

keeping in touch

Excellent communication with customers is key to the success of any nursery business, and there have never been more ways to keep parents in the loop, says director at ParentMail, **Geoff Jones...**

Communication with customers and external influencers forms a central aspect of business and service today, and early years settings are no exception. In order to be successful, parents – the ‘customers’ – need to be kept up-to-date, involved and informed about all aspects of the business that affect them.

Effective communication is vital in securing good customer service in a nursery, a central cog to the success of any business. Parents have a right to be kept informed, so, as a business, it is crucial that you ensure they are. Communication is the part of any relationship, whether personal or professional, that will either make it strong or weak.

There are a number of issues that should be considered whether first setting out or re-addressing your communications policy. Firstly, parents should wherever possible be kept

within a nursery’s policy and information loop. For example, they should be made aware of general policies, quality standards, general updates, news and announcements, and the philosophy that underpins your service. Alongside this, you should make sure they are made aware of what will happen if there is an accident or if their child becomes ill, and what to expect in terms of sensitive issues such as health promotion, equality and child protection. Make sure that these procedures and policies are clear from the outset to pre-empt dissatisfaction and complaints.

Remember, too, that the majority of children will have working parents with different schedules and commitments, so bear in mind when examining your communication policy that one size does not fit all – knowing and understanding your audience is essential to maximise the benefits.



Methods of communication

Constructing and supporting a strong and effective communications process is vital. Points to be considered for success include maintaining regular communication that is two-way (it is about hearing what parents are saying as much as speaking at them); recognising and working to overcome potential barriers to communication such as language differences or low literacy levels; and becoming familiar with the information needs of the families.

It is important to consider carefully, therefore, which communication methods are going to best suit the needs of your individual business and base of parents. Never before have there been so many options for methods of communication:

■ Opportunities for face to face communication such as meetings or keeping in touch events will always be important to the communicative process as a whole, offering a personal approach. This allows parents to get to know on a personal level the people responsible for their children's wellbeing, important for building trust and a good relationship between both parties. Why not consider running a workshop with your parents to address key issues, policy changes, or to help them understand key points about child development and how they can support this? These can provide a valuable opportunity for developing a bond with 'customers'.

find out more

ParentMail specialises in helping educational settings communicate with their children's parents. For more information, visit www.parentmail.co.uk

■ Written communication such as letters home and newsletters have always been popular choices to 'plug the gaps' between more formal meetings, helping to keep parents informed and involved. However, letters often get lost in bags or discarded and so storing information online is now commonplace. In recent years, nurseries' websites have become choice ports of call for parents, so make sure that information on yours is kept up-to-date, and that it tells parents the key points that they need to know.

■ Increasingly, alternative electronic forms of communication are emerging as flexible ways of keeping in contact, allowing communication to occur more frequently and allowing businesses to strengthen ties with their customers. The sector has recently seen an increasing move to email and even text systems as methods of communication with parents and guardians.

ICT enables information to be captured and monitored quickly and closely, meaning that parents can then receive and access information about their children's progress and development when and where they want, either online or via their mobile. This not only cuts down on time and administration for all parties involved, but allows contact to be much more frequent, keeping those concerned up-to-date. An additional benefit is that information can be fairly quickly and easily tailored – for example, changing the language it is written in – to suit individual needs.

Also worth considering is the new generation of smart phone apps, which have the potential to take communication a step

further, allowing information to be updated and accessed through a simple interface, on the move and throughout the day. Around a quarter of the UK population now own a smart phone, so while they may not yet be universally accessible, in combination with a variety of communication methods, apps can provide a way for parents to keep up-to-date with information and announcements – one which they can tap into at their own convenience, and which will allow them to be more directly involved than has previously been possible.

On a final note, if you are looking to improve the communications system within your nursery, consider undertaking a survey into what information people want, like or need, and when and how they want to receive it. An early years setting is in the fortunate position of having twice-daily personal contact (albeit brief!) with parents, making it relatively easy to get customer feedback even if on an informal basis. This could provide some illuminating and valuable results about what could be done to shape, strengthen or improve your business.

Sharing information

It is widely recognised today that parents are key partners in children's learning, having an overwhelming influence on their child. Siraj-Blatchford (2009) found when speaking with parents that many were keen to discuss how parental support could be improved, with good information and advice being central to their needs. Keeping parents up-to-date with their child's development on a regular basis can help strengthen the impact of your work at home, and ensure they are familiar with how they can support this going forward.

Remember that parents will only generally see the nursery at the beginning and end of their child's daily sessions, and will not necessarily see what goes on during the day, the good practice of your staff, or particularly innovative work undertaken. It is never safe to assume that they know what you know.