

GROW: Marketing Ideas for Print Shops

Capturing Summer Camp Business





Kevin Majka

About the Author

Kevin Majika | InkSoft Success Squad

Kevin spent five summers as a staff member of two different Boy Scout Camps. He has attended camp for 12 years. Currently, Kevin serves as a volunteer for the Boy Scouts where he serves in a marketing capacity.

Did we mention Kevin is one of four Eagle Scouts at InkSoft?

With an estimated 12,000 summer camps attended each year by more than 11 million children and adults, you don't want to miss out on this lucrative market.

CAPTURE CAMP BUSINESS BY OFFERING SOLUTIONS TO CHALLENGES AND NOT ONLY PRINTED APPAREL.

It's that time of year when thoughts turn to the great outdoors and one of the greatest seasonal profit centers known to garment decorators: summer camps. With thousands of traditional and specialty options at local, regional and national levels featuring a multitude of activities, camps represent a potentially limitless market for logoed apparel, uniforms and more. And there's now an unprecedented number of ways to capture camp sales, but you have to do your homework.

Camps come in all shapes and sizes and getting a feel for what's out there allows you to target your efforts for maximum success. The type of camp determines volume, product and service needs and, of course, budget. It also factors into the time frame for sales.

The traditional summer camp season is from around Memorial Day to Labor Day and planning for it usually begins about 11 months out. But even as late as a month out from the first day, there still may be opportunities for sales depending on the type of camp.

Established camps, such as those sponsored by national organizations or those with a long history



(and long-time vendors) typically are more structured in their purchasing; hence they may require a longer lead time.

However, newer, smaller camps may still be getting their staff, schedule, etc. in place and may welcome your service and personal attention during what's a busy time for them and your potential competitors. A local startup might buy a month before camp begins.

Camps range from those sponsored by nationally and regionally known organizations like the Boy Scouts of America, Camp Fire and 4-H to local groups. There are overnight and day camps; youth, adult and family camps; and camps focusing on specific interests and activities from academics to photography to sports. The good news is that once you have a proven track record with one group, it can get your foot in the door with others and the going gets easier.

A good place to start getting a feel for what's out there is by checking out the camp directories online, where a search can be narrowed down by various parameters. One place to find camps is through the American Camps Association (ACA) at <http://www.acacamps.org/>.

Find camps at
<http://www.acacamps.org/>.



RESEARCH REQUIREMENTS

When considering selling to a camp, be sure to find out whether the sponsoring organization has any specific vendor requirements. Be particularly aware of and respect licensing. Many camps have national affiliations and closely protect their brand and identity.

In some cases, you may have to purchase the license to produce the product, which can be a deal-breaker before you leave the gate. Do your research and make sure you have express permission to print copyrighted materials. Camps vary with respect to restrictions on their branding, but it's something that can impact how you want to proceed.



WHAT TO SELL

Just as there are many types of camps, there is a wide range of potential merchandise you can offer. It can be a selling point to specialize in certain types of items such as apparel, but the key is offering the right mix in terms of garments and accessories.

For example, don't discount offering specialty items relating to specific camp needs like flashlights, water bottles, lanyards and tennis visors. If you are selling from a web store, these can easily be added even if the camp itself will be filling those orders.

In developing your product mix, think beyond "summer camp T-shirts." A good place to start is by looking at where and how camps use logoed apparel and accessories. In addition to basic categories like campers' T-shirts and caps and staff uniforms, there are opportunities relating to special teams and events, commemorative and recognition items, souvenirs and alumni/family apparel. You also should find out if there are any needs for banners and signage in your quest to be a one-stop shop.

A good place to start is by looking at the general camp process. Where and how do camps use products you can supply? From the time campers get on the bus to



when they divide up into subgroups, there is a need for ID shirts for them and for staff.

When they get there, there will be things that were forgotten or need to be replaced, as well as events and activities that could be promoted and memorialized with apparel or awards. And before camp even starts—and after it ends—there are opportunities in helping to build anticipation and remember the experience.

When putting together a package to present to a specific camp, checking out its schedule of activities will likely spark product ideas or at least enable you to create virtual or physical samples that are targeted to its particular program. A combination of offerings that includes apparel and nonapparel items with mockups of the camp's logo/branding will showcase your capabilities and make your company stand out.

Too many print shops undervalue and grossly underestimate the selling opportunities available from summer camps and their participants. Getting into this space is profitable, fun and a great way to diversify your business.

INCREASE YOUR VALUE BY OFFERING SOLUTIONS

The key thing to remember is to be solutions-driven. Find out what the camp already does and figure out how to make things easier for them. Typically, a camp has a budget, a time line and a list of campers. If you can take service to the next level, both in terms of the product you can provide and how you provide it, it will open the door to being a partner as well as a vendor.

Making things easier for camp customers ranges from streamlining ordering, personalization, payment and shipping to presenting ways they can tap into wider markets and raise funds for camp improvements, projects, scholarships, etc. Online sales provide a powerful tool for meeting the needs of your camp customers and simplifying and enhancing their merchandise sales to campers.

Typically, camps are going to be comparing several vendors for product, cost and service, and hidden benefits, such as the capability to provide an online store, can introduce a new variable to the mix that can give you an edge.

