

TechnoTrends: spreading the word through the Internet

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With each passing season, more summer camps have migrated toward digital solutions for the management of their businesses. How many camps use a paper ledger to manage their financial accounts? It sounds silly, and in 2004, it is. What hasn't changed, however, about financial management of a camp is also true for marketing--the principles remain the same. It is simply easier to use a financial management application over graph paper. The same is true for marketing--the audience and clientele haven't changed. It is simply easier, faster, and cheaper to market to them through the Internet.

Your Camp's Web Site: An Interactive Marketing Engine

Virtually every summer camp has a Web site. It is usually a static series of pages that reflect the print marketing material created for that year. Session schedules and costs, directions to camp, and biographies of camp directors are important; however, this does not address the dynamic nature of the Internet. It is a medium where interactivity with each visitor is key. A camp's Web site must be an interactive marketing engine--where new prospects are engaged and current customers find value. It is a springboard that empowers parents to spread the word about a camp's program and tradition.

The Marketing Audience Pyramid

Think about your marketing audience in a pyramid formation (see the "Prospecting Pyramid" sidebar). This is an exercise that demonstrates two points--be aware of your overall audience and be aware of how your audience is channeled. Don't underestimate the power of word of mouth. At the top of the pyramid are the campers that you worked with this past summer. Immediately underneath are the parents of the children that attended your camp. Beneath the parents are the

relatives and friends who knew that a camper was attending your program. Underneath friends and relatives come alumni, followed by their friends and family. This pyramid empowers camp directors to realize an ever-expanding universe of potential campers.

Now that you've identified your community, how are you empowering this audience at the top of the pyramid to spread the word to potential camp families? This is where the interactivity of the Internet greatly separates itself from the static nature of print material. Developing an interactive online community with newsletters and photographs allows for parents, campers, counselors, and alumni to easily spread the word about your camp program. This is achieved in a number of ways--e-cards, community invitations, guest books, and appropriate placement of contact information on a Web site.

Online Photo Albums

Many camps already publish a photo album on their Web site; however, it is usually a handful of photographs, which does not convey the overall joy, nature, and depth of the camp experience. Online photo albums, if created frequently, are the most extensive documentation of the wonder of the camp experience. To present parents with photographs of their child positively interacting with other campers--not to mention thoroughly involved in camp activities--is a true marketing bullet. By allowing parents to click a button and send a photo to a friend is the equivalent of receiving a testimonial from that parent.

Implement two rules for success--make sure the photo is framed with your camp's logo and overall Web site look and feel and make sure you provide contact information enabling e-card recipients to learn more about your program! You are empowering parents at the top of your audience pyramid to promote your camp on your behalf through the direct testimony of photographs.

Parents are not the only members of a camp's community who would like to see all of the camp's photo albums. Because photo albums should be password protected, enabling custodial parents to invite an unlimited number of friends and family is key to the marketing success of your Web site. An invitee is one big step closer to becoming a camp parent. Invitees are now aware of the diversity and quality of your programs--and have an intimate relationship with camp. They are advocates of your camp program and will now spread the word to other potential camp families.

Prospecting and Sharing Information

E-card recipients, online community invitees, and anyone who is accessing your Web site should be able to request additional information by simply clicking on a link that allows them to inquire about camp and its programs. This should lead to a form that requires families to list their basic contact information. Don't require parents to fill out a questionnaire that details their child's background and personal interests as this may be cumbersome and dissuade prospects. The form should simply be a vehicle to provide you with the necessary information to have a conversation with a parent. Qualifying inquiries over the phone is important--camp is a personal experience and personal contact from a camp's director establishes an intimacy that is harder to achieve through the Web or print-based marketing collateral.

Measuring Success

Marketing strategies and initiatives are only as good as your measurements of success. The value of an online community of parents, family, and friends is greatly diminished if you aren't tracking the usage of these services. To refine a marketing program, you need to define your goals, analyze metrics, and redefine goals. For those camps that have a waiting list, perhaps the goal is simply a greater connection between parents and the camp experience. For those

camps that have extra beds to fill, establishing parent to invitee ratios, tracking the relationship of an invitee to the camper, and measuring the number of invitees and e-card recipients that are requesting more information is fundamental. A statistics page that details usage of your site on a daily basis and the ability to list the relationship of the invitee to the camper should be important parts of your marketing strategy-- and a good tool to measure success.

Remember, what is considered run-of-the-mill at camp is magic at home. Photos and news of campers eating in the dining hall, walking to and from activities, setting up for the evening's program, cleaning out their cabin--all add to the overall quality of a camp's online community. Of course, capturing campers on the zip line, on the climbing wall, and in the camp play are extremely important, but these are the highlights of a day. Allow parents to share the whole world of camp. Parents tend to live vicariously through their children; it is this emotional connection with parents that makes them such great marketing advocates through a diverse online camp community.

The summer of 2003 marked a decrease in the number of campers attending camp. Directors must focus on their marketing strategies-- and how best to cover their overall marketing base. Empowering a camp's greatest advocates--parents and campers--to spread the word about camp through the Internet is inexpensive, easy to implement and to use, and easy to measure the success or failure of your approach and strategy.

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