

Schoolchildren and university students make up the bulk of clients for the language travel industry, meaning that business is largely concentrated in the main vacation times. But agents and schools can to some extent influence the seasonality of the market through product development and targeted marketing, as GILLIAN EVANS reports.

Broadly speaking, those destinations that enjoy good weather for longer generally have a longer peak language travel season. For example, Carlos Gonzalez Valle at Unilang Idiomas in Spain reports that they are busiest from March to August, and Sandra Rivera, Co-Director of Becari in Mexico, says their peak season lasts for seven months. In contrast, the UK has a relatively short peak season with most providers singling out July and August as being the busiest times of the year.

For most agencies, however, the school holidays are the most important determining factor for enrolments. About 40 per cent of student bookings at SAS agency in Japan are for courses in March and April, as, according to Hiroya Takagi at the agency, this is the graduation season.

Laura Vico, of NewBeetle Thema Viaggi in Italy, reports that her mainly teenage clientele takes language travel courses during the summer months, even to long-haul destinations such as Australia, which is experiencing its winter climate then. But this is not a problem for Australia, as Garth Keppie, Co-Director and Principal of the Australian International College of Language, which is situated on the Gold Coast, explains. "The year-round [warm] climate of the Gold Coast means that we are not necessarily disadvantaged, simply because the student is travelling from their summer [season] to what is our winter," he says.

Vacation times

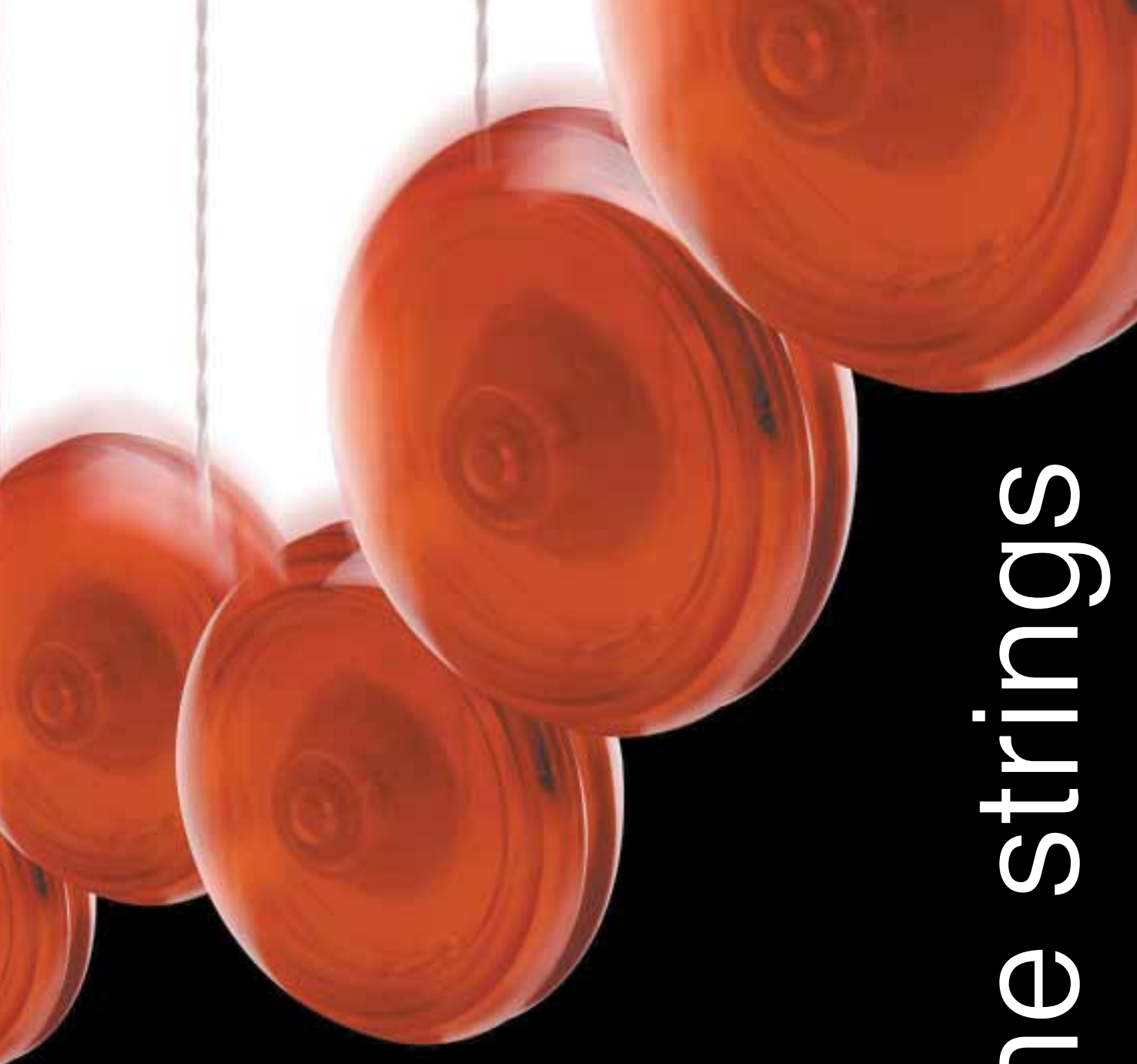
As school and university holidays differ according to country or region of origin, different student nationalities often have different peak seasons. Therefore, schools looking to spread enrolments throughout the year must ensure they attract a wide range of nationalities. Brazilians and Argentineans tend to take a course in January and February, while Thai students travel in March and April, and

