

6 Easy Ways To Boost Enrollments and Attract the Very Best Staff

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Everyone knows that child care is a low-profit, high-turnover business.

But does it have to be?

This nugget of “conventional wisdom” is little more than a self-fulfilling prophecy. Change your thinking – even just a little bit – and you can change the entire way your center operates, with amazing results.

Read on for 6 game-changers that will completely shift your thinking about your center’s direction, goals, and potential.

1. “Marketing” Is Not a Dirty Word

You probably got into the child care field not to turn a quick, easy buck (if so, I’m afraid you’re in the wrong line of work!), but because you care about kids and their families. Because you feel you have something valuable and special to offer them. Because you want to make a difference in your little corner of the world, one child at a time.

All good stuff, right? Then why are you so hesitant to tell people about it?

The concept of “marketing” has gotten a bad rap, but all it really boils down to is communicating your unique value to the people who can truly benefit from what you have to offer.

As a parent looking for reliable, trustworthy child care, I am ready and eager to hear how you can fill this need for me! You are not bothering me with your marketing, but actually doing me a favor by explaining all of the wonderful benefits and services you provide.

Similarly, if I am an experienced, well-qualified child care professional, I want to hear about why your center is a wonderful place to work – especially if I’m looking for a professional “home” where I can flourish for many years.

But if you don’t get out there and tell the world what you have to offer, we won’t know about it. Parents who would otherwise have eagerly enrolled their children in your program will find someplace else to drop off their kids every morning. And the best, most qualified teachers will wind up working somewhere else, too.

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If you've been reluctant to actively market your center, thinking it's boastful or pushy or something else that strikes you as unsavory, you need to get over that right now. Remember: *You are the solution to people's problems – and they want to hear about it.*

2. What's Your USP?

In marketing terms, your USP is your Unique Selling Proposition (you may also hear it described as your Unique Value Proposition, which sounds somewhat less salesy but means the exact same thing). In other words, what makes you different from everyone else?

Too many centers focus on the same general platitudes about low staff/child ratios, a caring environment, an enriching curriculum, and so on. These are not bad things, by any means – but you and most of your competitors are all singing the same tune here.

What makes you *truly* unique? Maybe you've been family-owned for the last 30 years. Maybe you have an in-house cook who focuses on using organic, local ingredients. Maybe you offer a fully bilingual English/Spanish program. Maybe you have an innovative indoor play space featuring unusual, specially designed equipment.

It may take some time, but sit down and really think through what makes you different from the other centers in your area, and then make sure you convey these unique benefits to prospective parents – on your website, in your printed marketing materials, and during your tours.

Similarly, consider your USP from a staff perspective, too – why should that very talented teacher come to work for you rather than the center across town? Do you offer unique training/development opportunities, paid vacation, a retirement plan, bonuses for performance, etc.? Whatever you've got, flaunt it.

What if, after really thinking it over for some time, you conclude that your center doesn't *have* a USP? Well, then, you need to get one. ASAP.

3. Consider Customer Lifetime Value (CLV)

Yes, we have another acronym for you – and this one will blow your mind when you really get your head around it. Customer Lifetime Value (CLV) refers to the value to your business over the span of the customer's entire relationship with you.



Example #1 (coffee): Let's say you go to Starbucks every weekday morning and get a \$5 latte. And let's say you do that five days a week, fifty weeks a year (even the most devoted caffeine hounds get two weeks' vacation each year), for ten years. That means your CLV to Starbucks is:

$$\text{\$5 latte} \times 5 \text{ days per week} \times 50 \text{ weeks per year} \times 10 \text{ years} = \text{\$12,500}$$

Not too shabby, is it? But you, as a child care professional, have the potential for CLV levels that Starbucks can only dream of. This is because child care is a much higher-ticket item.

Example #2 (child care): For simplicity's sake, let's say your tuition rate is \$50 per day, and that the average length of enrollment is 4.5 years (from tiny peanut right up through pre-K):

$$\text{\$50 per day} \times 5 \text{ days per week} \times 52 \text{ weeks per year} \times 4.5 \text{ years} = \text{\$58,500}$$

Eat your heart out, Starbucks! But wait, there's more: Many families in your program enroll more than one child. This means, viewing each family as an individual "customer," your average CLV can easily exceed \$100,000.

What does this mean for you? Well, for starters, it means that you can – and should – be willing to spend more than you probably do now on your marketing, because the value of each new customer (i.e., family) to your business is so very high.

Second, because it's so much cheaper to retain an existing customer than attract a new one, it also means that you should be making real efforts to keep your currently-enrolled families happy – maybe with sibling discounts, referral bonuses, family appreciation events, and so on.

The same holds true with your staff – it's far cheaper to retain an existing teacher than recruit and train a new one, so treat your staff well!

Additionally, because turnover is so disruptive in a child care environment (it distresses children and parents alike), it's especially important to do what you can to keep your star performers happy. Exceptionally low staff turnover can even be part of your USP; see above.

4. Don't Compete on Price

This one may seem counterintuitive – everyone loves a bargain, right?

Well, yes and no.



The people who are most attracted by the promise of a low price tend to be the ones who jump ship as soon as a better deal comes along. These are not the sorts of families you want to be catering to.

They are also the ones who tend to complain the most and suck up the majority of your time, energy, and resources trying to make them happy. It doesn't seem like it *should* be that way, that the folks getting a bargain are the most dissatisfied and demanding, but that's exactly how it works.

