



Recruitment and Retention: A Social Marketing Perspective

Recruitment. Retention. Seldom do Even Start Family Literacy professionals hear these two words in isolation of one another, and with good reason. As independent processes, there are numerous strategies used to first attract, and then keep, families. But, with careful planning of the processes as a complementary effort, the full power that effective recruitment practices can have on retention rates and, ultimately, family outcomes, can be realized.

Such planning is more encompassing than would initially appear, for it requires fostering a family-centered culture: understanding the goals, respecting the values, and building on the strengths of individual families. As much as this culture permeates an organization, so too will it drive recruitment and retention efforts.

“The issue of student retention must be high on the list of priorities for the entire instructional and administrative staff.”

(Malitz and Nixon-Ponder 1995)

While family educators may have the most face-to-face contact with families, it is equally important that administrators, collaborators, and support staff – in short, anyone associated with Even Start Family Literacy – be welcoming to, and supportive of, potential and participating families. All personnel involved with the program must recognize that each time a phone is answered, a class is taught, or a potential family is met, recruitment and retention are taking place. In so doing, staff will recognize and embrace their role in attracting and keeping families.

What is Social Marketing?

To the extent programs connect with families by respecting their goals, values, and interests, families will enroll and remain in a program. This connection can best be explained by a process known as “social marketing.” Social marketing applies “business” practices to education and public concerns. *Reading is Fundamental*, *Breast Cancer Awareness Month*, and *Seat Belts Save Lives* are well-known examples of social marketing campaigns.

As stated by Smith (1996), social marketing is “...an exchange process in which the provider offers programs of value to the client so that the client’s quality of life is changed and moved towards a more positive, self-sufficient direction.” As applied to Even Start, family educators offer, in exchange for participants’ time and commitment, the following valuables:

- **high-quality, intensive instruction that promotes adult literacy and empowers parents to support the educational growth of their children**
- **developmentally appropriate early childhood educational services**
- **preparation of children for success in regular school programs.**

As in the marketplace, if “customers” – i.e., families most in need of services – are not satisfied with what they receive, they will not return to the place of transaction. Therefore, it is the charge of all Even Start programs to ensure the ongoing satisfaction of its families, from initial contact through the enrollment and instruction phases to their transition out of the program.

Initial Contact: Building Awareness

All marketing campaigns – whether a push to sell more soft drink or a drive to increase the use of seat belts – begin with raising awareness of the product. That can of soda is suddenly everywhere: on television and radio, on fast food take-out bags, in magazines, on the side of buses. The *Click-it or Ticket* logo is on billboards, on the back of the card you surrender when you pay your toll, in the information package your child brings home from his field trip. Although it may seem all pervasive, advertising is, in fact, strategically placed so as to maximize the communication of the message to the intended audience.

How best, then, to raise awareness of your Even Start program? For this paper, Even Start programs in New York State with laudable retention rates were interviewed (Brentwood, Oswego County, Rensselaer County). From the many, many promotional activities from which to choose, the common recommendation from those programs is to meet families where they are: post offices, pediatric clinics, laundromats, WIC offices, churches, elementary schools, county fairs and other cultural events, libraries, etc.

Potential families contacting a program in response to a flyer or advertisement is categorized as “self-referral” by the Rensselaer County Even Start. In tracking the source of all referrals, this program found that self-referral was one of the most frequently cited responses (see box). Realizing the impact of flyers and print material, the program systematized its approach to its print-oriented marketing campaign, including customizing flyers to specific audiences, filling a copy of each flyer for future reference or use, and maintaining detailed maps of neighborhoods in which recruitment has taken place.

Recruiting door-to-door is an all-staff activity for Rensselaer County Even Start. As with many other programs, it formally notes recruitment and retention as a responsibility in the job descriptions of teacher aides, family educators, early childhood specialists, and the program coordinator. According to its partnership agreement, “Recruiting is part of everyone’s job description who becomes part of the Even Start staff.

