

The recruitment conundrum



Olivia Foley, whose nursery group, Hungry Caterpillars, won the Nursery Group category of the NMT Awards 2017, gives a personal take on the ever-present issue of recruitment and staff retention

How did Hungry Caterpillars start? Because, as a mother looking for great childcare for my first daughter (now 21 years old), I could not find what I was looking for. I know my story is not unique - there are many in the early years sector who started out in the same way and with the same motivation.

The challenge I faced was that I had no experience in business or

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early years. Marketing was like a foreign language to me in those early days, but somehow I managed to get so far without much more than the odd banner and leaflet drops. It seems unbelievable to think that it was only just over six years ago we developed our first website despite the fact we had been trading for 12 years and had seven settings.

It amazes me how we managed for all that time with no online presence or real marketing strategy, both of which now play a major role not just in filling places but in recruiting and retaining staff. In recent years, we have firmly focused on our marketing as a key strategy in developing as a business and early years provider - and have done that in many different ways.

Our online presence

Our website is now an integral part of all that we do and is the first point of call for parents and staff alike. Parents can find out more about us and where our nurseries are, make an enquiry, pay the registration, deposit or fees. They can easily view our Ofsted reports, menus, policies and general information. But on top of that – and crucially in these days of scarcity of staff - potential staff are able to view vacancies and apply.

They can also see our range of staff benefits, read our blogs and articles – the list is endless.

In addition, we have a live chat facility - another tool for communicating with potential staff as well as customers. Our website also links directly to our social media presence, which means we can use a combination of landing pages and direct links to our careers page to capture data which allow us to follow up quickly on leads.

Now, targeted Facebook ads are proving to be one of the most successful ways to attract applicants to our vacancies, and although they need monitoring in terms of traffic, they are a very cheap and often effective addition to a recruitment campaign.

Building your identity

It is all too easy to think of your visual identity as being there purely for parents looking for childcare. We developed ours over time and with the support of a host of marketing gurus. Indeed, developing our branding has actively helped us to cultivate our individuality, which, as well as supporting parents when they are choosing a nursery, gives a real flavour of Caterpillars to people looking for a job – our potential staff.

Grow your wings
and learn to fly



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Our identity spills over into everything we do, our uniform, our nursery presentation, our display boards, signage, banners and social media presence, to name a few. It is a firm thread that runs through everything. At Hungry Caterpillars, we want our children to grow their wings and learn to fly. We also want that for our staff.

The recruitment battle

A conversation often had with other nursery owners is the difficulty of recruiting and keeping good staff. That couldn't be truer in the present climate. Where have all the passionate, dedicated, qualified practitioners gone? It's an issue we face on a daily basis with a growing team of 140+ staff rising to around 200 by the end of this year.

It is getting tougher and tougher for us. Recruitment at our London nurseries is a struggle but nothing compared with our nurseries in the leafy suburbs. It seems we are not

alone: local nurseries tell me of how they supplement their teams on a daily basis with agency staff because they simply can't recruit permanent practitioners. Not to generalise, but agency staff are rarely a fabulous addition to the team, and the very nature of hopping from one nursery to another indicates a lack of commitment.

Commitment and consistency is what children need to feel safe, secure, happy and able to learn. But how do we provide that consistency with an ever decreasing pool of suitable applicants and the lure of better paid jobs at the local supermarket than in early years?

Marketing to recruit

Attracting staff is not just about placing a snazzy advert when you need to recruit. Strategies to draw applicants, for us, centre on harnessing marketing opportunities as and when they occur. We have worked hard to create our company

culture, ethos and vision with the aim of making our nursery something that staff want to be part of. This manifests itself in many different forms and, hopefully, potential and current staff relate to it and recognise that they can also influence it.

In terms of targeted marketing it also helps to get into the mind of the applicant and think about the all-important question of "What's in it for me?" Marketers out there will be familiar with this phrase, as it is often used to guide marketing campaigns by getting into the mind of the consumer. Creating your avatar is a very helpful tool in assisting you to understand your target audience / potential staff.

