



A LANGUAGE SHIFT

Rethinking how you talk about camp to constituents

Is the way you're currently talking about camp truly representing all camp has to offer? Unfortunately, something is often missing in how we talk about camp, whether our message is aimed at potential camper families, new staff or donors. It's not that we're saying anything wrong, but it's time we look at *how* we talk about camp so our messaging stays relevant for the current generations and the culture in which we live. ▶

The things most camps currently focus on in their marketing efforts are good. Camp is fun. It's a place to go to escape the stresses of everyday life. Going to camp can help someone discover new things about themselves and be an important part of spiritual formation. However, there's more to the story. These current narratives are missing certain aspects of camp that we need to share so potential new staff, camper families and donors can better understand all that camp has to offer.

Rachael Botting and Dr. Rob Ribbe of HoneyRock (Three Lakes, Wisconsin) presented a seminar in December 2022 at Together, CCCA's national conference, titled "Watch Your Language: How to Talk About Camp to Potential Staff and Camper Families." They hoped to help shift the current language used when we talk about camp.

Botting shares the reason behind their seminar, saying, "The narrative of camp doesn't seem to be accurately portraying what is actually happening at camp. Additionally, the way we talk about camp isn't always relevant to the needs, desires and interests of the people we are trying to impact." Botting explains, "When doing research for my dissertation, I was shocked to realize how much camps aren't saying about the faith formation that's happening there."

She's also concerned about how camp is perceived and discussed in larger spheres, such as academia and the church, when it comes to faith development and spiritual formation. In her research, camp was often viewed as an afterthought rather than an important piece of an individual's faith formation.

When reviewing a variety of camp websites, we found that words such as "fun," "good time" and "get-away" were often used, while words like "formational," "deep discipleship" and "life transformation" were harder to find. "There seems to be an emphasis on fun and relationships and getting away," Ribbe says. "All of that is good and true, but there's so much more going on in Christian camps, and it seems like we could say more to our constituents."

As Botting and Ribbe considered how camps and conference centers could better communicate about all that goes on at camp, they came up with four "from-to" statements that can help us effectively communicate all our camps and conference centers have to offer. "We're not saying that any of the phrases that camps are currently using are bad; it's simply the ways that they are used and prioritized that we would encourage [people] to consider," Botting shares.

From Escaping to Equipping

One of the many amazing things about camp is that it offers a retreat from everyday life. Unplugging from technology and leaving a busy routine filled with a list of activities is incredibly helpful as we take time to connect with God, others and ourselves. However, how we talk about this aspect of "getting away" is crucial.

"Often, the message is 'get away from the noise, the busyness, the rush, the craziness,' which is good. We need places of peace and renewal and recalibration, but we ultimately get away to be equipped to be more effective in our permanent setting," Botting says. "Rather than the language of 'get away for the sake of getting away,' let's consider using the language of 'get away for the purpose of being equipped and strengthened to go back and have an impact.'" ▶



“The story that camp is trying to tell isn’t always being heard correctly because the narrative doesn’t portray what is actually happening at camp.” —Rachael Botting, HoneyRock



Photo courtesy of Word of Life Fellowship

“Why are we communicating in the ways we are? As we communicate, do those we are reaching think our mission is simply to have fun or will they know it’s something deeper?”
—Rob Ribbe, HoneyRock



From Fun to Formation

One of the appealing aspects of camp (especially for kids) is that there is plenty of fun every day. Campers see opportunities to participate in thrilling camp games, practice archery, zipline, swim and ride horses, which gets them excited for camp. Counselors can use these fun experiences to connect with campers and share the gospel. Fun is an important aspect of camp; however, let's consider how we can communicate the meaningful purpose behind the fun at our camps and conference centers.

"I know camps are doing faith formation. I know camps are focusing on developing lifelong Christians, but they're not talking about that," Botting shares. "Instead, they're talking exclusively about fun and games. Let's move from fun-focused to discipleship-focused. Let's move from fun for the sake of fun to fun for the sake of formation." "In other words," says Ribbe, "is fun the end or a means to a much greater end?"

From Independent Organization to Partnership Organization

Are we talking about camp programs as if camp functions in a silo rather than viewing our ministry as a piece of a partnership? As camps and conference centers, we get to partner with work that is already taking place through the efforts of parents, colleges and churches. Ribbe and Botting pose a few questions to reflect on as you focus on viewing your organization as a partnership organization.

How do we help parents understand what camp actually does? Ribbe shares that HoneyRock hosts a family day for the last half-day of camp so parents can understand HoneyRock's vision, share their hopes for their child's experience at camp and meet individually with their child's camp counselor. What resources or processes do you have in place to tell parents the whole story (beyond the marketing copy)?

How can camps enhance what colleges are trying to do as they work to turn students into leaders? Consider how your camp or conference can partner with the colleges your summer staff attend so they can get the most out of internship experiences. Make sure colleges understand the actual takeaways students get as camp staff members. Wrangling horses or working in a kitchen doesn't only involve those tasks. Every team member is gaining skills in leadership, mentoring skills, problem-solving, relational dynamics and so much more.

What does it mean to be a parachurch ministry and walk alongside the work happening in churches? Botting encourages us to consider what it might look like for camps to have a "youth night," where local pastors who have members of their youth ministry attending could come to camp for a night to connect with their campers and hear how they're doing. How can you partner with area churches and youth groups to further the depth of ministry taking place on your property and theirs? ►



Photo courtesy of Camp Pondo

“Rather than the language of ‘get away for the sake of getting away,’ let’s consider using the language of ‘get away for the purpose of being equipped and strengthened to go back and have an impact.’”

—Rachael Botting, HoneyRock

From The Individual to The Community

Discussion about creating communities of belonging is very common these days. While individualism is certainly still rampant, there is increasing awareness of the ways in which we are impacted and shaped by the communities and places that we are a part of. The way we talk about camp should reflect that shift.

“How we talk about camp in terms of *individual* impact versus *communal* impact matters,” Botting shares. “When camp started in the early 1900s, the narrative was ‘come and conquer yourself, find yourself and develop your character.’ I’m not saying any of that is bad, but the cultural narrative now is more communal and less individual-focused. Let’s shift our messaging to a call of ‘come and be a part of a community’ rather than an individualistic perspective.”

■ ■ ■

As you seek to communicate the value of camp more effectively to prospective camper families, potential staff and donors, start with these “from-to” statements. How could you use these statements to revise marketing materials? How can these statements enhance the way your seasonal and year-round staff communicate about camp?

“Don’t forget to ask ‘why?’” Ribbe advises. “Why are we communicating in the ways we are? As we communicate, do those we are reaching think our mission is simply to have fun or will they know it’s something deeper?” Ribbe continues, “Our mission isn’t just to have people at camp — it’s something more — so don’t forget to prioritize your mission as you communicate.” ■



McKenna Reding serves as the marketing/communications specialist for CCCA. In this role, she provides project management and content development and is the editor of Flint & Steel, Section President’s Briefing and InSide CCCA. McKenna is also the photo editor for InSite magazine. Attending and serving at Riverside Bible Camp developed a passion for camping ministry in McKenna. She earned a bachelor’s degree in marketing from the University of Northern Iowa and currently lives in Cedar Falls, Iowa, with her husband, AJ. In her free time, McKenna enjoys drinking a good cup of coffee, playing the card game Dutch Blitz and spending time with friends and family.