- **Staff will be well trained to be flexible and sensitive. They will be knowledgeable of the community.**
- **Collaborative partners will be informed of Even Start through meetings, brochures, and fact sheets.**
- **Agencies will be visited by Even Start staff, and the reciprocal will be true. Agency representatives will be encouraged to visit Even Start.**
- **In pairs, staff will do door-to-door recruiting in neighborhoods that have been earmarked as target areas.”**

While some tasks are identical (such as going door-to-door to reach families), the respective roles of staff allow for unique contributions. Because family educators are onsite at the elementary schools and very visible to many parents, their individual cell phone numbers are listed on flyer tear-off strips. (Families are much more likely to call a familiar face than a faceless program.) The program coordinator, on the other hand, reaches out to key administrators to secure their support of, and referrals to, the program. Oswego County relies on its program secretary to log phone calls of inquiry, noting how callers heard about Even Start.

Rensselaer County Even Start’s examination of referrals to its program over a 24-month period indicated that:

- 18% were self referrals
- 18% were from school districts
- 17% were from Literacy Volunteers
- 13% were from collaborators
- 8% were from Healthy Kids
- 6% were from already participating families
- 6% were from CEO and Head Start
- 4% were from the village preschool

In the specific example of school districts (an oft-cited source of referral for both Rensselaer County and Oswego County Even Start programs), it is to more than the key administrators that a connection is forged. Even Start is made visible through:

- **presentations at faculty meetings and within special departments of the schools (guidance, special education, nurses' offices, transportation)**
- **involvement of PTA and PTO members**
- **articles in school newsletters**
- **inclusion of information in packages sent to families of incoming kindergartners, with special contact to families on free/reduced lunch lists.**

Through such constant and consistent contact, an Even Start program can not only ensure that school personnel know what the program offers, but also informally enlist those individuals as recruiting agents. They will be poised to share information about Even Start with their students' families, their colleagues, and their contacts within the community, which, after all, is what the first phase of marketing is all about: building awareness.

Enrollment: Screening and Preparation

Section 1235 of the William F. Goodling Even Start Family Literacy Statute calls for programs to “include screening and preparation of parents and children . . . to enable those parents and children to participate fully in the activities and services [of the program].” (United States Department of Education 2002) This is a time for programs to determine if families are a good fit for Even Start and for families to determine if the program is a good fit in terms of achieving their goals and respecting their values.

The screening and preparation period of Even Start should include an orientation that describes all program components and services, addresses potential hurdles, articulates program policy on attendance/absences, and answers participants' questions. More importantly, however, this period should also be a time for articulating goals. As stated in a review of research related to adult student recruitment and retention, “An orientation can provide a wide range of program and other information that allows adult students to make informed decisions and establish realistic goals and assess their own circumstances.” (Wonacott 2001)

Establishing realistic goals is intrinsic to retention. An extended study on learner persistence by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy listed “establishment of a goal by the student” as one of four supports to learner persistence. The authors further report that, “Adults who, when asked why they had entered a program, mentioned a specific goal (such as help my children or get a better job) were more likely to persist than those who either mentioned no goal or said they were doing it for themselves.” (Comings, Parrella, and Soricone 1999) The National Center for Family Literacy corroborates this idea, by including “lack of goal” as a high-risk factor for dropping out. (National Center for Family Literacy 2005)

In helping families set goals, it is important to keep in mind that the goal must come from the family, not from the program or the family educator. Why did the parent come to Even Start? What does the family want to accomplish by participating in the program? It may be useful for the family educator and the prospective student to jointly consider the “precipitating event” that prompted his or her to reach out to Even Start. “Mom” feels she needs more education now that her firstborn is off to school. Or, “Dad” lost his job, but lacks the basic skills to qualify for a new one. Working off of such events, “[t]he staff of the educational program must help the potential adult student define his or her goal and understand the many instructional objectives that must be accomplished on the road to meeting that goal.” (Comings, Parrella, and Soricone 1999) **Programs interviewed indicated that often families do arrive with goals, but that the goals need to be focused, expressed in realistic steps, and/or connected to the services provided by Even Start.**

Completing “in-depth, interactive goal-setting orientation activities” can be of benefit to students, educators, and the program itself. Students gain confidence, have an attainable goal, and know where to start. (National Center for Family Literacy 2005) Instructors, too, know where to start and have established a context for instruction. Programs have promoted the marketing of their program by ensuring that students know what to expect, and what not to expect, from Even Start.

