

Camp Marketing:

Are You Shutting Out Your Campers?

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Last May a camp director called me in a panic. “We’re way behind in registrations and I’ve tried *everything!* I don’t know what to do!” While we talked, I pulled up his web site. I asked, “Are you aware that your web site still has your 2006 dates and says “2007 registration coming soon?” Hmm. Tried *everything*.

When you hear “camp marketing,” what do you think of? Direct-mail brochures, post cards, web pages, newspaper ads, camp fairs? Lots of staff time creating, mailing, distributing, and attending. A big portion of your budget invested in web and print design, printing, mailing, advertising, fees, travel and hotels.

And why do you do all of this? To get a parent to sign her child up for camp, most likely by mail or online. And that’s where many of us make a critical error.

A very large percentage of parents need to get a question or two answered before they’re ready to sign up. (After all, this is a very expensive purchase involving their most precious possession, their irreplaceable child.) It might be as simple as “Do you have space in session 4?” or as complicated as a first-time mom seeking assurance your staff, activities, menu, and facilities are a good match for her expectations.

Here’s my experience calling many camps in February and March: “Hi, you’ve reached camp and our office hours or 9 to 4” (it’s now 2pm). “If this is an emergency, dial this other number”

(Emergencies happen so often it’s the first choice on their voice mail?) “If you’d like to reach the archery range, dial 1; the boathouse dial 2; the kitchen dial 3... for resident camp information dial 23” (They’ve assigned the extensions *alphabetically* and make everyone listen to the whole list!). Why voicemail during the day? Because the office manager decided, “Phone calls really slow down my work flow.” (I pointed this out to one director and he said, “I’m not sure I can convince her to change it.”) Hmm.



And that’s if mom can even find your phone number. I’ve seen dozens of camp web sites where the phone number is nowhere to be seen; or hidden in small type on the “contact us” page. I asked several of *those* directors what was up, and you guessed it, “Our office manager asked us to not put the phone number there as the whole reason for the web site is so parents *don’t* call us.” Hmm. (Better go check your own web site!)

Who answers the phone at your camp? Somebody that’s been at campfires, knows what goes on in the cabins, participated in activities, worked with

the campers and counselors? Some camp receptionists and registrars really are experts in helping parents and selling camp. But too often I've overheard conversations like this: Parent: "Hello, I'd like information about your summer camp." Receptionist: "Can you get on the internet? I can give you our web address," or "Give me your address and I'll mail you a brochure." The goal is to get the call over quickly so they can "get back to work." They've got lots of important work to do, and the calls are getting in the way.



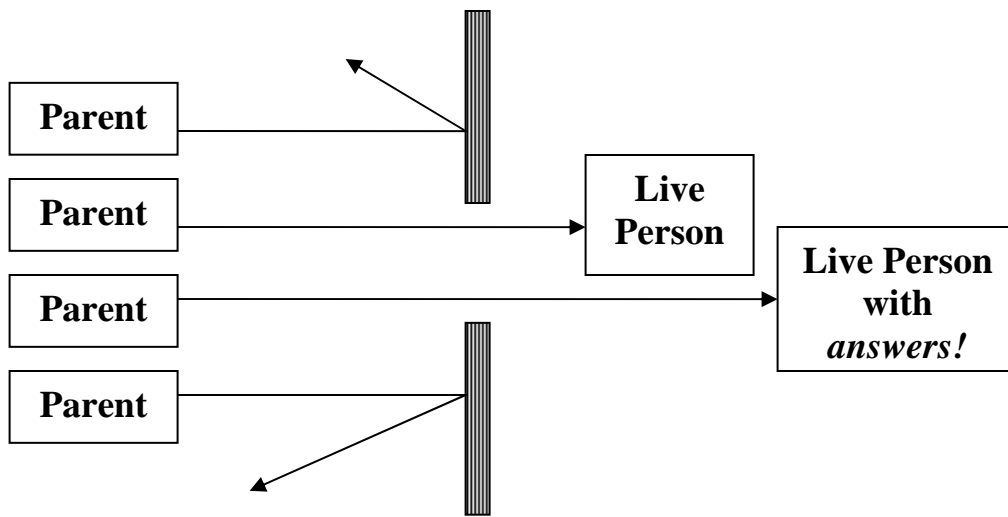
So the parent calls the next camp on their list and the receptionist says, "How can I help you?" When the discussion goes to areas she's not familiar with, like supervision issues or specific program offerings, she says, "Our camp director is here today, and I'm sure she can answer your question for you. Let me connect you!" Where does the camper go?

As usual, I learned many of these lessons the hard way. For instance, our entire office staff would take off at noon to eat together in the dining hall. When we returned after lunch there were always a number of phone messages on the answering machine. The phone tag game had started. Likewise when we

opened the office, there'd be 6 or 8 phone messages from parents that had called the night before. Our registrar would call each back, and get their home phone answering machine (because mom was at work.) Mom would call back when she got home that evening, and get *our* answering machine. Again. I've got no figures to prove this, but I'm betting many of those parents called the next camp on their list, and if they got through, that's where their kid went.

It was obvious to us that we couldn't let it continue, so we tried a new answering machine that put a date stamp on each message. It showed that most of the parent calls came between 5:30 and 6:30 pm (when mom got home from work). During the slower seasons we forwarded the "night service" to my home to catch those calls, and during the "busy" registration months we staggered office staff schedules so that someone was in the office at lunch and until 7pm. Real people answered all those calls, and those folks were signed up for camp.

Here's a different way to look at it. We spend tens of thousands of dollars, and days of our most valuable resource, staff hours, convincing parents they should consider our camp; to give us a call. Lots of parents, lots of calls. But many camps leave only a small window open for those contacts to get through, because so many of the calls from parents have been "deflected" away. We've inadvertently made the window smaller with a number of small decisions, which together make it more and more unlikely that a potential customer can get through to us. And they end up somewhere else.



Is your “window” open wide?

Instead of making assumptions, let’s immediately examine our “window” from a parent’s point of view, and fix anything that’s broke:

- Turn off the voice mail during the day.
- Change the voicemail message to focus on summer camp registration *first*.
- Update the web site: make summer camp the top choice; make the phone number obvious on every page; make it easy to find dates and descriptions; use photos to answer the most common questions, like “why is *your* camp *different?*”
- Extend phone-answering hours during peak registration months, even if you have to answer the calls from your home at night.
- Teach your receptionist how to put second calls on hold, instead of letting them roll over to voicemail; and encourage them to transfer summer questions to those who can best answer them.

- “Secret shop” your other sales points and provide the motivation (try brownies!) and training to improve their performance.
- Have all of your staff trained to “listen first” when they take a call, to fully understand what the parent (or any customer) is looking for before offering suggestions.

Parents and campers have so many choices, and so much research to do in deciding to go to camp, and then choosing a camp. Some camps make it easy for them, others make it nearly impossible.

Which are you? How quickly can you change?

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