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A person with long brown hair, wearing a white shirt and blue jeans, is sitting on green grass. They are using a silver laptop. The background is a blurred green field. A semi-transparent white box is overlaid on the right side of the image, containing text.

The way clients use agencies has changed over time. Nowadays, online processing and detailed information on the web is paramount in order to attract the modern client, although speed of processing is not always an associated requirement. **AMY BAKER** surveys a sample of agency clients and unravels modern business standards.

The modern client

Today zero per cent of our clients come by the office," says Dana Garrison of ISLS in the USA, who highlights a new breed of agency client that other agents also attest to. At Hyland Language Centre in Spain, Alice Noel, Head of Courses Abroad, agrees that more and more students are happy to use online resources rather than visiting the agency office in person.

"Fifteen per cent of our clients come in to the office," she relates. "This percentage was higher five years ago, as the clients didn't trust the Internet as much as they do now and they were less used to making bank transfers online." Noel notes that a higher proportion of Internet-based clients is also down to the fact that their customer base is expanding, which is another phenomenon to have occurred in many markets – customers happy to book from an agency not based in their region, or sometimes, country. "We are getting more and more clients from other regions in Spain, who live too far away to be able to visit us in our office," notes Noel.

Rather than booking directly, market evolution to date seems to be that many students are continuing to use an agency's service to book language courses abroad, but they may well conduct the entire booking process over the Internet, and aren't geographically loyal. Direct booking statistics reveal a very gradual rise over time, for most markets, while agency usage remains the predominant source

of client bookings for most language teaching institutions (see right).

"Agencies that are easily found online, respond quickly, follow up and give good and concise information are great resources for potential students"

Survey statistics

In our survey of 54 agency clients studying at various language schools around the world, one-third of clients used the Internet only, or the Internet and phone, to book their chosen course with an agent, circumventing any need to go into an agency office.

A range of nationalities indicated that they had done so, but Swedes and North Americans had all booked online, indicating some trend direction here. Furthermore, when it came to selecting an agency to use, 61 per cent of students in our survey indicated that they had first found the agency by browsing online. (The second most likely link was a friend's recommendation while both Turkish students in our survey noticed an agency's advert prior to contacting them).

"The website was very influential in my final decision [to use that agency]," relates Sarah Beymer, an American studying at Linguadue in Italy, while Serge Faucher from

Quebec, Canada, studying English at LSI Toronto, says he chose his agency "because they had a lot of information on the website". Han Ra Hyun, a Korean studying in Malta, adds that she selected her agency because its website had "pictures and explanations".

The widespread use of the Internet for research means that an agency's website is important for attracting clients and enabling them to book remotely, if they wish. However, although 61 per cent of students found their agency online, only 30 per cent of students booked online without any other telephone/personal contact.

Efficiency of technology

This increasing currency of the Internet, however, has a beneficial effect on agency business, according to Noel at Hyland Language Centre in Spain, who claims that with time freed up from counselling all prospective students in the office, the agency can be more efficient and more attentive to every client that books, while providing general information for all online.

"Our service is now more efficient and faster as we use new technologies and our team has grown," she recounts. "This permits each of us to give better attention to the clients."

One challenge for agencies is to ensure that their website stands out from the crowd and simplifies the selection and booking process for clients, rather than confusing them. Garrison at ISLS underlines, "I cannot tell you how many students have told me that the choices [for study abroad] were overwhelming. They have sometimes hundreds of choices when it comes to looking up study abroad options online." He continues, "Agencies that are easily found

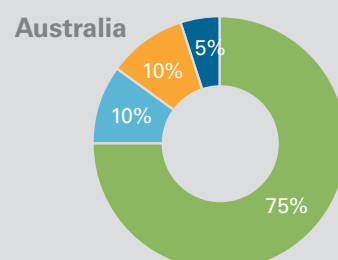
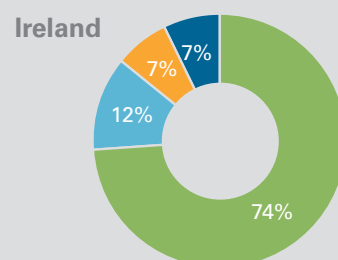
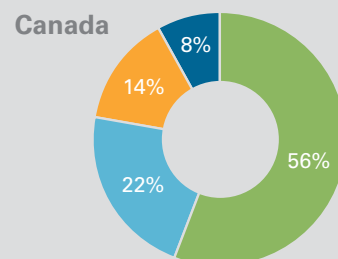
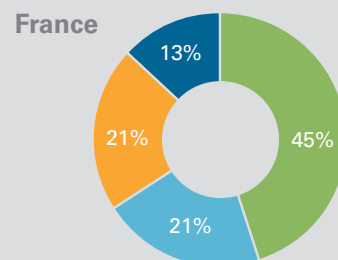
online, respond quickly, follow up and give good and concise information are great resources for potential students."

Interestingly, many agencies underline the importance of a quick follow-up time when dealing with clients but the results of our survey did show that booking confirmation – which is different to responses to information requests – was sometimes rather slow in being passed on to the client, based on our student sample.

