

The Spike of Suc

A tale of brilliant opportunity and sage marketing

by Mark P. Fisher

Wallace was more than successful. As a director, he loved his job because of the transformations in the lives of his campers.

But it hadn't always been that way. He could still remember when camp always had too many empty beds and his life was filled with playing catch-up, reacting to emergencies, and worrying about payroll and board meetings. He could recall how the marketing and communication efforts of the camp had lagged far behind before an unusual object invaded his life.

More clearly, Wallace could remember that life-altering Wednesday night.

Pay Dirt

It happened quite unexpectedly as he traveled in an 18-year-old, beat-up, donated 15-passenger van on the way back to camp from shopping at Sam's Club for the weekend guest group food.

The rural road was dark and empty when he heard the tire blow. Relieved that he was only doing 35, Wallace pulled over and muttered, "Great, the spare is probably flat, too—if it's even there." The flashlight in the glove compartment was dead, so he used his cell phone to barely illuminate his way to the hissing rear right tire.

Embedded in the nearly bald tire was a railroad spike. Apparently, he had dislodged it as he ran over the long-since abandoned railroad tracks just a half-mile back. In total frustration, the weary camp director yanked the spike out of the tire.

But just as Wallace was about to heave it into the woods, he stopped. He did not know why, but he thought he had heard a voice—or maybe it was the wind. It sounded like one word: "Look."

Exhausted from his 14 days of non-stop work, he turned toward the woods, squinting his eyes to see where the voice came from. Nothing was there. He looked down in his hands at the spike. It was smooth and shiny. When he opened the van door, the overhead light caught the spike just right. Although it was a bit darkened by the years, it was clearly gold.

Later, after some research, Wallace discovered that indeed it was no ordinary spike. It was the last spike, which had been driven into the tracks many years ago to celebrate the completion of the railroad. And it was worth thousands of dollars.

Golden Opportunity

The days that followed were a blur: newspaper reporters, television interviews, and bank appraisals—plus that guest group. Wallace set his sights on what this golden spike might bring him and his camp of many woes.

But the spike was just a clue—a compass of sorts to a much bigger treasure. As the director was becoming consumed with the spike, he stumbled across a stack of camper registrations and decision cards in a back office. Excited to share the good news with his campers, Wallace asked a camp secretary to enter all those names and addresses into the database.

Nearly two weeks later, two summers' worth of campers and camper parents

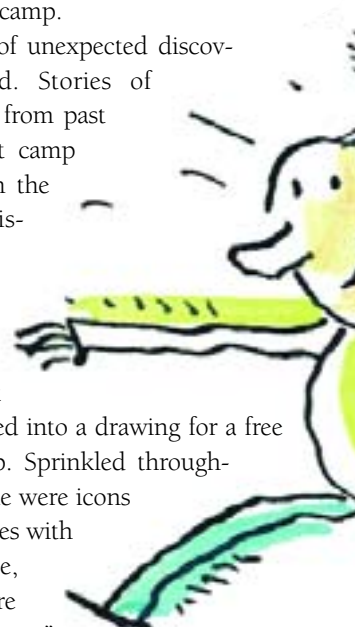
received an excited letter from Wallace. It told of the flat tire, the spike, and next summer's camp theme, "Hidden Treasures." It even suggested that if parents wanted to see the golden spike, they could log on to the camp's website for pictures and press releases.

Good News

Before long, the news spread as past campers and their parents told friends how the golden spike story had inspired them. The website could hardly contain the traffic.

Wallace hired a professional web and marketing company to redesign the tired old site. The company included numerous pictures, not only of the golden spike, but also of campers enjoying programs. It added a blog section where people could tell their own stories of hidden treasures they found at camp.

Headlines of unexpected discoveries emerged. Stories of changed lives from past experiences at camp overflowed on the blogs. Submissions of old camp pictures and personal stories were sent in to be entered into a drawing for a free week of camp. Sprinkled throughout the website were icons of golden spikes with headlines like, "Discover More Hidden Treasure."



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Soon, his tiny team at camp caught his excitement. Meetings were largely focused on encouraging more campers to come back, getting new ones, and sharing stories of past customers with potential guests and donors. The director decided he would schedule a weekly meeting to keep his and his team's eyes on camp registration. The meeting, "spike management," was a spin off a concept called "yield management" he had culled from the book, *Nuts!* (Broadway, 1998).

Each week, the spike management team reviewed a new form, the status report. It kept track of registrations, budget, and goals for the future, and also compared

current operations to the previous year.

The team members talked about how they could maximize their camp. They celebrated successes with Starbucks Frappuccinos, they held funeral ceremonies for dying events that had outlived their purposes, and they began to combine guest groups on the same weekends as camp-sponsored programs. They brainstormed marketing and communications ideas to get more campers. They also discovered a simple little secret: They could

Illustration Works

The links provided easy ways to sign up for the Hidden Treasures summer as well as for weekend camps and rental spaces.

Creative Juices

As web traffic increased, Wallace discovered something else. His excitement grew. His passion increased for sharing the stories, not just of the spike, but of the constant flow of encouraging changed lives accounts that were pouring into the website, as well. (He made sure that each camper who submitted a story and picture had agreed that the ministry could share his or her information.)



In CCCA's Store

► *Beyond the Core: Expand Your Market without Abandoning Your Roots* by Chris Zook

► *Selling the Invisible* by Harry Beckwith

► *Writing & Implementing a Marketing Plan* by Richard Gerson

On the Internet

► Sound Word's CCCA audio recordings, "Breakthrough Thinking," "Drowning in a Sea of Communication" (parts one and two), "Market Research Made Easy," "Turning Empty Beds into Revenue and Ministry" www.soundword.com

Related Resources

have fun while they got work done simply by looking at things differently.

On Schedule

The team meetings prompted the realization in Wallace that the camp's communications and marketing up to that time had been haphazard. On a small piece of paper, he wrote: "Ministry only happens at our camp when people are here."

That little phrase drove him to create a marketing calendar. He outlined what his camp would do month by month:

May

- Design a guest group postcard to fill fall and winter dates.
- Rent a mailing list of all the churches within a three-hour drive.

June

- Mail guest group postcards to past groups and the new list.
- Hand out next summer's brochures to all campers.

June–August

- Create great, life-changing programs.
- Offer incentives for campers to rebook while they are happy and still at camp.
- Enter all campers into a database.
- Post pictures of campers online.
- Process e-mails to campers from parents, accompanied by a bounce-back reminder of all the other opportunities the family can enjoy at camp.

September

- Participate in three conventions that have church leaders in attendance.
- Speak at four churches about how amazing things can happen when we stop and listen to God.
- Mail next summer's brochures to our growing mailing list.

October

- Meet with four Christian radio stations to discuss trades for advertising.

- Begin a Google keyword search campaign.
- Optimize website for searches.

As Wallace developed the calendar, it began to guide his efforts. He tested his ideas. He hired marketing professionals for insights, a video crew to produce a promotional DVD, and graphic artists to spruce up the camp's tired image. He watched his new, energized life unfold in front of him, his staff, and his board.

And what of the golden spike?

He never sold it. Instead, it sits proudly in each meeting—a constant reminder that problems could be great opportunities if we would just stop and look at them a little differently. ■



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