Japanese students go overseas during their holidays in March and April, and July and August. And Europe is a notoriously summer-dependent market. According to our Agency Surveys, 48 per cent of Spanish students take a language course in July alone (see *Language Travel Magazine*, August 2001, pages 18-19); and 75 per cent of Italian language travellers take a course during July and August (see *Language Travel Magazine*, March 2002, pages 10-11). The downside of all this for students is that there may be a high concentration of students of their own nationality in language schools at certain times of the year.

Although school and university holidays dictate when students may take a language travel course, many other language travellers without such restrictions prefer to take a course during summer, as this is the traditional holiday season. "Even business executives use summer as a training opportunity instead of other times of the year," reports Norman Renshaw of Intuition in the UK.

And, according to Bob Burger of Malaca Instituto in Spain, this is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. "Although there is





pulling the strings

Special offers

Special offers and discounts are commonplace in many industries, particularly in travel and tourism. In the past, language schools have been reluctant to employ such measures, but this appears to be changing.

International House Nice in France offers agents 30 per cent commission on off-peak bookings instead of the usual 20 per cent, while Becari school in Mexico gives students money off certain courses during the low season. Others target particular countries. "In certain markets, we offer special package prices, for example, all inclusive, heavily discounted [packages] to cover accommodation, tuition [and] registration fees," says Sally Thompson of YMCA International College in Canada.

St Clare's in Oxford, UK, employs a number of strategies to entice off-peak business. "Our approach is a mixture of last-minute offers, discounts for returning students, changes

in pricing structure and student recruitment in different markets," explains Francisco Bustos, the school's Marketing Manager. However, he adds, "We believe that discounts to students and higher commissions to encourage off-peak business are only short-term solutions."

Most agents welcome special offers from schools, which they can pass on to their clients. "Off-peak discounts offered by some of our partner schools are very interesting for our clients," says Agent Magda Nagyova of Eurotrend 21 in Slovakia. But she adds that it would be better for business if schools announced their discounts in advance "because sometimes it is simply too late to start any [promotions]."

For Laura Vico of NewBeetle Thema Viaggi in Italy, communicating the benefits of off-peak courses to clients has been effective. "The off-season programmes are getting more and more

successful," she says, "just because we explain the situation to our clients and make them realise the reasons why the prices can be [lower]."

But, despite the success of discounted courses, Vico feels there is also a role for special off-season programmes. "Schools should understand the big difference there is between [our clients] in the summer and during the off season, and should cooperate with us in order not only to decrease the fees, but also to provide different services, such as alternative courses."

Some schools maintain that product development, rather than discounting during off-peak times, is the way forward. "We have lots of off-season products and this is part and parcel of our marketing strategy," explains Bob Burger of Malaca Instituto in Spain. "We don't give discounts. We prefer to search out different types of courses and markets, rather than reducing prices."

Gary Smith of PGIC in Australia disagrees with the concept of discounts. "We sell our programmes based on quality service and student satisfaction. We need our students to choose our school because of what we offer, not because of price. I feel the seasonal nature of this business is unavoidable. Asking agents to focus on off-peak business is like asking them

to squeeze blood from a turnip. The [student] market is not as strong in those times because it is simply not there."

The experience of Hiroya Takagi at SAS in Japan would appear to confirm this. Although they promote off-peak scholarships, Takagi says, "Clients seem to be interested, but we have not seen great changes in sales yet."

tionalities, from Canadian to Swedish and Dutch.

Indeed, says Burger, "[Our] strategy to increasing off-peak business has been to seek out off-peak markets and products." To this end, Malaca Instituto also offers a whole raft of products during the quieter times, and when it launched its Spanish plus dance course, it deliberately positioned it as an off-peak programme. "We knew this course would attract big interest," says Burger. "Latin dance is very popular around the world, so it has global appeal. By offering it in the low season, it is a way of using a popular programme to attract students during this period."

Attracting different types of clients has also changed the seasonality of the industry in some countries. For example, Ireland and Malta are two notoriously seasonal language travel markets, which rely heavily on Western Europeans during the summer months. But the concentration of business in both markets has spread in recent years. Schools in Malta have developed courses for business executives, which have encouraged enrolments at other times of the year, while Ireland has become extremely popular with Chinese students seeking higher education places in Ireland. These students generally study on long-term English language programmes, which has in turn boosted student numbers outside of the peak season (see *Language Travel Magazine*, May 2002, page 27).

