how you can find and use "sneezers" and "leaders" to accomplish through VOLUNTEERS, things YOU couldn't do with a million dollars. It will take you less than a day to read both. You and your Y will be changed forever.

Best wishes, and Happy Thanksgiving!

Gary

Gary Forster, LLC

"Camp Solutions for Great Camp Leaders"

What am I doing now? Take a look: www.garyforster.com