

Top Ten Ways to Make a Great YMCA Camp Better

by Mark Pooler

The difference between running a good YMCA day camp and a great YMCA day camp is not rocket science. It is however, something that takes passion, dedication and vision. In my fifteen years of camping experience, I have seen many good YMCA camps and a few really great YMCA camps. After many discussions with my good friend and colleague Patrick Connelly, Outdoor Center Director at YMCA Camp Ingersoll in Portland, CT (also know as Mr. Character Crossroads), we decided to formalize a plan for “making a good YMCA day camp great” and share some of our experiences and best kept secrets with others in the camping profession. Why, you ask? Well, one of the many things that Patrick and I have in common is a desire for our YMCA camps, as well as other YMCA camps in Connecticut and other parts of the country, to be the best! In our travels we have seen many camps that, to put it frankly, “just need to get with the times”. Camping has changed dramatically just in the fifteen years I have been involved and some of our fellow YMCA day camps have not changed with the times. Maybe this will help give those good YMCA day camps a little wind in their sails to set them on the course to greatness! The following is our top ten ways to make a good day camp GREAT:

1. Staffing:

In order to have a great YMCA day camp you will need to invest in it. The first move that we recommend is having year-round YMCA professional staff in the leadership position at your camp. For full facility day camps, this means having a professional exempt staff person dedicate a minimum of 70% of their time strictly to the day camp program, (80 to 90% if you really want a great day camp). Gone are the days where your YMCA can view day camp as a seasonal program and your Child Care Director can run the camp in the summer. Child care and day camp are two different programs and should have two different YMCA professionals dedicated to each. **Having the right “camp person” in place is the single biggest factor in the success of a great day camp.**

When it comes to your seasonal day camp staff, here are some useful tips -

- **Design a Staff Development Program:** This is more than just having Counselors-In-Training and Jr. Counselor program. This means forecasting your staff for three to four summers from now as if they were a college basketball team. Know who your superstars are and use every bit of their energy before they leave early for the draft. Guide your freshman who will be your team captains in two or three years and develop a mentoring system with older to younger staff.
- **Use your great camp staff to recruit their friends; great camp staff generally recruits other potentially great staff because they tend to hang out with people that have the same great qualities.** Also, consider contacting the local high school or college to find out who the school leaders are. I have sent out applications to the class officers,

student council presidents, and athletic team captains with a note that says “we would love for you to use your leadership skills here at YMCA Camp Sloper this summer”. Recruit the best and you will get the best!

- **Staff shirts should be worn everyday.** Select a camp logo and some camp colors and stick with them. This will help your camp and your staff develop an identity and a culture. We chose the color orange for our staff shirts over five years ago and now that color is synonymous with YMCA Camp Sloper in our community. The staff feels like they have a superhero uniform on when they sport that camp shirt around town and children are pointing and waving. Yes, you will need to go over some ground rules about the appropriate places to wear these camp shirts, but if you hired the right staff, that should not be an issue. Also, parents love the fact that everyday at our camps you can easily identify a staff member at any time.

2. Marketing:

Have a professional graphic designer develop your camp brochure! If you are designing your camp brochure in-house on Microsoft Word or PageMaker, you are way out of touch. Parents expect professionalism from great YMCA day camps in the new millennium. Most YMCAs do not have the same graphic design capabilities as a professional graphic designer. As my buddy Patrick says, “You wouldn’t hire a graphic designer to run your day camp, so why have your camp director design your camp brochure?”. This is your primary selling piece, it needs to look professional and most YMCA directors don’t have the time or tools to accomplish this.

Develop a website or web page for your camp that has the capabilities of on-line registration at best or the ability to download your camp brochure and other forms at minimum (medical forms, registration forms, parent handbooks, staff applications should all be on-line). This is not the “wave of the future”; it is the “wave of the present”! The age of technology has been upon us for years so if that professionally designed camp brochure is not available on-line, you are missing out on potential customers and an opportunity for greatness.

Send out a minimum of two or three professionally designed newsletters to your campers throughout the year. I can’t believe that I have to say this, but some YMCA day camps are not staying in contact with their campers all year long. Keep the connection that your campers made to your camp going throughout the off-season. Update them on the end of the year parent/camper evaluation results, upcoming events, staffing updates and improvements for the next summer.

