

# Avoid the Big Mistakes

Preventing the disasters you've seen at "that other camp"

Reprinted from the Sept/Oct 2007 Camp Business Magazine

I visit about 60 camps each year, so I often get this question: "What are the biggest mistakes you've seen camps make in their facilities?" We've all seen the mistakes our friends have made, and when we put our ego aside, we know that if it happens to them, it could happen to us.

Camp's are building new things all the time. The most common big projects are new camp offices, new dining halls, expensive high-ropes towers, and new maintenance shops. Sounds like fun! But the first question should be, were any of these the top concern of the camper-parents or group leaders? Nope; not even in their *top ten*. Their number one was probably the bathrooms and showers, right? (Then maybe the cleanliness, the bunks, and the food. Sound familiar?)



If any of those campers and guests do come back, they see the nice new office, and now those nasty showers look even *worse* than they did before! That highlights the first lesson...



## 1.) Listen to Your Parents and Guests

Why is this number one? (Here's a quick review for those that are new to my articles: Mom is our customer. Moms sign 95% of summer camp registrations. If she's not satisfied, her camper doesn't return. It's her word-of-mouth that insures the majority of our new campers. She's usually left to makes her decisions on brief first impressions of her visits to camp, and what little information she gets from her camper.) More often than not I see facility improvements that come as the result of staff recommendations, weighted heavily towards those things that would make their own jobs easier. A happy staff is of course valuable; but they are of little use if you've got unhappy customers to start with.

"But we really need a new office!" I'm not saying that's not true; I'm just suggesting that you better take care of those bathrooms at the same time, or you'll appear very self-centered to the people that really pay your salary.

Good camp leaders have asked their users many times for their evaluations and suggestions. So many times in fact that we get used to thinking "too bad we can't do anything about that." I worked with a large family swim center a

number of years ago that had declining enrolment. The staff had a number of ideas for new programs, but I wanted to know what the families that *didn't renew* their membership had to say. "Well that's easy; they say the water's too cold in the pool. But there's nothing we can do about that." Not so fast. They added a pool heater and the retention rate doubled.

Staff suggestions, and the personal gripes of the director, tend to carry so much weight because we hear them so often. Occasionally I ask a camp director, "What do your parents say they want you to fix?" If the director responds, "I don't know," the real problem starts to become more obvious.



## **2.) More stuff means more expenses. Where will the revenue come from?**

If you've been living with a 5,000 square foot dining hall for years, your revenues have been covering the expenses. But what happens when you add a new 10,000 square foot dining hall and keep the old one for a rec hall? It's twice as large, and will likely take at least twice as long to clean each week (maybe more since it's brand new and dirt will show up much quicker). More than twice the lights, maybe twice the heat. This one's now air conditioned (which costs even more than heat). So your housekeeping and utilities for the dining hall have now more

than tripled. But have we added even one more bed?

Too often I've heard directors say "we just assumed that with a new dining hall we'd get lots more business." But during prime weeks the camp was already full, and during slow weeks they didn't do anything to eliminate their customers' greatest complaints.

I had a friend who was a successful director for 25 years. To cap off his career, he raised the money and built a beautiful new dining hall... that added \$25,000 of new expenses every year without bringing in a single dollar of new income. After three years of deficits, he lost his job. His replacement raised money to add new cabins and bathrooms, and that new revenue brought them back into the black.

## **3. Small additional programs can be "high maintenance" and slow to break even.**

For most resident camps and day camps, the vast majority of campers come for the traditional summer camp programs. The schedule, equipment, facilities, and planning take only minor changes every year, so the "management overhead" is relatively low. But now you want to add a new specialty program; maybe horseback riding or adventure-based activities. Lots of planning time, marketing, new equipment and facilities for just 10 or 20 new campers. It may pay off in the long run if you're given that much time to make it work. But if you made promises to your boss about immediate growth in net income, you may be in trouble.