Families who understand what Even Start can provide – those who can answer, “What’s In It For Me? (WIIFM) – will be more likely to remain in the program. To that end, “[a]ll staff at the learning site – testers, registrars, office personnel, teachers – need to facilitate smooth and speedy enrollment, underscore learners’ abilities, and show them what the program can do for them.” (Brod 1995) This statement underscores one of the foundations of this paper: all staff must be actively engaged in the recruitment and retention process.

The extended screening and preparation time offered by many Even Start programs is an ideal time for families and staff to explore WIIFM, to participate in home visits and center work, to start setting goals, and to commit to the program. Failure of families to fully participate during this time should prompt the program to ask itself, “What needs of the family are not being met? Is the family educator a good fit with this family? Is this the right time for the family to participate?”

By honestly answering these questions, programs can avoid early, untimely departures of fully enrolled families. For it is through full disclosure of Even Start’s expectations of families and families’ expectations of Even Start that programs can “avoid the mistake of assuming that everyone understands the benefits of education, especially literacy education; the intent of marketing should be to inform.” (Wonacott 2001)

Instruction

Effective recruitment will result in the enrollment of families who are good matches with the program, who understand its goals and expectations, and who will remain with Even Start until their goals are attained. Despite a program’s best efforts, however, some families find it difficult to remain with the program. Why do some families stay while others leave? Researchers studying adult basic education students in pre-GED classes identified four supports for learner persistence:

- **management of positive and negative forces that help/hinder persistence**
- **self-efficacy**
- **establishment of a goal by the student, and**
- **progress toward reaching a goal. (Comings, Parrella, and Soricone 1999).**

Interviews with Even Start programs confirmed the applicability of these supports to Even Start families and revealed strategies to promote them.

Management of positive and negative forces

There exist positive forces (e.g., a desire for higher education) that help support persistence in an education program, as well as negative forces (e.g., lack of free time for study) that push adults to drop out. Persistence can be improved through the management of those forces – that is, by strengthening positive forces and weakening negative forces – that have a significant effect on the student.

The strongest positive force mentioned by adult students is the support of people, particularly families, friends, teachers, and fellow students. Brentwood Even Start finds this to be particularly true for its population of recent immigrants. It identified “support from husband” and “positive relationships with Even Start staff” as the two most important factors that seem to influence students to stay in the program. The program strengthens these positive forces by organizing events in which all family members are involved and providing daily

opportunities for conversation – both student to student and staff to student. Other strategies for building support are to:

- **arrange carpools to GED exams or classes (Oswego County Even Start)**
- **supply (with permission) the names and contact information of classmates to each student (Oswego County Even Start)**
- **formulate a student communication plan for no-show and extreme absentee follow-up (Malitz and Nixon-Ponder 1995)**
- **involve students and staff in community activities, such as a town clean-up day or a charity walk. (National Center for Family Literacy 2005)**

Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is the feeling of being able to accomplish a task. Someone with a high sense of self-efficacy can confidently say, “I know how to do it. I know that I can do it. What I do will make a difference!” Having a sense of efficacy influences the choices we make, the effort we put forth, and how we feel. (Hudson River Center for Program Development 2004) It can be difficult to build self-efficacy if someone does not feel good about oneself.

Suggested ways to build the self-efficacy of students include:

- **providing opportunities to experience success by setting reasonable goals that can be reached in a short period of time**
- **facilitating contact between students and adults like them who have succeeded**
- **overriding negative self-efficacy developed from previous schooling, perhaps through a “focused inquiry” (see box) which allows participants an opportunity to share views on their literacy histories**
- **helping students deal with tension, stress, and other negative emotional states, perhaps through dialogue journals**
- **focusing on families’ interests and strengths**
- **offering sincere praise and criticism; students do not want to be patronized.**

Establishment of a goal by the student

The importance of goal setting was previously discussed. But, effective goal setting can be overwhelming for parents. Rather than assuming parents know what they want and how to get it, instructors should engage with learners in “an interactive, ongoing, and cooperative process” that:

STRUCTURED INTERVIEW FOR FOCUSED INQUIRY

PART ONE: BEFORE SCHOOL

- 1) Tell me about your earliest recollections about literacy. Were you read to? How often? By whom? Did anyone tell you stories? Did anyone try to teach you about reading, writing, speaking, and listening?
- 2) In general, do you think literacy was encouraged in your family? Do you remember what you thought about things like reading and writing?

