

# Managing Through Tough Financial Times

*By Donna Thornton-Roberts*

August 29, 2009

Nearly everyone is talking about the slow-down in the economy and the uncertainty it may bring to our center's financial health and viability. I know firsthand how stressful money worry's can be to a director. As one for nearly 35 years I have weathered many storms; in the late 70's, my center nearly tanked as we struggled through double digit inflation and record unemployment. In the mid 80's and 90's we saw phenomenal growth expanding from one center to a couple of dozen. I am reminded of the Apostle Paul when he said in Philippians 4:12-

*13 I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through Him who gives me strength. NIV*



Leaning on God's strength and wisdom can turn stressful, unpleasant situations around to become extremely productive. It's the tough times that produce great growth; we learn how to manage more effectively and experience greater accomplishments as we go through challenging circumstances. Those priceless experiences give us great courage and faith that build unshakeable confidence in Him. It's that experience that says in these difficult times **to focus on the basics and do it better than anyone else**. One basic is building enrollment through exceptional phone skills.

Experienced directors understand building enrollment and managing those dollars affectively influence every decision that is made within a center. Income dictates outcomes--from what type of building we have to how much staff is compensated; managing enrollment determines every success. **Many inexperienced directors do not understand the first point of managing enrollment begins with the phone.** It doesn't sound very glamorous, but the phone to a child care center is like the heart to the human body. It's critical to our life's flow; and yet some assign the inexperienced and untrained to answer it! Remember - nearly every enrollment results from a referral who calls the center. What a scary thought placing a potential customer in the hands of an unskilled Answerer. Callers decide within seconds to do business with you!

To maximize the phone opportunities – let's get back to the basics in excellent parent service and execution.

1. Answer the phone on the **second ring**. Answering on the 1<sup>st</sup> ring may seem too aggressive – answering on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> gives the impression of being too busy.
2. **Physically smile** before picking up the phone. Let your callers hear your smile.
3. Use a warm, friendly, energetic voice. Answerers are the center's representative – it's the only 1<sup>st</sup> impression the caller will receive and determines if a follow-up visit happens.
4. Train your Answerers to **enunciate clearly** so the Caller can hear the name of the center.
5. Use a **Phone Script** for all Answerers “thank you for calling the Adventure Club, this is Donna, how may I help you?”
6. Do not rush, sound hurried or unconcerned. Bond with the parent by asking them questions about their child and then directly relate that to the teacher who would be caring for their child.

For example:

**Answerer:** thank you for calling Special Beginnings, this is Mary – how can I help you?

**Caller:** how much is it for a three year old full time?

**Answerer:** your three year old is going to love being in Ms Jan's class – she has been with us for 3 years and her assistant for 2- they make a great team- can I email or fax over a monthly class newsletter and activity calendar so you can see what activities they enjoy with the children?

**Caller:** sure my e-mail address is...

**Answerer:** **thank you – I'll send that over** – can you please tell me again what you need in service – full time? Part-time?

**The goal is to personalize the call** and gain the critical follow-up information **before** discussing prices. Highlight the teachers who will be caring for their child and be sure to let the teacher know that a new parent will be coming in to visit. Parents choose child care from an emotional decision – it has to feel good first!

7. Be careful that **background sounds** are not heard over the phone – although a crying child may sound routine to us, it's not a good first impression for a new parent to hear.
8. **Never put a person on hold for more than a few seconds**. Silent holds seem longer than they actually are; if you are using HOLD – consider using a recorded message about your center while the Caller waits.

9. Train **everyone** Answerer who picks up the phone to answer the same way extending excellent customer service.

Managing through tough financial times requires skill, energy, and wisdom. Every center decision is a financial one; like it or not – it's true. And as Directors, we have a responsibility to manage through the tough times by focusing on the basics. As our heart keeps us alive so does answering the phone correctly builds enrollment. It is a simple skill that anyone can learn and be successful. Don't neglect training your staff to answer the phone properly; it's the first point of enrollment and the primary method parents' use in connecting with the center.