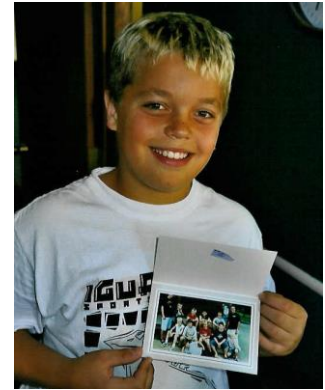


# Making Camp Sticky

by Gary Forster

When their summer camp sessions are over, most camp directors make the mistake of thinking their job with those campers is done. They brag about how summer camp makes lifelong memories and has a positive impact on kids when they get home. But they put all the responsibility of that happening on the back of the campers. You put *so* much into providing a meaningful summer camp experience, why wouldn't you want to be sure that it *sticks*?



**E**ven when kids have a great time at camp, their parents often don't know how to talk to them about it. They ask the wrong questions, get short answers, and eventually give up. That robs them of sharing in the remarkable stories, and robs the kid of the affirmation they'd get from their parents, and the repeated chances to relive their experience every time they tell a new story. If camp doesn't get home, they've been cheated of the future we promised.

*On the way home in the car:*

**Mom:** "Did you have fun?"

**Camper:** "Yeah."

**Mom:** "Did you make friends?"

**Camper:** "Uh-huh."

**Mom (frustrated):** "Is the food as bad as I remember?" (*hoping to get SOME kind of reaction*).

**Camper:** "Yeah. Can we stop at McDonalds?"

Most moms ask yes-no questions, and are surprised when they get one-word answers. For many, the best indication they'll get as to what happened at camp is when they go through the dirty clothes:

**Mom:** "Oh look, they still do color wars, this shirt is blue." And, "I guess it did rain at camp, I'll never get this mud and smell out!"

*Or worst-case scenario for young boys:*

**Mom:** "None of these have even been worn!"

*"Mr. Peabody, it's time to fire up the way-back machine..."*

Please travel back to your own childhood. What sticks out as the most meaningful experiences of your youth? I'm serious. Think of something from when you were 9 to 14.

I'm willing to bet that one or more of the following contributes to the fact that it still means so much to you, or you even remember it at all:

- You've got at least one photo that you've looked at occasionally over the years.
- You've saved an "artifact" or two from the event (in a box or "junk drawer?") even if you can't find it today.
- You shared the experience with a friend, and/or made new friends there.
- You described the event in detail to at least one other person after the event. You "sold" it.
- You may have even written about it in letters or a journal; (now it would be Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc).
- Each time you re-told the story, the "good parts" became even better.

Here's our problem as camp directors: by pretending that none of these are our responsibility, we're insuring that much of our hard work will be wasted. It's like writing a book and forgetting to hit "save" when you were done. We're the professionals; we're the ones getting paid to make our camps successful. If we believe in the value of what we do, we need to follow through so our campers and their parents get the full value out of their investment.

And that doesn't even touch on the *economic* issues on *our* end (which can be even more motivating!) The financial success of your camp is dependent on two things above all others:

- 1.) **A good camper return rate** (no amount of marketing can fill *that* many beds)
- 2.) **Word of mouth from satisfied moms** to other moms (the way 75% or more of new campers find you).

Even *if* you have a terrific camp program and staff and facility, most moms will never know how good you are because most campers won't tell her without our help.

Moms that know the specifics of their own child's summer camp experience are eager to share the stories with their neighbors, friends, co-workers and relatives. (Good news like that is just so rare). And that's the goldmine for new campers, and repeat campers. That's the "Amway" effect: when mom shares her positive experience with others, she's not only selling *them*, she's selling *herself*.

How can I convince you of how important this is? Do you know camps that fill up every summer? This is why. Every time.

Here's a checklist of ideas that I've seen work. Every time.

□ Send a letter (snail-mail or e-mail) to mom with suggested open-ended questions (see attached). This will help her get her camper talking about the cool things that happened. Not, "Did you have fun?" (which solicits a frustrating one-word answer), but rather "I saw you had a campout on Wednesday night, how did you cook dinner?" or "Tell me about your counselor," or "Can you teach me how your favorite camp song?" THEN she'll be willing to fill out a short evaluation of the summer. Suggest she sit with her child and fill it out together.



□ Are photos posted on Facebook? (If not, get them there!) Don't post more than a dozen at a time; spread them out over several days; or even several times a day. Remind parents before, during, and after camp where they can see the photos, and that they can be copied to their own Facebook page,

shared with Grandma and Grandpa, or printed out to post on the refrigerator or in a photo album.



□ If you've got great photos of specific campers, send them *to that parent!* E-mail or snail-mail. ("Really? Each individual parent?") Yep, if you've got a photo that will "make their day," there's literally nothing you could do that would better guarantee they'd share their good feelings with others, and encourage their child to return. Just think about how overjoyed you'd be if a camp director took the time to send something that valuable. (Even better than returning lost and found, which is also good!) "But I don't have one for every kid." Do it for the ones you've got; it's like the starfish story: "It matters to this one." Get your counselors to help match pictures with names. Crop the pictures so the faces are big and you can see what's going on (no need to immortalize ground and sky!)

Send another in the fall (with a link to the newsletter and to next-year's registration.) A simple photo and a short, "I just had to share this with you!" is all you need to get the ball rolling again on their end. Way better than a brochure.