PART TWO: DURING SCHOOL

- 1) Tell me about your first impressions of school. Did you like going to school? What things were you good at? What did you dislike?
- 2) If you struggled, what literacy skills gave you the most trouble? What kind of help do you remember getting? Was it helpful?
- 3) While in school, what did you think of yourself as a reader? A writer? How were you at listening and speaking? Were you able to remember things better if you heard them or if you saw them?

PART THREE: SINCE SCHOOL

- 1) When did you stop going to school? What made you decide to leave?
- 2) For what you do now, do you have to read or write? Listen or talk? Observe? Draw or make models/charts? Which come easily to you? Which are difficult?
- 3) Are there some literacy activities you would really like to do but have difficulty actually doing? Do you have any ideas about what causes these difficulties?

CONCLUSION

What seems to make learning easier for you?

(Walmsley 2004)

- identifies and categorizes learners' goals
- determines whether goals are short- or long-term
- considers goals that will support the parent's role as the first and primary teacher of his/her children
- ensures goals are specific, realistic, attainable, and measurable
- includes a timeline for achieving goals
- allows for periodic review and revision of goals. (National Center for Family Literacy 2005)

To record the goal-setting process, it may be useful to both family educators and families to complete a Family Action Plan. (Rensselaer County Even Start 2005) For each major component of Even Start (interactive literacy activities, primary teacher/education partnership, and adult literacy/employment), instructors work with families to complete a grid. A sample grid for interactive literacy activities is depicted below.

SPECIFIC GOAL	BENEFITS	FAMILY STRENGTHS	HURDLES	SUPPORT
How will you share learning with your child? Goal: How will you achieve this goal? List action steps.	Why do you want to achieve this goal?	What does your family already have to help achieve this goal?	What might make it hard to accomplish this?	Who or what might be needed to help you achieve this goal?

The reverse side of the grid provides space to record accomplishments and parent comments as the grid is periodically revisited.

Progress toward reaching a goal

Reviewing and revising goals as a joint effort between educator and student can be a very powerful way of depicting progress toward reaching a goal. Measures of success discernible to students are as important to a program as measures of accountability (such as PEP), for if students do not see progress, they are more likely to leave the program. There are many ways – both big and small, formal and informal – to demonstrate to students their progress. Some examples are:

- holding regularly scheduled conferences with students about their goals
- displaying concrete proof of success by using a collection of students' work (e.g., a portfolio)
- offering productive and immediate feedback on student learning
- providing opportunity for immediately putting into practice what was learned
- asking students to self-score on the PEP and discussing those scores with the instructor to compare them with previous postings
- recognizing TABE achievement, perfect attendance, most improved attendance, and like accomplishments in regularly held award ceremonies
- pointing out to parents the connection between their accomplishment and their children's literacy development ("Because you did 'x,' you're helping your child...").

Transition

Demonstrating progress is particularly important to the retention of families during periods of frequent absenteeism brought on by family crisis, health problems, childcare conflicts, etc. Because of these interruptions, Comings, et al. (1999) encourages the use of a broader definition of "persistence" than has historically been used, namely: "adults staying in programs for as long as they can, engaging in self-directed study when they must drop out of their programs, and returning to programs as soon as the demands of their lives allow." Frank and Gaye (1997) later refer to this practice of interrupting study, but planning to return, as "stopping out."

Whether “stopping out,” leaving permanently, or “graduating” from the program, families no longer actively participating in programming are in the midst of some form of transition. Transition requires either new strategies or more intense application of current strategies. Drawing a parallel to the marketplace, makers of pain medication that became tainted and caused users’ deaths quickly needed to change their marketing campaign from emphasizing the *effectiveness* of their product to emphasizing the *safety* of their product in order to maintain customers’ loyalty.

If programs hope to be particularly vigilant about meeting the needs of their “customers” during times of increased risk for dropping out, they must, of course, recognize those periods. One program reports that its “critical time” is approximately six months into the program when families fully realize the enormity of the commitment expected by Even Start. Another program finds holidays and even the end of the elementary school year (the latter perhaps indicative of a decreased interest in education in general) as times of high no-shows.

