

# Success strategies

To achieve and maintain a good profile in the marketplace, an agency needs to consider using advertising and Internet mediums strategically and to try and meet potential clients face-to-face, as well as ensuring repeat bookings through good customer service.

JANE VERNON SMITH reports.

**A**mong all the marketing techniques available, Ana Beatriz Senra Faulhaber of Brazilian agency, CP-4 Cultural Projects, believes the power of word-of-mouth cannot be underestimated (see box, right). Over the years, she believes this has been her agency's most effective marketing tool. Yet, however powerful word-of-mouth may be, most agents cannot afford to rely on goodwill alone to generate their business. Most agencies employ a range of marketing techniques, including some that focus on recruiting new clients and others that are designed to harness repeat bookings.

At CP-4 Cultural Projects, lectures and presentations, together with participation in fairs and educational events are all an integral part of the marketing mix, while advertising –

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mainly in the educational sector press – is also a strategy sometimes used. According to Faulhaber, language fairs have played a significant role in increasing the popularity of the agency's work and travel programmes, by opening students' eyes to new ideas.

Education fairs, student lectures and seminars are also highly regarded by other agents, including Mohammed Zakir Hossain of Transglobe Consultants in Bangladesh, whose agency has conducted four educational seminars over the past 12 months. Educational events have represented the most successful venture for the agency in the course of the past year. "We got at least 50 per cent of customers by attending educational seminars or exhibitions, and we got at least 30 per cent of customers by placing advertisements in national newspapers," he relates.

For Malaysian-based agent, Weston Wong, education fairs have also proved to be the main way of attracting business. "This," he explains,

"is because, prior to the actual date... of the fair, there will be heavy advertising."

## Getting the word out

Advertising, of course, is not necessarily limited to paid display advertisements in newspapers and magazines. In Hungary, Vera Baldauf reports that her agency, Hera Holdings, mostly advertises its services in printed and electronic media. However, the agency also gained exposure because, "Many interviews were [carried out] by leading TV and radio channels with Hera Holdings' employees," Baldauf says. "We prefer [such] reports that advertise our services, because these are more effective than the most expensive commercials on TV."

Another marketing method that has proved particularly successful for Brazilian Exchange (BEX) in Brazil, according to Ricardo Notare Costa, is the promotion of cultural events of interest to the agency's target group of young adults aged from 15 to 25. "The events we promote cover a wide range [of interests], from tennis tournaments to music concerts [by] local bands," he reports.

This kind of marketing activity does not, on the whole, come cheaply. Hossain, President of the recently formed international language travel agents' association, Saielta, points out that, although most local association members engage in national newspaper advertising, many have so far held back from participating in educational seminars or exhibitions, owing to lack of funds. However, given the clear benefits, members are actively encouraged to consider this form of promotion, and Hossain is confident that many will be looking to do so in the coming year.

Similarly, Hungarian agents are also often obliged to limit their marketing activities because of financial constraints. According to



Baldauf, most agencies cannot afford to advertise their services because of the very high cost of advertising in the country.

However, there are other promotional options. At Austrian-based Europe Echanges, Helga Probst reports that good contacts are maintained with local language teachers through regular presentations. The agency also uses direct mailings as a marketing tool and promotes its services by placing posters in libraries and universities and providing information folders to a variety of cultural institutes in Austria and southern Germany. Probst reports good results from both its marketing to the cultural institutes and word-of-mouth recommendation.

Direct mailings, both to potential clients and to schools and universities, are a popular marketing tool with many agencies. However, keeping the mailing list of potential clients up-to-date and relevant is a major challenge, which can prove costly and time-consuming. At Globo-study Sprachreisen in Switzerland, Claudio Cesarano reports that the process has been made more efficient as the company sends out newsletters "where students can easily update their details themselves".

## Up-to-date information

Another major undertaking, the agency brochure, also appears to be moving on. In these



fast-changing times, this has to be up-to-date, as well as visually appealing. In addition, stresses Cesarano, “We make sure that we have some new things to offer every year – like new destinations, exclusive offers and services for our students.”

Brochures remain a crucial marketing tool and promotional platform for many agencies. However, at Hera Holdings, keeping up-to-date means producing single sheets of information that can change on a weekly basis. And, in Austria, according to Probst, things are changing so often that her agency has now largely abandoned the brochure in favour of folders, which have the advantage that they may be changed very quickly. In Malaysia, Wong too works without a traditional brochure, relying instead on copies of the materials provided by his partner schools and

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universities. Here, however, the reason is primarily the small size of the market, rather than the need for constantly updated information. Meanwhile, Faulhaber uses original materials from schools, alongside a brochure, to ensure students definitely have all information.