□ Did all of the craft projects go home with the campers? (Probably not). If you've got some that you can identify who they belong to, getting them reunited with their owner will spark not only storytelling on the spot, but insure years of memories that would have been lost.

□ Thank your donors. They don't want a plaque or a form letter. A single photo of kids being impacted at camp (meaning there's an counselor in the photo, and they're outdoors), with a single hand-written line of thanks from you will be so remarkable they'll share it and show their friends.

□ Thank your counselors. They likely haven't printed out a single picture. (They just keep them on their phones these days). Before Christmas, send them at least one print (15 cents plus postage) that they can stick on their wall at school to bring back all the best of their memories. It's not only the least you can do to thank them for the long hours and low pay, but one of the *most* valuable gifts, the gift of pleasant memories when they need them most. And more will want to return, and/or tell their friends.

□ Thank your counselors' *parents*. They are the ones who are most likely to prevent your best counselors from returning because they don't understand the responsibility and experience their college student got out of working at camp. Send them a photo of their kid to hang on the refrigerator. (The same photo you took for the "biography" posters each counselor makes for parents to see on check-in day; the same photo you post on the map of where your staff come from and go to school. You do that, right?) And these parents refer campers, too.

□ About your website... as people talk about you and share photos, new parents will be clicking on your website to find out where you are, what goes on, next year's dates and rates (nothing wrong with saying "tentative dates and rates" at this point... LOTS wrong with not having anything). You get the idea. Don't expect your customer to bookmark your website and come back to it next spring. If they want the message now, set the hook. Get their e-mail address and get back to them when registration starts next year.

"This sounds like a lot of work." How much do you charge for a session of camp? Is there any other way you could earn that much from a 10-minute investment of your own time? Make someone feel so good? Collect so many compliments for you and your staff? And fill your camp?

□ Get volunteers and counselors to help, too. Thinking about the best times of the summer is a *gift* to them. But don't expect to get any takers by sending out a blanket e-mail to a whole group. Make a few phone calls to "say thanks," see how they're doing, and ask if they're willing to help. That's how you get busy people... the ones that follow-through... to "volunteer."

Congratulations on the lives you changed as a result of this summer's investment of your time, strength, and emotion... and hitting "save."

#### **Be proactive *during* summer, too:**

Take **cabin group photos** the first or second day of camp. (Get nice-and-close, so the faces are easy to see.) It will give parents initial confidence, spark dialog when their camper gets home, ("Tell me about each of them,") and be kept by the camper... *forever*.

Teach your photographers to get **counselors** in most of their photos of campers (to show safe, caring supervision and instruction,) include recognizable camp **landmarks** (to make you distinctive), and show campers and staff **doing** things ( to tell stories about *what goes on* at camp and not just *who goes there*.)

**Teach camp songs**, and sing favorite songs *often*. Camp songs are a universal sign of *membership*; and *memorable*.

Have everyone make at least one **craft to take home**. Encourage arts and crafts be made as gifts, too. (Don't shy away from traditional crafts like gym and friendship bracelets. Just like camp songs, they invoke positive responses from others "in the club," like friends at school -- even parents and grandparents! Many will be kept for years, and bring camp "back to life" each time they're seen, touched, or talked about.



**Gary Forster**, a 25-year camp executive, has consulted with over 250 camps in 43 states. Reach him at [gary@garyforster.com](mailto:gary@garyforster.com) and visit his website for more free resources.

## Teaching Parents How to Ask Open-Ended Questions

by Gary Forster

SAMPLE LETTER given out on check-out day as they arrive, or mailed (or e-mailed) with a parent evaluation to arrive home the day before:

Dear Parent,

**Thank you** for the trust you've shown in our camp!

Could you and your camper take a couple of minutes to fill out the enclosed evaluation together? Those things your camper liked best need to be repeated. We know that there are areas where we could improve, too, and want your advice on where to put our energies. (Please don't assume we already know something that you've noticed! ) You're advice and feedback, both good and bad, will have an impact on how we finish this year and prepare for the next.

Summer camps have been providing "Memories to Last aLifetime" for almost 150 years. To help keep your child's memories alive, I hope you can make time to talk about what they did and how they feel about it. To avoid getting one-word answers (like "Yeah" and "Nope") I suggest you use open-ended questions that require them to think about the answer and put it into their own words. Depending on age, you could try . . .

**"I heard you started each day at the Chapel with a "thought for the day". Could you tell me about one of them?"**

**"Did your cabin get to sleep out and cook your own dinner one night? What jobs did you have at the campsite? How did you cook dinner? What did you do after dark?"**

**"Which Skill Clinics did you like best? What did you get to do? What did you get better at? (Clinics are the morning five-day classes the campers take each week).**

**"Can you teach me some of the songs you sang at camp?"**

**"What kinds of chores did you have to do to keep your cabin clean each day? Did your cabin ever win a "cabin clean-up award"?"**

**"Who was your best friend at camp? What did you do together? Would you like to write a letter?"**

**"Who was your favorite counselor? What did you like about her/him?"**

Your interest in the positive things that happened to your child will help insure lifelong memories. If you've got any questions, please don't hesitate to call or write. We'll continue to keep in touch through the year with our newsletter. We hope to see your family up at camp again soon.

Warm regards,

Camp Director