

# Expo strategies

How do agencies and schools approach the issue of representation at language fairs and expos? Such events present good opportunities for profile raising, but both parties need to work together to achieve the best results. AMY BAKER talks to agents and schools about expo protocol.

For those agents who choose to attend language fairs and expos in their country, there is significant potential to market their products to potential clients. But the issue of how an agency should collaborate with its partner schools needs to be addressed, as the lack of a coordinated approach could mean lost opportunities for both parties.

Pascal Carré, of Languages & Travel in France and Belgium, feels strongly about the issue. Having attended Expolangues in France earlier this year, only to find that "even the most agent-minded schools were giving away posters with their Internet address on, and dates and fees to anyone interested", he questions the value of agents attending expos at all. "I doubt I will ever go [to Expolangues] again," he says. "[It is] so humiliating to agents on the whole, and to me in particular."

While Carré's concern stems from schools marketing to students independently of agents, at Study Group International (SGI), Regional Sales Director, Andrew Hutchinson, says that SGI's local agents are contacted prior to the company's attendance at a language fair overseas and asked to attend the SGI stand. He believes the best practice is "always to notify agents that you are attending [a fair] and either share costs with key partners or pay in full and distribute contacts made afterwards".

Katherine Bushell, Assistant Director of Communications at the Canadian Education

Centre (CEC) Network, adds, "The CEC Network's position regarding agents is that we recognise their importance in promoting Canada and Canadian school programmes, so it is our intent and has been our practice to work with agents whenever possible." The CEC Network organises a number of local Canadian education fairs around the world.

"On the local level, we don't prohibit schools having agents represent them in their booths during fairs," says Bushell. "In fact, at our fairs in Brazil, held just days after the events of September 11, agent representation was crucial in helping us continue with [our fairs]. Agents filled the gaps where Canadian representatives were unable to travel. The only proviso to agent representation is that the agent must agree to promote only that school while working in the booth."

Bushell acknowledges that in some markets, agents are sufficiently well established to take their own booths at CEC Network fairs, although they are only allowed to promote CEC Network clients (schools). In some overseas markets, agents pay to be an agent sponsor, and so are permitted to exhibit when other agencies are not.

As far as agencies are concerned, joint participation at an event is often seen as the ideal scenario. "I would like to exhibit in collaboration with partner schools, because that will give the impression that we are very closely related and the students will believe more readily that we are the official [repre-

sentatives] of the school," says Nelson Chen, of ChinaElite International Consultancy Co. in China. He adds that students receive a better service if they apply through his agency, "because they do not need to pay more but we provide [a] service they cannot get if they work directly with the schools".

Juris Tuns, of Mecenats in Latvia, suggests that an agent should have "exclusive rights" when jointly attending an expo with a school. Of course, problems can arise if more than one agent collaborates with a school at the same expo. "This may sometimes produce misleading information," says Chen. It can be difficult for schools to know the best way to proceed, but what is clear is that discerning agents realise the importance of their presence at local events and that a collaborative approach is better for all parties.

Okanlawon Jamiu Adekunle, of Shankant Afrique Consultancy in Nigeria, points out that the agent can, in some cases, play an important role as translator at a local fair. Nelson Tu, of Worldwide Education Foundation in Taiwan, normally negotiates a deal in advance with schools wanting to participate at local fairs. He believes that expo strategies should evolve organically. "Agents [and] schools have the right to decide how they want to conduct the fairs themselves," he says.

What is clear is that communication between agencies and schools is vital in order to determine the best possible outcome at an expo and ensure that opportunities are not missed.

## An expo's worth for agents

Many schools exhibit at education and language fairs overseas to enhance their profile and reputation in a particular market. The same reasons motivate agencies, as a well-established or well-organised local event can serve as a unique opportunity to promote services and meet potential clients.

"I find fairs and exhibitions very useful, [but] the success depends very much on the fair organiser's ability to promote the fair and on their promotional budget," relates Karel Klusak of Intact agency in the Czech Republic. "I attend most fairs in Prague or Brno, the major cities, as an exhibitor. It is quite important to exhibit for us since our office is not based in a major city."

Klusak sometimes exhibits jointly with a partner school, and the costs are divided between both parties. "I usually ask for one-quarter of the total costs," he says, explaining that he only considers joint participation if a school is being promoted that year in his brochure with special prices and offers. Otherwise, Intact participates solely, representing all of its partner schools equally.

"Intact usually tries to be a major partner of the fair. We provide free courses to the organisers and we try to get the support of our major partner schools in the form of free courses," says Klusak. "Schools feel that free courses for competitions are more justifiable than paying us money." He adds that while schools may provide marketing support for the Intact brochure because publishing and distribution costs are high, "I do not think [schools] would find a contribution towards a fair sensible".

Some agencies and agency associations are capitalising on the promotional benefits associated with language fairs and expos by organising them themselves. In Yugoslavia, agency Kub Travel Enterprises organises its own expos, in the form of a travelling roadshow, which schools are invited to participate in. Association Niki-M in Bulgaria is organising an expo for the first time in September this year, while many other agency associations, including Belta in Brazil, Tieca in Thailand and Tosa in Taiwan organise their own events, promoting their own organisations and members alongside exhibiting schools.

