

Market Research Dispels 5 Foster Care Myths

Consumer studies on child welfare consistently debunk false notions about foster parenting and promote action for better outcomes.

By Daniel Stein

OVER THE PAST DECADE, RESEARCHERS AT TRUE Insight Marketing have plumbed the minds and hearts of potential foster parents across the United States, and overall the findings have been encouraging. A sizeable minority of those surveyed across the country say they're "very interested" in foster parenting, and only a small percentage must sign up to meet the abundant need for foster homes. What's more, many prospective foster parents are just waiting to be asked to take on the job.

Indeed, today's challenge is less about a dearth of interested adults than about finding resources to consistently engage interested adults in providing safe, stable and loving homes for one of society's most vulnerable populations.

From California to New York, from Louisiana to DC, the True Insight Marketing studies reveal the truth behind the following five common beliefs:

MYTH #1:

Not enough people are interested in foster care.

Across the country, 15 to 23 percent of adults report being very interested in becoming foster parents. That's great news: If just a fraction of those prospects signed on—fewer than 10 percent across all regions studied and as few as 2 to 3 percent in some locales— there would be enough qualified foster homes to care for all the children needing temporary families.

That's why, time after time, a smart and targeted ad campaign with the right, attention-grabbing message generates so many new calls. It's what already interested people need to convert them from interest to action.

Of course, not all very interested people can take in a child immediately. Ongoing marketing must be in place to create a long-term pipeline of foster parents. Fortunately, with today's technology, staying in touch with potential foster parents has never been easier or more cost-effective.

MYTH #2:

Foster parents are only in it for the money.

From what we see on television, it seems everyone knows foster parents sign up just for the cold, hard cash, right? Wrong. Evidently, only scriptwriters labor under that misconception. The general population credits foster parents with far more altruistic motives.

In fact, in city after city, the top five reasons for becoming foster parents remain the same: people grasp the deep need for foster parents; they love children; they want to make a difference in a child's life; they have a desire to give back to society; or they need to take care of children in their extended families. And again, across the board, to those who are very interested in becoming foster parents, these reasons are even more powerful.

Ironically, in contrast to the myth, income and religious beliefs consistently surface as the least compelling reasons for foster parenting.

MYTH #3:

Nobody appreciates foster care workers.

Contrary to how it feels to some foster care employees, about half the population believes the foster care system in their area does a good job.

More importantly, adults who are very interested in foster parenting believe in their local systems even more strongly: On average, compared with the general population, 38 percent more said their foster care systems do a good job.

MYTH #4:

Regular visits by foster care workers are the biggest deterrent to signing on for foster parenting.

“Well, sure, I’d hate to have foster care workers in my home on a regular basis,” one prospective parent said with a smile. “That would mean I’d have to clean!”

Of course, some people express more serious concerns about social worker visits, but issues of time, income and living space consistently top the list of deterrents to foster parenting.

Even deeper insight surfaced when researchers asked very interested prospects the open-ended question, “What concerns, factors or questions have stopped you from taking steps to actively explore becoming a foster parent?”

After time, living space and income, the response “nothing” ranked highest, at 14 percent. In other words, some people just needed to be asked! Factor in the answers “not informed” or “don’t know” (issues that improved marketing and communications might address) and the total reaches 24 percent—the same as the top concern of “time” and more than the primary concern about living space or income.

MYTH #5:

People interested in becoming foster parents all share the same demographics and attitudes.

Many prospective foster parents are relatively young, are members of minority groups and have known someone involved with foster care. Beyond that, however, their characteristics vary widely by geography. In some regions, lower income or education level correlates with greater interest, for instance. And in some areas, those who volunteer at local schools are more apt than others to apply as foster parents. For these reasons, local research, outreach and in some cases even media buys are critical to zoom in on the target market most efficiently and cost-effectively.

Hope in Action

The “myths” described above represent just a few of the false notions about foster care propagated by the popular media. But consumer-driven research has proven consistently encouraging and hopeful. Most important, such research is actionable.

Foster kids can’t live on hope alone. They need action grounded in solid research that points the way to improving their odds. Indeed, even more market research and education is needed to dispel these notions and engage more caring adults in improving outcomes for society’s most vulnerable members.