

Marketing wish list

To provide a good service to clients, agents have to have in-depth knowledge about their partner schools and locations. In order to achieve this, they want thorough and up-to-date marketing support from the schools themselves. GILLIAN EVANS reports on the marketing wish list of agents.

Agents have to make sure they are fully equipped to field any questions thrown at them by clients. They are, therefore, reliant on schools to provide them with up-to-date and extensive marketing materials, and to back these up with an efficient and reliable administration system.

Most schools these days provide agents with more than just their brochure. "We generally receive the school brochure, a map with the school's exact location, [and sometimes] a CD-Rom and video of the school," reports Adam Zhang, Chairperson and CEO of Beijing Hongzhi Jiuzhou Information Consulting Service in China.

Marco Muru, of Ageoviaggi in Italy, says that visual aids depicting the school and the accommodation are important. He would welcome "a complete video or series of photos about the school and accommodation [because] students sometimes find that the real situation is not as they had thought".

Karel Klusak at Intact agency in the Czech Republic urges schools to supply photos on lightweight CD and update them regularly. "At Alpe, I received a bulky photo album with about 60 photos from a school," he laments.

Agent manuals are also becoming more common. In fact, Kath Bateman of Caledonia Languages agency in the UK, says, "Everyone we work with now produces [these]." The agent manual must be highly detailed – "the more detailed the better", says Paolo Barilari of I Centri in Italy – and go beyond the school

brochure. According to Bateman, it should include "all the information that the main [school] brochure doesn't, for example, local information, costings, train and bus times for arrivals from local airports [and] contact names at the school for specific areas – such as bookings, accommodation, finance etc".

Klusak questions the lack of standardisation across agent manuals, or sales manuals as he calls them. "I just wonder why the schools' associations do not provide guidelines for sales manuals," he says, pointing out that his colleague, after visiting the Arels fair for the first time last year, commented that some schools had no idea what information agents needed.

While a good agent manual is undoubtedly a "must have" for any agent, there is no substitute for visiting the school itself. "Once the place has been seen, one can be so much more convincing [when counselling students]," confirms Eva Brodszky from OTP Travel in Hungary. Familiarisation (fam) trips are, therefore, extremely useful for agents, but these should be subsidised by the schools, ideally. "If more schools would offer a free fam trip this would help enormously – even by offering us accommodation and a guided city tour if we paid for travel," says Bateman.

Agents also find it helpful when school representatives travel to their country, especially if the market is not well developed. "Some schools provide seminars and this helps us a lot in the recruitment [of students]," confirms Marie-Claude Saliba, of Educum

Overseas in Lebanon. Brodszky adds that it also helps the schools get to know their markets, and "shape their courses and services according to [a market's particular] needs".

Although schools and agents usually work in partnership, fairs and exhibitions in the agent's market can be a grey area. Some agents complain that schools may attend such events independent of the agent to court direct bookings. "What we want is that schools [use agents and] facilitate our sales by giving us full marketing support," comments Pascal Carré of Languages & Travel in France and Belgium.

Agents also request that schools provide free courses for agents to pass on to their students. Some schools say they limit these to the countries they are hoping to grow, but Barilari feels such promotions should be more widely available. "Just an extra commission or a certain number of free scholarships [would be useful from schools] if the agency has made an extra effort to promote the school," he says.

As well as marketing materials, agents require good administrative support. If their questions are not answered quickly, it could mean a lost sale for both the school and agency. The relationship is a two-way partnership, says David Wood, at the Languages Institute, Mount Royal College in Canada. "It is up to the school to ensure that agents have the information they need," he says. "That said, the agent [should] inform the school what kind of information [they require]. After all, we use agents because of their local knowledge."

Working together on the web

A rather moot point in the language travel industry is commission on Internet bookings. Many agents strongly believe that they should receive a commission for bookings from their country as the student may have consulted them about a school and then gone on to book directly via the school's website.

These days, some schools do pay at least a part commission to agents if there is proof that the student consulted them first. Some schools also refer students to their local agent rather than taking the direct booking, and on their website they have web links to the agency's website.

Adam Zhang, of Beijing Hongzhi Jiuzhou Information Consulting Service in China, supports this move, although he says none of his partner-schools link to his website. "It [would be] useful if more schools could offer this to agents," he says.

However, it does depend on the agency's market. Paolo Barilari, of I Centri agency in Italy,

says that, although he generally welcomes such an idea, because many Italian agents mark up the school prices with their commission it would only work if the school website did not include the course costs. This, of course, raises a separate issue of working with dual prices.

Agent, Kath Bateman, from Caledonia Languages in the UK, says, "We do not name our partner schools in our own brochure or website and do not wish to have this direct link before the student books." She explains this is to avoid the problems caused by students booking directly via the school after visiting the agency.

Weblinks between schools' and agents' sites can also create problems from a school's point of view. Andrew Hardy, of Scanbrit School of English in the UK, points out that an agency's site may redirect a student to another local school. "If an agent works with several schools in our area, [a link to their website] may not be such a good idea," he warns.