Timeframe for response

The most typical length of time that students had to wait before "you were informed of your confirmed place at a language school" was one month (25 per cent). The next most typical wait was a more expected one week (16 per cent) and other times given ranged from two days (four per cent) to 6 months (just one client!) with as many clients

Means of recruiting students by country, 2007



Source: LTM Status Survey to date, 2007



Programme and agency selection

The LTM Feedback surveys each month give some insight into why students choose a particular language school, but we also asked our sample group of 54 students for reasons behind their school selection. An interesting array of responses were given, including: I didn't want to live in a host family; it was the cheapest; the course was very intensive; the school was in a safe town; the school had Korean staff; I needed to get a certificate; and the school had a good breakdown of activities available. Most importantly, many students said that they simply trusted their agency's recommendation.

When asked why they chose their agency, reasons included: I had the opportunity to attend private lessons [at the agency]; the fees were reasonable; it had a good reputation; it was a big company; a nice website; because of the good staff.

Two-thirds of students who responded to our question about booking fees said they had indeed paid a booking fee, but not all students were happy with this. One student thought this was ok given that "the agency had to organise everything"; but another said he thought his fee of €100 "was extremely expensive and unnecessary".

saying they waited two weeks as three months to be told of their booking confirmation.

The question could have been construed to mean "sent detailed advice" perhaps – nevertheless, the results paint a different picture to the expectations of clients summarised by agencies canvassed for this article. The results could also be related to the protocol of the school given that both students (from two different countries) who received confirmation within two days were at the same (Spanish) institution. However, many schools attest that agencies demand quick responses now to be able to pass the information on to their clients, so the outcome could reflect a different business pace across countries. "We aim to confirm [a student's place] within two

hours and it's true that everyone expects instant responses these days," reports Kevin McNally at Hampstead School of English in London, UK.

Students who indicated they waited three months or more before they were informed of a confirmed place at their school came from a range of countries including Switzerland and Japan.

Satisfaction report

Any possible delay in confirmation of a place was not heeded by students, however, as bad service, with a majority of students (84 per cent) who responded to this question saying they were satisfied with the overall booking service (nine per cent did not reply). This included the student who waited six months for their confirmed place!

When asked if they would use an agency again to book their language course, 54 per cent said they would and 20 per cent said they might. Acknowledging the inherent value in booking through an agency, one student, Gabriela Pinto Arjonas from Brazil, said, "Yes [I would use an agency], but not this one, maybe I would choose an agency that would offer me more options of schools and programmes."

So, while poor agency service in the eyes of a client doesn't necessarily put them off booking with a third party, it does make them want to shop around in the future. Good service, on the other hand, engenders loyalty. Myung Chul Shin, studying at Oxford English Centre in the UK, says of his Korean agency, "If I need to learn another language, I will definitely use the same agency."

We asked students how their agencies could have improved the service offered to them. "More information" and "more choices" were, in general, the most common calls. More specifically, students had some constructive and interesting comments. Emily from Sweden said, "It would have been good to get more information about how to travel and about the arrival" while a Brazilian student said, "The agency didn't tell me about the trips to the USA [from Toronto], about the possibility of moving to Vancouver during my course. I could have planned my travel better if I knew that."

Other requests were for information about wireless Internet access, nationality breakdown at the school, tourism attractions in the region, city travel or visa application processes. Interestingly, one client said he wished his agency could have given him the name of the school he was going to. Another Swiss student suggested, "I think it would be better when they give you something like a catalogue to choose the [host] family"! And Jose Gonzalez from Spain said his agency could have improved its service "by pointing out exactly where the family lives using Google Earth, for example".

Services other than school selection

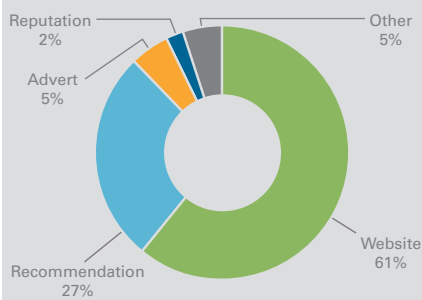
We asked students if their agency advised on booking travel to the school, on activities in-country before or after their language learning programme and if they offered orientation about what to expect on arrival at



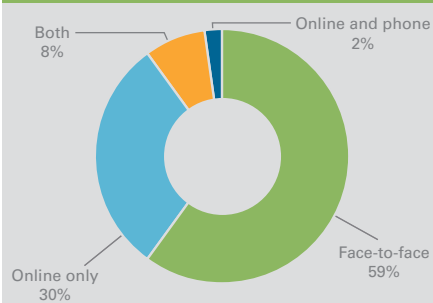
Students are likely to call to discuss options

the school. While not all students answered these questions, of those that did, 61 per cent received advice on booking travel to the school, only 45 per cent were given advice on what they could do pre or post-trip and 56 per cent said they received orientation about what they could expect when they arrived at their chosen language school. This may have included being shown a video about the school, being given "a pack of useful information", being shown pictures of the school or having an agency representative at the airport to greet them.