Develop a camp logo, slogan, camp colors and put them everywhere. I strongly believe that every great YMCA day camp should have a culture or a feel about it. That started for us with the development of our camp logo, our staff philosophy, choosing our camp colors, developing our camp tag line/slogan and then, putting that stuff on every marketing piece we sent out. It did not take long before everyone in our community knew who we were and what we were about.

3. Facility:

First and foremost, keep it neat, clean and well groomed. If you have a full-facility YMCA

day camp, make sure you have the appropriate maintenance budget, staff and equipment to maintain it properly. If you have a building-based YMCA day camp, make sure that you have an excellent relationship with the Maintenance Director or Janitor of the school/site. Based on years of evaluation and with backing from Gary Forster's findings (Gary Forster is the Camping Specialist for the YMCA of the USA), **clean bathrooms are one of the most important things to campers and parents.** If you have to clean those bathrooms four times a day, just do it! There are far too many "diamonds in the rough" out there for YMCA day camps; start polishing those diamonds and you will see what they are really worth. **Having enough water access is very important during the summer months.** **Drinking fountains** are inexpensive and easy to build. Hydration is a major concern of parents when they drop their camper off on those 90+ degree days.

Whenever possible, design, build and create facilities at your camp that are age specific. Having separate program areas for young children and teens is key to our success. Our 143-acre facility is broken down into two program areas, one for the younger campers (grades K-5) and one for the older campers (grades 6-10). Just as these age groups have different program needs, they also have different facility needs. Keep that in mind when you are developing your long-range master plan for your day camp facility and program.

Good signage is key! A beautiful facility is great, but if people don't know where they are going when they get there, they may just turn around and drive out. Signage is a great and relatively inexpensive way to enhance your facility. Have some informational signs that direct campers and visitor clearly and easily. Have other signs that are fun and "campish". One of the best signs I have ever seen is the signs at the entrance/driveway at the Camp Jewell YMCA in Colebrook, CT. They read "Slow down, you move to fast, we got to make our campers last (a take-off on the Simon and Garfunkle song "Feeling Groovy"). We have a sign above our drinking fountain that reads "Fountain of Youth – Drink Heartily and Play Forever". Be creative, be fun, be "campish" with your signage!

Paint and woodchips go a long way to cover any non-attractive areas. We all have those areas in camp that are just eye sores and the money is not in this year's budget to fully address the problem. I would be willing to bet that either a coat of paint or a well spread pile of woodchips would make that area look a lot better. We have had great success with local tree service vendors and contractors donating woodchips. Ask around, most times they are looking for a place to get rid of woodchips. As far as painting goes, keep in mind some consistency throughout your facility; make an attempt at some sort of theme throughout your facility, don't just pick random colors.

For non-facility YMCA day camps at schools or leased properties, look for opportunities for collaboration with the owners of the site. I was just recently informed of a joint venture between a branch of our YMCA and a local school who are collaborating on the expenses of constructing a climbing wall in the gymnasium for students to use during the school year and the YMCA campers to use in the summer. It is all about relationships!

4. Programs:

Your camp programs should be age specific with more options for campers as they get older. As mentioned earlier, separate facilities should be designed with these age groups in mind. Our program works off a "stepping stone" philosophy. The older you get, the more options you have at camp. This keeps kids looking forward to the next summer and helps with the return rate.

Develop “cutting edge” specialty camps. If you are not doing any specialty camps, you are again behind the times. Start with the basics (sports camps, environmental camps...) and get more creative each year. Adding new specialty camps every year gives campers something new to look forward to each time the new camp brochure comes out. Evaluate the old specialty camps and keep the fresh ones coming. Our Fort Building Camp had 40 campers register on the first day this year. Here are some others that have worked for us: Adventure Camp, Media Arts Camp, BMX Camp, Skateboarding, Rock Climbing, Aquatics, Fishing, Carpentry and Golf.

Develop specialty areas that can run without specialty area staff. The bigger your camp gets the more activities you will need to accommodate all the potential campers. We have made a conscious effort to develop specialty activities that do not require any additional staff. The activities have to be easy enough for the average 18 year old counselor to run themselves. Here are some examples: Slip and Slide, Superslide, Mountain Boards, Radio Station and Mini Golf.