Finally, if you compete on price, you lose your advantage any time someone in your area undercuts you – at which point you need to cut your prices (and profits) even further. You become a commodity – which is the last thing you, as a caregiver for the little people who are the single most precious thing in their parents' lives, want.

If you start presenting yourself as the bargain-basement option, that's how everyone else is going to start to view you as well. This is the exact opposite of being perceived as a unique, special place with a lot to offer.

Rather than focusing on cost, focus on the *value* you're providing to your families. And then be willing to charge a fair price for it.

5. Put Yourself in Their Shoes

Once again, this goes for parents and teachers alike – always be asking yourself, “What do *they* want?”

You, for example, may not want the hassle of being open on weekends or evenings – but your parents would probably kill for a date night, or a free Saturday morning, and would pay almost anything you asked for child care during those times. More than enough to make it worth your while.

Similarly, maybe it's a pain to allow your teachers a lot of scheduling flexibility, but your staff really loves it – it makes them feel respected and valued, and it's one of the things they like most about working at your center.

Don't know what they want? Then ask them – at staff meetings, at dropoff, using online surveys, whatever. The *how* doesn't really matter. Just remember that the key to your center's success is giving people what they want – which is often very different than what you *think* they want.



6. Leverage the Power of Referrals

Anyone else remember that old shampoo commercial from the 1980s? “I liked it so much that I told two friends...and they told two friends...and so on, and so on, and so on...”

The great thing about referrals from current families and staff is that they do a lot of the marketing heavy lifting for you. You don’t have to go out and hard-sell your program because your happy customers/employees are already singing your praises to their friends and families.

The best thing you can do at your end to facilitate this process is to a) remind everyone on a regular basis how much you appreciate their referrals and b) reward them – in a memorable, fun, tangible way – for the referrals that pan out.

For every new family or employee that stays with you for, say, 6 months or longer, give a valuable referral bonus to the person who referred them. This is important – given the high CLV discussed above, and the high cost of employee turnover, it’s worth your while to thank your referrers in a BIG way that gets people talking *and* provides a steady stream of referrals.

This could mean a dinner out (with child care included, of course!), or a morning at a spa, or a really amazing bottle of champagne, or – for employees – a paid afternoon off. Again, the secret is asking what people would most like, and giving it to them.

BONUS TIP! Remember...What Gets Measured Gets Managed

You may well have heard this old chestnut before, but the reason it’s stuck around to become an old chestnut is that it’s 100% true.

For example: While your forgiving jeans may be willing to stretch the truth, so to speak, after a weekend full of dietary excess (the best kind of weekend, in my opinion), your bathroom scale will not be. And the cold fact of that number on the scale is what’s going to spur you to cut back on Cheetos the following week. Numbers don’t lie.

Now, I know you’re probably not a “numbers person.” If you were, you would have become a CPA or a tax attorney or a math teacher instead of a child care professional.

I hear you - I’m not a numbers person, either. But tracking just a few key numbers can make all the difference in the world to the financial health and success of your program. Right now, today, start keeping track of:



- Number of total inquiries per month: calls, emails, and drop-ins
- Percentage of inquiries that convert to tours (should be 50% or more)
- Percentage of tours that convert to enrollments (should be 50% or more)

These numbers are crucial because they tell you *exactly* where your current marketing efforts are falling short. Which is actually a good thing! Because that means you can both identify and fix the problem.

- If you have **very few inquiries coming in**, you need to do a better job of getting the word out about your center and your program. There can be many factors at play here, but the first thing to look into is your web presence.

Nowadays, prospective parents are doing their preliminary child care research online. If your center doesn't show up in the search results (or if it does, but your website isn't sufficiently compelling), they're going to move on. You've already missed out on that preliminary phone call, in other words, *but you don't even know it*.

- If you have **lots of inquires but few tours**, you may be dropping the ball on follow-up and/or failing to provide the proper incentives for people to come and visit.

- If you have **lots of tours but few enrollments**, something is broken in your tour process – or possibly at your center itself.

You also need to keep an eye on how well you retain your current families and teachers, but if you're new to the numbers game, start with your enrollment process (the numbers above) before turning to retention.

I hope you've found these tips useful! Please do stay tuned at the website for more ideas and strategies to implement at your child care center. I'd love to hear your ideas and feedback, too.

All best,
Jen Carsen
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About Jennifer Carsen

Jennifer Carsen is a mom, child care communications specialist, writer, and recovering employment law attorney.

At Childcare of Choice, we help child care centers with their communications – both internal (current parents and staff) and external (prospective parents and staff). This can include:

- Helping you **get found online**
- Polishing up (or writing from scratch) your **website** and your **ads**
- Implementing **legally compliant best practices** that keep your center productive and lawsuit-resistant
- Writing **blogs and newsletters** for parents and/or staff
- Drawing up both a **staff handbook** and a **parent handbook**
- Working with you to figure out what makes your center **truly unique and special**, and helping you spread the word
- Enhancing your relationships with current parents and staff to **increase loyalty and retention**
- Developing a **strong referral program** that will consistently bring you all the kiddos you can handle
- Providing **hiring and interviewing strategies** to help you find the very best teachers for your center
- **Troubleshooting common – yet costly – problems** that can decrease enrollments and increase undesirable staff turnover

If you're ready to take your child care center to the next level, I invite you to call (603-340-1854) or email (jennifer@childcareofchoice.com). Let's talk about what you need, and I'll help you reach – and retain – more of the great families and teachers that keep your center thriving.

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