

feature

Doing business the right way

Professional standards are central to business relations between Canadian high schools and education agents.

The relationship between a school and an agent can be a tricky one, with each side aware that the actions of a business partner can have repercussions on their own professional reputation. However, high schools in Canada and the agents who work with them have developed a range of measures to ensure best practice, and each party agrees that the benefits of a good business relationship outweigh the risks involved.

For both agents and schools, the reputation of an organisation is very important when looking for new partners. "Normally schools in Canada are happy to do business with us because of the work we have been doing for many years," underlines Ana Beatriz Senra Faulhaber from CP-4 Cultural Projects agency in Brazil. "When we are looking for new partnerships, normally I talk to people I know, who can suggest serious programmes."

Word-of-mouth recommendation or association memberships are both important ways for agents and schools to ascertain the quality of a potential partner, although many schools and agents also emphasise the importance of personal impressions. "We make it a practice to carefully screen potential agents in order to minimise problems surfacing," says Mike Kliman from School District 38 in Richmond, BC. "The more time we spend on the 'front end', the less time we will need to spend on problem solving throughout the process of working with agents."

Tatyana Khromchenko from Takt & Partners in Russia has her own method of vetting potential partner schools. "I prefer to visit a school and only after my visit and stay in a [host family] can I [recommend] a school," she says.

In Brazil, Faulhaber reports that her agency has an extensive screening process for new partners. "CP-4 has two meetings a year to discuss possible new partners," she says. "This process involves analysing the brochures, contracts... operational procedures and details, and visiting the institution. All the schools present themselves as [of high] quality but as soon as we start asking some basic questions on services they provide, materials that are used, we know what 'quality' means."

Once a partnership has been agreed, many schools and agents use contracts to set down clearly the conditions of their working relationship, although, as Mike Polan from School District 42 in Maple Ridge, BC, says, "Enforcement of international contracts is extremely difficult, so it is best to choose your agent partner correctly."

Contracts, however, can be useful to prevent confusion over what is expected of either party, even if they

are rarely enforced by law. "Our contract covers everything from commission fees and conduct to expectations and deadlines," says Shannon Peck from Queen Margaret's School in Duncan, BC.

Misunderstandings and disagreements can arise for many reasons and schools generally make clear the financial expectations of any partnership from the start, particularly commission rates. Barbara Rutherford from Lakefield College School in Lakefield, ONT, says that her school does not generally pay agency commission. "[We don't pay commission as] we don't feel the need of [agents'] services as we usually get on average about three applications for every [place] available each year," she says. "Having said that, we decided this year to enter into an agreement/contract with [one of our] agents because he is well established and recruits the appropriate student fit."

Rutherford adds that commission is paid on the first year's fees followed by "a small amount in the second year and then nothing after that". While some schools pay commission on fees beyond the first year, more usually, commission is paid for the first year only and, according to Faulhaber, agents would welcome further discussion on this issue. "Normally [commission] is for the first year [only] but we are trying to demonstrate that we also work for the student to stay at the school and it should be fair to have commission on the subsequent years."

As important as contracts can be to iron out any differences in terms and conditions, the most important aspect of an agent-school relationship is an atmosphere of mutual trust and professionalism, according to Polan. "Agents work best when a good relationship [has] developed – based on respect, trust and honesty, and good communication," he comments.

Rutherford agrees. "The agents that we deal with are true professionals and they really care about the international students they place at our school," she relates. "They continue a relationship with us and the parents on an ongoing basis throughout the year – also visiting the students they have at our school."

As Kliman explains, the development of agent relationships is going to become more important for Canadian high schools in the future as competition intensifies. "With such a competitive marketplace it will be necessary to work closely with qualified agents who know and understand the market, the culture, the language etc," he says. "We need to rely more heavily on established and solid relationships with agents to do their work of representing our institutions to the public."