Evaluating a Camp's Facilities and Site

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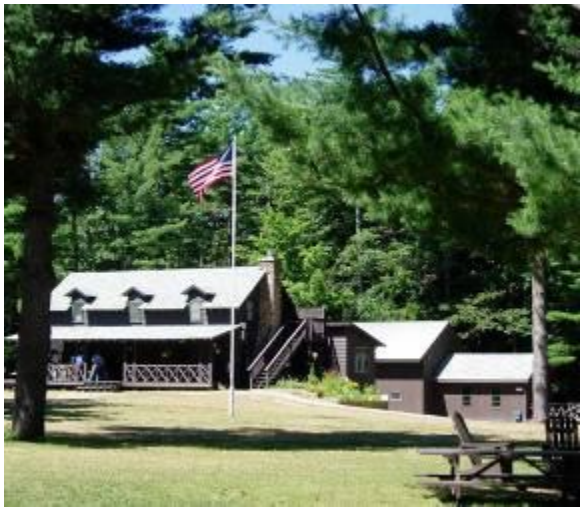
by Gary Forster

Whether you're looking at your current site to make some improvements, or evaluating a piece of property for use as a new camp, or maybe more likely visiting someone else's camp to get some "new ideas," few people can visualize the cause and effect facilities can have on outcomes. Yet our camp sites and facilities are integral to our marketing and our program. Good facilities facilitate good programs, and communicate the values of the organization.



Here's the question we should be asking: "Is this place effective at doing what parents send their kids to camps for? And if it is, what are the components that make it successful?"

Of course it has to be safe. That's number one. But you already know that, so we'll save that one for later. Let's tackle some less obvious ones first.

First impressions are almost impossible to shake if you start out wrong. That's always been true, but we have a new twist: moms, who sign 95% of camp registration forms, are much, much more risk-averse than they use to be. As a result, you're more likely to have parents want to tour your camp before making a decision, and more interested in meeting their camper's counselor than ever before. That makes it much tougher for camps that are more than a three hour drive from home to include that personal contact. You could have a successful camp anywhere, but closer to market now has a decided edge.

How difficult is it to find the camp? Are the directions easy to describe; are there directional signs that let you know you're getting close?

From studies that the American Camp Association has conducted, the number one predictor of whether a youngster will go to camp is having a parent that went to camp as a child. That means that most parents have a pre-conceived idea of what the think a camp will be like, and it's usually a romantic Disney-esque version of trees and water and fields and a flag and a rustic dining hall and cozy cabins. Whenever we contradict that image, we're setting ourselves up for scrutiny. So the quicker we can display those "camp" components to parents and campers as they arrive, the more satisfied they will be when they arrive.

Architects call this "the arrival sequence," and it's one of the most critical parts of creating a positive first impression.

Your ideal camp would have an entry gate like a national park or a ranch to drive through, wouldn't it? Because it gives such a sense of arrival, and permanence, and ownership. "You're entering a special place." Now it doesn't *have* to be an actual gate. A series of substantial signs that build anticipation will do the trick, as you wind back and forth catching teasing glimpses: maybe a few horses in a pasture; a sailboat with a colorful sail reflecting in the water; maybe a climbing tower; definitely NOT the camp maintenance yard and the dumpsters!

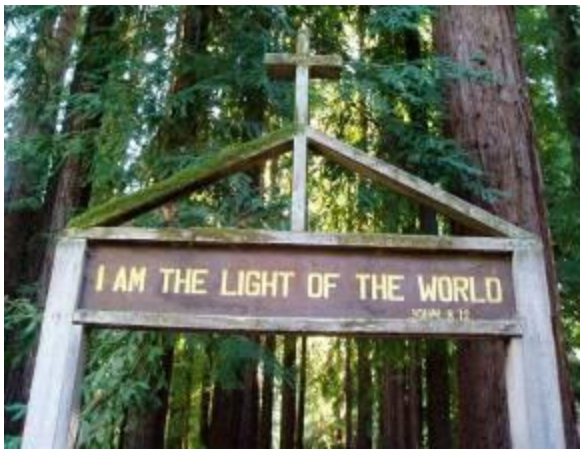
Next you'll want to know where you're going, and although signs are good, an expected view is even better. If you see the camp's flagpole and an obvious dining hall, you know you've arrived. If you see the welcoming opening of the "A-shape" of a roof gable over a wide porch you'll guess it's the camp office. Hallelujah, we made it! Then you ask "where do we park," and not before. (Most camps have an "all cars park here" sign long before you see *any* building. Like *anyone* is going to get out of their car before they know where they're going!)

