



Team Steps to Success

Skills for running and sustaining your childcare business

Marketing your childcare business

Business
success for
Childcare

Welcome to 'Team Steps to Success'

'Team steps to success' is a series of guides, which are aimed at improving the sustainability of all forms of childcare businesses.

The guides are primarily for 'Team Managed' childcare settings, but they might also be useful for some childminders.

Team managed childcare settings range from privately owned settings to ones which are run by a voluntary management committee.

About the guides

The guides contained within the 'Team Steps to Success' series are useful for all childcare settings whether they are:

- Privately owned or voluntary managed
- Profit making or 'not for profit' groups
- Charities, cooperative organisations, private companies, social enterprises, maintained childcare settings or any other form of childcare business

As you would expect these guides contain many references to business concepts, words and phrases, in particular the words 'profit' and 'surplus'.

However, it's important to note that the guides are **not just** about making a profit in a private sector environment, far from it!

They actually refer to good business practices, which will enable your childcare setting to remain sustainable, whether or not you choose to invest all your surpluses back into providing a better childcare service.

Definition of
'Sustainability'
- The ability of a childcare provider to continually maintain its business.

Definition of
'Team managed'
- A team managed business is one which employs more than one person and is generally managed by a team of people, such as a nursery, playgroup or out of school club.

Did you know?
The word '**profit**' originates from the Latin word '**profectus**' and the old French word '**proficere**' meaning to '**progress**' and '**advance**'.

Consider the following

All group childcare settings have the following in common:

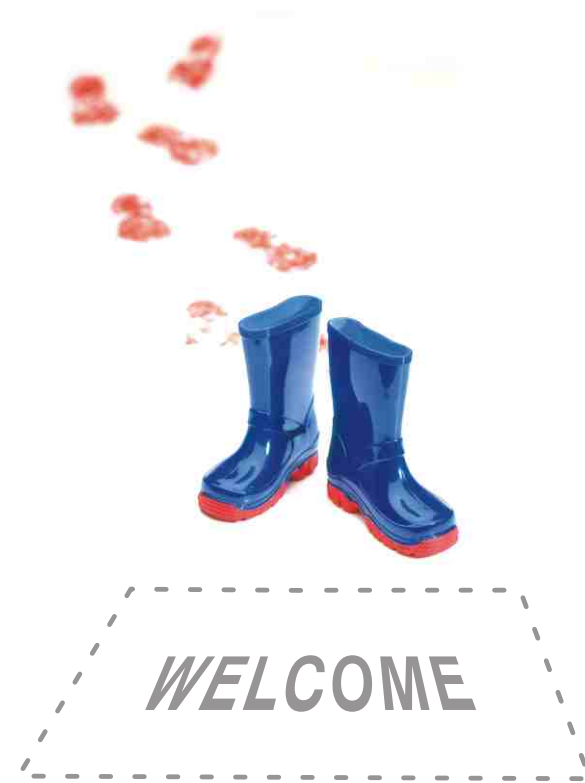
- Parents pay for a childcare service
- Staff are employed
- Premises are rented or owned
- Costs are incurred

Whether your childcare group is profit making or not, it's essential that all costs are covered and some surpluses are generated to keep the provision sustainable for the future...

These guides can help your organisation begin to do that.

What kind of childcare settings are these guides designed for?...

- Nurseries
 - Out of school groups
 - Holiday play schemes
 - Breakfast clubs
 - Playgroups
 - Pre-school groups
 - Crèches
- to name but a few



How to use this guide

Team Steps to Success is a series of four guides and a foundation module, that are aimed at **'team managed'** childcare businesses. The four guides cover the key business issues, drawing on best practice in business support. They build on the **'foundation'** module, **'Planning for business success'**, which is designed to be used as a reference point as it contains the practical planning techniques for applying the concepts covered in this guide.

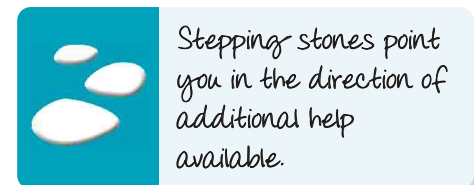
Planning for business success

Planning is the foundation of the Business Success for Childcare guides and this module defines the key principles of business planning. The module is designed to be read first, as it shows how you can plan and implement ideas and concepts contained in this guide.



'Marketing your childcare business' offers ideas, thoughts and techniques around promoting your childcare service. It offers practical examples of how you can better understand your market, successfully advertise and keep customers happy.