One development that has allowed agents to become less reliant upon the traditional bro-

chure is the rise of the Internet. Some agencies, such as Alternatif in Turkey, have embraced the Internet and in this agency’s case, it now operates a website that offers a searchable database of 4,000 schools. But according to Cesarano, web promotion can be something of a double-edged sword for language travel agents. Just as they themselves may gain business from Internet clients who visit their webpage and source information from there, so schools too may obtain direct bookings from their homepages, and leave their agents out in the cold.

“I see direct enrolment as another competitor, which is getting bits of the market,” says Cesarano. “At the moment, it might be about three per cent of our market that is enrolling through the Internet directly with the school,” he estimates. “But this will increase, and we have to make sure that schools and colleges are aware of the advantage of having their agent promoting and handling the booking.”

#### Online bookings for agents

The Internet has made greater inroads in certain markets than in others. In Malaysia, Wong reports that Internet booking by students has not, so far, reached significant proportions, while Probst notes that, although she receives many email enquiries as a result of her inclusion in an Internet travel service, these are “seldom successful”.

Elsewhere, however, Internet services have really taken off. In Hungary, Internet bookings at Hera Holdings have increased by around 200 to 300 per cent over the past year, according to Baldauf. “Our main web page itself has about 150,000 visitors a year, and the downloads of the pages are more than three million,” she says. Faulhaber in Brazil reports that all of CP-4’s clients now have Internet access, and tend to use it to search for primary information. “But Brazilians do need someone that they trust to apply [for a programme],” she says, emphasising that, “the Internet has facilitated the way we can show information, the profile of the company [and] the providers we work with”.

Just how useful an Internet presence will be depends not only upon the disposition of potential clients, but also upon how successfully the agency manages to market and position its website. The key here is to enable web pages to be found easily and this can be a major task in itself. “It is hard to get on top of the important search engines,” says Cesarano. “One has to evaluate and research well, on where and how much to invest in these.”

Baldauf has negotiated this by “putting our web pages onto all search portals”, she relates. “We try to obtain the names of well known web pages and direct them to our own pages,” she adds. Also important in gaining the maximum number of Internet bookings, according to Cesarano, is to have a page that is “easy to handle, with correct information, and not loads of animation”. □

## The secret to a good reputation

Claudio Cesarano, Managing Director of Swiss agency, Globo-study Sprachreisen, believes that staff training is fundamental to building client loyalty, as does Brazilian agent, Ana Beatriz Senra Faulhaber of C-P4 Cultural Projects. “We are very strong in training our own staff,” emphasises Cesarano. “Students are getting more and more demanding, so when one can provide a good service and [ensure the] correct handling of the whole process of counselling, the student feels [he is] in good hands.”

Once a sale has been achieved, and a language course completed, agents take a variety of approaches to their role. Weston Wong, an agent based in Malaysia, believes that what sets his consultancy’s service apart from others is the after-sales service it provides. “Normally, [the] agent’s duty is considered completed after students have enrolled into the college or university,” he says. However, at his own consultancy, the relationship continues long afterwards. “After-sales service,” Wong points out, “can be in the form of constant contact with the parents concerned; exam result monitoring; helping [students with] poor results to switch institution if necessary and paying the students a visit or two per year.”

Mohammed Zakir Hossain of Transglobe Consultants in Bangladesh confirms the value of continued contact, hailing it as “one of our most successful and prime marketing [activities]”. Past students are called upon to recount their experience to others, and are also invited to attend educational seminars or to accompany staff to study abroad exhibitions.

Ricardo Notare Costa of Brazilian Exchange (BEX) in Brazil is another agent who believes in the importance of good follow-up. “Our follow up includes a ‘welcome back’ pack, with an ‘I did it’ T-shirt and certificates for students who finish their programmes,” he explains. “We also keep an up-to-date birthday list and send a card to all students – [both] prospective and alumni students. The agency also sends a courtesy letter to students following their initial contact, inviting them to return with any further questions they may have.”

Effective follow-up also includes monitoring students’ experiences to check on whether programmes are meeting their expectations. At Globo-study, Cesarano reports that every student is sent a questionnaire after completing his or her course. If any aspect of the course has been marked as less than “good”, the agency calls to find out how either the agency or the school/college can improve – or just to see whether the comments are justified or not, says Cesarano. Together, all of these small actions contribute to the impression the agency makes on the client and the likelihood of a recommendation being passed on.