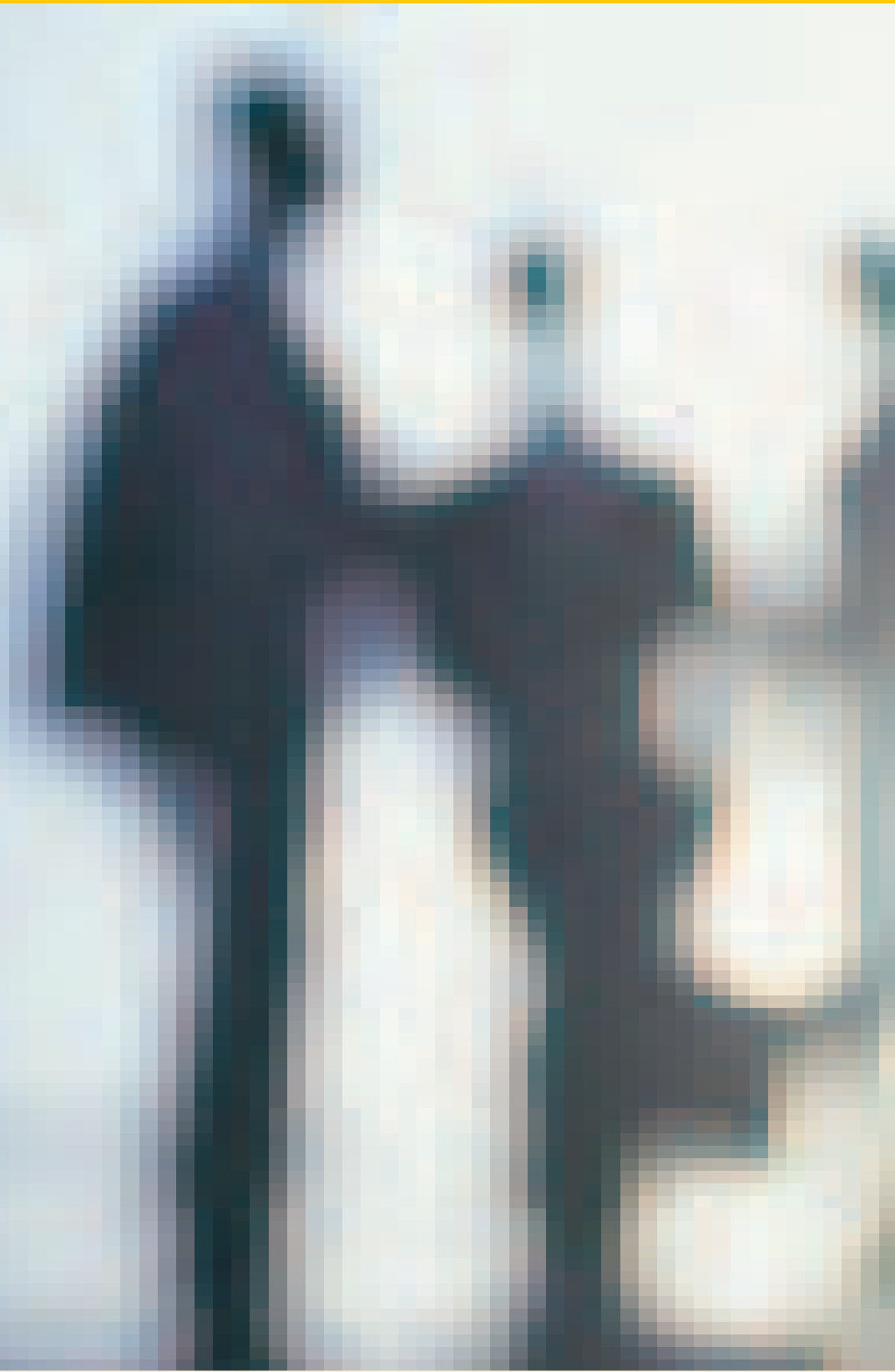


unified approach



More and more agencies are joining together to create associations of language travel agents. This enables them to set themselves apart from other players in the market, raise their profile as quality organisations and provide the industry with a single voice. GILLIAN EVANS reports.