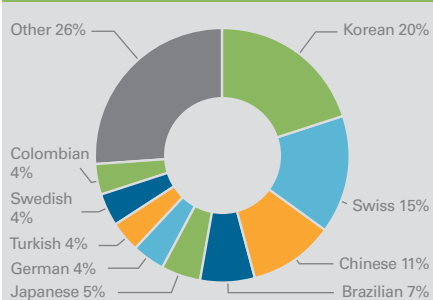
How did you find out about the agency you used?



Did you have a face-to-face consultation or use online resources?



Nationality breakdown of student sample



Given that schools often attest that they like to work with agencies because students are well prepared on arrival, the notable 40 per cent of clients who said they received no orientation is not an ideal state of affairs (a further four per cent said they approached the school directly for more information).

Staying in touch with clients once they were at their school was also not a given with 55 per cent of clients who answered this question saying their agency had not been in touch. It tended to be Korean and Chinese students mainly reporting that their agency had been in touch. What is interesting is that of all the clients whose agencies had been in touch, only two said



Face-to-face advising is still favoured by many

they would not recommend their agency to others. In all, 72 per cent of students said they would pass on a recommendation while six per cent said they might.

Kidoo from Korea, studying in Malta, said he wouldn't recommend his agency to others because "they don't get in touch with me", while Gezu Dilek from Turkey felt his agency "should care more about the students after their arrival in the country".

The agency perspective

Agencies have varying procedures in place, however, relating to keeping in touch. Noel in Spain says that this is not done for adult clients unless something goes wrong. "For our junior programmes, we get in touch with our group leaders almost every day."

Daniel Di Benedetto of Worldwide School of English in Switzerland observes that some of his clients don't appreciate agency intervention once their course has started. "Mostly I keep in touch with the students," he says. "But about 50 per cent of them do not really like that. I think this is a part of an agency's job, but I try to not bother them."

David Duque Terneus of Langex Ecuador agrees, "We feel that it is part of our job but it is not easy because a good percentage never answer so we try to get in touch with the family here as well".

A number of agencies point to the importance of obtaining feedback once their client has returned from their course overseas.

How long before you were informed of your confirmed place at a language school?



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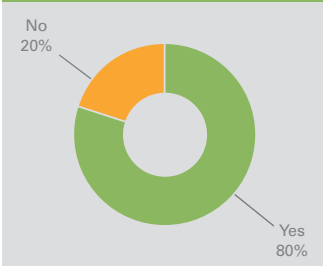
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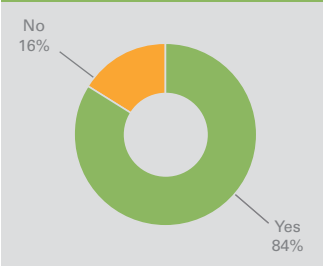


CHANGING LIVES THROUGH WORK, LANGUAGES, TRAINING AND TRAVEL

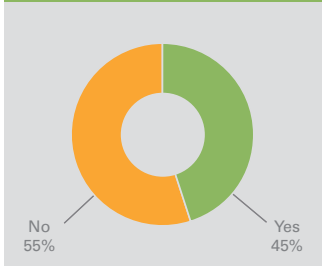
Were you presented with a choice concerning accommodation?



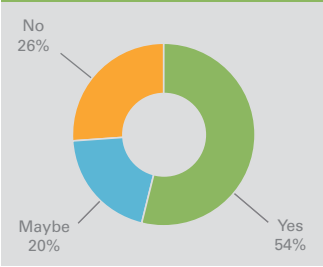
Were you satisfied with the overall booking process?



Has your agency been in touch since you arrived overseas?



Would you use an agency again?



Daniela Socci at 3 Esse Agency in Italy says, "We ask clients to send an email (used to be a postcard) in order to tell us about their experience. On their return, we always send them a report to fill in."

She emphasises what she sees as the main advantage that agencies can offer over direct booking: professional selection and qualified advice. "What we offer is a good experience, good knowledge of what is on the market and of the schools we propose," she states. "This is our main job: advising students so that they can choose the right programme." Providing student testimonials about previous language travel trips is also something a number of students in our survey singled out as very beneficial for them.

Duque Terneus also emphasises the qualitative advantage agencies offer. He underlines that good agency staff are more

than salespeople. "The client is looking for counsellors that know all about the programme and can tell them experiences of travelling," he says. "Not someone who repeats information – for that reason, we prefer that our counsellors travel and know the programme that they are selling."

With companies offering all this – professionalism, experience, orientation, visa assistance (48 per cent of students were offered visa help) and personal contact while overseas – it is understandable that a good agency reaps repeat bookings and the loyalty of clients and schools. "I had no trouble with the agency at all," says Nathalie Eberle from Switzerland. "Everything went really well and I would use the same agency in the future." ●

Thanks to the following schools for canvassing students at their school for this feature: ATC Language & Travel, Bray, Ireland; Chamber College, Gzira, Malta; Insearch-UTS, Sydney, Australia; Institut Européen de Français, Montpellier, France; Linguadue, Milan, Italy; LSC, Toronto, Canada; LSI Toronto, Canada; K2 Internacional, Cadiz, Spain; Oxford English Centre, Oxford, UK; Wimbledon School of English, London, UK.



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