Throughout this guide there are information and action points labelled **'Steps to Success'**. These items are particularly important because they aim to prompt your thinking. There are also a number of **'Stepping Stones'** that will direct you towards useful sources of guidance and advice. There is a useful summary **'Stepping Stone'** at the end of this guide. The guide also contains a number of practical aids and simple exercises to help you plan and prepare for the future. To get the best from the guide, complete these as you come across them.



Welcome to 'Marketing your childcare business'

It's an unavoidable fact that marketing and sales are one of the key tasks of any business. For some businesses this may involve employing a sales team and the use of a variety of sales techniques. For businesses such as childcare providers, a more subtle approach is appropriate.

As a childcare provider you're selling places and sessions. The ability to fill these successfully is the life-blood of your business. So, just like other businesses, you need to focus some time on sales and marketing activities, to enable you to fill your childcare places.

Marketing your childcare service

This guide introduces some relevant marketing and sales techniques and methods. It also suggests an approach you could take to finding, securing and keeping customers. It covers the key components of sales and marketing including:

- **The market**
 - Why doing some basic research is important
 - Understanding the local area
 - Checking out the competition
 - Give customers what they want
 - Customer service surveys
 - Conducting market research and surveys
- **Filling places**
 - Anticipating changes in child numbers
 - Put yourself in their shoes
 - Your service
 - Attracting new customers
 - Advertising ideas and a plan
 - An information pack
 - A visit process
 - Talking about your price
 - Reaching a decision
- **Keeping customers happy**
 - The two customers
 - Customer concerns and complaints
- **Planning for success**
- **Stepping stones**
- **Template**
 - Your service

The market

Why doing some basic research is important

Knowledge comes from experience... and research!

Having access to relevant market research is a valuable tool for any business, in any sector. It provides an insight into the market, its trends and its customers. The local market includes the requirements of the parents in the community, which may be satisfied by you and your competitors or may as yet be unmet. These needs change continually, so market research needs to be updated on a regular basis. Market research also helps a business obtain a clear picture of how and where it fits into the overall market, so it can plan effectively and set realistic and achievable objectives.

Knowing where the opportunities are in your local area will help you:

- Secure 'on going' business
- Spot gaps in your service and opportunities in the local community
- Learn about your strengths and weaknesses
- Work competitively in your locality

In the childcare sector this means you should have access to information such as the number and type of other providers in your area, as well as where children require places and in what numbers. There are four important areas that you should know about:

- How many parents require childcare in your area
- The activities of other childcare providers
- What type of provision the local area wants or needs (full day care, sessional care, out of school or pre-school playgroup places, etc)
- What your customers are thinking in terms of quality, price and flexibility of provision



Understanding your local area

In the childcare sector there are a few numbers and trends you need to be aware of. These include:

- The number of children in your area eligible for your services
- The birth rate in your area or the age range of children able to use your services
- The number of childcare providers in your area
- The number of childcare places (all providers) in your area
- The building of medium to large scale new housing in your area
- The re-location of businesses into or out of the area
- Emerging childcare developments from Local Authorities and their EYDCP

Although this may appear daunting, it's not, as most of the statistical information you'll need is readily available.

Your local Business Support Officer or Childcare Development Worker will also be able to help you with your research. They may have access to information you'll find useful, such as surveys and research the Local Authority has conducted.

You can pick up other pieces of interesting information by reading the local press, listening to the local news on TV and radio and being aware of other local provision. This type of research will help you to identify opportunities and threats.

Having an understanding of your local area gives you a good appreciation of the general demand for childcare in your area and the availability of places. This will help you plan more effectively, enabling you to manage your business to suit the demands and opportunities of your local area and customers.

Your local area will change all the time. It's a good idea to review these numbers regularly so you can spot changes and avoid being caught out.



Check out the competition



Speaking to competitors, reading their ads, leaflets and/or cards, knowing how much they charge and generally being aware of their activities helps you see the threats before they become a problem.



If you spot an opportunity and want to take advantage of it, talk to your local Business Support Officer or Childcare Development Worker - they'll be able to give you some guidance.

It's helpful to have a good relationship with the other providers in your area, as there may be opportunities to work in partnership at some point in the future.

The inevitable reality though is that, however good a relationship you have, there is an element of competition between you and other providers. This is perfectly natural and occurs in all sectors of business. A degree of competition can in fact be beneficial as it can help to improve the quality and diversity of provision.

