Pitching Camp:  
The Hidden Benefits of Summer Camps

There are many things to consider when deciding whether a summer camp program is right for your museum. Below is a list of some of the challenges that Strawbery Banke has faced while operating summer camps and things to consider for each one.

I. Space - Where will the campers be during the camp?

Choose one place where everyone can gather in the morning. It should be close to parking so parents can easily drop off their kids. You may want to choose somewhere with space to draw or play a game while you wait for the whole camp to arrive.

An engaging camp usually involves a variety of activities and movement throughout the day. Find a few different spaces where activities can take place (inside, outside, in an exhibit/gallery, at another nearby institution) so the campers aren’t staying in the same location all day.

Your space must have restrooms nearby. It is best if they are located in a place where the kids can access them on their own without needing a staff person to walk them there.

When an activity is to take place outdoors, prepare a backup plan in case of inclement weather. Perhaps switch your agenda for one day with another that is focused more indoors. Choose another activity that can be run in an inside space if an outside location is too wet/cold. Don’t be afraid to go outside in the rain. Ask kids to bring raingear and have an adventure.

If it is a full day camp, the campers will need a place to eat lunch. If possible, choose an outdoor location where the group can run around and get some energy out.

Choose spaces that comfortably fit the maximum number of campers that might be in your group. When people are spending several hours together, having space to spread out is important.
II. Staff – How many staff do you need?

You need to check with your state to see if there are any laws/rules pertaining to day camp programs. If so, you will need to follow their guidelines. ([https://www.acacamps.org/resource-library/state-laws-regulations](https://www.acacamps.org/resource-library/state-laws-regulations))

If your state does not have licensing regulations then a minimum, two staff should be involved with a camp group in case of illness, emergencies, bathroom breaks, behavior issues, set up and clean up. If the camp is going to be project-based with a lot of crafts, there will need to be enough hands to help the campers so no one is sitting too long and getting bored.

The age of the campers matters too. Kids under 8 can need a lot of help doing everyday tasks (zipping jackets, tying shoes, opening packages, etc.) More staff with younger kids is very helpful.

Look carefully at your budget to decide how much money you can put into staffing. If the answer is not much, try recruiting high school volunteers that need community service hours or want to gain experience working with children. Interns are another option and actually working the programs gives a better experience for aspiring educators than running errands or doing office work.

You may need to take on the running of camp, at least until you can cover staff costs.

III. Audience - Is there a market for your program? How will you reach people?

If you live in an area with several towns/cities within driving distance, there are probably a number of camps available in your area from which families will choose. Asking other museums or organizations (or following their websites while signups are happening) can give you an idea of which camps tend to fill the most spaces and how popular camps are in your area.

Survey your members about camp topics, times, prices, etc. to see how much interest you might have within your member base.

Learn about the demographics in your area. If most families have nannies or a stay at home/work at home parent, it may not be necessary for you to accommodate parent work schedules (i.e. providing before/after care.) However, if your potential audience members may need full day childcare, you may gain a bigger audience by offering pre/post care. Parents using this service should expect to pay more so do charge a little extra to cover the costs and limit the participants. (Typical camps run from 9:00 – 3:00 with pre-care beginning at 7:00 – 8:00am and after care lasting until 5:00 or 6:00.)
Find the local outlets where parents find the summer camp selections such as Hulafrog or Macaroni Kid. Usually you can advertise in the camp section of these websites.

Contact your local school districts and ask to advertise your camps. Many schools have newsletters that are emailed out a few times per month. Other schools may allow you to bring brochures that can go home with each student. Usually contacting the superintendent’s office is a good place to start.

IV. Cost

A good way to choose a price for your camp is to look at what other organizations in your area are charging. YMCA camps and local recreation department camps are very often much cheaper than other museums, nature centers, theater groups, etc. are charging. Make sure your price is reasonable compared to other institutions like yours.

Your budget will make a difference to your price. Go through the exercise of adding up all your materials, staffing and any other costs associated with your camp and set the price to ensure that you will cover those costs. If you include on your marketing materials “Must have a minimum of X number of campers to run the program.” You can avoid running a camp that does not fill and will lose money for you.

However, building an audience for camps does take time. If you keep your costs as low as possible the first few years so your price and stay as low as possible, then you will have a good idea if your camps will be financially sustainable over time.

These are just a few tips, but I am always happy to talk camps with anyone. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions.

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