

# Working together

Even in the best working relationships between schools and agents, there may be times when problems occur. AMY BAKER hears from agents and schools about typical areas of difficulty and suggested solutions to make working relationships easier.

Despite a school or agent's best efforts, problems can arise in the process of client counselling and placement. From the agents' point of view, key concerns include slow responses from schools, out-of-date information and delays in receiving commission payments.

Hasnain Naqvi, Director of Ed-Tech International in Pakistan, comments, "I believe the most common problem is lack of prompt response and lack of communication [from schools]. [If] schools don't give us up-to-date information about courses and dates, we suffer embarrassment."

From the schools' point of view, similar problems occur with agencies that they work with, as one of the chief complaints is about insufficient information being passed on to the client. "I would say that wrong expectations on the part of the client would be a common problem," asserts Geoff Butler, Manager of Mount Maunganui Language Centre in New Zealand. "We do our utmost to provide thorough information about our school and our policies, but it can be difficult to monitor whether an agent has actually read and taken in that information."

For agents, all they can do is stress the importance to their school partners of receiving timely information. Naqvi says that if problems continue with schools, it can result "in the cancellation of contracts". Peter Gainey, Managing Director of International Vision Education in Australia, which acts as a consultancy for schools, backs up this point.

He says that he has often been responsible for solving problems between agents and schools, the most common of which is a "general tardiness of responses [from schools] to communications, sometimes quite critical communications at that". He advises, "If a school doesn't reply to an agent, sooner or later, they are simply going to find another school [to work with]."

On the schools' side, some schools testify that they make every effort to ensure agents are fully briefed. "Today, we have a comprehensive pre-departure pack with practically everything [explained about what] the student can expect from our school and our partners in Canada," explains Marcos Londe of Canadian College of English in Toronto, Canada. "With all that information in their hands, our number of complaints, especially regarding

## Association membership as a mark of quality

*"We always try to work with good schools that are officially recognised," says Celso Luiz Garcia at CI - Central de Intercambio in Brazil. Alexandra Galindo from Global Connection agency in Colombia agrees that membership of a quality association is important when considering new business partners. However, she relates, "One time we had an incredible problem with a school accredited by the British Council. Since that day, we don't believe too much in accreditation."*

*Schools similarly attest that, while membership of an agency association is seen as preferable in many cases, they do not always judge an*

*agency's credentials by this alone. Shane Wilkinson, Managing Director of Bournemouth Business School International in the UK, says, "In many cases, there may be good reasons why the agent is not a member [of an association]."*

*But it is clear that, overall, quality associations are still used as some sort of benchmark on each side of the industry to ascertain an indication of quality credentials. In the USA, Gordon Clark, Director of Ashland University Center for English Studies in Ashland, Ohio, says association membership is "one of the most important criteria" when selecting an agency.*

wrong expectations on the part of the agency client, has dropped to virtually zero."

Londe points out that schools take similar action if they find that agencies continue to pass on misleading or inaccurate information to clients. "After explaining to agents [what] the adequate procedures [are], no more than once or twice, if problems continue we prefer to stop working with that particular agent," he says. "We cannot run the risk of having our students deceived as the student may think the problem was caused by the school."

The other main bugbear that schools point to is receiving incomplete enrolment information. Chiann Karen Tsui, at Carl Duisberg Centren in Berlin, Germany, comments, "The most common problem that we have experienced is in the transfer of information from the agent to our centre. Sometimes it takes quite a while to receive all the different components: registration form, the preliminary placement test, housing request and payment, for example." Cyril Henderson, Marketing Manager for Pacific International Hotel Management School in New Plymouth, New Zealand, agrees that "incomplete information" about a student placement is the most usual problem encountered with agents.

Of course, there are other less usual, and sometimes unethical problems, experienced on both sides. Gail Kellersberger at the University of Houston Downtown in Texas, USA, recounts that she has received enrolments from new agents who then hope to receive a commission. "We must first establish a contractual basis on which to work, so these requests cannot be honoured until the preliminary work has been done," she explains.

