

# Reaching out to agents

Language school associations exist as regional, national or international groups, all of which deliver a serious, quality membership of language schools. In recent years, many of these groups have put agents high up the agenda, as JANE VERNON SMITH reports.



Colleges join language [schools'] associations for a range of different reasons," says Sue Blundell, Chief Executive of English Australia (EA). "One of these is the way that association membership can differentiate them from other providers. The work that an association does to foster this [point of difference] and improve levels of awareness among agents internationally is valued."

Raising awareness of what a language schools' association stands for is necessarily one of their core purposes. And communicating that message to agents is an integral part of the agenda, as Jan Capper of the International Association of Language Centres (Ialc) relates. "Marketing has been Ialc's central purpose from the start and our marketing strategy has always focused on agents. Ialc was founded as a marketing network rather than an accreditation scheme."

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While Ialc has introduced its inspection scheme latterly, some groups have always had accreditation of quality standards as the tenet of their association. Whatever an association's origins, nearly all have taken proactive steps in the last few years to interact with agents and promote themselves nationally or internationally. While some association representa-

tives shy away from using the word "marketing" to describe their activities, most formal regional, national or international groups of language schools now seem to be involved in some kind of agent outreach.

This may be in the form of organising familiarisation (fam) trips or workshops, sending newsletters or trying to foster online communication. In the USA, the American Association of Intensive English Programs (AAIEP), which today is above all a lobbying organisation, organised its first agent reception in 2004 at the Nafsa Workshop. AAIEP Vice President of Outreach, Beata Schmid, observes, "We hope that, over time, this becomes a larger and more widely attended event... We also hope that agents will come to rely more heavily on our association in terms of verifying that schools they send students to meet minimum standards."

In Europe, the European Association for Quality Language Services (Eaquals), drawing its membership from both private and state educators across Europe, is a classic example of an organisation founded to promote quality. Although marketing directly to agents does not form part of its remit, Secretary General of the association, Laura Muresan, reports that communication of quality standards has taken on increasing importance recently. Eaqual's marketing sub-committee has been upgraded in status, and now



## The power of persuasion

Lobbying activity by language school associations has increased considerably in recent years, and no more so than for AAIEP in the USA. "Since 11 September 2001, enrolments in US-based intensive English programs (IEPs) have consistently declined and many programmes have closed," notes Beata Schmid at the association. As a result, communicating with legislators on industry issues has taken on a new importance. AAIEP has highlighted the effect of lost revenues on local communities, states and the country as a whole. It has also lobbied for a reduction in the Sevis fee for short-term students, and is currently pushing for a change in visa requirements to allow short-term students to enter on tourist visas.

Visas are a thorny issue for many associations, and frequently a subject for lobbying, both with a view to solving specific problems that arise and with the aim of improving procedures. Recently, Canada's Capls has undertaken a major initiative with Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) and Industry Canada to develop of a self-regulating framework for Canada's private language industry. Linda Auzins at Capls says, "This framework is intended to build better communications between the private language industry and Canadian immigration officials; to streamline and make student visa processing more effective; and to build greater accountabilities and quality assurances into the system."

Likewise, a current focus for Education New Zealand is "working with the government to develop consistency, clarity and customer efficiency around student visa processes," says Stuart Boag. The organisation has also been

working to encourage a more student-focused environment for work-related regulations while studying.

Meanwhile, English UK is in frequent contact with bodies such as UK Visas to help ensure that Entry Clearance Officers throughout the world are consistent in their approach

to students applying to the UK to study English.

Lobbying activity extends to many other areas of interest to the industry. After several years of lobbying the Maltese government to introduce more specific legislation to regulate host family accommodation, Feltom's efforts were

rewarded, when its recommendations finally gained acceptance in 2002, reports John Dimech. Meanwhile, the Italian association, Asils, has been campaigning both on visas and the issue of contracts for teachers, according to association president, Alessandro Vidoni.

has regular meetings and clear objectives. One of its key initiatives of the last two years has been a new website, with more information about members and a "communities" page with information for agents.