To understand your prospective applicants, you need to ask:

- **Who are they?**
School leavers, Level 2s, Level 3s, mature returners to work
- **What's important to them?**
A professional working environment and well-resourced nursery, a supportive team, opportunities to develop / train / progress, a happy working environment, a knowledgeable and competent manager, a company that cares, where their voice is heard
- **What may be a barrier to working?**
Childcare costs, long working hours, work / life balance, pay, travel costs / time
- **What might they not have been offered at another setting?**
A comprehensive range of staff benefits
- **What motivates them?**
A passion for supporting children to grow and develop, career development, a happy team, recognition for their hard work, being appreciated by management and co-workers.

Crucially, at Hungry Caterpillar, we have focused on ensuring applicants are aware that by joining our team they will become part of something exciting and will have opportunities to develop, train, progress and reach their career aspirations.

Taking this approach has led us to develop a range of staff benefits ►

➤ with the aim of attracting and retaining staff, including:

- free uniform
- a day off for your birthday and flowers from the directors
- a comprehensive annual training programme, including five paid-for training days per year and our Hungry for More – an annual in-house training program,
- our annual Caterpillar Superstar Awards to celebrate teams, individuals and the company's achievements throughout the year
- a whole-company Christmas party
- 'thank you' team nights out to recognise effort and achievement
- active email communication direct to individual staff and regular staff newsletters
- working party groups with staff from all levels involved, which genuinely have a voice and influence
- regular staff surveys to check we are getting it right and to see if we can improve or add anything to our offer.



"I have worked for Hungry Caterpillars for seven years. I was a young apprentice when I started, Hungry Caterpillars has given me the chance to grow and develop and allowed me to climb the ladder to a senior role as deputy manager. I learn so much from all of the team and love having my little munchkins to share my days with."

Stevie Langton, deputy manager



Celebrating together

I recently interviewed someone for a role and they told me that they had been stalking us for a while (not in a creepy way), but that they loved what we are about and what we offered and really wanted to be part of that. Ultimately, that is the aim – attracting applicants who are not just applying for a job but buying into your ethos, vision and aspirations.

Does winning awards help?

Winning awards is fabulous and has a huge impact on the morale of the team at all levels. Essentially, awards not only allow recognition of individual people and nursery teams, but also bring national recognition and a connection to the wider world of our wonderful early years community. Staff can feel undervalued and isolated - that what they are doing isn't important. Contact with the wider community helps to dispel those myths and demonstrates the hugely significant role they play in the development of young children.

Being part of the early years awards cycle is what motivated us to start our own annual in-house Superstar Awards day, and it has become an increasingly popular part of our calendar. We bring the whole company together including chefs and our maintenance team. The event (successfully) aims to recognise the part each person has played and, in particular, those that

have stood out for a particular reason. There is nothing better for team bonding than bringing the whole company together to celebrate our year and to look ahead.

The policy makers

There is no doubt that happy, valued and motivated staff are imperative to providing a great nursery and ensuring children and families are getting the best possible care and education. Without your team fully engaged and sharing your vision and goals, it is impossible to succeed in this business. However, even with the best of everything in place, recruitment is a battle and there is no easy answer.

What's really needed is a focused government strategy to attract into early years new people wanting to train in much the same way as teachers are being incentivised to train. If you speak to training providers, the number of sign-ups to Level 2 and 3 courses has plummeted with little improvement since the GCSE battle was won. The message from recruitment agencies is the same: there are very few Level 3s on the books.

If the government is serious about developing high-quality, sustainable provision with increased places for two-, three- and four-year-olds, then drastic action is needed to build the workforce for the future and make early years a valued profession within the education system. ■

- Olivia Foley is the founder and director of Hungry Caterpillar Day Nurseries, a family-run business with 11 day nurseries across West London and Buckinghamshire.

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