

Using Targeted Marketing to Increase Foster Carers: Making Smarter Use of Limited Marketing Dollars

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Abstract

Finding enough foster carers for children in Australia who are not safe with their birth parents is a major challenge. Communicating more effectively with those who would consider fostering is one practical way of trying to attract more carers. Based on an empirical study with 499 Australians it can be concluded that people with the highest likelihood of making the first step towards fostering in the next 12 months differ significantly in a number of socio-demographic characteristics and demonstrate a preference for different media channels. These findings will help foster care agencies target their communication messages more effectively, thus getting more value for their (often very limited) marketing dollars.

Keywords: market segmentation, foster carer recruitment, target marketing, communications

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Introduction

One of the biggest social challenges for Australia is to provide homes for the significant number of children who are not safe to live with their birth families. This number has more than doubled over the past 10 years (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2010). Broadly speaking there are two main reasons why people decide not to foster a child.

(1) They do not want to or cannot. This can be due to lack of interest (no interest in children, no interest in caring for children that are not their own, etc) or because people do not feel they are in a position to take responsibility for a foster child (because of family circumstances, their age, work requirements, caring responsibilities for others etc.). It is unlikely that any communication message will convert members of this group of the population to become foster carers.

(2) They would, in principle, consider fostering a child but they simply do not have enough information about foster care or may not even know about the different ways in which they could help a child through fostering, some of which require a long-term commitment, others not. This groups represents a highly suited market segment for well thought-through communication messages because there is a chance that additional information may lead to converting some of these people to become foster carers.

It can therefore be concluded that one of the biggest social challenges in Australia is in part a marketing challenge. It can also be concluded, that mass marketing approaches, apart from not being financially viable for most foster care agencies, may not actually be the most effective. Rather, if the segment of people with informational needs differs significantly in their use of communication channels, it would be better to develop a differentiated and more targeted communication strategy.

It is this marketing challenge we focus on in the present study. More specifically, the aims of this study are to identify (1) what proportion of people who would consider being a foster carer in future actually intend to take some action towards this goal in the next 12 months; (2) whether those who do intend to take action in the next 12 months are characterised by a distinct socio-demographic profile compared to those who do not intend to take action; and (3) what media channels would be most effective in reaching this segment of the market.

Results from this study are of direct benefit to foster care agencies because they provide guidance regarding the most appropriate choice of communication channels when trying to reach those people likely to take action towards becoming a care in the near future.

Literature Review

Most studies of foster care originate from the fields of social welfare or child psychology and focus on the complex challenges of providing quality foster care systems (Ainsworth and Maluccio, 2002; Smyth and McHugh, 2006) and maximising outcomes for children in care (Barber and Delfabbro, 2004; Tarren-Sweeny and Hazell, 2006). While the importance of quality carers who can provide loving and nurturing home environments has been emphasised as key to achieving these positive outcomes for children (Butcher, 2005), there has been relatively few studies which investigate how they might be recruited more effectively.

Until now there has been limited application of sophisticated marketing techniques in the field of foster care. One reason for this is that providers of foster care services have traditionally focused their resources on the operational delivery of core social services rather than administrative functions such as marketing that are considered peripheral to their core objectives. Also resulting from this focus on core service delivery has been a lack of specialised marketing experience within these organisations, the result of which are recruitment efforts often based on their “best guess” as to what messages to use in appeals for foster carers and where communications should be placed in order to increase enquiries.

In the last decade there has been some increase in the number of studies focussing on this issue of foster carer marketing and recruitment. Siminski, Chalmers and McHugh (2005) recognised the value of understanding the market of potential foster carers. Their analysis of Australian Bureau of Statistics data found that foster carers were more likely to be women aged between 35-54 year and not in the workforce. Given the increasing numbers of working women they predicted that this will lead to reduced numbers of carers available in coming years, a trend that in the years since has since proven true (Wooldridge, 2009).

Attempts to investigate the effectiveness of foster care marketing efforts have produced varying results. Some have found that the majority of the population are not reached by broad-based campaigns (South Australian Department of Family and Community Services, 1997). Others have concluded that market-wide recruitment campaigns raise awareness of the need for carers and generate interest in fostering, but the authors acknowledge that they have limited success in converting enquiries into actual carers (Keogh and Svensson, 1999).