Realising that they all face the same challenges, language travel agencies around the world are forming national associations. Just glancing at the sheer number of newcomers over the past couple of years confirms this – Anex in Colombia, Halta in Hungary, REC in Russia and UED in Turkey are just some of them. And many of the market challenges faced by agencies are global, which has led to international associations and alliances. International groups include Ialca, which has a code of practice for its language travel agent members to ensure quality and provides a forum for discussion, and Alto, which unites both individual language travel agents and schools, as well as their respective associations. Alto has developed a charter and codes of conduct to promote ethical business practices among members. And in addition to this, individual national associations are united through the international federation of agency associations, Felca.

As a federation, as well as individually, agency associations have certainly lubricated the communication channels in the language travel market. They have, as Dao Thi Lien Huong of Vieca says, forged “dialogue between agents and agents, agents and the government, and agents and foreign institutions”.

While creating an open arena for discussion is a feature of all associations, their other roles may include anything from marketing and fair organisation to quality assurance. REC was formed earlier this year, and its main aims, according to one of its founding members, Izabella Lauterprakt, is to provide a forum for the exchange of information, offer practical help to fellow members, ensure the quality of members through a code of practice, and ensure all agency members’ voices are heard through the rotation of the group’s presidency.

Shared experiences

The opportunity to share experience and knowledge with counterparts is one of the most important features of many associations. “We now have a group and place to expose our ideas about our activity and the natural conflicts, doubts and ways of improving our service,” confirms Claudia Roza, Secretary of the one-year-old Colombian association, Anex.

Similarly, Paulo Barilari of four-year-old Ialca in Italy says, “Ialca’s main achievement has been the development of closer relationships among our mem-

bers. Ialca members are now accustomed to working together and to sharing experiences. The final result [of this] is the possibility to offer better services and better products.” Ialca members also help one another, and work together rather than as competitors. Barilari says that “knowing each other better, we understand that every single agency has its own specialisation” and they often pass on any client requests to the relevant specialist member.

Quality measures

Quality, which is generally guaranteed through a code of practice, is one of the cornerstones of all associations. Most language travel markets around the world remain unregulated, often leaving them open to possible exploitation by companies that offer sub-standard

Anex, National Association of Education Advisers
Country: Colombia
Year established: 2001
Type of members: language travel agents
Total members: 30
 b, ws, cop, f

Aseproce, Asociacion Espanola de Promotores de Cursos en el Extranjero
Country: Spain
Year established: 1987
Type of members: lang. tr. agents
Total members: 62
 b, ws, cop

Alto, Association of Language Travel Organisations
Country: international
Year established: 1998
Type of members: language travel buyers and sellers
Total members: 200
 b, ws, cop, f

Atosa, Association of Tour Operators Studies Abroad
Country: Italy
Year established: 2001
Type of members: tour operators that also offer language travel
Total members: 9
 cop

services. According to Aseproce President, Juan Manuel Elizalde, one of the reasons the Spanish association was established was to “protect [member’s] interests against illegal organisations that have flourished due to the lack of government regulations for agents and programmes”. Aseproce has been working closely with the government to establish regulations specifically for language travel agents. As well as using its united voice to affect regulations, Aseproce has also lobbied hard to ensure agencies are not undercut by other organisations such as “foreign language schools/suppliers and government-protected agencies” that do not have to comply with the same tax regulations as language travel agents.

The new Hungarian association, Halta, currently has 10 language travel agent members, who joined forces to influence legislation affecting the industry. Their bugbear is that many organisations operating as language travel agents do not have a licence – even though this is a legal requirement – meaning that they have lower operating costs. “Our main aim is to make the competition fair for all parties,” says Robert Goldmann of Halta. “Therefore we require equally strict criteria for all participants.”

By presenting a united front through an association, individual language travel agents are able to get their message across more effectively. This has certainly been Halta’s experience. “We have [conducted] a campaign aimed at raising public awareness of the



role of a registered travel agent,” reports Goldman. “We have been on television and radio, and the major papers have written about us. We got many phone calls and people were happy to learn about us and consider our association as a compass to find their way [through] the jungle of different [operators].”