There's a very strong chance that you may at some stage be looking to provide places to the same children as other local providers. This makes them a potential threat, so it's sensible to monitor their activities in your area. In particular be aware of:

- What service they offer - nursery, pre-school playgroups, out of school, childminding, etc
- What they charge, so you can compare their fees with yours
- Whether they offer special discounts
- The age range they cater for
- What it is that makes their service stand out if they're a successful provider
- Where they advertise and what they say in their advertisements
- What facilities they provide and their hours of business
- What type of care they offer - full day care, sessional care, flexibility, etc
- Whether you could work together to offer new services

Also, watch out for any local closures as they may provide you with a chance to expand (premises and local authority allowing).

Give customers what they want

If you understand what parents want, you'll increase the likelihood of children being placed with you. Consequently, you should think carefully about the requirements of parents so you can demonstrate that you understand their needs and design a service they'll buy.

Talking to parents regularly is essential. When you do, don't be frightened to ask them what they're looking for in a childcare service. This type of feedback will enable you to take action to improve or change your service to meet the specific needs of your customers.

Try building up a clear picture about items such as:

- **The times they require childcare services:**
 - A full week
 - Certain sessions per week
 - On an occasional basis
 - Half a session
 - Out of school
 - Pre-school/playgroup
 - By the hour
 - Mornings/afternoons
- **The price they want to pay:**
 - Whether they would pay more for a higher quality service
 - Whether they would take more sessions if they were cheaper
 - Payment methods they prefer
- **What elements of your service are important to them:**
 - The additional services they would find useful (like collection and drop off or day trips)
 - The educational activities they want you to provide
 - The types of activities they want their children to have access to
 - The location of your childcare provision
 - The importance they place on security

You're trying to encourage parents to place their child with you and the more you understand about what they and their children want, the better.



Finding out what your potential customers want, then matching your services to their needs will keep you ahead of your competitors and make selling your services a lot easier.



Getting regular feedback from your customers to help improve your service will help you keep existing customers and gain new ones.



Don't forget to ask children what they like or dislike about your service. They're the most important customer.

Customer service surveys

As mentioned, an important piece of research you can undertake to increase your understanding of what customers want is to gather feedback from your existing customers. Ask the parents of the children you care for to complete a short questionnaire to find out what they think of:

- The quality of your service
- The areas their children value most about your service
- The friendliness of your staff
- The suitability of your facilities
- The hours your service is available

You can also ask questions that will help with your future marketing activities, such as:

- Where they found out about you
- Why they chose you rather than other local provision
- What additional services they think you should offer

In addition, ask them if they think your service can be improved and in what ways. Customer surveys are a great way of finding out about your strengths and weaknesses. If there are elements of your service that are unpopular with parents, you can address them before parents withdraw their children.

Plan to do these surveys on a regular basis, maybe once a quarter. Once you've completed the survey, respond to the information and then let parents know what changes you've made based on their feedback.

You may not be able to implement every suggestion but parents will appreciate that you're committed to continually improving the standard of service that you provide.

Conducting surveys

Conducting your own surveys will provide you with an opportunity to find out about particular issues that can help you improve your services.

Your existing customers can tell you a great deal about your service, the market place and what's being offered by other providers. If you decide to do a survey these points will help you create an appropriate document:

- Have a short introduction explaining why you're doing the survey
- Keep the survey and the questions as short and as simple as possible
- Used closed questions [i.e. those that require a yes, no or don't know for an answer] or a ranking type answer [i.e. rank the following in order of importance with 1 being most important and 4 being least]
- Provide a space at the bottom of the survey for people to comment
- Make sure the survey is well laid out
- Put a note of thanks on the bottom of the survey

Our Playgroup

To help us improve our service to you, could you please take a few minutes to complete this short survey?

Please respond to each question by circling a number from 1 to 4, one being poor and four being excellent, or comment in the space provided.

1. How would you rate the overall quality of the childcare we offer?
1 2 3 4
2. How would you rate the accommodation we provide?
1 2 3 4
3. How would you rate the range of toys/activities that we offer your children?
1 2 3 4
4. Do our opening hours meet your childcare requirements?
1 2 3 4
5. Are there any other opening times that you would use our services?
Please state.....
6. Would you be willing to pay for additional activities such as outings to fun places.
Yes No
7. Would you be willing to provide a reference for our childcare services?
Yes No
8. Are there any other comments that you would like to make about our services to you and your children?
Please comment.....

Please return this questionnaire to one of our staff and thank you for taking the time to help us improve our services.



Use the space below to write six questions you could use in a customer service survey. You could then prepare a full survey using the questions and try it out on your customers.