The results of these limited marketing-related studies of foster care suggest that there is a large proportion of the population which, while sympathetic to the need for more quality foster carers, are not serious in their intentions to become carers in the immediate future. In order to maximise the effectiveness of limited marketing budgets we need to firstly identify that segment of the market which is seriously considering becoming a foster carer in the near future. Understanding the distinctive characteristics of this group would enable the development of targeted marketing campaigns that reach them effectively. It is this gap in knowledge that this study is seeks to address.

Empirical Study

Fieldwork Administration

A national survey of the Australian population was conducted in November-December 2009. The questionnaire was administered via an online research panel that contains over 225,000 Australian residents. In order to ensure a wide range of panel members and avoid the bias sometimes encountered with online panels, members are recruited through various channels including online, at shopping centres and through newspaper advertisements. The online method of data collection for this study enabled the inclusion of a national sample within the time and cost constraints of the project. Invitations to participate were sent to a representative sample of the Australian population. The sample was 499 adults between the ages of 18-64 who had not been foster carers before but indicated they would consider it in future.

Measures

Intentions in the next 12 months. The segmentation technique used for this study is known as *a priori* (Mazanec, 2000) or *commonsense* (Dolnicar, 2004) segmentation because one

splitting criterion (in this case immediacy of foster care behavioural intentions) is used to group respondents. To enable segment formation, participants were given a list of 10 different actions one could take in order to become a foster carer (see Table 1 for the full list). Participants indicated whether they intended to perform these actions (1) in the next 12 months, (2) between 1-5 years, (3) at some point beyond five years or (4) not at all. The two segments were formed by grouping (1) all individuals who intended to perform **at least one** (and possibly more than one) of these actions in the next 12 months and (2) those who indicated they that they did not intend to perform any of the behaviours in the next 12 months.

Socio-demographics and media usage. For profiling purposes and identifying differences between segments, participants answered *socio-demographic* questions (age, sex, education, employment status, income, marital status and area of residence). In addition, participants were asked a number of questions regarding their *media usage* including the TV station they watch most often, the newspaper they read most often, the type of radio station they listen to most often and the magazines they read. Given that all variables of interest were ordinal or categorical in nature, Chi-square tests were used to test differences between the two groups.

Analysis and Results

Frequency counts for the 10 foster care intentions questions are presented at Table 1.

Table 1: Frequency counts for foster care intentions.

Do you intend to...	Yes, next 12mths (%)	Yes, 1-5 yrs (%)	Yes, beyond 5 yrs (%)	No (%)
... seek information about foster care	14	33	38	15
...contact a foster care agency to enquire about becoming a foster carer	13	29	36	22
...attend an information session on foster care	11	27	33	30
...discuss becoming a foster carer with your family and/or friends	21	28	31	21
...apply to become a foster carer	9	27	40	24
...undergo training to become a foster carer	9	27	37	26
...take on children who need urgent placements at very short notice (emergency care)	8	23	33	37
...take on foster children for a weekend here and there to give the regular carers a break (respite care)	8	24	36	32
...take on foster children for a few weeks or months at a time (short-term care)	7	23	35	34
...take on a foster child for the long-term (long-term care)	5	17	30	48

Of those who would consider becoming a carer, only one quarter (n=123) intended to take some action in the next 12 months, the other three quarters (n=376) did not. The sample was split into these two segments for profiling and identifying differences between groups.

Chi-squared tests were computed for socio-demographic and media usage variables. Variables for which significant differences were found are presented at Table 2. There were no differences found in relation to sex, education, income, television viewing and readership of selected magazines. Due to space restrictions these have been excluded from the table. Where figures do not add to 100 percent this is because an “other” or “not applicable” category was offered. It should also be noted that some p-values are close to 0.05. Given that multiple independent tests were computed for this analysis they need to be interpreted carefully. A replication study with a larger sample would be desirable to provide further support for the differences identified in this study.

Table 2: Segment Profiles.