Recognition

By developing an association that represents quality and provides a united voice for the language travel sector, some of the more established agency associations have also succeeded in improving the image of the industry as a whole and becoming the voice for the sector in their respective countries. “Aseproce’s main achievement has been getting nationally recognised as a reliable group of language study

Belta in Brazil has been busy forging relations with a number of national organisations to improve quality standards in the country, as Alfredo Spinola, Belta President, explains. “Since the current Belta board took office [in September 2000] we have developed a strong relationship with Procon, our very strict consumer [protection agency]. Also Embratur, the Brazilian Tourism Authority, has been [one of our]

Belta Brazilian Educational & Language Travel Association
Country: Brazil
Year established: 1992
Type of members: language and education travel agents
Total members: 52
 b, ws, cop, f

ESS European Schools Service
Country: Europe
Year established: 1980
Type of members: language and education travel agents situated in Europe
Total members: 7
 ws, cop

Felca Federation of Education and Language Consultant Associations
Country: international
Year established: 2001
Type of members: language and education travel agent associations
Total association members: 13
 b, ws

FDSV Fachverband Deutscher Sprachreise Veranstalter
Country: Germany
Year established: 1990
Type of members: language and education travel agents only

Total members: 21
 b, ws, cop

Halta Hungarian Association of Language Travel Agents
Country: Hungary
Year established: 2002
Type of members: language and education travel agents
Total members: 10
 b

lalca Italian Association of Language Consultants and Agents
Country: Italy
Year established: 1997

Type of members: language and education travel agents
Total members: 12
 b, ws, cop

lalita International Association of Language Travel Agents
Country: international
Year established: 1994
Type of members: language and education travel agents
Total members: 16
 b, cop

Jaos Japan Association of Overseas Studies
Country: Japan

Year established: 1992
Type of members: language and education travel agents
Total members: 27
 ws, cop

Kosa Korea Overseas Study Association
Country: Korea
Year established: 1998
Type of members: language and education travel agents
Total members: 136
 b, ws, cop, f

L'Office Office National de Garantie de Sejours et Stages

professionals and a dependable source of information for the public and media,” says Elizalde.

Albert Lee, President of Tosa, makes a similar comment about the Taiwanese association. “All parties concerned – the consumer, agents, education institutions and government bodies, etc – have come to realise the importance of Tosa’s role as the mediator to constantly upgrade the standard of the industry.”

An indication of the respect Kosa has earned in Korea is that it has been requested by the Korean government to help increase the country’s education export market. “The Board of Education [has] asked Kosa to recruit foreign students to Korean universities and we are trying to help,” explains Kosa President,

Jhun Hyun Park. “So, Kosa will advertise Korean schools to the agents from many countries at the Icef [workshop] in 2003.”

In Europe, FDSV, Aseproce and Unosel have been working with organisations representing the education and travel industry in Europe under the auspices of the Comité Européen de Normalisation (CEN) to develop guidelines for all aspects of the language travel package. The development of CEN, together with the establishment of domestic regulations for language travel agents, remains Aseproce’s top priority, according to Elizalde.

partners and we are developing a project to establish some compulsory standards to be followed by every entity willing to counsel Brazilians to travel abroad for studies. ABAV, the Brazilian Association of Travel Agents, has also been very cooperative by offering their offices to us to hold seminars, [for example].”

Associations can also play a valuable role in ensuring their agent members are informed about market developments and changes. Last year, Anex held a seminar for its members, where it invited seven embassies to discuss visa issues with language travel agents. “[Anex] members were happy to have a closer relationship with visa departments,” comments Rozo.

To keep Tosa members, schools in Taiwan and overseas institutions informed, Tosa produces regular electronic newsletters. “They include up-to-date study abroad information, change of visa and government policy, and news on events and fairs,” reports Lee.

PR work

Agency associations are well placed to take on the public relations role of the industry in their countries, and implement a programme of generic marketing for their members. Their main marketing tools for this are brochures and websites. Association websites vary from statements about the associations and a listing of members to more interactive creations. Belta has two websites, one for education institutions and one for



“We now have a group and place to expose our ideas about our activity and the natural conflicts, doubts and ways of improving our service”



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students. The latter is an online version of their annual student guide and it has a search engine allowing visitors to choose the course they want and send an email to members offering that course.

Another method of raising the profile of the association – and thereby of its members – is by

attending education and language travel fairs. Sylviane Halphen at Unosel in France says, “Since our creation, we have [exhibited] at Expolangues [in Paris].” More recently, associations have begun hosting their own events too. Tosa, Tieca and Vieca organise a series of fairs in their countries – a good example of cross-border cooperation between agency

associations. Even newer associations have been quick to seize the opportunity of hosting fairs – Anex organised its first fair in Bogotá at the end of August.

