

# Challenges ahead

Language travel agents face a number of challenges in the race to keep one step ahead. ANNA ZACHARIASSEN reports on issues of concern to agents as they enter a new year.

In order to secure the future growth of their business, language travel agencies must overcome a number of hurdles. Although most agents are confident that the quality service they provide will ensure steady growth in the number of bookings, other issues are still cause for concern.

The poor performance of a country's domestic economy can have a detrimental effect on the number of students choosing to study abroad, as Arlette Rechsteiner, of Azics Intercambio Cultural in Brazil, explains. "The current high exchange rate [in Brazil] is responsible for the decrease in demand among students for study abroad," she says. "As soon as the problem stabilises, the growth of our agency will continue."

While agents may have no means of controlling their country's economy, there are other potential threats to the growth of their business that agencies can, to some extent, overcome. The vast amount of information available on the Internet means that more students have the opportunity to bypass agencies altogether and book their language course online. This is one key issue that has been of concern for several years now.

"Students can get lots of valuable information from the Internet, but many still prefer to discuss their requirements face-to-face," says incoming agent, David Straughan at International Educational Services in the UK. Other agents are in agreement that although a school's website may succeed in attracting students, it is usually unable to provide enough detailed information the course, school and location itself. "An attractive school website does not [necessarily] reveal the real academic quality of the institution which is a concern [not only for agents] but students looking for a language or vocational programme," says Rechsteiner. "The Internet is not a real threat to an individual agency like ours, because there will always be clients interested in a personalised, high quality service."

With one threat diminished, what others are there facing agents in 2002? Being able to offer a personalised service is what sets agencies apart from their rivals. As student demands become more sophisticated, individual agents are realising the importance of providing a tailor-made service for their clients. "Our [clients] are coming to us with a better sense of what they want and what their

needs are. We want them to know, more than ever, that they are our priority," says Sophie Taillard, Director, France, at the Council on International Education Exchange.

As agents strive to exceed their client's expectations, the popularity of workshops and education expos as a means of obtaining up-to-date information and making new contacts has grown. The number and size of these events is increasing, so agents can find themselves with some critical decisions to make. "Conferences and workshops, which are held for education providers and agents, are now overloaded with language centres and other institutions," says Mansoor Hassan Hashmi of Hashmi Education Consultants in Pakistan.

With so much choice available, agents must think carefully about which events to attend and which institutions they decide to represent, according to the needs of their clients. Mikhail Koudriavtsev, Director of Study Flight agency in Russia, points out, "Every year brings us new exhibition, magazine or web project. And not all of them are effective and rewarding. In 2002, we have to choose more carefully."

The essential goal for agents remains the same: to represent good quality courses. But there are other factors to consider as clients' needs evolve, including providing high quality at competitive prices, innovative learning techniques (see page 37), impeccable host family accommodation – which is reported to be more difficult to find, according to Izabella Lauterpakht at System 3 in Russia – and relevant work or social experiences.

Despite the threats to business because of the terrorist attacks in the USA (see right), as agents enter a new year, client satisfaction remains central to success, as Andrew Rynne of Juralangues agency in France concludes. "The future is bright for agents and language schools," he argues, "if they can continue to guarantee customer satisfaction, [providing] friendly schools and welcoming host families."

## Reacting to events in the USA

The terrorist attacks on the USA in September last year sent shock waves through the language travel industry and saw agents around the world unite in a shared concern for the future of their business. "The recent events in the USA have contributed to a serious decrease in demand [for study abroad] which is a real concern for the growth of our agency, as we cannot foresee what is going to happen," says Arlette Rechsteiner of Azics Intercambio Cultural in Brazil.

Alexandra Albert, at Talk and Travel Studienreisen in Germany, adds, "We are worried because we [had] no bookings coming in [in the third quarter of 2001]. We guess that people don't want to travel at the moment."

While the extent of the impact on the language travel industry is uncertain, some agents have already reacted to the crisis in public confidence. In Japan, agent Yuzo Kuroki, of ISA Inc, reports, "Our travel agency has [suffered] directly from the tragedy and we have lost a quarter of our [outbound] business to the UK and the USA." The agency has set up an English language training camp in Japan and is offering English lessons locally to provide alternatives for Japanese students who would otherwise have travelled overseas.

Franco Rossi, Director of AP Educational in Italy, also notes that his agency wants to encourage bookings in these uncertain times. "Even though the attacks took place during the low season, the number of telephone enquiries decreased [significantly]," he reports. "We [aim] to keep fees low for as long as possible."

For many agents, pessimism among clients is a major concern. "Most of my business is carried out in the Middle East, Far East, India and Pakistan," says David Straughan of International Educational Services in the UK. "[The events in the USA] have made me wonder what the level of interest will be."

However, Straughan believes that the necessity of gaining language and education qualifications will prevail, and those agents that maintain momentum will reap the rewards. "[A drop in student enquiries] is likely to be short lived," he predicts, "as many students rely on getting good qualifications in the UK to be able to return to their home country with better employment opportunities."

