



STAYING CONNECTED

The keys to off-season communication



I had a best friend in high school who loved to journal. Whenever she had a great day or amazing experience, she would call it a “journally” day, meaning she would write about and hopefully remember it for years to come. ▶



But can a touchpoint as simple as a hand-written birthday card really help with camper and staff retention? Absolutely.

As camp leaders, we strive to create “journally” days that our camp family will never forget. But let’s face it, not long after campers return to school and summer staff have returned to their colleges or jobs, those wonderful memories of camp start to fade away.

The demands and distractions of life at school or work can make even the best camp experiences distant memories. That’s one reason why trying to cultivate lasting relationships during the fleeting weeks of camp each summer isn’t enough to build true community and keep campers and staff coming back next season.

So how do we keep the joy and excitement of camp forefront in the minds of our campers and staff when they aren’t *at* camp? The answer sounds simple, but it takes planning and intentionality — staying connected. When you stay connected to your camp family throughout the off-season, you keep the magic of camp alive. And that’s one way to boost your retention rates for staff and campers.

Let’s look at four keys to effective year-round communication with campers, staff and community that will keep them returning summer after summer.

Key 1: Communicate Year-round

Your camp may only run during summer months, but your communication can’t be seasonal. Creating unique touchpoints, whether through social media, blogs, print resources or in-person gatherings, is essential to making camp something more than just a week-long experience.

And that’s what potential staff and parents are looking for — something enduring and impactful. They’re looking for a place where leadership invests in their staff and camper relationships and growth long-term, not just for a week or season.

Catherine Elbaum, staff director at Camp Greystone (Zirconia, North Carolina), said that one of Greystone’s most successful means of staying connected throughout the year is *Sparks* magazine, a print publication sent to campers and staff in the fall and spring. Not only does it include pictures and stories from camp, but it also communicates to campers, staff and parents any camp updates and upcoming opportunities to stay involved in the camp.

“We look at the year ahead and want to make sure we’re touching base with our campers and staff at a regular cadence,” Elbaum explained. “In addition to *Sparks* magazine, we have a big Christmas mailing for our campers. It’s usually a Christmas card and a small gift.”

Elbaum said they also send a spring mailing “to enrolled campers to get them excited about camp.” In the past, they’ve sent things including an “infographic poster or flipbook that provides both campers and parents with details about important dates and what to expect at camp this year.” ▶



Photo courtesy of Word of Life Fellowship

Key 2: Provide Opportunities for One-on-one Connection

One of the best things about camp is the chance for staff to connect with individual campers. Cabin counselors become friends, leaders and mentors to their campers. Camp becomes a place where one-on-one discipleship happens every day. And those staff-camper friendships don't have to stop when the season ends. You can provide opportunities for year-round connection, which keeps campers and staff invested in their camp buddies.

Greg Shaffer, program director at Black Lake Bible Camp (Olympia, Washington), shared that his cabin counselors take a few minutes at the end of each week of camp to write birthday cards for their campers, which are mailed throughout the year. Shaffer said birthday cards are a quick and easy way for staff to stay connected with campers.

"The birthday card doesn't have to be a long message, but it's a personal touch because staff will write about specific things they remember about the camper and the week they had," Shaffer explained. "It's an easy way to remind the campers about camp and something that can be done before staff leave at the end of summer." (It's also a task that's built into the staff's role and doesn't require more of them once their summer job has ended.)

But can a touchpoint as simple as a hand-written birthday card really help with camper and staff retention? Absolutely. As Shaffer explained, "We've had parents email us after their kid received a card and say how great it is that the cabin leaders care about their kids so much."

Parents notice when staff continue to uplift and encourage campers after camp ends. "I think what sets us apart as a Christian camp," said Shaffer, "is our intentional relationship with the kids, and not just making sure they have fun, and staff and parents can see that."

Key 3: Don't Wait Until Camp Starts to Build Community

Finding and hiring staff that fit the camp culture you've created can feel like finding a needle in a haystack. But one way you can attract the kind of staff that will invest in your campers and stay engaged with camp is to build a camp community that stays plugged into camp year-round.

Taylor Mugge, summer ministries manager at Hidden Acres Christian Center (Dayton, Iowa), wanted to see his staff grow in their walk with Christ during the off-season. To ensure staff continue to learn and stay connected with the camp's discipleship goals, Hidden Acres' leadership team started a Zoom class this year called the "Spring Equipping Class."