		Intend to take action in next 12 months (%)	Do not intend to take action in next 12 months (%)	<i>p-value</i>
SOCIODEMOGRAPHICS				
Age	18-24	11	20	.000
	25-34	20	32	
	35-44	27	25	
	45-54	25	17	
	55-64	18	7	
Employment Status	Working full-time	39	50	.006
	Working part-time	30	23	
	Unemployed but looking for work	10	7	
	Homemaker	9	10	
	Retired	11	4	
	Full-time student	0	5	
Household Income	\$0-\$249 (\$0-\$12,999 annually)	7	4	.050
	\$250-\$499 (\$13,000-\$25,999 annually)	11	10	
	\$500-\$799 (\$26,000-\$41,599 annually)	23	14	
	\$800-\$1,199 (\$41,600-\$62,399 annually)	15	24	
	\$1,200-\$1,699 (\$62,400-\$88,399 annually)	19	21	
	\$1,700-\$2,499 (\$88,400-\$129,999 annually)	14	19	
	\$2,500+ (\$130,000 or more annually)	11	8	
Marital status	Never married	31	48	.000
	Married	52	42	
	Separated	4	3	
	Divorced	7	7	
	Widowed	6	1	
Children	Yes	63	48	.002
	No	37	52	
Area of residence	Urban	46	61	.013
	Regional	39	28	
	Rural	15	12	
MEDIA USAGE				
Newspapers	National newspaper (e.g. the Australian)	5	2	.048
	State newspaper (e.g. Sydney Morning Herald)	39	51	
	Regional/Local newspaper	22	20	
	Online news site	6	7	
Radio	Alternative	6	10	.045
	Classical	3	1	
	Dance/R&B	5	4	
	Easy listening	22	17	
	News/current affairs	7	3	
	Rock	7	14	
	Sport	4	2	
	Talkback	9	8	
	Top 40/Pop	17	25	
Magazines	Open Road/Road Ahead	15	7	.010
	Women's Day	26	18	.040

Socio-demographic Profiles

A number of differences were found when the two groups were compared. In terms of socio-demographic characteristics, the group that does intend to take action in the next 12 months are most likely to be in mid-range age groups, between the ages of 35 and 54 years. In terms of employment they are most likely to be either working part-time, retired or unemployed but looking for work, and are also more likely to be in lower household income brackets (under \$41,000 per year). In terms of family status, this group is most likely to be married and have

children. Finally, those intending to take immediate action to become foster carers were more likely to come from regional and rural areas and less likely to live in urban districts.

Media Usage

Differences were also found between groups in terms of media usage. Those intending to take action in the next 12 months were more likely to read local or regional newspapers and less likely to read state-based newspapers or read the news online. Regarding the types of radio stations they listen to, those intending immediate action were more likely to listen to Easy Listening and News and Current Affairs stations, and less likely to listen to Rock or Top 40 stations. Finally, for many magazines there were no differences in readership found between groups. The two exceptions were Open Road/Road Ahead magazines and Woman's Day, both of which were more likely to be read by those intending to take action in the next 12 months.

Conclusions and Limitations

This study aimed to understand (1) the proportion of Australians who intend to take action toward becoming a foster carer in the next 12 months, (2) if this group differs from those not intending to take action in terms of socio-demographic profile; and (3) through which media channels they could best be reached. Results indicate that about one quarter of those who state they would consider foster caring in future intend to take actual steps in that direction, e.g. contacting a foster care agency and asking for information, in the next 12 months.

Those who intended to take action did not differ from others in terms of gender, education, income or TV viewing. They did differ in age (they are more likely to be 35-54), employment status (more likely part-time, retired or unemployed), income (lower income), family status (more likely married and children) and area of residence (more likely regional/rural).

Finally, a number of significant differences in the use of media channels were also revealed with those intending to act being more likely to read local or regional newspapers and listen to Easy Listening and News and Current Affairs stations on the radio. In terms of magazines, the Open Road/Road Ahead magazines and Woman's Day are read more by this grouping, making them attractive outlets for communication messages relating to foster care.

It should be acknowledged that the segmentation variable used for this study, foster care intentions, are not always indicative of actual behaviour. This issue is not unique to foster care but has been raised by numerous researchers previously (Ajzen, Brown and Carvajal, 2004; Chandon, Morwitz and Reinartz, 2005). Also noteworthy is the possibility of social desirability bias in stated intentions regarding foster care. Both of these issues could be investigated by a follow-up wave of data collection with the same sample to assess the extent to which participants performed the behaviours they intended to in the initial survey.

Overall it can be concluded that communicating, especially through the most suitable channels, holds great potential with respect to the recruitment of foster carers in future. The fact that the market segments with the highest likelihood of taking action differ in their socio-demographic profiles and media usage has important practical implications. Foster care agencies no longer have to make heavy use of expensive mass media, instead they can target local newspapers, some magazines and radio stations and in so doing reach those most likely to listen and act. Theoretically, this research demonstrates that there is structure within the market of potential foster carers and that heterogeneity exists between segments.

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