"With increased Internet dependency of both agents and potential customers, the website is instrumental in facilitating the search for and obtaining of relevant information, as well as in establishing contacts between language providers, agents and clients," says Muresan.

In New Zealand, English New Zealand, formerly known as FielsNZ, is active in courting agents. Aside from a series of agent workshops organised in various world cities (see *Language Travel Magazine*, December 03, page 8), William Neale, Chairperson of the association, explains, "We send out monthly e-zines to agents and host annual receptions for local agents in Auckland and Christchurch." At fellow national organisation, Education New Zealand, Stuart Boag lists e-zines, news flash services, workshops, fam trips and formal/informal relationships with agent associations as part of the association's gameplan. However, he says direct agent communications need to be developed further. "This is an area we want to give priority in 2005," he says. "As part of this we will be both initiating more regular communications with agents individually and via associations, and where possible building our relationship with [agents'] associations."

At the Canadian Association of Private Language Schools (Capls), Linda Auzins underlines, "The relationship of Capls and its members to agents and agent associations has always been very important. Our schools regard the agent relationships as critical to their business and it is estimated that almost 60 per cent of members' students are recruited by way of their agents."

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Capls also aims to boost its level of dialogue with agent associations. "It makes a lot of sense for school associations and agent associations to work together in a more formal way," observes Auzins. "This is needed in Canada in light of new legislative changes concerning student visa processing. But more importantly, it will surely become the focal point in the future promotion of national brands."

Capls is in contact with the Federation of Education and Language Consultant Associations (Felca) three or four times a year, while also liaising with national agent associations as the need arises. The existence of organisations like Felca, its school association counterpart, the Global Alliance of Education and Language Associations (Gaela), and the Association of Language Travel Organisations (Alto) has undoubtedly lent impetus to the development of cross-industry relationships and joint action.

A contributor to this trend is the Alto "dialogue" system, whereby agent and school members meet to discuss common issues and develop solutions together. At the 2003 Alto Dialogue at WYSTC in Thailand, the main issues discussed were Internet bookings and commission on accommodation. Alto's Bradley Allen reports that Alto has now made available to members a summary of the solutions offered and has formulated recommendations on both issues.

According to Capper at Ialc, "The greatest value comes from association cooperation when agents and schools work together to raise standards, to lobby or to raise the profile of the industry." She adds, "Without a doubt, the development of Gaela/Felca and creation of Alto have increased the awareness of both partners of each other's perspective on certain issues."

Ialc is currently working on increasing the visibility of its website. "It is, and will remain, primarily a site for industry professionals," says Capper, "but we also want more students to visit it. Ialc is quite well known within the industry," she adds, "but not so familiar to students. We want them to know they can rely on the quality of Ialc schools and to ask agents about [them]."

For most school associations, promotion to potential students is limited – being carried out primarily via the web – for the reason that schools do not wish to bypass their agents and want to safeguard their relationship with them. Neale at English New Zealand underlines, "[The association] is not currently seeking to raise the profile of our members among potential students or the general public, with the exception of our website. Instead, we seek to promote to and through agents – our partners in the marketplace."

The association website is also currently the focus of attention at English in London (EiL) - a body that groups together certain London-based English language schools. To help promote London in the current

The British Educational Travel Association (Beta), an association that represents the whole of the UK's youth industry, was created specifically with lobbying in mind. According to spokesperson Emma English, it has so far been involved in many issues that are currently or potentially

affecting the industry, including working holiday visas and new legislation dealing with fire regulations for hostels.

Another dedicated lobbying organisation is the Association of Private Providers of English Language (Appel) in New Zealand – set up to deal with

lobbying initiatives on behalf of the two New Zealand school associations, English New Zealand and Crels. "Appel has recently been involved in lobbying on visas, student fee protection and the education export levy," reports Chairperson, William Neale.