Additional benefits

While the marketing activities of the associations and their ability to publicise their quality image are certainly important features, the fact that associations



linguistique
Country: France
Year established: 1997
Type of members: federation of language travel organisations, parents’ associations, and education and tourism specialists
Total members: 47 (15 associate)
 b, ws, cop

Naomsto Russian National Association of Education, Youth and Student Travel Organisations
Country: Russia
Year established: 1998
Type of members: language and education travel agents; tour

operators that offer language travel
Total members: n/a
 b, ws

REC Russian Education Consultants
Country: Russia
Year established: 2002
Type of members: language and education travel agents
Total agent members: 7

Tieca Thai International Education Consultants Association
Country: Thailand

Year established: 1997
Type of members: language and education travel agents
Total members: 28
 b, ws, f

Tosa Taiwan Overseas Study Association
Country: Taiwan
Year established: 1994
Type of members: language and education travel agents
Total members: 36
 b, ws, cop, f

UED International Education Association

Country: Turkey
Year established: 2001
Type of members: language and education travel agents
Total agent members: 18
 ws, cop

Unosel Union Nationale des Organisations de Sejours Linguistiques
Country: France
Year established: 1978
Type of members: language and education travel agents, language schools in France
Total members: 42
 b, ws, cop

Vieca Vietnam Education Consultants Association
Country: Vietnam
Year established: 2000
Type of members: language and education agents only
Total agent members: 14
 b, ws, f

Yuta Yugoslav Association of Travel Agents
Country: Yugoslavia
Year established: 1999
Type of members: travel agents (with language travel subgroup)
Total agent members: 15
 ws, cop

Key: b brochure ws website cop code of practice f association fair n/a not available

represent a body of agencies often enables them to provide additional services to members – proving that there is indeed strength in numbers. Barilari in Italy underlines “getting better prices from our suppliers” as an additional benefit of Ialca membership, while the pan-European organisation, ESS, managed to negotiate standard commission rates from individual schools for all its members.

Like many educator associations (see *Language Travel Magazine*, October 2002, pages 24-29), a handful of agency associations have developed an associate membership category. This is usually for overseas schools, and means that they can benefit from a number of special services. Both Belta and Tosa have

Strength through a federation

The dynamism with which many agent associations have taken up the establishment and development of a federation, called Felca, is an indication of the importance they place in working together towards a common aim.

“It is extremely important for Ialca to be a founding member of Felca,” confirms Ialca’s Paolo Barilari. “[It] gives us the opportunity to

follow closely all the latest developments in our market, to strengthen the collaboration among agents all over the world, and among agents and schools.”

Dao Thi Lien Huong, of Vieca, is also keen to underline the advantages.

“In the world education market, we need this [federation] for dialogue with institutions in new markets or cooperation on quality.”

associate membership categories, and those members benefit from support and assistance for any marketing

trips to Brazil and Taiwan respectively, participation at a discounted price in the associations’ fairs, and entries on their websites.

Whether well established or just starting out, agency associations have a clear and important role to play in the language travel market. “We have to raise the profile of the industry and upgrade our professional standing,” concludes Lee. “I personally [believe] that agent associations have to move [in this] direction to protect the interest of students and schools, and to bind the agents together by taking our industry in this healthy direction.” □

“Each association brings some good ideas to the global table, which are collected and developed by Felca”

Felca, whose first meeting took place in 1998, has a number of aims including the establishment of a code of practice for Felca members and guidelines for Internet marketing with schools. Pascal Carré of ESS comments, “Each association brings some good ideas to the global table, which are collected and developed by Felca – which already [represents]

some 400 individual agencies or more. This is a great achievement.” Alfredo Spinola of Belta, which is a new Felca member (see page 8), adds, “Being part of a federation will strengthen the role of each association.”

The federation has also been one of the driving forces behind regular meetings with its school counterpart, Gaela. Carré maintains that Felca is “the

only real solution to having our interests defended versus partner schools”.

“The most important target we have got, since Felca has been founded, is the constant communication between agents’ associations and schools’ associations,” says Barilari, adding, “A professional global network of agents and schools, working together, can only benefit the sector.”