Conduct an end of the summer evaluation and use this as the basis for your staff meetings throughout the year. Every summer we have what we call – “Evaluation Based Improvements”. These are improvements that are taken directly out of the annual parent/camper evaluations and addressed by the leadership staff for the following summer. If your camp is not doing some sort of evaluation, you need to. If your camp lets the evaluation results sit in a file somewhere, that is just as bad as not doing an evaluation.

5. Year-Round Planning:

Year-round planning is a must and it should start in the September, right after your preceding camp season. The basis of year-round planning should come from two places, the parent/camper evaluations and the staff evaluation. Those are the two populations that know your camp the best, so make sure you ask both of them “How can we do better?” These evaluations will set your agendas and objectives for the next year.

Meet with your leadership team a minimum of six times throughout the off season – monthly if possible. A great YMCA day camp is only as great as the leadership; and no one YMCA professional can do it alone. You need to have a leadership team of people who are committed to improving your camp each year. This can be a combination of key staff, camp counselors, parents and even campers. The leadership team’s primary function should be to dissect the annual evaluations and make improvements for the upcoming summer. Then, develop a year-round calendar of events of things that need to get accomplished, discussed, evaluated or changed. Great leadership teams provide communities with great YMCA day camps.

A complete re-evaluation of all areas of your camp should be conducted every four to five years. We just got through a re-evaluation of every aspect of our camp last year and it was one of the best experiences that a great YMCA day camp can go through. It is time consuming and tedious, but well worth the efforts. We reevaluated everything from our staff interviews to our staff banquets, every age group to every specialty camp and even the way the leadership team met on a monthly basis. If you do not challenge the way that you have “always done things”, you are bound to get stagnant and I have never heard of a great, stagnant YMCA day camp.

6. Staff Training:

No matter the size of your camp, your staff training should be pre-planned and a minimum of 30 hours. This is a minimum and certainly will not get you to greatness. I would say you need a staff training program in upwards of 40+ hours to really put on a dynamic and educational training event for your summer staff. There should be a balance of teambuilding activities, fun stuff and workshops that enlighten your audience about the seriousness of being a YMCA camp staff member. In the day and age we live in, there are too many required training items that must be covered in those minimal 30 hours. And yes, your camp staff may say that training is too long each summer, but most would say that if you covered everything in one day.

Every day camp staff training should have the following key ingredients: a special event, an overnight, a road trip and a special guest. These are the keys for success and in my opinion are what separates great camps from good camps. Each of the items listed above has a valuable role in getting your staff to bond together and function as a team throughout the summer. A hypnotist is a must with camp staff at least once every other year.

There should be a pre-planned team presentation approach to staff training. The leadership staff of the camp should present as much of the training if not more than the Camp Director. The lecture style of presenting is not always the only way to present materials and, more often than not, very ineffective with High School and College aged staff who just got out of that environment weeks ago. Some of the most successful training workshops we have had include parent panels, speeches from camp alumni, guest presenters, bringing in campers to training and always changing up the location of the workshops.

7. Fun Enhancements:

Take a step back and look at how you can make any area of your camp more fun. Every area of camp has the potential to be more fun than it already is. Let's take the Nurses Station for example, generally not the most exciting place in camp. However, we have plans to blow out the window behind the nurse's desk and make it a "campish" exit. We are going to take the window out and put a slide in that leads back to the outside. We plan to hang a sign over the window that says "Healthy Campers Exit Here"; that way every time a camper comes to the nurses office, they can look forward to leaving, instead of staying in the office. It may take some time, but if you think hard enough, you can come up with a creative twist on a bunch of areas around your camp. Utilize pictures as much as possible too. Hang fun pictures in your cabins, offices and the YMCA of all the fun things camp has to offer.

You MUST add one or two new and fun enhancements to your camp each year. Is funding a problem? Well, a camp improvement fee is a great way to do that. We added a one-time \$10 camp improvement fee a few years back and rather than having parents complain, it was a huge hit! We highlighted in our "professionally designed" camp brochure and newsletters what the fee would do to enhance the camp and never heard one word about it. For us, this generates about \$20,000 a year to put back into the camp for various improvements that have included: Mountain Boards, Slip-n-slides, Water parks, and many needed renovations.

