

How nursery groups can make a name for themselves

What do you do when you acquire new nurseries and they all have different names? Do you badge them all the same for economies of scale or keep their individual brand collateral to capitalise on their local identity? Here, we talk to Family First Nurseries, to discover more about their approach to sales and marketing...



Across the UK, nursery groups which are growing through acquisition all face the same dilemma. Should they rebrand a newly acquired nursery or keep its existing name? There are certainly pros and cons to each, as Ollie Humphries, the chief executive of Family First, explains.

“Managing multiple brands can be a very costly business,” he says. “Not only do you have multiple websites to update or a huge variety of brochures, ads and banners to create, but you also have dozens of different social media channels to oversee and expensive marketing and recruitment campaigns to run.

“On the other hand, you retain a brand identity that has built up years of goodwill and is well known in the local area and sellers are always keen for us to retain what they’ve developed over the years.”

For this reason, Family First has decided to adopt a hybrid approach. It is currently managing 30 different brands among its 80 nurseries but is reducing this to around 10, with five core brands based on geography or proposition that will sit alongside strategically retained regional brands. This will become even more important as it intends to grow to over 100 nurseries by the end of the year.

Head of Sales and Marketing at Family First, Natalie Hunt, explains: “We decide which brand a particular nursery will fit

into and either keep their existing name or rebrand them, sympathetically. As we continue to grow, it is important that we have a brand strategy that allows a flexible approach to nursery branding that we can use to maximise the impact of each setting.”

A good example is the Little Garden Day Nursery Group, which was its first acquisition in June 2019 and started as a four-strong nursery group in London. It has now added a further eight nurseries so far to the premium brand group.

Its premium brand in the West Midlands is the Footsteps nursery group, acquired in November 2021, with 10 nurseries so far and more planned. There’s also a Montessori group which is expanding, so far incorporating Prima in Gillingham, Acorn in Harrow and Rosewood in Ruislip. Plus there is a Community nurseries group and soon there will be a new premium outdoor brand.

Retaining each nursery’s individuality

Just because a nursery’s name may change, or its logo may be redesigned into a new shape or colour palette, does not mean it will lose its individuality. In fact, every effort is made to retain as much of its original identity as possible.

As Ollie reflects: “At one nursery, we kept the teddy bear that had sat on the

shelf for the past two decades because parents remember it from when they were children themselves.

“At another, Drayton House Nursery School in Guildford, there is a photo of every class with every child that has ever been there over the past 20 years and parents recognise themselves and show the photo to their children. It would be scandalous to take these down. It would rip the heart out of why we exist.



“What’s really important to us is each nursery’s reputation, whether they get great reviews and whether parents are happy to leave their pride and joy with the people who’ve just given them a tour of the nursery.”

Ramping up sales and marketing

Once an individual nursery or small group has joined Family First, the nine-



strong sales and marketing team swing into action, identifying opportunities to promote the business.

The team includes a field sales and marketing manager whose job is to look closely at what is happening in each local area, such as any new housing developments that could mean more families.

Natalie explains: “They support the local nursery manager with their advertising, including their online presence, and help them to prepare ahead for potential new business.

“We aim to hold eight open days per year for each of our nurseries, including newly acquired ones if they are in a position to grow. Our supportive marketing team works with them to make the open days a success and turn them into sales.”

Developing a strong digital presence

At the heart of their marketing is a new website, which will eventually feature all of its nursery brands in one place.

“Our aim is to have a website that is market leading, educational, functional and enquiry-driven, that generates significant leads,” said Natalie. “We intend to have all our new nurseries on the one platform within 30 days of ownership.

“Our website is our shop window,

so it’s important we get this right. It is optimised to handle phone enquiries and drive conversations between us and potential families. Having a good digital presence is an important part of our business model and we are investing in more Google ads to drive traffic to the site.”

While some of the newly acquired nurseries have a strong digital presence, others have none at all. Those who are comfortable with social media, for example, will continue to manage their own presence, while others will be supported by the marketing team.

The Day Nurseries website (www.daynurseries.co.uk) also provides Family First with a significant number of leads, which is why every nursery’s presence online needs to be fully optimised.

Managing enquiries centrally

Family First also has a central team to manage enquiries about each nursery. Ollie explains: “We tend to buy nurseries which already have a great reputation in their local neighbourhood and we can grow them through the additional marketing we provide.

“Our central parent liaison team manage the enquiries about our nurseries to free up the nursery teams. For example, they follow up after every nursery tour. We are also trying to upskill our nursery managers so they can convert nursery



visits into places, so we clinch the sale on the day.”

The clear ambition of Family First is to become the UK’s number one quality childcare provider which is why a brand and marketing strategy is so important, but they couldn’t do that without keeping their current families happy.

Ollie concludes: “As well as holding open days for new clients we regularly hold events for existing families. These are an important part of our marketing strategy as they really sell the nursery. It is important to talk to our children and their families and know they are happy as they can really help to promote our nurseries, which is great for our business.” ■

If you are interested in finding out more about Family First group, please visit: www.familyfirstnurseries.com