If you had to go to a bank to get the money for a major new expansion,

they'd force you to do a very detailed pro forma, a month-by-month estimate of each individual new expense, the plan and costs for marketing and start-up, and a realistic estimate of how enrollment will grow over time. If camps were forced to do that more often, two things would happen. First, some projects would never get off the ground. Second, those that did go ahead would have more preparation done in advance. Which brings us to number four.

**4. If you build it... don't expect them to come (unless you've got all your ducks in a row.)**

Man, have I got examples. Let's just look at a couple that happen all too often.

A.) A camp starts a new project (pick any of the above). The director, who's been doing a terrific job leading the camp's operations and constantly fine-tuning things with her attention to detail and empathy for parents, now is focused almost entirely on fundraising and construction. Some important customer service details begin to slip. The camp gets torn up by construction traffic. Routine maintenance and housekeeping falls behind on the facilities current guests are using because the camp maintenance staff is involved in parts of the new project. Just when expectations for growth are the highest, enrollment takes a dive. Why? A drop in return rate and positive word-of-mouth. Could it have been prevented? Absolutely, but only with some serious forethought, delegation, and on-going evaluation.

B.) A small historic dining hall needs to be replaced because it's become too small. The camp has been very successful at adding new cabins to grow enrollment. Upon completion, the new dining hall is hard on the cooks because they have to walk 4 times as far to get the same meal prepared.

The whole camp can now eat inside at once, but meals last only 15 minutes because the acoustics are so bad the noise is unbearable, especially for the staff. Kids can no longer have conversations at meals, so they resort to the only thing that works: screaming cheers. "What great spirit we have!" the director says, though he finds every possible excuse not to eat there any more. When parents and alumni tour the camp, they say "wow" when they enter the dining room but keep right on going, where they use to spend time looking at all the photos and hand-made plaques on the wall.

After several million dollars couldn't we end up with something *better* than the old dining hall, not just *bigger*? As an architectural designer, I see this all the time. The camp staff have been dreaming about a new dining hall for years and years, but during most of that time they've only been thinking about the things they *don't* like about their current building, not what they *do* want in the new one. Architects are hired and it is such a relief to be underway, the staff just dump the project on them and eagerly await their perfect design.



Surprisingly, the first design isn't perfect; in fact not even close. So the staff tell them everything they *don't* like

about the new design, and leave the poor architects to guess again at another solution. Buy the time the working drawings are needed to hurry up and get the project finished, almost everyone is tired of the planning and say, “Just get it done! I’m sure anything will be better than what we have!” Construction starts and all of a sudden it’s, “Where are the outlets? Where’s the stage? Where will kids hang their coats? I didn’t know the floor would look like that!”

Architects and contractors aren’t mind readers, and camp directors aren’t typically good at visualizing something from a drawing. But only the camp staff will have to live with the results, so the responsibility really has to fall on your shoulders to get it right. The best way to do that is to start collecting ideas long before anyone starts putting pencil to paper. Photos of favorite buildings with shots of specific details and materials. Rip full pages out of Country Living and Log Home magazines. Visit themed restaurants, ski resorts, and Disney World, not just other camps. Don’t even THINK about painting a whole room or a whole building until you’ve seen another

one done the same way. Same thing with lighting, floor covering, and ceilings. Give your designer files of exactly what you like, with sticky-notes describing why. Take your architect and your contractor to your favorite restaurant so they know exactly what you expect your new dining hall to “feel” like. Ask them to explain to you what makes that particular restaurant work as a memorable space, a place people tell stories about and return with their friends. Your ducks are getting lined-up.

Sure, great decisions take courage; but it’s the hard work over the long-haul that makes them come alive. You know how much satisfaction you get when a good idea pays off. Now imagine dozens of people being just as invested in the outcome as you are. That sense of group ownership will yield not only to a better physical result, but also enrich the lives of everyone involved.

And that’s never a mistake.

---

*Gary Forster was the camping specialist for the YMCA of the USA for 8 years, past executive of Camp Jewell (CT), past program director of Camp Tecumseh (IN), and holds an MS in Management from Purdue University and B.Architecture from Kent State. Contact him at [campgaryforster@gmail.com](mailto:campgaryforster@gmail.com)*