Develop fun stuff for the staff as well as the campers. Enhancements are not just for the campers. One of the most recent enhancements we gave to our staff was the High Five Award. At our end of the day staff meetings, I recognize something positive that a staff member has done by announcing what they did to the entire staff and giving them a high five with a \$5 bill in my palm. \$5 bucks every day is a small price to pay for a well appreciated staff (\$225 to be exact for 45 days of camp). Brainstorm with your leadership staff some other

creative ideas: staff play days, staff competitions and contests, send a picture to them in the off-season to remind them of all the fun they had during the summer. Great YMCA day camps have happy staff!

8. Long-Range Planning:

Develop a long-range Master Plan that is professionally designed for your facility and program. This will help you define who you are and who you want to become. This is important for both facility and non-facility day camps. If you get into adding something new every year, you will want to make sure you have a plan in place as to where that new addition is going. Continue to test and re-evaluate your Master Plan every few years as industry trends develop and more creative ideas are unleashed. This will also help you develop some visions for your day camp and other program areas. All day camps should have a vision, long-and short-term goals and create annual objectives to meet that vision. Long-range planning should involve staff, volunteers, parents and much of the information gathered from your parent/camper evaluations.

9. Volunteers:

Develop a year-round volunteer program that gets people out to your camp in the off-season; working on all those fun enhancements. We have had more projects completed at our 143-acre facility by volunteers than by contractors. They are a large part of our success and many of them never set foot on the property during the summer months, other than to visit. You will need to have pre-determined projects that meet the visions of your long-range Master Plan. Also, utilize local Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts and especially Eagle Scouts. With the right direction, volunteers can accomplish a great deal of things that will have a direct impact on your YMCA day camp in the summer months. Make sure that you recognize and thank your volunteers as often and as publicly as possible.

Develop an Alumni Association for your YMCA day camp. This is a great way to recruit volunteers and potential donors. This is becoming more and more common among YMCA day camps. We developed our alumni association last year and raised over \$6,000 in the first year for camp scholarships. It takes time and is tedious at first, but once you hear all those old camp stories rolling out at the first alumni event, you will see it is worth it!

10. Road Trips, Research and Recourses:

Get out of your camp/YMCA/office and visit other YMCA day and resident camps. This is essential! See what other camps are doing with their facilities, programs, volunteers and staff.

Go visit other camps on three different levels:

- Slightly better than your camp: See what the next step is for you and get some concrete ideas that you can take back and implement at your camp relatively easily.
- Way better than your camp: You have to have high standards if you want to be a great day camp. Even great day camps were only good at some point. This will be extremely helpful when developing your long-range Master Plan too.
- Way out of your league: If you do not dream, you will never find greatness in your reality. Get out there and find programs and facilities that you would love to have. There are some amazing camps that have probably been around fifty to a hundred years longer than your camp. Reap the benefits of their experiences.

Go to some national conferences and talk to other camp people. The ACA Tri-state Camping Conference in New York City in March offers tons of ideas! I just got back from the National YMCA Camping Conference at the Blue Ridge YMCA Conference Center and had an

amazing and enlightening experience. The YMCA offers tons of great training opportunities and regional/national events every year. Get in the loop!

And finally, I am going to give you my two biggest resources in camping, and they are not other camps, they are people; Kent Sampson and Gary Forster. Kent Sampson is the Membership and Program Consultant for CT, NY, NJ and is a wealth of camping knowledge. I have been on a few program assessments with Kent for struggling day camps and he has always been very informative, educational and wonderful to work with. Gary Forster is the Camping Specialist for the YMCA of the USA and one of YMCA camping's best resources. Gary has ideas about all aspects of camping from marketing ideas to facility ideas. If you want to be a great YMCA day camp, you need to be receiving Gary's monthly newsletters and do whatever he recommends. In the last two years, I have implemented many of the marketing strategies off his "Most valuable marketing ideas I have ever heard" list and had great success with all. Gary can be contacted at gary.forster@ymca.net and Kent can be reached at kent.sampson@ymca.net. Take advantage of your national YMCA dues and get these guys involved in your camp.

Well, I hope that you have gained some valuable ideas on how to make your good YMCA day camp GREAT! Remember that it takes passion, dedication, vision and time too. Be patient and make improvements every year. I wish you a fun and safe camp season in 2005!