

Camp Brochure and Web Site Design

Tailoring your image to fit the concerns and expectations of your number-one registration group; which means setting the right first impression on your Web site and in your brochures. – by Gary Forster, first published in *Camp Business Magazine*

Quick – who signs 95% of your camp’s registration applications? Mom. Who do you think makes the decision as to whether it’s time for her child to go to camp, and which camp to go to? Right again. So regardless of our aims in child development and recreation, we have to sell mom first.

So what does mom want? Several camps went together a number of years ago and did a novel thing. They asked her. Many moms, in fact, through the use of a research firm and focus groups. (Focus groups can give you the motivation behind decisions in a way simple surveys rarely can).

They found that far-and-away their number one concern was *safety*. (And no-one would argue that it’s an even bigger concern today.) Parents would sacrifice anything to keep their children from harm. As one mom recently told me, ‘Why would I *deliberately* put my child in a risky situation, and *pay* for it?!’

Number two on the list will be of no surprise either: “Mature, well-trained staff as role models.” Not just to keep the kids safe, that’s been covered already in #1. Parents know that their kid is very likely going to pick up habits from their camp counselor. They want those to be *good* habits. They want their kids to idolize a responsible young adult that makes good decisions. Number three on



Photo by Russ Link, Camp Olson MN

the list is “improved self respect through skill development. In other words, learning new things.

“Fun” was on the list, of course. At number 5.

Now if none of this comes as a surprise to you, let’s look and see how we use the information in our marketing, specifically in those big out-of-pocket expense areas of brochures and web sites. You’ve probably collected dozens of camp brochures over the years and have them in a file drawer. And most web sites are just the brochure, minus half of the photos, and with lots more words. (“Oh yeah, stick this in there too.”)

The web home page and brochure cover are typically a picture of a cute kid. Usually a girl, smiling. I’m guessing that girls are just more photogenic and that’s why we have so few pictures of boys when it comes time to layout the brochure. So what does that photo, in the most valuable and expensive piece of

advertising real estate we have, actually say? “A cute kid once went to our camp.” Doesn’t set you apart from all the other camps where “a cute kid” also attended. Doesn’t help with mom’s #1 and #2 concerns.

The next most popular photo, which shows up all through brochures and web sites is the “group shot.” It’s a group of kids, most likely smiling and looking right at the camera. But no counselor anywhere in sight. (Maybe they were taking the picture?) So how safe are these kids if they are unsupervised? No role model. No instruction. *Wasted opportunity.*

On the second or third page will be the obligatory “high ropes” shot, no doubt to show that camp has programs for teens, too. It usually involves a camper on a “pamper-pole” lunging for a trapeze in mid air. How do most parents actually interpret that shot, do you think? They say, “I’m sure this camp conforms to all ACCT standards and even though I can’t see it; I’m sure that child is in a full-body harness belayed by a certified instructor.” Or maybe not. In fact, how many teenagers sign up for camp for their first year from seeing your brochure?

Which brings up the most urgent question, who are your website and brochure for? By trying to make one marketing vehicle fit all needs, we usually end up missing everyone.

Let’s look at our needs. Our strongest market is returning campers, and even that needs two messages: one for the campers, one for the parents. The campers need to be primed from before they leave camp that you want them

back and you’ll miss them if they don’t return. You can reinforce that with special “news” pages on your web site, and postcards or newsletters or a yearbook. Every one should offer the opportunity to sign up for next year, either via web site or with a registration form. Don’t be subtle here. “Make sure your parents have signed you up for next year before all the spaces are full!”

In most cases, parents are looking for confirmation from their child that the summer was worth while. You can help that along by teaching parents how to ask “open-ended questions.” In a newsletter or e-mail, suggest that “Did you have fun at camp” might not get the in-depth discussion that they crave, but questions like “Here’s your cabin photo; can you tell me about each of the kids?” can show that they really are interested in knowing. And when the great stories come out, you want to be ready with registration; again either on-line or with a registration form, several times a year.

So what are the web site and brochure for? To sell new families. The best use is as a sales tool when satisfied parents are telling their neighbors, friends, and relatives about camp. Never send just one brochure to a returning family, as they’ll use that registration card for their own kid. Send them a couple, asking them to “share it with your friends.” People love to share good news.

And of course you’ll be mailing some out to those people who have requested them, and often to addresses you’ve received from partner organizations or mailing houses. Again, it’s for people who have never been to your camp. Knowing that, you need to be able to

grab their attention and tell a story quickly. Only photographs can do that. A good website or brochure should read like the National Geographic: you can get the whole story just by looking at the pictures and reading the captions. Who reads the story? You'd have to be completely sold to dig into the text in most brochures, and that's not the case. They have piles of brochures and dozens of web sites to visit. What will grab them is a story that shows safety, mature staff as role-models, and kids learning new skills. Not in text, because anyone can (and often do in marketing) lie. People just trust photos more, and they trust the testimonials of real-life parents. Use those great quotations you get in your evaluations every year.

If it all comes down to good photos, then you better get some. Of course the best option is to take them during the summer, but even then they don't come by accident. Since this is advertising, think of it as an "advertising photo shoot." You come up with the story you want to tell, then you decide on the photos you want to tell the story, *then* go out and set up the shots and take the photos. This isn't photojournalism; it's the communication of specific messages. And it's never too late. You've got great photos of your facilities and property already, so put kids and a counselor in summer clothes even if it's snowy outside, and "PhotoShop" them on to the summer backgrounds if you have too!

One of the most important (and least used) techniques is to crop your photos. Too often we just use the whole shot the same size it came from the drug store photo department. That usually means lots of sky, lots of grass and parking lots, and tiny little faces. By cropping down to the essential action you can focus on the message, the action, and the relationship between the people. Then blow it up large enough so it's easy to see, and use a testimonial quote as your caption.

Don't rely on your own instincts. You come with a lot of bias toward your own camp,

and photos you may think are cute may actually send the wrong message. (As with a camp I recently visited that purchased tie-died staff shirts, not thinking that parents wouldn't be thrilled with their camper checking in to a "Grateful Dead and Phish" convention.) Ask a variety of moms to give feedback on your photos. You can do it instantly with e-mail. The hard part is taking their advice!

If you were going to plan a vacation to a Caribbean resort, what kinds of things would you look for on their web sites? Beach...Pool...Restaurants and Food...the Room... the Activities. You wouldn't be interested in a list (advertisers lie), you'd want to see pictures. You'll be comparing several resorts against each other to find out which one has the right "feel." Go to your own web page. Chances are you only have photos of smiling kids, alone and together. Nobody taking swim lessons from a handsome lifeguard, no-one loading up at a sumptuous buffet, no view of kids at story-time in their cabin.

Let your photos tell an accurate story of what makes your camp rise above the other things a child could do in the summer. These are the things that help parents see how your camp is different from every other web site, from every other brochure,. These are the images that will help your satisfied parents sell *your* camp to *their* friends.

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