That porch we saw, either on the office (our first stop) or the dining hall (and hopefully both) is an important part of the sequence. Watch what happens when people step up on the porch. The first thing they do is turn around and look at the view, because porches not only protect you from the rain and the sun, but they create a wonderful frame that actually improves any view. (That's why they didn't say "look at that view" until they were up on the porch!) The porch becomes a safe place to gather their group together, decide if they're in the right place, arrange how they look, and THEN they're ready to go inside. Architects call it a transition space, and it's works easiest when the ceiling heights are low enough that you feel the difference from outside, to a safer confined space, and then inside. Yes, porch roofs can sometimes be too high to be effective.

For people to create vivid, long-lasting memories of a camp, they need to have postcard-type image burned into their brains. If I said "Yellowstone Park" what would that image be to you? Or "Disney World?" Without those visuals, your memories of those specific places would fade. So we have to create them, just as Disney does with it's "Kodak Picture Spots" and the national parks do with scenic overlooks.

Look at any camp's original dining hall, and you'll see it was built where it had a terrific view. If you were going to find a restaurant at a resort, you'd pick the one with the great view first. But kids' camps are a little different. When kids are eating, they are oblivious to the view. But here's the important part: they spend as much time waiting outside the dining hall as they do anywhere else in camp. If we want to make a "photo spot," this should be our first choice. Can we eat outside? Can we trim trees

to make a frame of a great view? Plant the flag pole to add an axis and a bright color punctuation to make a good view better? How about comfortable chairs where adults can take in the view, a cup of coffee, and still keep an eye on the kids? Plant lots of seats for kids near the flag pole, in conversation groups, and kids will show up early for the chance to be together, and all the while imprinting your postcard view as the "album cover" of lifelong memories.



This idea of focusing the view when we've got kids gathered can work in other areas of camp, too. The chapel, the council ring, the stadium seating at the waterfront or athletic field. Stadium seating? Absolutely. Just like at the 18th green of a golf tournament, high-action places at camp are perfect for kids to meet each other while they watch from the edge of the action. A large grassy slope, some picnic tables, some large rocks, all can be gathering spots. The ideal mid-afternoon hydration break (in the Midwest we called it "Pop Stop," but thankfully more kids are drinking water now, too) or after-dinner Trading Post time would include: a picnic table for every cabin group, some pick-up games like four-square, kickball, basketball and volleyball, bouldering, skatepark…and seating around the edges for kids to gather and just watch and make new friends. And even the shy ones may eventually get enticed into trying a new sport.

Program Areas – where to invest?

We should more often make the distinction between "marketing aids" and tools for programs. If you had endless cash, there are lots of things that would be fun to have. But that's not the case. We not only have to come up with the initial purchase price, but the annual cost of upkeep, which could include inspections, new equipment, staff training, and daily supervision. And then you should make a reasonable guess as to how many hours a day it will be used, and by how many kids. If you start taking that into account you'll be amazed to see so many expensive high ropes courses and so few picnic tables and checker-boards. Yes, a tennis court or high-ropes tower looks good on a list of activities in a brochure. But do the cost-per-use test and you may find there are many more things that might get more bang for your buck.

And that leads us back to the "effectiveness" factor. Parents and kids want three primary things from camp: New Friends, New Skills, and Great Memories. It's of course more complicated than that. Parents want their kids to feel good about themselves, and that comes from having friends and feeling confident in one's abilities. Let's see how cabin placement might affect those goals.

For a family camp, adults might enjoy a remote cabin with a back porch that overlooks the view… a good place to hide. But for kids the opposite is true.