In addition to these critical times, programs should be alert to risk factors (see Table 1) identified in the ABE Florida Resource Guide as requiring programs to provide either:

- **careful and frequent monitoring (“moderate risk”)**
- **regularly scheduled assistance and support to find solutions that will allow for positive participation (“high risk”)**
- **immediate attention (“danger risk”).**

By anticipating critical times and recognizing risk factors, programs can heighten their efforts to promote the value of Even Start and address upcoming hurdles so that families are encouraged to stay. More specifically, “an early-alert counseling program to recognize potential problems before they occur [can] let students know that there are alternatives.” (Malitz and Nixon-Ponder 1995)

TABLE 1

Moderate Risk	High Risk	Danger Risk
Unclear expectations of self or program	Lack of goal	Late entry into program
Limited work experience	Unrealistic expectations	Lacks reliable transportation
Limited family support	Personal health problems	Lacks child care
No friend to talk to	Family health or hygiene problems	Spouse or significant person opposed to participation
Lack of confidence	Nonreader	Substance involvement
Teen parents	Teen pregnancy	Uncertain housing
Communication problems	No history of overcoming obstacles	History of leaving a program
Externally motivated	Experiencing a plateau in progress	Failure on a test
Lack of knowledge about how to reach goal through program	Change in work schedule	Work schedule conflict
Periodic absences	Frequent absences	Absence from first class
Isolation in class	Attendance has been mandated	Three consecutive absences
	Lacks access to a telephone	Trauma

Reproduced from National Center for Family Literacy’s *Recruitment and Retention for Literacy Programs* (2005).
Based on work by Leon County Schools Adult and Community Education as found in the *ABE Florida Resource Guide* (2004).

For families that have missed several home visits or center sessions, it is important to determine the specific reason for their absence. Is the family coping with an illness in the family? Is there a disconnect between the family educator and the parent? Does the family feel it has achieved its goals? This can only be learned by communicating with the family or, possibly, communicating with someone close to the family. Family educators might consider leaving a note at the family’s home or talking with the family’s emergency contacts.

Collaborating agencies might also be contacted to determine if the family is still receiving services or if they might have left the area. Oswego County Even Start sends a letter to any family who misses four home visits, asking for contact to be made within two weeks, which it finds an effective prompt for families to return.

Conclusion

In a sense, following up on absentee families might be regarded as “re-recruitment,” bringing to full circle the process of recruitment and retention. Information gained by the program about families’ departures – whether permanent or temporary – can be used to enhance future efforts. Does the “product” need improvement? Is the target audience properly identified?

Furthermore, families who do achieve their Even Start goals should be encouraged by the program to participate in recruitment and retention activities, perhaps reaching out to friends and neighbors, speaking at gatherings, or serving on a retention committee. In so doing, Even Start programs will be including administrators, family educators, teacher aides, support staff, collaborators, and families as intrinsic members of its recruitment and retention team. Since Even Start is based on understanding the goals of *the family*, respecting the values of *the family*, and building on the strengths of *the family*, what could be more appropriate for a comprehensive and effective marketing campaign?

Resources

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Take Time for Professional Development

There are many ways to use and share the information contained within this document. If you are looking to initiate a discussion of how social marketing principles can improve your recruitment and retention rates, consider using the following procedure at your next staff meeting. It may be helpful to designate a specific staff person to facilitate the discussion.

Facilitator Notes

One week prior to the staff meeting, distribute copies of the article to all staff members to read. During the staff meeting, facilitate discussion of any or all of the following questions:

- 1)** Describe in as much detail as possible our “customers.” Who are they? What do they like to do? What are their values (regarding family, education, work, etc.)? Where do they congregate?
- 2)** Think about the culture of our organization. What messages are we – as individual staff members and as a program – sending to a) prospective families, and b) currently participating families? How can we connect our messages to the values of our customers?
- 3)** Do any of our messages conflict with the values of our customers? If so, how are these conflicts impacting our recruitment and retention efforts?
- 4)** What image do we want our customers to have of a) Even Start in general, b) our program in specific, and c) members of our staff?
- 5)** How can we, as a program and as individual staff members, all promote this image during a) initial contact with a family, b) enrollment, c) instruction, and d) transition?



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