Question 1	
Question 2	
Question 3	
Question 4	
Question 5	
Question 6	

Before you move on, see how well you know your market, the activities of other local providers, the needs of your future customers and the thoughts of your existing customers. Use the following checklist to find out.

> The market

Only tick the question if you definitely know the answer.

The market	Do you know...	✓
...how many childcare providers are active in your area?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...the total number of childcare places on offer in your area?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...the number of children in the age range that you care for in your area?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...the birth-rate for your area?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...of any current housing developments in your area?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...of any planned housing developments in your area?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...of any large businesses moving into your area?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...of any large businesses moving out of your area?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Current customers	Do you know...	✓
...if they're happy with your service?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...if they're happy with your facilities?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...if they're happy with your staff?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...if they're happy with your location?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...if they're happy with the hours your service is available?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...if they're planning to move out of the area?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...if they've plans that may change their childcare needs?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...if they've any suggestions that could improve your service?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...how they value quality against price?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...what their children think of the service?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Future customers	Do you know...	✓
...the price parents expect to pay for childcare?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...the hours parents generally require childcare?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...what services parents expect from childcare providers?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...the major influences on parents when choosing childcare?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...how they value quality against price?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...where they heard about your service?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...if you were recommended?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Other childcare provision	Do you know...	✓
...how much they charge?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...what discounts they offer?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...what facilities they offer?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...how they attract parents? (e.g. advertising, leaflets, etc)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...the starting time of the local schools?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...the finishing time of local schools?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...the hours their service is available?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...how they attract parents?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...of any plans they may have to expand?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...if they're planning to close?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...what type of sessions they offer - block sessions, day sessions, after school, breakfast, playgroup sessions, etc	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If you've completed this checklist fully, you'll now have a good idea of where you need to concentrate your research activities. Ideally you'll have ticked the majority of boxes against each section, however it's equally positive if you haven't, as you've identified aspects of your business that can be improved upon. For the boxes you haven't ticked, it's worth investing some time in doing some research.

So, you've covered the importance of market research, so what techniques can you use to promote your service and ensure you're 'filling places'?

Filling places

Keeping places filled is critical to the sustainability of your childcare service. If a child leaves your care it will have a direct impact on your income. So how can you anticipate changes in child numbers and fill places?

Anticipating changes in child numbers

In business, as in life, it's not always possible to foresee changes. Some events are beyond our control. Most of the time, however, you should have prior warning that a child will be leaving, as you'll have a notice period in the contract you have with the parents of the child.

There will be times however, when you don't receive any notice, so you need to watch for those telltale signs that allow you to think ahead, such as a parent changing jobs, moving house, an unhappy child and/or parent.

You can pick a lot of this up by speaking regularly with the parents of children you look after, even if it's just over a coffee when they come to pick their children up.

The essential aspect of replacing children leaving your service is timing. You can't afford to wait for one child to leave before trying to find a replacement. Ideally, you want the new child to start before or on the day the old one leaves.

So what can you do to fill your vacancies? How can you attract new customers?



Speaking regularly with parents will enable you to anticipate changes in child numbers.



Acting to fill a vacancy as soon as you know one is to occur will help you sustain your income.

Put yourself in their shoes



There's no right or wrong way to go about attracting new parents. All parents are individuals and as such will be attracted by different things, just as you are when choosing other products and services.

There are a number of common factors, however, that all parents will take into account when deciding whether they'll entrust the care of their child to you, rather than a competitor:

- Location
- Quality and attitude of your team
- Quality of your facilities
- How you handled a visit
- Price
- Hours available
- Reputation and what other parents say

To make sure you've a steady flow of children seeking places with you, think about these factors when you plan your activities to attract new parents. A good technique is to put yourself in the place of the parent. If you were in their shoes, what would convince you to use your childcare service rather than that of other local providers.



Your service

Try and be different. With your team, discuss what makes your service special and use these as your selling points. If you've done a customer service survey, this may help you discover those special aspects of your service. Once you've identified these key aspects, make sure that you emphasise them when you plan your activities to attract new parents and children.

The following table gives an example of some of the points that you can include. There is a template at the back of this guide that you can use to record some of the details of your service and what makes it special:

Your service:

Type of provision offered	Pre - School Playgroup
Location	Leicester
Opening times	Morning session - 10am - 12.00pm Afternoon session 1.30pm - 3.00pm
Number of places available	22 places available
Price per session	£4.25 per session or £3.75 for members
Activities offered to children	Opportunities to draw, do crafts, use computers, discover numbers, educational toys, go on outings and socialise
Skills of employees	Staff are fully qualified and are trained in health and safety, child protection policies and procedures and they know how to make childcare a good experience for children
What our customers say about us	Fun, safe environment, professional staff, would prefer more flexibility around opening times, children are happy and content
What we do differently/better than other providers	Membership allowing discounted fees, we have team games everyday

Attracting new customers



Current customers can be your best form of advertising.



