

A Marketing Plan for Effectively Communicating with Parents

Trust, Two-way Communication, and Technology are Key Requirements

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Introduction

This marketing plan spells out what state agencies and their contractors must do to effectively communicate with all parents and how to go about doing it.

This marketing plan is based on data from 14 group discussions held with 89 parents and 52 key informant interviews conducted as part of the state’s Pre-K Planning Grant. The group discussions included mothers and fathers in rural, suburban, and urban settings. The participants included African and Latino immigrants, American Indians, African Americans, Hmong, and white parents. The participants also included vulnerable and underserved parents. The phone interviews were with persons across Minnesota knowledgeable about the experiences of diverse parents and communicating with them.

The key takeaway from our conversations is that no single marketing method or approach suffices. All the groups and interviews mentioned multiple preferred methods, with a common theme that the communication, regardless of method, should come directly from a trusted source.

In sum, we found that **trust, two-way communication, and technology** are the three key ingredients to effective marketing strategies with parents. Both the content and the method to deliver messages about child development and early education opportunities must be customized and segmented to achieve equitable access to information that parents with young children in Minnesota need to raise healthy children.

Effective marketing strategies also require time to overcome or prevent linguistic, racial, cultural, and geographic barriers and inequities many parents experience accessing needed information.

Finally, state agencies and their contractors should be aware that they will likely be met with skepticism and mistrust as they create and carry out their marketing strategies. In our study used to develop this marketing plan, early childhood community leaders, professionals, and parents expressed exasperation with the lack of apparent system improvements despite previously providing feedback numerous times, the focus of state agencies and programs more on rules and confusing eligibility requirements rather than on child and family well-being, and the growing child care shortages across Minnesota.

Details of study findings are available in a companion report prepared for Child Care Aware of Minnesota by Wilder Research titled “Exploring and Developing Communication Strategies with Parents: Key Themes, Insights, and Recommendations.”

“The goal should be to empower parents, not just to hand out a bunch of paper.”

“There is no best way – It’s all about meeting parents where they are.”

Trust

Effective communication with parents begins with trust and respectful relationships. While “one size does not fit all” is a cliché, effective communication strategies must move beyond printed and translated materials and websites to focus on relationships and to demonstrate respect for all types of families.

To build and maintain trust with parents, and to avert or not exacerbate mistrust, state agencies and their contractors must intentionally ensure the following:

- Support and take sufficient time to develop trust and relationships with parents, intermediary organizations, and communities. Go out and meet with them on their turf and in their own places. Have conversations and listen more, speak less. Learn about parents in different family situations and cultural contexts.
- Acknowledge that some parents fear or mistrust government agencies and people outside their cultural community. In particular, they may fear being judged, having children taken away, or deportation.
- Integrate consistent messages that reinforce each other across all programs and systems that impart common information to parents.

Parents receive information from and share information with people they trust and with whom they have a good relationship in their cultural and geographic communities. They pass along information through word of mouth with family members, other parents, friends, neighbors, co-workers, and church and mosque members. These trusted sources of information also include a wide variety of professionals, including pediatricians, public health nurses, social workers, and child care providers.

Consequently, state agencies and their contractors should provide the same consistent and clear messages to pass along to parents regardless of the source.

- Be prepared to clearly and straightforwardly explain the differing qualifications and eligibility criteria for accessing services, which for many parents are a primary source of information. A graphic “road map” could be one tool for clearly describing eligibility for different programs and the paths parents must take to access services.
- Pay attention to how messages are framed. Scrutinize the information to be communicated to ensure it is not hurtful and cannot be construed as marginalizing, biased, or judgmental. Take an asset-based perspective. Don’t assume that parents lack knowledge or need parenting directives. Parents do not want to be told what to do or what they need to know or be judged as a bad parent doing everything wrong.

- Similarly, be aware that language to promote connecting to services may backfire. On the one hand, seeking or receiving any services may be viewed as a stigma or as connoting “failure” as a parent. On the other hand, inequities may be magnified when the services or educational opportunities being promoted are not affordable or culturally appropriate.
- Also be aware that language about “quality” can be off-putting and can taint the whole message as culturally biased information. In some cases, informal home-based care, which may be preferred, is by implication low quality; whereas in others, centers are perceived to be uncaring and too much like school. This miscommunication is also likely to arise when parents are being pushed toward quality care, yet licensed infant care is scarce, or quality rated care is not available in many areas of the state.
- Gear information to fathers as well as mothers.

State agencies and their contractors should also be mindful of these gaps and pitfalls when building trust with parents based on social networks:

- While many parents rely on family and friends for early childhood information, an emphasis on communicating to parents through those channels would leave out the most isolated families.