Londe relates instances when agents have offered to jointly participate in student fairs

and then redirected students to other establishments after receiving substantial support from the school. Or "the worst problem of all" – when agents do not pay their invoices. "As charging an agent in a foreign country is quite expensive, the best attitude in my view [in this situation] is to immediately stop working with that agent and inform colleagues and school associations," says Londe.

In all cases, an established agreement and/or a contract between the two parties can help draw up working guidelines and clarify the expectations of the agency and school. In Vietnam, Ha Viet Hang, Assistant Director of ISC agency, confirms, "Before beginning to work with schools, we try to set up a system and we follow this system. I know that it will not waste the time or effort of the two parties."

However, as Manya Bredell, of the Cape Town School of English in South Africa, points out, only experience and a mutual respect for the client and the other party can ensure good business practice over time. "Guidelines and rules will not necessarily guarantee quality," she says. "Only working with an agent and experience will show how much they have the client at heart, or not."

Hans-Georg Albers, Director of Sales and Marketing at Carl Duisberg Centren in Germany, underlines the need for flexibility when he says, "Late bookings and change of student details or wishes, especially concerning accommodation, are difficult to manage, but of course we try our best." Londe concurs that his school takes agent relations seriously. "We consider that respect for serious agents is paramount," he says.

Agents need to be similarly understanding about their relationship with schools. Paolo Vieira, Director of Studies at the Language

*"We like to work with agents who are members of the national agency association that associates with Felca; who are members of Nafsa; or a similar association," he explains. "I have attended two Felca meetings and could see how organised and professional these agent organisations are."*

*At the Canadian College of English (CCE) in Toronto, Canada, Marcos Londe, Director of Marketing, says that it is CCE's first goal when dealing with a new agent to ascertain membership of a relevant association. But he adds, "That type of agent usually has long lasting partnerships with specific schools and very occasionally [agrees] to work with a new school, at least in mature markets like ours."*

*He adds that well-established agencies are less flexible when it comes to establishing commission rates, "demanding extremely high commission rates that small schools are not able to provide". Londe advocates working with a higher number of smaller agents in several countries, and "only with agents that prove to be serious, which also contributes to a great student nationality mix in our school".*

*On top of association membership, many schools like other evidence from agencies about their business dealings. Cyril Henderson, at Pacific International Hotel Management School in New Zealand, says, "We insist that [agents] send us their corporate profile, and, in several countries that we work in, we work with other institutions and form networks. In these instances, we meet regularly and review agents' performances."*

Centre of Central Queensland University in Australia, says, "Sometimes, agents expect consistency between colleges. This isn't always the same across the industry. Payments



are always a source of frustration." He explains that with university language centres, for example, "commission payments have to go through a laborious process before finally reaching the agent".

Problems are inevitable in a client-led business such as language training overseas, and cross-cultural communication can also sometimes cloud the issue. Gainey underlines that, while marketing managers have international experience, "frequently, non-travelling staff have no idea of cultural contexts or sensitivities to observe across cultural borders". He adds that staff are not always aware of the pressure that agents are under from students and, in Asia particularly, their parents.

Ha in Vietnam mentions that one problem with schools: that they do not issue separate

receipts to the agency and the client. "For agents, we have commission, [and] we do not want to show [this to] the parents," she says.

Experience and understanding can solve many of the problems that occur. Vieira advocates prompt action in the event of a misunderstanding, either through email or with a phone call. He says, "Usually, once a good working relationship is established, problems can be ironed out amicably."

In New Zealand, Butler recommends face-to-face meetings to resolve misunderstandings and maintain good relations with agents. "Even if a problem has been resolved previously, if a marketing trip is scheduled, we make a point of visiting the agent in question," he says. "It's amazing how much can be achieved by a simple sit-down."