Have a book of parental and children's references. Like a visitors book - it's great reading.

You know what makes you good at what you do but prospective customers will not, so to attract them you need to make sure you get the message across. To do this you may choose to use some basic tools:

- **Advertising ideas and a plan**
- **An information pack**
- **A visit process - for meeting parents and explaining your service**

These will be explored in more detail shortly, but first.

Get people talking

Never underestimate the power of the grapevine. Word of mouth remains one of the greatest advertising formats and it's the easiest way to let parents know about your vacancy.

Ask the parents of the children you're caring for to tell their friends that you've a vacancy available. Think of the number of times you've asked friends to recommend an electrician or plumber and then used them because of that recommendation.

Parents trust you with their child and their recommendation to friends will mean that your service is regarded in a positive light. Also ask your friends and relatives to pass on the information to their friends about any vacancies that you have.

Make a point of getting references from the parents of children you've looked after or are currently looking after. Being able to show good references is a powerful tool in influencing the decisions of new customers.

Also, don't hesitate to speak with other childcare providers. They may know of parents looking for places but have no current vacancies of their own. In this situation they may be happy to refer them to you and you can return the favour in the future.

Advertising ideas and a plan

An advertising plan is simply a formal list of where, how and when you intend to promote your service. Whenever you choose to promote your service, it should be part of your overall plan. It will therefore form part of a strategy that will help you achieve your objectives.

There are a number of different ways in which you can promote your service, these include:

- Advertising in local papers or newsletters
- Links with local jobcentres
- Cards in newsagents, shop windows, doctors' surgeries or on public notice boards
- Posters in libraries or on notice boards
- Leafletting
- Mail shots
- Open days
- Prominent, quality signage
- Public relations activity
- Website
- Local radio / TV

Some of these methods are simple and inexpensive, such as placing cards in newsagents and on public notice boards. Ideally you should aim to do these on a regular basis. Others such as using local radio and TV can be effective but are usually expensive and you should, therefore, be more selective about using them.

Others may be inappropriate for now. For instance you may not yet have a website. This may not be a problem today but keep it under regular review because as the Internet becomes more widely used, you may need a website to promote your services.





Your Business Support Officer is a useful source of information when it comes to identifying the right places to advertise.



If you want to set up a web site, contact your Internet provider who'll be able to give you advice and guidance and recommend suitable sites.

Choosing where and how to advertise

When considering the most appropriate method of advertising your business, two things are important:

- Selecting the most effective way to reach your target audience
- Whether you want to spend money, and if so, how much

Always make sure that you measure the results of any advertising that you do. When parents come to you, ask them how they heard about you. This will make sure you don't spend money on advertising that gets no response.

...Dare to be different...

When you advertise you'll be competing against other childcare providers who'll be advertising their services. Try and make your service stand out by including points that make it unique. This may be about your services or the qualifications of you and your team. Perhaps a member of your team is fluent in more than one language? Maybe you have flexible opening hours allowing early drop offs and late pick ups, or perhaps you have an outdoor play area, or specialise in activities for young teenagers?

Also, different people respond to different things, so try different styles, when advertising your services. Over the page are examples of differing styles of advertising.



Hello.

I am **Gemma** and I have a friend called **Edward** and we would like to let you know that **Our**

Playgroup, has some vacancies and we would love some new playmates to join us. We get lots of trips out, and there is a garden with swings and everything to play on.

Our Playgroup have been caring for children like us for 10 years. Playmates between the ages of 3 and 5 years could join us from 21 March 2003 - Monday to Friday. I am 4 and Edward is 5 years old. **My mum** says **Our**

Playgroup have competitive rates and she's happy to recommend them. So if you would like to be our new playmate get your parent to phone them on...

Our Teenage Activity Club

We specialise in providing care for young teenagers in out of school hours. We're based within the local school and offer numerous fun and challenging sports based activities in an exciting, vibrant environment. We also have a quiet area for study, with access to the Internet.

So for more information on our services call us on...



TwinkleToes

At the **Twinkle Toes** Pre-school group it's important to us that children get to experience different cultures. We are pleased to offer an individual service for each child, ensuring that their cultural needs are met, along with special dietary requirements.

