

# Marketing Strategies that Work in Early Childhood Education

by Roger Neugebauer

Over 30 years ago, I partnered with Bruce Schon to write an article that applied marketing principles from the world of business to early childhood. While the guidelines Bruce and I proposed in that article (see box) are still valid, the methods for implementing them have been transformed. To catch up on the latest ideas on how to build enrollment, I reached out to the real experts—early childhood professionals who have built successful early childhood programs around the world—and am excited to share their new insights.

## Promoting via Word of Mouth

Everyone I contacted agreed that word of mouth is still the most effective means of attracting new customers and offered these ideas for enhancing its effectiveness.

ECE is a people-focused business. It is relational and operates on trust. Operators need to earn the trust of parents. Reputation is won or lost on each and

every interaction between individual ECE team members and everyone he/she comes into contact with. What they say and do matters, in terms of marketing, whether it is greeting the delivery guy or answering a phone query. We thus put in a huge effort into customer service. Secondly, we need to demonstrate care and love for children that instills confidence in parents. We are extended family entrusted with these children. Parents need to feel safe leaving them in our care. And if something goes wrong, we need to own up, apologize and fix it. Parents who trust us are our best marketing tool.

—David Wright, Paint Pots Childcare, England

We create videos of our parents describing their experience within the program and post those on our social media outlets

—Damon Carson, Neighborhood House Head Start, USA

People want to brag about their kids. Help them with that.

—Jerry Parr, Willow Tree Early Education, USA

We make it easy for customers to promote our programs by offering and delivering the highest quality early

education solutions consistently. We provide diverse family resources, including webinars, blogs, podcasts, written articles and learning resources, which support families in a variety of capacities. These resources are an effective outlet for promoting our organization and our programs. In addition, we offer a family referral program that provides our customers an easy and actionable method to promote our programs, which includes an incentive. Alumni are always acknowledged when they refer potential families to our programs and are encouraged to be promoters.

—Linda Hall, Bright Horizons Family Solutions, USA

We regularly survey families to assess their engagement with us, and to get ongoing feedback. How each center addresses what their families ask for, or sustains what their families love most, helps generate word of mouth in every center community. We also encourage families to share customer-facing feedback on online review sites, which are increasingly important to families with young children.

—Jeff Spiegel, KinderCare Education, USA



Roger Neugebauer is the co-founder of *Exchange* magazine and executive director of the World Forum Foundation.

## Marketing Messages

The messages you are communicating about your program must convince prospective customers that you are special—a great place for their kids.

You have to deliver a high quality, bullet-proof product to a really well-informed consumer. Parents have learned a lot about early childhood in the last 40 years and have high expectations and low thresholds for disappointment. Have a mission bigger than you. Millennials want businesses to be cause-driven.

—Jerry Parr, Willow Tree Early Education, USA

Our award-winning status for classroom spatial design, playground design and curriculum design inspires a higher sense of confidence, quality and a culture of continuous improvement.

—Darius Singh, Chrysalis Care, New Zealand

Our most effective message is to tell “our story,” which sets up expectations for an excellent and consistent customer experience. We emphasize over 30 years as an industry expert in early childhood education and share the pillars of our program: support for the entire family, inspired teachers and a proven approach to education to tell the story. Part of our story includes the proven success that we achieve with school readiness, the investment we make in our teaching staff and the intentional learning environments that are set up that inspire discovery, exploration and investigation. Families connect on an emotional level as we prepare them to envision what their child and entire family will experience at our programs.

—Linda Hall, Bright Horizons Family Solutions, USA

Warm, nurturing relationships with staff, safe environment, high quality early education and care. Proven student outcomes, ready for future learning and

life.

—Jo Kirchner, Primrose Schools, USA

Using annual parent surveys, as well as anecdotal comments, compile a list of why families choose you and what specifically you can improve on to make them love you for upcoming years.

Families spend more on child care than any other budget line item besides their mortgage. Families that remain enrolled through their child’s entire pre-school career and then pay you a sincere compliment by enrolling younger siblings are your bread and butter!

Listen to them. And pay close attention to the ones that leave, even if they are unhappy. We cannot all be a perfect fit for everyone.

—Kathe Petchel, Hinge Brokers, USA

We have always had a three star rating, which is the highest rating for Tennessee’s QRIS. We do development assessments on all children twice each year to identify any development delays. We operate 24/7/365 (we do not do care for children 30 months or younger after 6 p.m. or before 6 a.m.). We provide transportation to and from schools for the before and after school program. We partner with Head Start/Early Head Start. We have a sliding fee scale and a scholarship program. We provide three meals plus a snack each day. We have a parent assistance fund for parents to help with emergency expenses such as car repairs. We have a parent assistance fund to help parents with their fees when they get behind because of illness or medical bills.

—Phil Acord, Chambliss Center for Children, USA

## Marketing Tools

Thirty years ago, yellow page ads and printed brochures were the standard marketing tools for early childhood programs. Much has changed.