## The way forward

Looking ahead to the next five years, it seems brand development will remain a key focus for language school associations around the world. Carolyn Blackmore at Quality English in the UK says, "Our long-term vision is to

establish Quality English as the leading global brand for high-quality English language training in English-speaking countries." John Dimech at Feltom in Malta adds, "Feltom will also strengthen its corporate marketing role for the

political climate, the EiL website is currently being revamped, and will be publicised by "free, eye-catching postcards", to be distributed through British Council offices worldwide, explains Chairperson, Judy Loren.

A relative newcomer to the association scene is Quality English (QE), formed by members of the UK national association, English UK, specifically to promote their high quality services. While English UK has a broad remit, including marketing, quality standards and lobbying, QE is focused exclusively on marketing and promotion. QE runs two overseas missions a year, and in March 2004, held a reception and mini-workshop with Aseproce agents in Madrid. A further mission to Italy took place in the autumn.

The development of localised and special interest groups, such as EiL and Quality English, reflects the growth of brand marketing throughout the industry.

Auzins at Capls observes, "We anticipate that our emphasis on marketing will increase and that Capls will build a marketing programme in support of its members [for] 2005."

In EA's case, Blundell prefers to use the term "profiling" rather than "marketing". The association has published information fliers in different languages and has launched an email update service for agents. "As the number and range of 'players' in the international education industry increases every year, both agents and providers have become more concerned with ways and means of identifying who will be reliable and trusted business partners," she explains.

Richard Truscott at English UK agrees. "The current political climate has perhaps increased the attraction of high-profile and trusted organisations," he says, and offers a further reason for brand promotion. "[Visa] entry clearance officers can only look

increased benefits of all members.”

In France, Jean Petrisans, Spokesperson for French association, Souffle, suggests that “the ideal for France, and so for the members, would be to do the same as English UK” and group private and state association members

together under one inclusive brand umbrella.

In other countries, there may be specific issues that an association is hoping to solve before it concentrates on brand promotion, such as in Italy, where Alessandro Vidoni, President of Asils, observes, “Our main objectives are short-term

objectives, such as... visa issuance and teachers’ contracts. Once we have solved these important matters, we can also think about commercial objectives, such as the promotion of our members.”

Associations have to keep their eye on the ball and always be prepared to tackle

issues of note, as well as raising their profile with agents and consumers. Sue Blundell at English Australia comments, “An association will only grow and retain its position if it stays relevant to the people/organisations it is there to serve. I predict that the core goals we pursue will not change in any major

way. However, EA will continue to be responsive to the needs of our members and other stakeholders.”

Stuart Boag echoes this view. “Our core functions will remain, but we will be working hard to enhance the value we have across all our activities,” he says.

favourably upon applications through members of a reputable body with a proven track record. Students might more easily be recognised as serious in their intentions and to have received relevant advice before applying for visas.”

John Dimech at the Federation of English Language Teaching Organisations in Malta (Feltom) cites a further benefit of association membership in a particular country. “The voice of Feltom members is listened to at the highest levels, as Feltom holds a very important advisory and representative position in shaping the future of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Malta.”

In Canada, where, according to Jay Jamieson from the Canada Language Council (CLC), “the language training industry has long been characterised as largely fragmented and unregulated”, communication between language schools’ associations and govern-

ment bodies is particularly important. The association has its own quality assurance scheme for members – from both the private and public sectors – and is currently working in partnership with government

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departments to raise the profile of its accreditation system. Although there is no collaborative project with Capls at present, CLC is also working with Industry Canada to consolidate the national industry.

The fact is that the more language school associations take on, the more it seems there remains to do. That is a sign of the growing sophistication of the language travel market. Boag in New Zealand observes, “Advocacy, marketing and industry development are our core functions, and all those jobs seem to be getting bigger.” □