We have over 5 years experience and have vacancies available from 21 March 2003 - Monday to Friday. Competitive rates. References available.

For more information, contact Twinkle Toes on...



Let the Children's
Information Service
advertise for you! Visit
them at:
www.childcarelink.gov.uk
or call 0800 0960 296

Advertise yourself...

If you haven't done it before you won't believe how easy it is to place an advertisement. There are lots of places where you can advertise, from local papers to community or church news sheets. Don't be put off by the cost, as some advertising is really cheap. Here are some of your options:

- Local papers: most have childcare sections; ask to place a lineage advertisement
- Yellow Pages: you can obtain a free entry (name, address and telephone number) in the childcare section, call 0808 100 8182
- Thomson Directory: you can also obtain a free entry with this directory (name, address, telephone number), call 01252 555 555
- Community/church newsletters: you can often advertise in these for a small donation
- Local registers: the Local Authority and their EYDCP and the Children's Information Service keep a register of childcare providers and you're entitled to a free listing

Keep the message short but be sure to mention key points such as, what age range you cater for, the hours you can provide care and your different pricing strategies. Build trust by mentioning that you're registered, experienced and currently have children or teenagers in your care. It may be worth adding a note about the checks that are made during the registration process. Or you could mention additional features you have, such as having a garden with swings and a climbing frame.

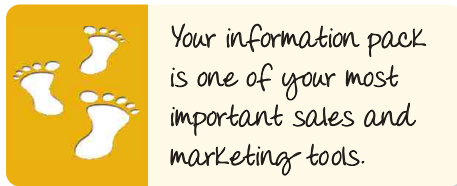


To keep track of your promotional activities you can use a simple plan

Advertising plan

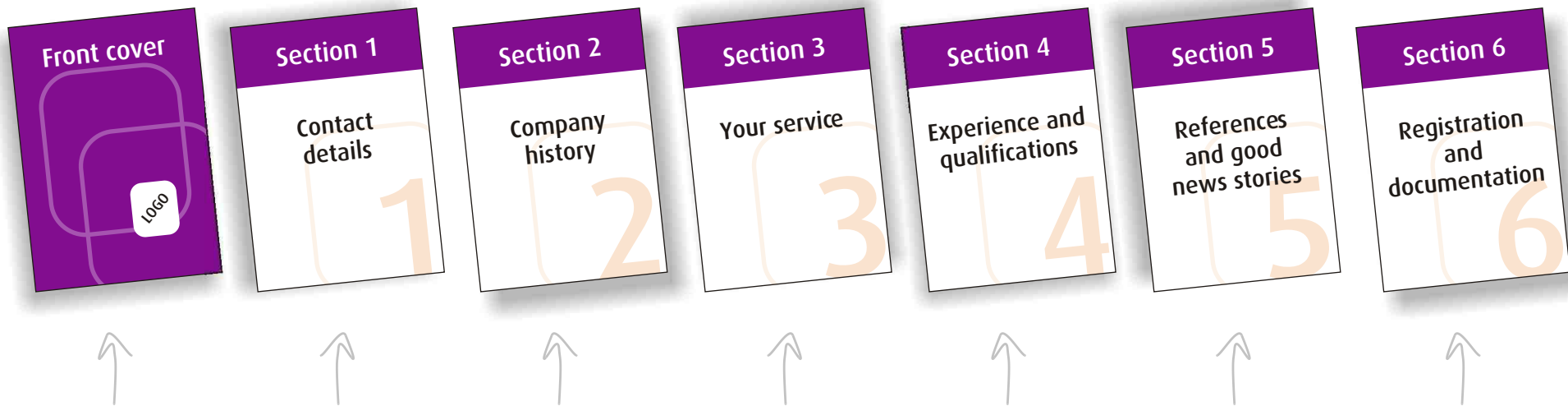
Date:	From 1st June 03 To 30th June 03	
Objective:	Increase fee generated revenue by 15% by July 2004	
Action:	Increase awareness of the business through marketing	
Date	Activity	Cost
12th June 03	Leaflets in doctors' surgeries	£50.00
18th June 03	Open Day	£70.00
26th June 03	Distribution of flyers to the new housing estate	£80.00

An information pack



The value of giving potential customers a well-presented pack that provides them with all the information they need to know about your service can't be over-estimated. Even if they've been impressed when they visit, it can be re-assuring to take something away that they can look at in their own time. It also keeps your service fresh in their mind!