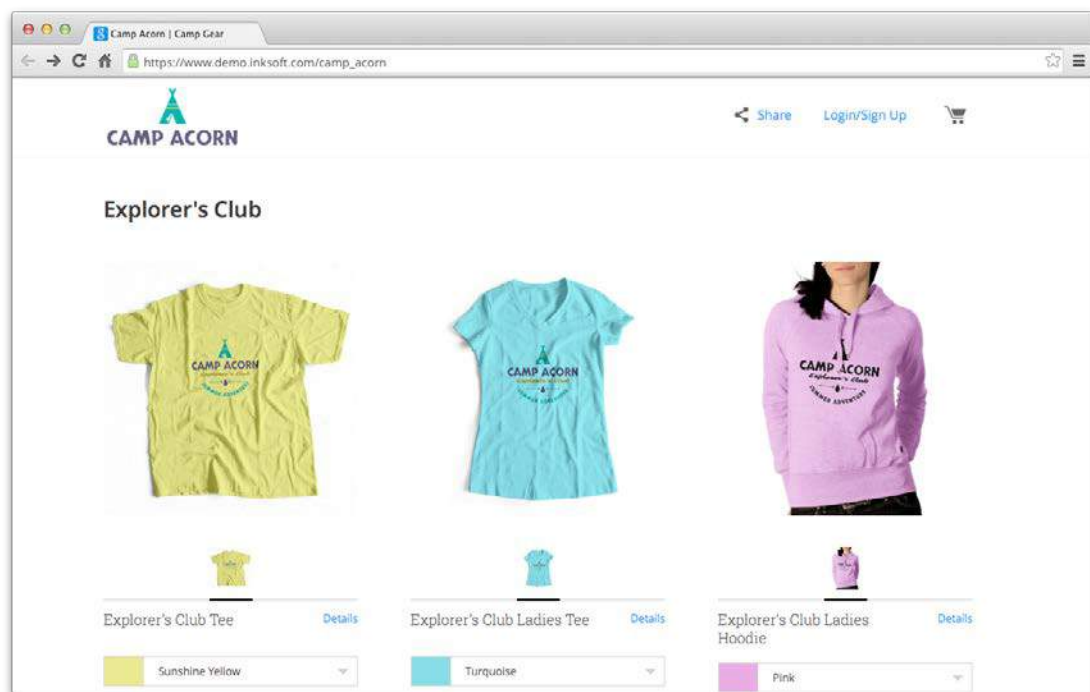
THINK BEYOND APPAREL

A lot of camps may not have even thought about selling online. In addition to eliminating the paperwork and handling the ordering process for them, selling through a web store allows for easy preseason sales. It also makes it cost-effective for camps to offer required equipment such as fishing poles, mosquito netting or binoculars.

The organization does not have pay for merchandise in advance and have it sitting on a shelf until the first day. Campers can order and pay in full online without dealing with deposits and have the whole package waiting when they get to camp.

It's a way of helping the camp sell what it already sells through a simpler solution. Selling online also enables the organization to extend its sales season. Post-camp sales are great for clearing out dated merchandise that can be pitched to alumni as collectibles.

Selling online can provide an edge in terms of preprints and personalization as well. In general, the best mix is a combination of preprinted designs along with some items that can be personalized or customized.



OFFER PERSONALIZATION OPTIONS

Camps can have the option of offering personalized apparel—or even custom commemorative items, such as a T-shirt with a camper’s original design for an art or photography camp. And, depending on how the web store is set up, allowing camp-goers to design their own printed goods can have particular appeal, with the many interest-based clubs and programs often offered.

This enables campers to show their identification with a group and express their camp pride in a unique way. The camp also can offer items geared to specific teams or programs. The key here is artwork and making it easy for the camp to provide it.

Oftentimes, the camp or subgroup has the vision, but not the time or skills to create a professional look; enabling them to do this with minimal effort can go a long way toward making the sale. Again, you’re offering a solution.

Independent of actual camp sales, being able to assist camps with fundraising is another online service you can offer. Many camps serve underprivileged youth or subsidize the cost of the camp for those in need. Fundraising web stores are a great way to raise money and awareness and help promote the camp with printed goods. They also can raise money for special projects, events and teams, and sometimes provide a way to deplete “aged inventory” from the camp store.



GETTING STARTED

Once you've identified some potential camp customers, you'll want to seek out the program manager or camp coordinator from camp web sites or social media channels. A quick phone call is often the most effective initial contact because it gives the message that you seriously want to do business, rather than just introducing yourself in an email.

It also begs a response. Sending a mailer a month or so before calling also may be helpful, provided it's a professional, well-designed one that won't get lost in the shuffle.

Another way to introduce yourself is by getting a sponsor-level table at community events or open houses presented by organizations that sponsor camps. A small donation can be a good investment in creating name recognition and getting exposure in the arena.

Set up a meeting well in advance of the camp season, and be ready with a simple, well-organized presentation. As with a web store, you'll want to showcase your capabilities and services with an assortment that includes standard camp apparel, but also some products that show you can do a little something more.

Possibilities range from office items such as framed prints of scenic camp views and “dad and lad” photo frames to staff and camper name tags.

You’ll want to use the good-better-best approach in your presentation and in your product mix. It makes sense to offer enough things at a variety of price points where you can satisfy any kind of shopper, but also not be stuck with a bunch of stuff at the end of the year.

As a rule, camps require durable garments, but show them the options you’re able to provide, e.g., printing, embroidery, etc. A good way to do this is by using a sample web store where you can not only display product and decorating options, but also the design, ordering and fulfillment services you can provide.

The camp scene may not be exactly as you experienced it growing up, but it’s still a huge part of the American summer. And with the increasing trend toward more localized camps and the growing number of special-interest programs, it’s a market with opportunities for almost every decorator.

Online summer camp stores provide printing businesses with a new and powerful way to maximize selling potential that camps offer.



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