



Running a successful language travel agency is not only about offering high quality services and products. A business's prosperity is also dependent upon its ability to market itself well and put itself in the spotlight when clients are considering their study abroad plans. AMY BAKER talks to agencies around the world about their marketing tactics.

# creative marketing

There are two types of businesses: those that change or die,' says Tasha Lewis of International Connections Consulting (ICC) in the USA, quoting Peter Kotler, an author of marketing strategy books. In the last 10 years, most agencies would acknowledge that they have had to adapt their marketing techniques to stay competitive in their field. Promotional strategies to attract potential clients must now be wide-ranging and innovative, and cannot fail to include the most important marketing revolution for agencies of the late 1990s: the Internet.

'Now we are [focusing on] our website because that's the way we think we will contact our clients and our clients will find us,' says Claudia Bertotto of Coventry House School of English in Argentina, who also mentions that they use a range of other marketing techniques such as sending emails, visiting potential clients and newspaper advertising. Catherine Van Dale of Planète Langues in France is in agreement with Bertotto. 'Our most successful [marketing] method used to be [advertising in] magazines but now it is our website,' she says. 'We are now using the Internet a lot to promote our programmes. [Our] online bookings will grow if we can ensure secure payment [online].'

The Internet has revolutionised the marketing process - and booking process in some cases - although the management of an agency's website alone needs considerable time and attention (see overleaf). But it is by no means the solution for all marketing goals. As Sandra Steketee, of Lexton Language Programmes in the Netherlands, points out, the best results are only possible by using a range of marketing methods. 'We think it is necessary to combine the new and more traditional media,' says Steketee. 'In all our advertisements and on all our promotional material, we publish [the address] of our Internet site.'

## Marketing channels

Indeed, while many clients will use an agency's website to find out more information about the company and its services, the agency first has to make the client aware of its existence. Of course, as Jelena Vukovic of New Visions School in Yugoslavia underlines, 'Word of mouth [recommendation] does wonders!' But, aside from this, targeted advertising and visits to groups of potential clients are both key ways of building client recognition.

'As we are a school of English in the first place, offering business English to different companies, we use these contacts to distribute information about [study abroad],' explains Vukovic, who adds that her company is planning to advertise on billboards in the future. In the USA, ICC conducts visits to local schools and universities to market to potential clients there. 'Normally we are invited to participate because of ICC's reputation,' says Lewis. 'The visits entail meeting with the administration, staff and students. We tour the facility and attend special seminars if they are offered.'

Planète Langues favours a direct mail campaign. 'We send brochures and posters to youth centres, universities and language schools all over France,' explains Van Dale. 'We have established a close cooperation with some English language schools in France and they often send us student bookings. We offer language schools a commission fee.' Planète Langues has also established fruitful contacts at universities. Internship programmes can be compulsory for French students on some courses, although the university, or school in some cases, may not be able to provide a placement service for an internship. In these cases, students are often referred to Planète Langues, says Van Dale.

The direct mailing of brochures has always been an important facet in an agency's marketing strategy (see page 24). However,



strategic advertising also includes placing advertisements in relevant student publications or reaching an agency's potential clientele via TV, radio or press features. Not many agencies use TV advertising,

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largely because of the high costs involved, although Cesar Eden Bastos, of Integrity Exchange Student Agency in Brazil, says that this is one of his agency's plans for next year. But, for now, he says, 'We are trying to focus more and more on specialised magazines and newspapers.' According to Bastos, this is the most successful marketing method for his agency. Another advertising avenue that Bastos experimented with was promoting his agency in a shopping centre.

#### Using the press

Advertising in targeted publications is certainly one way to reach clients. Steketee explains, 'We advertise in magazines for youths aged between 15 and 20 years old. We also advertise in a magazine for secretaries. Of course, the content of each advertisement is very different.' The mainstream press can also yield sales opportunities through the placing of advertisements or producing relevant articles. Rachel Wang, International Marketing Officer at the Beijing Oz Enrolment Center of International Education in China, explains that they have a year-round contract with well known newspapers so that they can place advertisements at

any time. They usually place an advertisement when an overseas university visits China and conducts interviews or seminars with students.

In the USA, Christine Cote of Language Studies Abroad (LSA) works with some of her partner schools to ensure press exposure for both the agency and the school involved. Cote explains, 'The agency will contact local writers and schools agree to host them as students for a week. When the writer publishes, both the name of the agency and the school appear in the article.' Cote has used other innovative means to increase exposure for her agency. LSA ran a Spanish essay contest, where the winner was offered a two-week Spanish course. LSA paid the airfare and the school paid for the tuition and accommodation.

Cote stresses the importance of schools and agencies working together to promote their services, but she also underlines the need for transparency in the school-agent relationship concerning direct bookings. 'In 2000, we stopped using the names of the schools we represent [on our website] because Americans tend to want to get all the information from an agent and then go direct,' she says.

Schools that have arrangements with LSA concerning direct bookings - 'other than 'give us a list of students' names'', says Cote - are asked to work with LSA on joint marketing initiatives. 'At some point we will probably stop working with schools that do not organise a satisfactory means of dealing with [direct bookings] so we can again put the schools' names in our brochures and on our website,' says Cote.