Keep your information pack simple and to the point and include the following:



A cover showing your business name and, if you have one, logo

Your address and contact details (name, telephone number, email address and website if you have one)

A short background on how long you've operated

Full details of the service you offer (facilities, ages, hours, price ...) including any unique selling points and the main benefits to customers

Details of the experience and qualifications of your staff

References from past and current parents. Include good news stories, press clippings and perhaps photographs of activities or outings

Copies of your memberships, registrations and other professional / local authority certification

Try and present your information pack in a distinctive, fun and professional way. Use a good printer and lay out the pages well. Put the pages in a good quality folder or plastic binder and where possible include pictures.

Packs produced by other childcare providers are a good source of ideas about what you should consider putting in your information pack. Look at what they do and review yours against theirs. If you've access to the Internet, visit other provider's websites as these contain a wealth of information and examples.





When parents visit don't hesitate to promote your services. Other childcare providers won't hesitate to promote theirs.



Ask parents how they heard about your business; it will help you work out what your most effective advertising activities are.



A useful way of checking if you've got your visit process right is to track the number of parents who place their child with you after a visit. If ten visit and eight place their children you're doing well.

If ten visit and only three do, there's maybe something that can be done better, so review all aspects of your service and facilities.

A visit process - for meeting parents & children and explaining your service

From the moment you arrange a visit for parents, to the moment they leave, you have opportunities to encourage them to entrust their child to your care. As a result you shouldn't leave the visit to chance, plan it!

There are a few simple steps you can take to ensure a successful visit:

Arrange an appointment time



Make sure that the appointment is arranged for a convenient time i.e. not when you're likely to be rushed and unable to pay them the attention they require

Greeting procedure



When parents and children arrive, make sure they're greeted properly and feel as though they're expected

Visit process



Have a standard way of showing parents and children around your facilities that highlights all the things they'll want to know and all the things you want to show them, making sure you don't just highlight the basics but show them the extra things that make your service special

Discussion



When you've finished the tour, have a space/room available where you can sit down and discuss things over a cup of tea or coffee in a relaxed environment

Questions



Ask them any questions about their preferences and give them an opportunity to ask you questions

Reaching a decision

Show them your references and the qualifications of your team. If they don't make a decision on the spot arrange a time to follow-up with a phone call... and then follow-up. Give them an information pack to take away

Talking about your price

One of the most difficult aspects of the visit process can be speaking with parents about charges. Some may already have a figure in mind as to what they should pay. You could also find that neighbours, family and friends expect you to do them a favour by charging them less for your service.

Be confident about telling parents your rate per hour, day or week. No sensible parent will expect you to work for nothing. After all, if you lose money and go out of business, they'll have to find someone else to look after their children.

So, once you've set your fee and you're happy that it's competitive, try to avoid feeling obliged to reduce it. If the figure parents wish to pay is below your costs, explain why your fee is what it is and why you can't reduce it.

So, once you've
set your fee...



Reaching a decision

The time you have to fill your vacancy may be short and parents may want to reflect on their visit before deciding whether or not to use your service. If the parents don't make a decision during their visit arrange to call them the next day.

Ideally, you want the parents to make a decision before they leave. You can help them to make a decision with a few simple techniques:

1. Summarising what it is they want from childcare. You can do this by quickly listing back the main points of what they're looking for. It demonstrates that you've listened and understood their requirements. It also helps to ensure that there are no misunderstandings and that both parties are agreed on what's being offered. This can save problems later on.
2. Check out if there is anything else. This would include asking them if there are any aspects of your service that they're uncomfortable with. This shows that you're prepared to be flexible and adapt to specific needs.
3. Don't be afraid to ask closed questions. This would include, for example, if they're happy with your fees.
4. Be clear about what happens next. Before they leave ask them if they're in a position to make a decision. If they're still not sure then arrange to make that follow up call.

In asking these questions you're also in a great position to get feedback about your service.

If they're still not happy about any aspect of your service ask them what it is that concerns them. You may find it's something that you can easily put right. If it's your fee, you could explain how you arrived at it and why it can't be reduced.

If you feel you've covered everything and they still say no (this could be for a number of reasons that are out of your control) try and find out why; it might help you when looking to fill vacancies in the future. Feedback, good or bad is useful and worth seeking, however, much of it is personal opinion and some of it you may wish to use and some of it you won't. That's okay, nobody can please all of the people all of the time.



Keeping customers happy

You spend a lot of time and money filling places. Having done this, the last thing you want is a lot of children leaving earlier than you expected because the parents are unhappy with your service.

Keeping parents happy isn't down to good luck! You need to provide a good quality service and manage their expectations. How you do this will vary but planning what to do and when is key.



