



20|20

TOOLBOX

Tomorrow's Camps, Today's Realities



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The camp experience is a part of America's heritage and culture. Today, 10 million children and youth go to camp annually, yet, the American Camp Association (ACA) only directly impacts 5 million of those experiences. By 2020, ACA wants no fewer than 20 million children attending camp annually with the ACA camp community directly impacting the lives of those 20 million children.



In order to reach out to more campers and meet this goal, one of the many strategies employed will need to include the development of more camps in the future — and the support and empowerment of those who would venture down the development path.

As those who are freshly-in-the-trenches of camp development know from experience, starting a new camp in today's marketplace is a highly ambitious and challenging process. In order to survive, camps must employ the entrepreneurial spirit of our camp predecessors while operating in markets where many of the operational, organizational, and fiscal models for starting camps from the past are simply no longer applicable in today's realities.

For the 2010 ACA National Conference in Denver, the 20/20 Toolbox Team organized an educational session entitled, "Tomorrow's Camps, Today's Realities" to provide opportunities for those with an interest in starting their own camp to learn from those who have started camps within the last five years.* The camps represented on the session panel were all started from 2004–2009 (with one in progress). Panel members included owners and directors, all of whom have been actively involved in the development of their camp. The camps represented on the panel included for-profit and nonprofit, private and agency affiliated day, resident, and group programs — with various operational models — serving a diverse variety of clientele. The following are pieces of insight shared by the panel

regarding what to consider when starting a new camp.

Realities That Must Be Addressed

A Challenging Economy

The economic climate in the US was different from the economic climate at the time of writing this article, which will be different again by the time this issue of *Camping Magazine* is printed and distributed.

But there is a good lesson in that new start-ups have to structure themselves to survive this kind of ongoing challenge and change from the front-end. There is a nimbleness required for new camps starting now, which ultimately will allow them to be more responsive in the long run. No one starting a camp in today's realities can risk becoming complacent. For many, camp is a "nice-essy," not a necessity. New camps need to look at new ways to bring the camp experience to the public, and be ready to change quickly to marketplace demand.

High Land Costs

For those who want to build their own camp, the cost of suitable land in desirable locations has made building a camp a daunting proposition in many regions of the country. Owning the land that your camp operates on is simply not an option for many. New operators may have to find creative solutions to "finding a home" for their programs, including the use of other existing camps, public lands, public and private facilities, schools, etc.

The Changing Definition of "Camp"

We as camp operators do not own the word "camp." The new realities are that a large segment of the public no longer defines "camp" by the facilities, settings, or length of time spent there. The only people engaging in the debate over if one camp or another "isn't really camp" are camp operators. At the end of the day, it is the consumer-public who make these decisions, and they do so with the choice as to where to spend their dollars. Camps entering the marketplace have to do a much better job of selling the outcomes from their experience and working to ensure those outcomes are important in the minds of the public.

Marketplace Competition

There are just about fifty-eleven-zillion other things all vying for the same one kid's

attention. How are you going to set yourself apart? Camps are not just competing with other camps, but with everything out there that is also offered for the same clientele you want to serve. The ever-growing plethora of new activities is greater than ever, and it's a real impact on the camp marketplace. And with increasing choices, families are less tied to the idea of "legacy" or "loyalty" to just one camp. They want to try something new each summer, so they hop from program to program.

Marketplace Saturation

Additionally, the new camp operator starting today must have well-researched understanding of where and how the current camp marketplace is already saturated. Marketplace saturation occurs when there are simply too many of the same kinds of camps, serving the same populations, and/or doing the same activities for an area (market) to successfully sustain them all. While this concept may appear to be counterintuitive to the need to build more camps in order to serve more kids, there are parts of the US where starting one more of the same kind of camp, serving the same kind of clientele, and doing the same kind of activities just isn't going to be the best business decision. This is not to say that competition in a marketplace is a bad idea; but rather, trying to compete in a marketplace that simply can't support another of the "same ole, same ole" probably isn't the best idea.

Marketplace Fatigue

A close cousin to — and often a result of — both competition and saturation, marketplace fatigue sets in when those attending camps in a marketplace are tired of doing what is being offered (been there, done that, got the camp t-shirt!) and are looking for something new and different, or a better way to meet their needs. And in areas with lots of choices *other* than camp, the public will simply make the choice to do something they like better . . . so it's bye-bye camp business. Fatigue in any marketplace creates challenges which the prospective operator must be aware of and ready to find creative solutions to.

Changing Demographics in the US

This is both a challenge and an opportunity. Those wishing to start camps must do their homework in terms of demographic research: what populations are growing,



where the populations are moving to/from, who is being served by camps already and who is not. In many ways, this ties back to needing a keen and savvy awareness of who your competition is, and knowing what, where, and how the marketplaces are saturated/fatigued.

Increasing Regulations

Camps are facing more and more regulatory and/or legislative issues and challenges on a wide range of topics that vary from national issues to state issues to regulations enforced by the local municipality.

Key Tips for Starting Your Camp Business

Remember That Camp Is a Business

Many people are driven to start a camp because of their passion to make a difference in the world, or they had a personal life-changing experience as a result of attending camp.

