

# Making your Website

## An Effective Marketing Partner

By Julie Wassom

The Internet has become a primary way your enrollment prospects move from information gathering to readiness to buy. While most parents will make their final child care decision only after the face-to-face contact that comes during a center visit, an increasing number of inquiry source reports cite the Internet as the place early education



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prospects go to investigate centers worth visiting.

This makes the Internet an important part of the purchasing process.

Is it important for your early care and education business to have a presence on the Internet? Absolutely! Having a good website is an essential marketing tool for attracting today's buyers of your child care services. Without it, some prospects will not even know you exist. As you design or refine your website, you will get a greater return on your investment if you make it more than an online brochure that merely educates visitors about your center and your services. It must also be a marketing tool that helps you generate inquiries, secure center visits, convert the visits into enrollments, and serve your customers and other referral sources.

■ What will make your website a more effective inquiry generator?

■ How can you build your site so search engines (and your ideal customer) will find you?

■ What are the best techniques for driving qualified prospects to your website?

For answers to these and other questions about website marketing, I interviewed two Internet marketing experts: Anita Larson and Heather Lutze. Anita is an Internet marketing speaker, author, and consultant who fuses common sense with technology and believes in the powerful, global effect of a great website. Her company, The Web Muse, helps businesses attract ideal clients to their websites. Heather is the owner of Findability Group, a firm offering boutique search marketing services, including Pay Per Click (PPC), Search Engine Optimization (SEO), and social media. Heather, a recognized authority on search engine marketing strategies, is author of *The Findability Formula* (John Wiley & Sons, 2009). Anita and Heather's responses confirmed many of my own recommendations for effective

website marketing and added several more tips.

**Julie:** *Why should every early care and education program have a website?*

**Anita:** Because more and more people are using the Internet to search and the Internet constitutes a large percentage of their search. Many people want to see something visual before making contact, and a good website can give them that.

**Julie:** *When a child care business owner is designing a website, what are some key considerations that will cause the site to more effectively help them market the center and its services?*

**Anita:** First, determine who you are trying to reach. What is the goal of the site? What do you want to have happen? Do you want it to educate or generate inquiries or sell? Build your site around that. Your site visitor needs to be able to figure out your site goal in three to five seconds. The Home page of your website is the most critical, and not just to look pretty or be educational. Also, it's important to design a site that is inter-active. Link to other pages. Give the visitor something specific to do. They might download an article, subscribe to your newsletter, or go on a virtual center tour. Also, keep it current. Get old dates off the site. Visitors will immediately leave if your site is out of date.

*(Author's note: Prospects perceive that if you are neglecting your site; what else are you neglecting in your business?)*

**Julie:** *What specific elements of a website tend to cause visitors to stay on the site?*

**Anita:** You want people to take action as soon as possible. They might view information or photos describing a specific program, look at a map of your location, subscribe to your newsletter,

or contact you with specific questions. Put three to five bullets on the Home page with clickable text links. People tend to just scan your Home page. If they see something they like, they'll stay. If you want them to view a news article featuring your center, type the link in blue text and underline it, so they can click on it to go directly to that page.

**Julie:** *What causes 'stickiness,' or draws visitors back to a site again and again?*

**Anita:** The site has to change frequently. Change the copy, image, or quote on your home page each month. Have a section of "What's New." This could include a calendar, current activities or events, latest press releases, statistics or trends for what's happening with child care services. Another way to get them back is to offer resources. This could be a brief description and links to a parenting tips blog, a review of recently-published children's books, or a map of your center in your geographical area. Make sure these links are pop-up windows, so your visitors automatically return to your site. Also, attempt to get reciprocal links so visitors from other related links can at least send an e-mail request to you for further information.

**Julie:** *How often should a website be updated?*

**Anita:** At least quarterly remove old events, holiday hours, or anything that is outdated. Whenever you have new events or resources, update your site then notify current or potential customers of your new items. Encourage people to bookmark pages in your site and check back as they are updated frequently. On a regular basis, mark your calendar to review your website every quarter, add new photos, change text, etc.

**Julie:** *What traditional marketing activities should owners of early childhood education*

*businesses do to direct prospects and customers to their website?*

**Anita:** How many people are going to find out about your website off-the-web before they are online? Print your web address and e-mail on every piece of paper and promotional material that leaves your office. Your web address and e-mail address should be on business cards, brochures, letterhead, and envelopes. The recipients of these items will be prompted to take a look at your website. Maybe they have seen your site previously, but have not been back for a while, and will place your business card by their computer as a reminder to check it out. Postcards, labels, your center vehicle, Post-It® notes, and notecards are more places to put your web address.

*(Author's note: I also recommend you add your website address to your e-mail signature. Make it a hyperlink so recipients can link right to it. You can also add it to the end of your voice mail message with a phrase such as, "Meanwhile, please visit our website at . . .")*

**Julie:** *What are ways centers can use their website as a business tool, in addition to an advertising and educational tool?*

**Anita:** A great way to pre-qualify potential clients that visit your website is to add a FAQ or *Choosing The Best Care for Your Family* page. This will help fine-tune the types of prospects who will contact you about your center and services. To develop your own FAQ page, think of the top questions your ideal customers ask you. Browse your e-mails for the most commonly asked questions and your responses. When people are shopping for child care, either on or offline, the FAQ can help draw them to you.

**Julie:** *What else is important in website marketing?*

**Heather:** Have clear calls to action beyond *Contact Us*. Tell the visitor what you want them to do on that page, such as *Play Now* (for a video) or *Sign Up for our Newsletter*. Remember, your website can be a place to help you build a relationship with your prospects before they are ready to become your customers. The analogy I like to use is that you don't ask someone to marry you without dating them; users don't want to buy your services without trusting you are a good fit with what they need. So be obvious. Also, stay very focused with your site. Use solid keywords and good, action-oriented website design. Make sure you are proud of your website before you start driving people to the site through traditional marketing or social media marketing such as Twitter.