We are using integrated digital marketing strategies such as search

## Guidelines for Effective Marketing

- Adapt your marketing approaches to the varying stages of readiness among families in the community.
- Concentrate your publicity where parents needing child care services are most likely to perceive it when they are actively looking for child care, or when they are in settings that require them to use child care.
- Identify and emphasize your program’s dominant features and marketable differences.
- Make doing business with you an easy and pleasant experience for parents.

engine optimization, paid search, blogs, net promoter postings, Facebook, LinkedIn, and so on, in order to meet parents where they are today, online.

—Jo Kirchner, Primrose Schools, USA

We find most of our inquiries begin online—increasingly on mobile devices. More and more, families searching for early learning and care are relying on web-based tools to find answers to questions and to identify resources near their home or workplace. Even when inquiring by phone or in person, the journey for insight and information begins online.

—Jeff Spiegel, KinderCare Education, USA

Answer the phone, and then listen and follow up! You are really busy. But each time the phone rings your school has an opportunity to build a relationship with the caller and hopefully schedule a tour. It is disheartening to discover how often

we ignore a call or let voicemail pick up, when we should prioritize the parent on the other end of the line and engage in customer service. Do not forget to do a little pre-selling about your program and be sure to refer the parent to both your beautiful (and hopefully mobile friendly) website and school social media pages.  
—Kathe Petchel, Hinge Brokers, USA

We maintain a high profile in the media. I appear on local radio as a “child care expert,” with a Thought for the Day. I occasionally do TV interviews. I write quite a few magazine articles, blogs, posts and tweets, and I have a number of speaking engagements at conferences, groups and other events. We engage with our community, working with schools and other operators to provide training. We run information events on child development topics, including free film nights. We run our own charity, Families First Southampton, which supports dads, families and kinship caregivers. We work with other charities in our area. We also support a charity in Kenya that rescues abandoned babies. We are hoping to take some of our team to volunteer there. I work with our government department for education and our regulator. I also sit on an ECE council for a national head-teachers’ union.  
—David Wright, Paint Pots Childcare, England

We use a wide range of marketing technology tools to create our marketing and advertising campaigns....While these tools provide us with a plethora of ways to connect with our potential and current customers, we find that it is our team (our directors and teachers) that have the greatest impact on the success of our schools. It is their dedication, passion, and commitment to children and their families that make the strongest impact in marketing. Families enroll at our schools because they feel a strong connection with our amazing team.  
—Cara Johnson-Bader, New Horizons Academy, USA

## Dealing with Competition

Over the years, as demand for child care has steadily increased, the number of organizations and individuals competing for customers has increased. In recent years, the fastest growing segment of the market is public schools, which are threatening the survival of community programs in many states.

You need to understand that you are competing more than ever for every enrollment. We know that people consider multiple centers and are incredibly conscientious in their research—you have to understand that you are competing for their business. Everyone on your team needs to know the importance of each new enrolment, how to behave on a tour, how to greet a new family, how to answer the phone and how to present the center. It has to be a whole of team approach.  
—Warren Bright, Goodstart Early Learning, Australia

The best way for us to compete with public schools is not to—it is to collaborate with them. Parents make the choices that are best for their children and families, and if there is an older sibling at a school or their child’s K-3 placement depends on whether she does pre-K at the school, it is difficult to argue. With that said, private providers have a lot to offer in return. If we bring our own revenue to the table (for wraparound, Head Start or private pay), school districts can pay us a fraction of what they would pay themselves to serve children. We can offer program options they cannot. We have flexibility in employment they might not. Our preferred path is to be a partner, a support, and ultimately a preferred vendor to school districts.  
—Henry Wilde, Acelero, USA

Have a relationship with the schools you are feeding into. Make sure the teachers and administrators know where those bright, well-adjusted kids are coming

from.

—Jerry Parr, Willow Tree Early Education, USA

Lower ratios, smaller, warm environment, proven student outcomes.  
—Jo Kirchner, Primrose Schools, USA

We partner with our local school system to serve their children eligible for pre-K in our building.  
—Phil Acord, Chambliss Center for Children, USA

We market the success and history of Head Start, along with the provision of comprehensive services. We identify things within our program that families cannot find in other programs, such as health and dental care and field trips. We offer a menu that is all natural and organic. We also market our student to teacher ratios, which are typically lower than a school district.  
—Damon Carson, Neighborhood House Head Start, USA

Highlight the center’s curriculum (kindergarten readiness), center culture and teacher qualifications as compared to the public school. Engage in parent education regarding the differences between the two programs once their child enters the two-year-old program, to ensure they are aware of the benefits of staying in their center until their child goes to kindergarten.  
—Fran McIntyre, Pendulum Dependent Care Solutions, USA

We do not compete. We send parents to other operators with a good practice checklist. We invite them to visit as many as they feel they want to, to ensure they make the right choice for their child. If we are not the right choice, we do not want these parents. Most parents come back and sign up. We market ourselves as “homey.” We are not an institution, we are somewhere where children are loved, where there is plenty of laughter and individual needs are understood, respected and hopefully

met.

—David Wright, Paint Pots Childcare,  
England

Yes, much has changed in 30 years. But the basics of providing and marketing early childhood services remain consistent. Operating a high-quality program, providing top-notch customer service and encouraging your parents to spread the word about your program are always solid foundations for maintaining high enrollment.