They want to be seen and see what's going on. There has to be a porch or an outdoor gathering area so they can see other kids walking by, and meet kids from other cabins. A great cabin should urge a camper to sit on the porch (or picnic table) rather inside, and from that porch invite them to engage in a pick-up activity rather than just sit and watch. These informal times are some of the most effective for building friendships.

Camp is on one level a vacation, and a vacation means a good dose of relaxing. For most everyone nothing says relaxation better than water. Just looking at it is soothing; hearing it even better. So if your site includes water views, try to take advantage of them. And if it doesn't, a view of the pool or a man-made pond is a good substitute, especially if you can add the sound of falling water from a fountain or waterfall.

Don't think I encourage kids to do nothing but sit around. (Though for the friend-making part, it's hard to beat). We'd like kids to pester *us* to go for a hike or join in an activity. For that, we need *destinations.* The easiest ones are those you can put in plain view, like those that can just be seen on the opposite side of a lake, or an overlook viewpoint. You can just imagine kids saying "let's hike to the Tipi!" or "can we go see the covered bridge! (and drop stuff off of it!") Once you've got kids started on their way, it's easier to entice them even further with signs that tease of what's "around the next bend." Mythology can be built around anything that stands out: a boulder dropped by a glacier becomes a remote playground; a huge tree can teach history lessons; an overlook can host a picnic. (Remember picnics? Before McDonald's drive-thru? Bring 'em back, blanket to sit on and all! How can kids appreciate Yogi Bear without ever knowing a pic-i-nic basket?)

A critical piece of the magic is a good name for a destination. A trickle over some rocks can be "Muskrat Falls;" a cliff can be "Coyote Howl Rock;" a campsite is "Frogtown." Don't take the job lightly, as your names can last for decades. Good names build on local history, geography and native species, and add mystery and whimsy.

Safety fist, second and third

Vehicles are the greatest danger at camps, so separating them from campers should be a priority. Just because kids have always used the same roads as your delivery trucks doesn't mean it has to be that way. Creating a series of footpaths, crosswalks and speed-bumps will be much cheaper than moving your dining hall away from its central location.

Bathrooms are seen as a safety issue for the mothers of first year campers. Central shower houses may be ideal for group supervision and interaction at camps, but mothers are concerned about their child walking alone at night to find a bathroom, and campers are rightly

unnerved by the idea of gang showers. Gang showers have to be eliminated. Now. We've been teaching kids since kindergarten that they have a right to privacy, so we can't take it away at camp. Each shower stall should have a private changing area, too.

For your youngest campers, use your newest cabins. They are the ones most likely designed with bathrooms for year-round groups. (Too often I see these cabins use for teen leaders, kids who would be happy to live anywhere just to be back at camp!)

Finally, security has moved to the front burner as an area of concern. Once, the remoteness of camp was seen as enough to keep kids safe from strangers. Now we need to be more proactive. Not only do parents expect their kids are supervised around the clock, but that access to the camp is also limited to staff and registered guests. When you take extra efforts to be safe, you have a distinction that's worth mentioning.

When visiting camps we have a rare opportunity. We can ask why a particular decision was made. But maybe more valuable, we can ask "what would you do differently next time?" Get out and visit, and be sure to ask!

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Fresh eyes see things that you've become desensitized to. On a regular basis, ask visitors (parents and camp directors are two good options) to do a quick survey for you before they leave:

Camp "first impression" Evaluation:

Quick! What were your first impressions? I'd really like to know. We can't see the forest for the trees after a while, and I'd love to hear what you have to say. Program, service, facility, etc.
Really! Let us have it!

1. What, if anything, really WOW!ed you? What would you tell the people back home about? And what specifically about it did you like?

2. If you could change or fix a few little things RIGHT AWAY, what would they be?

3. If you could change or fix one or two big things RIGHT AWAY, what would they be?

4. Anything major you think we should consider in our long-range planning? (Things we should change, things we should have?)

What are we going to do with this information? Well the things that need fixing we'll get at right away. The longer-term areas we'll collect more information on, so we're sure we make the best decisions. And the things you liked best? We'll try to do more of it!