

GUIDELINES FOR MARKETING A CHRISTIAN CAMP OR CENTER

Marketing is both an **idealistic** agenda – Board and staff members want to share the Christian faith through their ministry – and a **practical** agenda – the ministry must have participants in order to support the site operation and programs.

Christian camp and conference center leaders sometimes experience tension based on language in relation to the marketing effort of the ministry. To “market” as a retail or for-profit operation would do conjures up images of being opportunistic and making selfish gain. To “share” the ministry, on the other hand, seems much too haphazard and unintentional for such substantial operations, and not related to specific goals.

To undertake “**marketing**” in this ministry is to **acknowledge and draw upon the appropriate strategies in the secular discipline in order to effectively and intentionally reach out** to as many persons as possible through the services and events of the camp and center. Marketing is an art and a science, often supplemented by the assistance of professionals trained in the field.

A **first priority** for creating an effective marketing strategy is **having a “product” (programs) or service (hospitality)** that is needed or desired by the potential clientele, and which can be **described in terms of benefits and values to others**.

As the center offers its programs and services to meet the guest group needs, it will do so in the following ways:

- *through a hospitable, supportive residential environment* for camps, conferences and retreats sponsored by its own denomination and judicatory, by other religious groups, and by like-minded community agencies and organizations.
- *through program resources* for groups who contract for use of the site, and who request special program assistance for specific goals.
- *through unique program offerings* designed to meet specific needs of persons and groups, and directed by the site staff.

These roles of hosting and resourcing groups, and directing programs are often well-defined in practice, but can usually be more specifically described and interpreted to potential guest groups.

Marketing is not a single-faceted effort. It involves at least three different, but interrelated, functions:

#1 PUBLIC RELATIONS

This effort **creates a positive experience** for all guests so that they will speak highly of the site wherever they are. It is an essential component of marketing because *it is one hundred times more difficult to overcome a negative experience or image than to create a positive one.*

Establishing positive public relations is the responsibility of *every person* related to the site – the staff, the program leaders, the Board members. It involves influencing the perception of the guests through their experience about tangible items such as food, lodging and program quality, and also about intangible items such as integrity and value.

These perceptions can be identified by formal means, such as evaluation forms and surveys. It is also important to do continual informal listening, seeking opinions candidly and responding appropriately and appreciably to guests' comments. A good public relations effort attempts to mold these perceptions by intentional, responsive hospitality and "image creating" publicity.

It is essential for staff and Board members to receive critical feedback non-defensively. Leaders never *intend* for guests to have negative experience, but sometimes they do. The guest's perception about the situation IS reality and must be responded to sensitively.

#2 PROMOTION

This effort **creates the specific image** desired by the Board and staff in persons who use and support the site's services and programs. Promotion is done to enhance the awareness of the unique offerings of the center and to create general knowledge of the entire ministry. Good promotion is *designed to generate receptivity in relation to the particular ministry opportunities.* It does not necessarily call people to any action at the moment, but will make them more responsive when a program or service is marketed to them.

#3 TARGET MARKETING

This effort **identifies persons**, new and returning, who are likely users of the site and programs, and **communicates** to them the **specific opportunities and benefits** in such a way as **to cause them to contract for site use or register for a program.**

The purpose of this effort is to get a specific response of participation! This aspect of marketing requires a clear understanding of what the ministry has to offer that will meet the needs of the specifically targeted audience. It requires the ability to communicate the values and benefits in a medium that is credible to the person/group. Every target marketing effort must provide a way for the person to respond.

Each of the preceding efforts is undertaken for the same purpose – **the full use and appreciation of the ministry as a year round Christian education center**. However, each effort is accomplished by different activities and by different people. The interpretive materials needed for one type of marketing are different than those required by the other areas. Creating plans for each marketing function – **public relations, promotion, and target marketing** – is necessary to assure success.

These are the specific steps that the consultant recommends be undertaken to enhance the marketing efforts:

- A. Evaluate the literature produced to determine its primary purpose.** Newsletters usually try to do all three functions, which may not result in any one effort being completely successful. Specific written materials are needed for each of these steps.
- B. Create specific materials for groups who want to be hosted** by a quality retreat/conference center for their own programs. Especially write the description of services and package the rates to allow maximum flexibility by non-church groups and organizations who don't fit in the weekend and summer vacation periods.

Target groups who do in-service, business-related events and seek use for spring, winter and fall midweeks. Likely users will be government agencies, university faculty, church judicatory units, associations. Especially seek REGIONAL groups because these will be larger, though less frequent.

- C. Create a planned approach for the three types of users**, including appropriate literature, procedures and personnel assigned:

Repeat use – be certain that present users are reserved for their next event.

Spin-off use – provide information for all adult group participants so they know that the site is available for other organizational events in which they participate. Encourage inquiries and tentative scheduling while at the site.

New markets – establish select groups to target each year. Set aside budget and time to create mailings or make telephone contact, focusing on a straight-forward invitational approach, and using the language of the group being approached. (e.g. educators do in-service trainings; businesses do meetings and seminars; church groups do planning retreats, etc.)

- D. Establish numerical goals translated into people and groups**, backed by a plan, and watch your successes grow!!