The general maturing of schools and their programmes also results in more off-peak business. "We've noticed we are now busier in the autumn and winter months, particularly from school class and university groups," says Bill Godfrey of Manchester Language School in the UK. Renshaw adds, "September has become busier and busier each year – it is now as busy as July."

For a relatively new school such as PGIC in Australia, which was launched in September 2000, the school's Executive Director, Gary Smith, maintains that gaining the trust of agents is instrumental in the year-round spread of enrolments. "As a younger school, agents were less likely to choose us before more established schools," explains Smith. "I expect this to change in the future as the trend in our enrolments is showing a dramatically larger percentage of long-term overseas students since the

always talk of possible changes in school years [in some countries]," he says, "unless the climate changes dramatically, it won't really affect the seasonality of the [language travel] market."

Product development

But one aspect that can influence the seasonality of a school's enrolments is product development. The launch of products aimed at specific markets has been the key to success for New Horizon College of English in New Zealand. "Recently the whole business has changed dramatically for us," recounts Christine Schmidli, Principal at New Horizon. "Seasonal fluctuations used to be such a terrible problem because I had to lay off staff, so one of our marketing focuses was to flatten out the seasonal peaks and troughs." New Horizon launched a high school vacation programme for April, June, September and December, to coincide with school holidays in Thailand, Japan, Korea and Brazil. "[This strategy] certainly worked and now we are finding enrolments are coming in consistently," Schmidli reports.

In Spain, Malaca Instituto's sister school, La Brisa, also offers an off-peak course for closed high school groups, which attracts a diverse range of na-

"Seasonal fluctuations used to be such a terrible problem because I had to lay off staff, so one of our marketing focuses was to flatten out the seasonal peaks and troughs"

beginning of 2002. This demonstrates greater trust in our school on the part of the agents, which will lead to a larger number of short-term placements over the same period in 2002/2003.”

Marketing success

Agents can play an active role in helping schools attract students at different times of the year. They can be most effective, says Burger, through devising specific marketing strategies. “Niche marketing is something we can’t do and agents can, but they really need to get a portfolio of similar products together and get out there,” he says.

For schools, the Internet has, to some extent, helped attract business in the quieter months, as it is


“a constant marketing tool”, says Frances Corley, Marketing Coordinator at the Manchester Academy of English in the UK. William Rubenstein of International House Nice in France says they attract “many more nationalities due to [our] website and the other websites on which we advertise”.

“The Internet is an important tool for reaching more markets from which students may be more likely to enrol at different times,” agrees Keppie. “Furthermore, in some markets, the recruitment of students is determined by the marketing strategies of

“The Internet is an important tool for reaching more markets from which students may be more likely to enrol at different times”

large education and travel agents, which tend to have fixed times of the year for marketing. The Internet enables the education provider to reach those students who might otherwise only come in those set periods.”

External forces

Although organic market growth, course development and agent marketing all contribute to the spread of students into the quieter months of the year, external 

Seasonal problems

For schools, the main problems associated with severe variations in student flow during the year are maintaining satisfactory class sizes, ensuring sufficient school facilities, numbers of qualified teachers and host families, and keeping activities and other services going during

the quieter months. This is important because, regardless of when they study, students expect the same high quality provision.

At International House Nice in France, July and August account for around 60 per cent of enrolments. During this time, says William Rubinstein at the

school, "Class size remains the same but we have to rent more premises, therefore it is more expensive."

Christine Schmidli at New Horizon College of English in New Zealand says that it is important not to overfill a school. "If we cannot offer every student the same quality of teaching and care

then we have a responsibility to close the roll for a few weeks or limit the number of short-term groups."

While students may experience a quieter school atmosphere and fewer activities when studying at off-peak times, Garth Keppie of the Australian International College of

Language in Australia points out that for some, this may be an advantage. "For the serious students, there are few, if any, disadvantages of studying off peak," he says. "[They] have the advantage of more personalised attention to their learning needs as well as a wider choice of host families."

factors can also cause a school's business to become more or less seasonal. "As provider economies wax and wane, so does the business emanating from them," explains Scott Anderson of SES Folkestone in the UK. "We've only had one student from Argentina so far this year."

Sally Thompson, Senior Manager at YMCA International College in Canada, reports a similar experience. "Recently we haven't had many students in January due to the weakening economy in Brazil and other South American countries."

On a more positive note, Smith says, "The downturn in European economies has had an interesting impact in that students who cannot find a job right away have more flexibility in their study schedules, leading to an increase in the number of students coming for up to 12 weeks throughout the year."

"Recently we haven't had many students in January due to the weakening economy in Brazil and other South American countries"

All in all, the seasonality of the market, to some extent, is here to stay, as traditional vacation times continue to shape the language travel market. But product development, combined with innovative marketing from schools, can help spread student enrolment figures throughout the year. As Jonathan Handcock, at Skola Group of Schools in the UK, concludes, "What's good for us is good for [agents] too, so we need to find ways of working together." □