While all of that is well intentioned, you need more than passion and altruism to get the job done. Camp is a business. Starting a camp — running a camp — requires business acumen just as any other business. If you are a “camp person” who only knows the fun-programming-marshmallow-roasting side of camp, you are missing a *huge* piece of the picture. Get off of the ropes course, put down the canoe paddle, and learn the business of the camp business — and bring in those who know how a good camp business operates to help.

Have a Good, Solid, Working Business Plan

Before you do anything else, take the time to lay out a real, detailed, well-thought-out business plan. Get professional advice as needed to help you through the process. This is a critical step!

Do Your Homework and KNOW Your Prospective Marketplace

Back up that start-up dream with real, solid, factual, researched information. Just as with any business start-up, you should have a crystal-clear picture of the competition, demographics, prospective challenges with permits, zoning, regulatory issues, state or local licensing requirements, etc.

There Is No Such Thing as Too Much Money

Starting a camp is a costly proposition, and you will probably need more funding than you planned for. Don't let your dream die because you run out of money mid-stream. Make a plan for funding the long-term, and have a back-up plan for when the unexpected comes up.

Hire Professional Help

Get good professional help in the areas you need it. Consider consulting attorneys, accountants, bankers, marketing professionals, photographers, Web site designers, architects, etc. Don't try to be the “end-all, be-all” of everything. The cost of quality professional help will pay for itself in the long run.

Be Ready to Make Changes and to Be Responsive to the Demands of the Public

Just because you build it does not mean they will come. You may think you have the greatest delivery model ever, but if no one wants to buy what you are selling, you will shortly be out of business. Be ready to meet the ebb and flow of what your customers and prospective customers want. The ability to be flexible and evolutionary is key to success. This doesn't mean giving up your mission, but rather being willing to modify how you might deliver that mission differently than you once planned.

Remember What You Are Passionate About and Keep That as Your Driving Force

Starting a camp may possibly be the hardest thing you ever do (and, FYI, it is harder than it looks). In the middle of all of the trouble, tribulation, and eating boxed macaroni and cheese for the third time that week because you don't have any money left, there is going to be that moment where you ask yourself, “What was I thinking?” And the answer is what made you want to start a camp in the first place.

Don't Quit Your Day Job

Unless you are independently wealthy, you are probably going to need something else to live on, at least for awhile. Typically, camps are a slow-growth business, and depending on various factors, it will more than likely take at least a few years to get to the point of “break even.”

What Were/Are Your Top Challenges in Starting Your Camp?

Money:

- Having enough income to operate.
- Having enough to fund capital expenses.
- Having enough to sustain us for the long-term.
- Ongoing fundraising needs.

Facilities/Building:

- Finding land.
- I didn't know anything about building codes or development, so I was way in over my head when we started building.
- The challenges of being a rental user on someone else's property.

Business Development:

- Having the right kind of professional support.
- Marketing.
- Not knowing enough about the business-end of the business.

What Was the Biggest Mistake You Made in Starting Your New Camp?

- We didn't have a business plan.
- We relied too heavily on a few user groups to sustain us; didn't branch out enough.
- We didn't realize the needs of the clientele we were trying to serve were so much more complex than what we prepared for.
- We didn't market ourselves aggressively enough right at the beginning.
- We didn't have enough funding to get where we wanted to be quickly enough.
- We did a great job with funding the build, but now we don't have the money to maintain all of it and are

having to go back to do fundraising we didn't plan on.

What Did You Underestimate the Importance of the Most?

- Having a good business plan.
- Understanding how camp is a business operation, and that I had a lot to learn in that regard.
- The need to hire outside experts to help; I tried to do it all myself.
- Really listening when they told us how they wanted the program to change: I had my vision of how I wanted to do things, but in the end really needed to get out of the way of my ego, and make the program what the customers wanted to buy.
- Having a strong marketing plan.
- Having money to go beyond the first couple of years.

Is There Anything about How Your Camp Turned Out That Is Different Than What You Originally Set Out to Do or Came as a Surprise?

- I dreamed of and planned for a resident camp, but it turned out that a day camp was a much better way to go for the marketplace I was trying to serve.
- Several of our "lesser" optional activities have become some of our most major program focuses and key selling points for parents. We had no idea they would become so important to the program, and had to modify our plans to fund and support them.
- The kinds of clientele we thought we would attract and serve are not the kinds of clientele we are attracting and serving.

What Challenges Do You See in Your Immediate Future?

- The impact of the current economy on camper enrollments.
- Marketing to get ourselves known to the public.
- Fundraising.
- Funding capital development.
- Building and facility infrastructure development.
- Long term sustainable funding.

*Author's note: Participants in the panel discussion included Douglas Armstrong, North Star Reach; Greg Cronin, Verdun Adventure Bound; Tommy Feldman, Mountain Day Camp; Mary Beth Fraley, Victory Junction; Kevin Gordon, Camp Kupagani; David Secunda, Avid4 Adventure; Diane Tyrrell, Camp Motorsport; and Harriet Lowe, director of communications, American Camp Association.

Photos on pages 54 and 55 courtesy of Camp Aranzazu, Rockport, Texas; Camp Gray, Reedsburg, Wisconsin; Camp Tall Turf, Walkerville, Michigan; Camp Howe, Goshen, Massachusetts; Tom Sawyer Camps Inc., Altadena, California; and Cathedral Domain, Irvine, Texas.

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