

The Elevator Speech

Every day we sell our camp; and most of the time we blow it.

You meet a parent in line at the grocery store and you're wearing a camp shirt. You're at a friend's house for dinner and a couple you've just met says, "So I hear you run a camp!" You overhear your part-time receptionist butcher your camp mission on the phone, and you offer to "Take that call" for her.

Dozens of times each week, we have a chance to tell a potential customer why our camp could be the most important thing her child has ever done. We spend precious money and more precious time on brochures and advertising, hoping parents will call us to register their child. But when they call, are we ready?

I was at a Camp Marketing Lab with 27 camp directors recently, and I asked them to take 15 minutes to write a 5 sentence "Elevator Speech." How would they answer a parent's question, "Why should I send my child to your camp?"

Collectively, these 27 people spend more than \$405,000 on printing and mailing and advertising every year. Yet not one could put into words why a parent should part with their child – and their money – for a week of summer camp. *They* were embarrassed and frustrated. Imagine what parents must feel.

I was at a camp this spring and asked the young summer camp director to give me the same tour he'd give to parents that were interested in camp. "So what makes your camp different than all the



Photo by Case McCrea, Detroit Y Camps

others?" I asked. "Oh, it's the Camp Spirit!" That sounds interesting. Can you tell me about it? "Oh, no. It's indescribable." Try me. "Really, unless you experience it, you can't know what it is." Hmm. Maybe not. Not my kid, not your camp.

Is it becoming clear why our Web sites and brochures don't work very well? People are bombarded by too much information every day. If you can't get them interested on the Home page, or on the front page, or in your first five sentences, then you've lost them. They have a whole big pile of other stuff to get to. In the trash you go. Click-click, on to the next search result. Hang up and on to the next phone number.

So right here, right now, make a solemn pledge that you won't spend one more dollar until you write your speech;

the five sentences that say “This is why your child should go to our camp.”

Here’s what you might include:

- First, you know children. You’ve got lots of experience with kids, you’re a professional, and your camp can offer things no parent can do on their own. Children need to spend time outdoors, practicing social and decision making skills that are new to them, while being inspired by “heroes” – your camp counselors.
- Your camp is safe (mom’s number one concern.)
- Your camp is different from the others. And parents who send their children to your camp feel better about their child and themselves for having made that decision. So much so they return year after year.

That’s it. You’ll see it in their eyes as they remember their childhood. Their questions will flow, and you’ll have them hooked. They won’t want to get off the line, off the elevator, off the internet.

If your “bait” tastes bad, they’ll spit it out. You’re *not* a professional, your camp sounds *dangerous* and *isn’t any different* than the hundreds of others. You’ve got the same group of smiling kids on your web site that everyone else has, you’ve got the same slow, fuzzy description of what happens at camp. And lists. Lots of lists, of the same stuff every other camp has a list of.

Those five sentences aren’t coming easy? Don’t feel intimidated, you’re not alone. But put it off and you’ll continue to waste the opportunities you’ve spent so much of your life creating. Do some research; get excited again. We are child development experts, after all. It makes sense that we keep up on the literature. These three books (or even any one of them) should get you so excited enough you’ll want to *seek out* a parent to talk to about it:

- Richard Louv: [Last Child in the Woods: Preventing Nature Deficit Disorder](#) – this adds new urgency to the importance of what we do, and should help you raise money, too.
- Dan Kindlon: [Raising Cain - Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys](#). There’s a PBS video, too.
- Mary Pipher: [Reviving Ophelia -- Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls](#). A groundbreaking book that changed the way people look at girls. (Don’t have time to read these? Then maybe it’s time for another line of work. Somewhere kids lives and parents’ hopes aren’t involved.)

Now start to write. And re-write. Share it with your spouse or friends or co-workers. Listen to their suggestions, and re-write it again. Then really practice it so you can do it without thinking. Like you were singing a favorite camp song.

You learn CPR so you can save lives. Learn your speech so you can save your camp, and the hundreds of kids whose lives could be touched if you were a better salesman. And just like a favorite camp song, you’ll come to love to repeat it, because of how it makes you feel, and the response you get from others.

Stay away from the money. Get your pen. Go.

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