

AT A CLICK

Websites are a key marketing tool for most nursery chains. **Annette Rawstrone** explains why and looks at how it's done.

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An internet presence is regarded as essential for the majority of businesses and nursery groups are no exception. The 20 largest chains all have dedicated websites and a click through the Nursery Chains directory reveals that most of the others do too.

“Nursery websites have really taken off in the past three to four years as a marketing tool,” says Melissa Kao, company director of NurseryCam. “We have got people coming to us to design a website because they feel they'll lose out to other local nurseries if they do not have a web presence. But nursery chains tend to be more business-minded and are more aware of the technology and sales channels than individual nurseries. A lot of nursery chains have had websites for many years and are now updating their sites.”

Treetops Private Day Nurseries' website is an “invaluable tool”, according to marketing manager Helen Bower. She says, “It is the first thing that busy working mums and dads look at to get a feel for the company. The website is about educating people to understand the nurseries' ethos. There is also information about where the individual nurseries are located, career opportunities in the company and information on the company as a whole. We can give all that at the click of a button.”

ONLINE

Before the internet age parents did all their childcare research at local authority to get telephone lists. Now websites are the first source of information for interested parents. “Most people look for anything from a plumber to a nursery on the internet now - I can't remember the last time I used the Yellow Pages,” says Kids Inc Nurseries financial director Balvinder Kalsi. “Almost three-quarters of our new parents say that they looked up the nursery on the internet. Finding the nursery group website is second only being recommended by parents.”

Toad Hall Nursery Group has had a website for less than a year and it already generates approximately 22 per cent of the chain's requests for information. Leapfrog Day Nurseries aims to achieve an average of 5,000 individual visits to its website from different people each week. Director Nigel Moon says, “It is a really important part of our marketing armoury and delivers a lot of enquiries.”

Through monitoring traffic on nursery websites, NurseryCam has found that a lot of parents do their childcare research at night. “Ten o'clock at night is the peak hour,” says Melissa Kao. “Of course, nursery managers are not on call through the evening so the site makes it possible for the nursery to do the marketing out of hours. Parents have a lot of time to browse during the evening and go to a lot of pages such as the facilities, fees, philosophy, curriculum and link through to the Ofsted report. They also like to request or download a prospectus online. Parents also like to use the websites to arrange a visit to the nursery.”

Many chains' websites have a home page to that groups all the nurseries together and then incorporates links through to the nurseries, so that each can give the browsing parent an idea of its individual character.

BY DESIGN

Treetops designed its website so that information is easy to read and access. “It is a very simple site, not over the top, because the more complicated and flashy a site then the longer it takes to download information which can be off-putting,” explains Helen Bower. “I believe the key to a good website is one that is clean, crisp and easy to navigate.”

When designing its website Kids Inc Nurseries studied other nursery chains' sites and decided on a different approach - even including pictures of nursery pets! - which contributed to the site winning Nursery World's Nursery Website of the Year 2005. Balvinder Kalsi says, “The majority of nursery sites give a lot of information about the company and head office but not much about the individual nurseries. We have taken the opposite approach because parents want to know who will be caring for their child, who is in charge of their child's nursery and what it looks like. They do not care about the corporate level. We also wanted to make the site personal to existing parents so they can keep in touch. It is an informal and personal website.”

Consumer first impressions count a lot, according to Melissa Kao. "If a nursery group does not improve its website and it looks old fashioned then parents can have the impression that the nursery is the same. Not updating fees and details such as phone numbers is also a big mistake," she says, "It affects the selling point of the nursery. If a nursery group does not care enough to do the website well then parents can doubt the quality of the childcare service."

Leapfrog's Nigel Moon says, "It is our goal to keep the website as current as we can and we do small updates pretty much every day. Content management and updating copy and pictures is done in-house by the marketing team. If there is a big change to be made, such as re-designing a page, then the web designers help us with that."

Keeping the website current is a joy and a battle but the more we put in then the more we get out. There is a definite business heed so it is important to invest the time."

CASE STUDY: LEAPFROG DAY NURSERIES

Leapfrog's website was relaunched this spring when the chain rebranded because it was felt the site had become confusing following the merging of different nursery groups.

Director Nigel Moon says, "The website enhances the values of our brand - that we are an open, caring company with children and parent at the heart." It has four main targets:

- **Parents** – to interest new people in Leapfrog and to keep existing parents informed
- **Third party companies** who may be interested in Leapfrog. "We want third parties to be able to find out information and contact us through the site and we are looking to exploit this more," says Mr Moon.
- **Staff** – both information for current staff and recruitment opportunities
- **Corporate customers and childcare voucher business** – "It is important that users of the vouchers and those that use the schemes have access to the site."

To make the site easier to navigate, the number of tabs on the home page has been reduced from around 16 to eight. The language is simple and the aim is to keep the site looking clean and modern, but not clinical.

"The website gives people a clear feeling for what to expect when they go to the nursery - the look and feel of the nurseries and what happens there," says Mr Moon, "It is like a window into the nursery. In fact, we have a video on the site which is a nice touch. We produced a DVD and put it on to add more background to what we do. It also gives the site a more modern air."

"There are also lots of nice photographs and we need to keep upgrading these at a local nursery level and make sure they go on the nursery pages so the parents get the right impression."

In the future, there are plans to develop a staff intranet. "There are a lot of important messages and training information that could usefully appear on an intranet. But at the moment there are the issues of nursery nurses getting access to computers - they only have access to one or two computers in the nurseries," says Mr Moon.

"We have done quite a lot of work on the website over the last six months and every time we will do more. There is a lot of practice outside our business for us to understand and learn from other markets, so that we can improve on what we do." ■