

Advice for your childcare business

Marketing



Effective marketing is one of the essential tools that will help you to become a sustainable childcare business, fill current childcare places and continue to attract new customers in the future. This leaflet outlines some basic marketing concepts.



Before deciding on a marketing strategy you need to identify:

- Who your current customers and potential customers are – and therefore your target audience.
- What your unique selling point is.
- The type of image you want to project.

Who are your customers?

Central to any successful marketing strategy is an understanding of your customers and their needs. It is important to build up a picture of who they are: Where do they live? Are they working? Do they have transport?

In order to build this picture you will need to pull together information from many different sources in a process called market research. Another sheet in this series, entitled 'Market Research' gives guidance on this. Please contact your childcare business adviser for this sheet or more in depth advice if needed.

It will be your ability to satisfy your customers' needs better than your competitors that will ultimately bring new customers. And in terms

of how you market your services to them, you will need to know where they shop, which local paper they read and which toddler groups they visit. That way you will know where to target your marketing promotions.

What makes you stand out?

What makes you different from your competitors? Do you have a unique selling point that would encourage people to choose your setting over others? Your unique selling point might be that you collect from local schools, serve organic food or have mature staff who are parents themselves. Identifying your strengths will not only help you to keep your existing customers but will also help you to attract new ones.

Once you have identified what makes you special you need to make sure your prospective customers know about it. You need to emphasise the points that your current customers value most and identify which aspects of your business will appeal to new customers.



When writing adverts keep the text simple and to a minimum of words. Emphasise your unique selling point.

Events

Special events can provide an opportunity to show off your business to potential customers and the local community. This might range from giving children the opportunity to come to taster sessions or having an open morning and advertising what activities will be on offer.

Draw up a programme of events for the year concentrating on times when you traditionally might need to recruit new customers. For ideas visit www.countmeincalendar.info

Invite the local press or radio station to any special events. If they cannot attend provide some text and a photo and email it to the news desk. Getting involved in other community events is another way to forge links with local businesses and groups and raise your profile locally.

Internet

A growing number of people begin their searches for products and services on the internet. By having a website you can provide potential customers with the information they require.

A web designer can set up your website for you or you can buy a template package and create one yourself. As with writing adverts the key is to keep the site simple and think clearly about the information that potential customers will want from you. You can probably use the information and images that you already have in your prospectus remembering to obtain parental permission before using any images of children.

Networking

Make contact with other professionals who work with children. Health visitors have excellent local knowledge and contact with young families. Send them your prospectus and invite them along to see what you offer. Contact schools, churches, toddler groups, single parent networks, adult education centres and Job Centre Plus who might have an interest in promoting your business.

Promoting your business

You will probably need to use a combination of promotional tools, most of which have costs attached. It is therefore important to think carefully about which combination best meets your needs and, importantly, fits your budget.

Word of mouth

Current customers are the best form of advertising and are free. Keep a book of references and thank you letters and have it on display. Word of mouth is perhaps the most powerful form of marketing and if you monitor your customers' feelings you can help to ensure that your good reputation grows with your business.

Signage

Good quality signage will bring your service to the attention of the local community. It should include a logo if you have one and tell the public what your service offers. Contact details should also be clearly displayed.

If possible the outside of your premises should be well maintained, clean and tidy. As it is often the first thing that the public will encounter and must reflect a professional image. Although difficult to achieve if you do not own the building it is well worth pursuing.

Promotional material/Leaflets/Newsletters

When designing promotional material you need to consider what your customer will want to know about your service, and also what image you wish to project.

- Have you made the most relevant or important information clear?
- Are the benefits clear?
- Does the advert/leaflet/poster stand out?
- Are you reaching the right audience?

Monitor the effectiveness of the types of marketing you are using to confirm that you are getting value for money.



Information packs or a good quality prospectus can be a very valuable tool. A well-presented, attractive document can be sent out to anyone who makes an enquiry about your business. It should include all the relevant information about your service and contact details. Information that will change, such as costs, can be provided as an insert so that you don't need a costly reprint too frequently.

Newsletters are a good way of maintaining close relationships with existing customers and allow you to keep them up to date with current events and activities.

Direct mail shots can be used to target specific areas quickly. For example employers, health centres or libraries.

Adverts

Advertising in the local press or parish magazine is sometimes expensive but the message reaches a wide audience. Also try contacting the Children's Information Service, who update Childcarelink, and any other local directories to ensure that your details are listed correctly.



Evaluation of marketing promotion

It is essential, especially when you have invested money in marketing, to evaluate whether that money was well spent. Therefore when potential customers make contact, always ask how they heard about you so that you can build a picture of which leaflet, advert or event was most effective. Keep records of contact details so that you can follow up enquiries. If they choose to go elsewhere, ask if they are willing to tell you why, so that you can note their reasons and see if a common factor emerges.

In addition it is good practice to ask joining parents to complete a questionnaire perhaps one month after beginning to use your services to give feedback on what made them choose you, and also how they feel now their children have settled in. You may also be able to either send questionnaires or use telephone interviews for parents who made enquiries but then chose to go elsewhere. This will help inform you as to why.

Further advice

For further advice regarding marketing a childcare business, or details about training, contact your childcare business adviser on: 01372 833833 or email: childcarebusinessadvice@surreycc.gov.uk

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