The two customers

Remember that in reality, you have two customers to please - the child and the parent. As a childcare provider you'll be skilled at taking care of children and making them feel welcome in a new environment. Ensure though that you also pay the parents plenty of attention because they need to feel totally involved in their child's day. Wherever possible ensure that they're happy with the service you're providing, as if either the child or the parent is unhappy the likely outcome is that they will walk away.

Every business spends a lot of time and energy attracting customers. As you may have discovered, attracting parents can be hard work, so having done this successfully, the last thing you want is for a child to leave your care earlier than you expected because the parents are unhappy with the service.

The longer you can care for a particular child the better. If a child leaves earlier than you expected, perhaps because you're not providing the exact service a parent and child requires, you'll have to replace the child and this can take time and cost you money.



The best retention plan you can have is to both formally and informally speak with parents on a regular basis. Speak with them when they pick-up their children but at a frequency that's right for you (maybe once a month) and consciously ask parents for their feedback and what their child thinks of the service as well.

On an occasional basis ask parents to fill in a short survey (as discussed earlier in this guide). You could do this with them for ten minutes when you meet to review how their child is getting on. This will provide you with invaluable information on what they think and how you can improve your service. It's also the type of information that you can include in the information pack you give to potential parents!

Parents will also appreciate the fact that you're continually looking to improve the service you provide and will value you asking for their opinion.



Customer concerns and complaints

Every time a customer, (child or parent), expresses a concern about your service it must be taken seriously. Simple improvements to daily operations can prevent minor concerns becoming major complaints.

If a customer complains, they're offering your team the opportunity to address their concerns and will value the fact that you listen, consider and take action to solve problems. Ignore customer's complaints and they'll take action for you. They may leave or worse still tell friends why they're not happy.

See complaints in a positive light as they give you the chance to continually improve your service.

Every childcare setting should have a policy and process for handling complaints, so what points should you bear in mind when producing these?

- Find out the exact nature of the complaint. Have a customer concerns/improvements form for doing this and either ask the customer to complete it or complete it with them.
- Remain polite and calm even if you think there's no cause for complaint. Listen to what the customer has to say and ask questions to make sure you gather all the facts.
- Don't let your emotions get in the way. Normally the complaint will be about a particular part of your service, not about you personally.
- Try not to give an immediate response. Let the customer know you'll address the complaint and give a time when you'll respond by. By doing this you'll give yourself some time to reflect, and therefore, avoid a knee-jerk reaction.
- Make it a priority to address the complaint and see it through to a satisfactory conclusion.
- Record the complaint and solution and learn from it. Share information about the complaint and how it was resolved with colleagues and staff. Make changes to the service if necessary.
- Make sure one person has responsibility for handling the complaints process.

So now you've explored the ways you can approach 'Marketing your childcare business'. What are the next steps? The techniques found in 'Planning for business success' will help you to implement your ideas. The 'Planning for success' section at the end of this guide gives an example of how you can use this approach.

Planning for success in 'Marketing your childcare business'

Goal: To ensure that there is always demand for the childcare services of the business

Objective 1: To have an effective marketing strategy by July 2004

Action 1: Research the market numbers - the number of children eligible for your service and the number of childcare places in your area overall

Action 2: Investigate the competition

Action 3: Find out what type of childcare service is required by conducting a series of customer surveys on current and potential customers

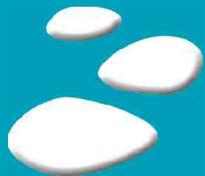
Objective 2: To increase the number of new customers using the service by 20% by July

Action 1: Investigate which methods of advertising are most effective, then formulate and implement an advertising plan

Action 2: Design and produce an information pack that can be given to prospective customers when they visit your setting

Action 3: Formulate a visit process that ensures all of the unique selling points of the business are highlighted and that all customer questions can be successfully answered

Stepping stone



For more information:

- Visit the Business Success for Childcare website at: **www.surestart.gov.uk/support4business** and use the "Ask-the-Expert" facility
- Call the free phone helpline on: **0800 294 2904**
- Talk to your Business Support Officer who is based at the Local Authority's Early Years and Development Childcare Partnership
- Visit the Surestart website at: **www.surestart.gov.uk** or call **0870 000 2288**
- Visit the Children's Information Service website at: **www.childcarelink.gov.uk** or call **0800 0960 296**

Your service:

Type of provision offered	
Location	
Opening times	
Number of places available	
Price per session	
Activities offered to children	
Skills of employees	
What our customers say about us	
What we do differently/better than other providers	



Business success for Childcare



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