**Anita:** It's important to have a good working relationship with your web company. Ask what's new that may enhance your website. Technology is advancing as you are reading this article. Look at your website at least once a week and ask yourself, "What would improve it?" Check out your competitors' websites to see what they are doing and what you might do differently.

**Julie:** *What are the best techniques for search engine optimization?*

**Heather:** First know how your customers search. Then be strategic. Pick one or two related keywords for each page. There is a free external keyword tool (<https://adwords.google.com/select/KeywordToolExternal>), which is a live database of Google searches by keyword. Pick keywords carefully and don't rush. SEO can be a six-month project before you break into first-page placement when you go organic (vs. PPC).

**Anita:** Use good keywords in your title bar, which may not be visible on your screen.

Keywords, meta tags, and meta descriptions need to be different on every page.

These are behind-the-scenes, but will be found by the search engines. Your indexing should not be the same on all the pages of your site. Pick keywords that most define your business. Use words that your prospects will put in, such as *child care, early childhood education, infant child care, or after-school program*. Also include your geographical location. The top search engines today are Google, Bing, and Yahoo. While people are still surfing with their favorite search engine, there is a trend toward more online referrals. These referrals are coming from social media, well-written business blogs, and link exchanges with relevant, non-compete sites.

**Julie:** *What are some tips on choosing good keywords?*

**Heather:** There are three buckets of keywords. First are those entered into a search engine by the web surfer seeking information. This person might put in the word, 'childcare' or 'preschool.' Second are those words entered by people who are actively shopping. They might put in the words 'infant childcare.' Third are the words entered by the person who is ready to buy. This prospect might insert words such as 'accredited preschools in Larimer County.' You must know your target customer's path to purchase and select your keywords accordingly.

**Anita:** Use keyword phrases of two to five words. Many visitors will type as many as five words into search engines. Separate keyword phrases with commas.

**Julie:** *How can center owners learn exactly what words their qualified prospects are using to search online?*

**Heather:** The following site ([www.spyfu.com](http://www.spyfu.com)) gives you a range of bids and how many times a specific keyword or phrase is being searched.

**Julie:** *Where should keywords appear on a site to help the search engines find you?*

**Heather:** Be clean and don't cross contaminate your keywords. Assign words by page. Use a limited number of targeted, highly related keywords in title tags and distributed in page body copy. Visitors are using search engines for focused, targeted, relevant search engine results.

**Anita:** In addition to behind the scenes placement such as title bars, meta tags, and meta descriptions, the first paragraph of text is also crucial. Search engines pick you up based on keywords in your first paragraph.

**Julie:** *What are your thoughts on Pay Per Click (PPC) versus organic methods of search engine optimization (SEO)?*

**Heather:** PPC has gotten a bad rap. Why pay for visitors who search for a keyword phrase? Most people want a valuable search result without scrolling, and they decide in seconds whether or not they will select your site to visit. PPC can mean you are findable on page 1. There is a competitive range of how much site owners are paying for a keyword phrase in a paid search. Google keywords start at a penny and go up. The more specific and targeted your keyword phrase, the fewer searches it will get, so it can cost less per search while giving you more qualified site visitors or those closer to buying. Do your homework before you commit to SEO.

**Julie:** *What is the easiest way for non-technical owners and directors to check site statistics?*

**Anita:** Sign up for Google Analytics. This is a free and accurate statistics tracking tool. Then ask your web company to install the script on your site. The script is not visible to anyone. The definitions of the terms are in Google

Analytics, making it simple to understand the terminology. Unique Visitors, Page Views, and Referring Sites are the top three areas to review. Some web hosts also provide site statistics.

**Heather:** Google Analytics. By adding a small bit of HTML code to each page of your site, you can compare PPC and organic page search statistics. Site statistics can also give you an indication of whether or not your site is giving people what they expect to find. Most people will stay on a page no more than 30 seconds if they do not find something to hold them there.

**Julie:** How often do you recommend that child care business owners review their web statistics?

**Heather:** Monthly. The Google Analytics program walks you through important areas to review. If you have a high bounce rate on 80% of your site, it is time to redesign it.

**Anita:** I suggest you review your pages at least quarterly to see where your traffic is

going on your site. If there is no action on a page you want to keep on your site, put something on that page to call visitors to action. You could add the option to view a video of your center's involvement in a special center or community event or a link to a white paper executive summary on brain-researched curriculum and its impact on kindergarten readiness. These add visual appeal to a static page. In addition, include some links that visitors can click on to go to other pages. Consider changing the name of that particular page; if it's currently named *Curriculum*, for example, change the page name to *Learning at (Name of Your Company)* or *Virtual Tour of Classrooms* or something that's more descriptive or intriguing to encourage people to click on that page.

## Conclusion

Website marketing is an essential tool to add to your tool chest of marketing methods for your early care and education services. As part of a solid compre-

hensive marketing program, a unique, focused, compelling website can be a vehicle that draws your prospects and customers to you and helps them make the enrollment decision in your favor. Developing and maintaining a good website is an excellent way to make your marketing job easier. Make your website your marketing partner now so when potential enrolling families are driving the Internet highways to investigate, shop, and determine where to visit to make a selection, you and your center do not get left off the short list.

## Resources

Visit or contact this article's featured experts:

■ Anita Larson at The Web Muse & Co.:  
[www.thewebmuse.com](http://www.thewebmuse.com) or  
[info@thewebmuse.com](mailto:info@thewebmuse.com)

■ Heather Lutze at Findability Group:  
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