"We were brainstorming about how to give our staff more theological depth ... we obviously give our staff theological training before camp starts, but it's not enough," Mugge said. "We felt like we could do a better job preparing our staff for discipling our campers, so we came up with a theological book study over Zoom."

Mugge explains that these optional Zoom meetings encourage staff to read and discuss theological topics, but they've also become another avenue for staff to keep in touch with one another.

"We meet for one hour, one night a week throughout the spring, and it's another touchpoint that keeps those ties strong with our staff," said Mugge. "It's a fun way to get the ball rolling on communication and to equip and train them before they ever step foot on campus." Mugge encourages all staff to attend, but for anyone who misses, Zoom meetings are recorded and posted on the camp staff's online hub.

Another way Hidden Acres is planning to build community throughout the off-season is by reaching out and partnering with local churches to build awareness of the camp. "We write our own curriculum for each summer, and we'll be offering it to our local churches as free Sunday School or small-group lessons soon," Mugge said. "It's a good way to share what we're all about while continuing to support campers, reinforce what they've heard about the gospel all summer and tie that camp experience to their church experience."

Mugge and the Hidden Acres' leadership team hope that by reiterating the camp's biblical lessons at their church small groups, the transition from the camp "high" back to school and daily life will be a little less spiritually jarring.

Another way they reinforce the camp experience after summer is over is to send parents a Spotify playlist with songs featured at camp, whether played at chapel or during an outdoor activity. "We encourage parents to play it at home or in the car. Campers can teach the motions to their parents and relive the best summer memories through music, [which] helps keep that interest — camp spark — when they go home." ▶



Photo courtesy of Sunset Lake



Photo courtesy of Word of Life Fellowship

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Let's Get Together

Connecting with staff in-person, off-season

Gen Z, those tech-savvy college kids who probably make up most of your summer staff, are known for being digital natives, but that's probably one reason they prefer to build relationships in person. They're surrounded by screens and digital messaging in school and at work, so when they find a community where they can build real, meaningful friendships in person, it's something special. An email, blog or chat app can never replace an in-person gathering when you're trying to keep staff returning year after year.

Program Director Greg Shaffer shares one of the ways Black Rock Bible Camp (Olympia, Washington) is trying to better communicate with staff during the off-season — by hosting an in-person staff reunion in late winter. "We haven't held a staff reunion for several years, but it was really successful when we did. This year, we're going to try to recreate that — a time when staff can come to camp, hang out and share stories."

It's the feeling of being valued and sharing a purpose with fellow staff members that keeps people returning to camp year after year. Shaffer said he hopes an in-person reunion will remind former staff of what God has done at camp and how He's worked through staff to bless campers. "Hopefully, they'll be reminded that this is what camp feels like, and they'll want to come back."

Black Rock Bible Camp also hosts two weekend-long winter camps in January and February, which gives Shaffer another chance to bring his summer staff back to camp for a fun off-season camp experience. "The big thing for me is to get them in camp mode again for a few days. Sometimes it's hard to coordinate, but it's a good way to stay in contact and recruit summer staff at the same time."

Getting honest feedback from your staff, campers and parents is vital for retention.

Key 4: Use Off-season Communication to Improve Camp Experience

Communication is a two-way street, and as camp leaders, it's important to give our campers and staff off-season opportunities to communicate back to us. If retention isn't a big enough motivator to stay connected throughout the year, receiving valuable feedback about camper and staff experiences should be.

Many camps, including the one where I volunteer, conduct staff exit interviews to receive helpful feedback. Staff need to know that their input is valued and that camp leadership wants to make next summer an even better experience for them. Some camps send an additional follow-up to staff six months after the exit interview via email. This provides an opportunity to find out who intends to return next summer and what questions or concerns they may have about returning.

At Hidden Acres, Mugge said part of their recruiting strategy is to make sure that staff and campers have an unforgettable camp experience. "We want our staff to have such a great experience that they want to come back as long as they can. We have a motto about retention: 'The best recruiting for next summer is this summer,'" Mugge explained. "The better experience they have, the more likely they are to come back." That's why getting honest feedback from your staff, campers and parents is vital for retention.

You can also give campers the chance to provide feedback in fun and creative ways. Campers love being reminded of fun memories of camp, so creating surveys or questionnaires featuring camp photos and memories serves a dual function — they generate informative feedback from campers while also serving as a touchpoint to get campers excited about the upcoming season. ■



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Photo courtesy of Camp Lebanon