

Marketing

Marketing is critical to all types of business. Early years and childcare providers are a unique type of business organisation as you are marketing yourselves to parents and carers to offer to look after and educate their children. This means that you need to think carefully about what messages you want to give to both parents and children about your provision, and what you can offer.

Marketing is about more than flyers and posters – it's about being aware of what you want your business to achieve, how you want it to be viewed by others and how you communicate your message.

To ensure that you can make the most of the opportunities provided by marketing based on recommendations and 'word of mouth', you will need to consider the service you provide, your quality standards, customer service, value for money and professionalism. And for each of these areas, you need to know what it means to you, how you define it and how you can evidence it to customers.

A good overall marketing strategy for a business needs to explore three areas:

1. **Your market** – who are your customers and who do you want to attract in future?
2. **Your messages** – what information do you need to get across and what impression are you trying to create?
3. **Your methods** – what activities will ensure that the right message reaches your target market?

This doesn't have to be expensive, and while there are skills and techniques worth developing, the best sources of information for developing a successful marketing strategy for your business will be you, your team and your customers.

What makes your setting special?

Underlying all of your marketing activity should be a number of key unique selling points (USP).

Your USPs are the things that you do really well, that you know appeal to your customers and that help you to stand out from your competition.

Even if you are confident that you are aware of your USPs, it's important to regularly consult your families (see market research below), since priorities can change.

If you have invested time and effort making sure that you and your staff are qualified to the highest level – make sure you let people know about it!

If you have a particularly good outdoor area – highlight it in your marketing!

If you've got brilliant Ofsted reports – shout about it!

If you offer care over longer hours than others – make sure working parents know about it!

If you've got the best location and loads of parking – tell people!

Key questions to ask yourself:

- What are you really good at? What sets you apart?
- Why did your current customers choose you?
- What do your customers value most from their childcare provider?
- What do other settings focus on in their marketing?

Market research

One of the easiest ways to begin a successful marketing strategy is to start with the customer. Ultimately, your customers determine whether you stay in business or not, so it's important to put yourself in their position and find out what their wants and needs are, and what they think about you.

Although it's important to put the customer at the heart of your market research, you will also need to think about the market that you operate in more broadly.

For early years and childcare providers, this means being alert to changes in:

- National early years policy such as changes to funding entitlements, nursery education funding and new quality standards
- Local policy and research such as local authority sufficiency studies
- Changes in the local population including numbers of young children, where families live or work and the effect of the economy on families
- The surrounding area including employers and their operating hours
- New housing developments and schools in the area, since these bring new families into the community
- Travel and transport patterns, in case these change and leave your business in an inconvenient location
- Other childcare businesses nearby (i.e. your competition) including their location, services provided and pricing policy
- The needs of local young children and their families, including opening times and any special facilities or services needed

Marketing methods

Once you've identified your USPs and done your market research it's time to think about the different ways to market your setting. If you've thought carefully about what message you want to give to potential customers and who those customers are, it may be that some methods are more suitable than others.

- If you haven't already, **set up a website** (either with the help of web designers or from a pre-built package). The internet is where many parents will begin their search for childcare. Your LA's website should list all providers who offer free early learning, so speak to them if you don't already feature on it.
- **Ask your customers for testimonials and quotes** that you can use on your website, social media channels and other advertising efforts. Create a simple online feedback form (using Google Forms or a site like SurveyMonkey) to solicit this feedback.
- **Have good quality, effective signage** so that passing customers and the local community know that you are there. Promote events with banners and A-frame advertising.
- **Write a regular** (perhaps fortnightly or monthly) **newsletter** for your existing customers about what's happening in the setting. There are a number of sites (like MailChimp) which offer free, attractive templates which are easy to personalise and send out. Ask parents to forward to any friends who may be interested and consider offering referral discounts.
- **Engage with social media** – provided you have a firm social media policy in place, there is no need to shy away from having a strong presence on sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Show your followers the exciting things your setting gets up to (for example, a Christmas play, a staff member getting a new qualification or a group of 4 year olds 'graduating'!) Lots of parents are very active online and enjoy sharing content with friends.
- **Develop partnerships** with local organisations like schools, other businesses and shopping and leisure centres to raise your profile, collaborate and get referrals. Link to other organisations that are supporting parents with younger children, like children's centres, health visitors, parent and toddler groups. Make contacts with the local press, who may publish photos and stories from your setting.
- **Make and maintain a database** of your customers and potential customers' information when they contact you so that you can communicate with them quickly and easily. Communicate regularly with potential customers to keep them interested in and updated on the setting.
- **Make sure that your staff are representing your setting** when they're out and about, and consider developing a policy with staff around promoting the setting positively both online and offline.