In addition, vulnerable populations may be somewhat skeptical about information from family. Some parents don't have family members in the area, and some have negative relationships with their family members.

- Some parents lack a helpful social network. They may not have any family or trusting family relationships. They may also be isolated socially and, in rural and reservation areas, geographically, without neighbors nearby.

Two-way communication

Two-way communication involves delivering and discussing information as well as answering questions and seeking feedback. Two-way communication is best done in person.

While most parents get information using their smartphones, some parents find it helpful to get printed materials from people they trust or via the mail, such as monthly newsletters from their early childhood development centers.

However, based on discussions with parents and interviews with professionals who serve parents, some parents, even when this information is translated, cannot read or do not understand the words, concepts, or values the information imparts. These parents include low-income parents, immigrant parents, parents whose children have special needs, parents who lack access to technology, parents with lower levels of education, and parents with their own mental health needs.

Accordingly, the best way to communicate with these parents is to deliver information in person. That approach allows interaction and the opportunity to talk through the information and answer parents' questions, leading to better understanding among parents. This method is also favored because it has the potential of being relationship-based or can build relationships in the process.

To effectively communicate with parents, state agencies and their contractors should ensure the following when using two-way communication:

- Carry out two-way communication face-to-face in community forums or settings, on the parents' turf where they feel comfortable.
- Outreach is outmoded as an effective marketing strategy for diverse parents. Emanating from outside communities, outreach can be perceived as deficit-based and judgmental.

Therefore, as an alternative, use in-reach – relationship-building and community organizing from the inside, with and by community members.

For example, African American fathers, who feel either invisible or disrespected when dealing with schools, recommend hiring an African American father to go where other fathers congregate to connect with them and share useful parenting information geared to fathers.

- For parents connected with service organizations and programs, trusted staff members are usual sources of information. Marketing efforts should communicate with parents in their community contexts by building relationships with trusted intermediaries such as child care providers, teachers, physicians, family support staff, and social workers. The trusted programs include WIC, community resource centers, health care clinics they are connected with, and family literacy programs.
- Houses of worship are another source of information and should be used as trusted venues for two-way communication, particularly for immigrant parents.

- Being present at community events is another way to connect with parents. Some examples include a community baby shower, county fairs, or setting up tables at preschools so parents can chat before or after drop-offs.

State agencies and their contractors should also be mindful of these limitations of using in-person communication with parents:

- Parents may require transportation to get the information they need face-to-face.
- An emphasis on communicating to parents in person would leave out the most isolated families, parents who do not like asking for help, and parents who fear or mistrust government programs.
- Therefore, in-person communication requires sufficient time and resources to establish trust and to pay attention to who participates to ensure that this mode of communication is not just reaching the same group of parents over and over again, but is reaching the range of parents in each community setting.

Technology

Cell phone use is nearly universal and often preferred over printed materials. Parents use their smartphones to access information via social media, Google, and other internet sites, which are the most mentioned sources of information for all types of parents. That is especially true for some younger parents who share information with their friends via social media.

To effectively communicate with parents, state agencies and their contractors should ensure the following when using technology:

- Electronic methods of communication must be mobile-friendly.
- Information sent via emails, texting, or social media must be short, clear, and to the point.
- Email, considered a useful method by nearly all types of parents, should have a distinct identity in order to stand out among other emails.
- A curated list of internet sites could help guide and link parents to accurate information on the internet.

State agencies and their contractors should also be mindful of these limitations of using technology to communicate with parents:

- Some parents lack internet access. Internet service is less available in rural areas and on reservations.
- Even when internet service is available, low-income families often cannot afford high internet costs.
- Immigrant parents and families whose home language is not English often stick within their own communities for information and may not use or trust social media or the internet.

Finally, state agencies and their contractors should build on the success and popularity of these digital resources mentioned as helpful by parents and professionals knowledgeable about parents' sources of early childhood development information:

- Marketing efforts should include communicating with parents through language-specific radio and television stations for Hmong, Latino, and Somali families.
- Other frequently mentioned useful tools include: Think Small's ParentPowered texts, Help Me Grow's videos, and CDC's Milestone Tracker app (available in English and Spanish).
- Multiple parent-teacher communications apps exist, including, for example, ParentSquare, Remind, and Seesaw. Programs within the same district or region should use the same app, as parents who have children of different ages in different programs--such as a parent with a child in ECSE, a school-based preschool, and in third grade--may end up having to use a different app for each child and teacher. This lack of integration ends up with parents feeling overwhelmed and missing information.

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