#### Collaborative efforts

Another marketing opportunity where schools and agencies often work together is language and educa-

## Embracing the Internet generation

Visitors to an agency's website typically expect a comprehensive and easy-to-understand summary of services offered by the agency and information about the locations and programmes available.

Websites may also feature photos, competitions, chat rooms and articles of interest about study abroad. Basic information about study abroad needs to be available for the first-timers who are unsure of what to expect of a study abroad experience. There also needs to be clear financial guidelines and instructions on how to pay. Some agencies are able to offer an online payment service, as well as an online booking and/or information service.

The level of attention and time spent on the content of an agency's website varies

according to company.

Some agents report that their website is overhauled annually although extra information can be added throughout the year. Others update their websites more frequently. Rachel Wang of Beijing Oz Enrolment Center for International Education in China, says, '[Our website] is updated daily. There are almost 50 new articles to be put on the website in an average day.' Tasha Lewis of International Connections Consulting (ICC) in the USA explains that they normally conduct monthly updates of their website, and adds, 'Providing all of our marketing material online helps to expedite the business process.'

The number of client bookings made via a website can depend on the geographic situation of the

agency. In the USA, where Internet usage is high, Lewis says 95 per cent of clients are recruited via the Internet. In Brazil, Cesar Eden Bastos of Integrity Exchange Student Agency estimates that just 15 per cent of all clients are recruited via the Internet. In China, despite a strong Internet profile, Wang says just 20 per cent of Chinese book via the agency's website, but she adds, 'If we count [students] who register with our site using nicknames and later come to our office using real names, the estimation is 40 per cent.'

Wang adds that her agency's Internet presence also helps it maintain a strong profile and attract other clients to the office for counselling services. 'About 70 per cent [of all clients] know about our service

through browsing our website before they consider visiting us,' she estimates. Sandra Steketee of Lexton Language Programmes in the Netherlands points out that other marketing methods may prompt a client to look at a company's website in the first place. 'Seventy per cent of requests for brochures are sent by email via our website,' she says. 'But we do advertise in newspapers, etc, with the website address, so people [may] have seen the address in the newspaper and then looked on the web.'

Student queries received via a website must be dealt with efficiently so that they can be followed up and converted into student bookings. According to Claudia Bertotto of Coventry House School of English in

Argentina, of the five students who make contact via the Internet per day, two usually sign up for courses. 'We send emails to introduce the school or answer enquiries and then we do about two follow ups,' she explains. 'If the students do not answer after the second [contact] we do not write again for a time.'

Lexton Language Programmes also emails potential clients regularly. 'In January, we send a letter and little brochure to everybody who contacted us the year before. Throughout the year, we send emails [to them],' explains Steketee. 'It is important to correct wrong addresses and to delete [contacts] which no longer exist or who no longer require information.'

tion fairs. However, some agents are sceptical as to the benefit of attending local fairs. 'Education fairs at universities do not work,' asserts Cote, 'because they all have their own programmes that they try to promote first.' Van Dale in France adds, 'Education fairs are not very useful and are very costly for the agency.' However, joint benefits can be obtained if a coordinated approach is employed by the agency and school, whereby both parties either exhibit jointly or enquiries are fielded to the agent (see *Language Travel Magazine*, April 2002, page 21). And, as Lewis acknowledges, '[Attending fairs] does add credibility and visibility to your agency.'

Some individual agencies and agency associations, such as Belta in Brazil, Tieca in Thailand, Tosa in Taiwan and Vieca in Vietnam, have gone one step further by organising their own education fairs, thus raising their own profile. Belta, for example, promoted its last fair in the specialised press, radio and through invitations distributed in universities (see *Language Travel Magazine*, August 2002, page 11).

There are other examples of innovative approaches to marketing. Cote says that she is working on a 'one world learning centre', where children and adults can learn about other cultures and languages and become future clients of the foreign schools. 'This

is not a new concept, just new for LSA,' she says. Fellow US agent, Lewis, says that ICC is always looking to establish mutually beneficial relationships with other organisations or agencies. 'We feel that by pooling our resources we can learn and help each other. We share ideas, marketing strategies and clients who we cannot accommodate.'

#### **Responsibility and seasonality**

Marketing a language travel agency can be a time-consuming job, on top of the day-to-day activities of counselling clients and organising their language stays abroad. Some agencies employ a marketing manager at their agency for this reason. In Brazil, Bastos uses a separate company to take care of the agency's marketing concerns, while at many smaller agencies, as Van Dale in France says, 'It is the programme director and the president who are in charge of marketing.'

Because the industry is a seasonal one, some agencies choose to invest their energies in marketing promotions during the quieter periods of the year, while many underline that they keep up their marketing presence year-round. 'We market year-round, but most heavily in the autumn when meetings, presentations, etc. are set up for the rest of the year,' says Cote. Van Dale adds, 'In November and December,

## The brochure - an agency's brand image

The brochure is one of the stalwarts of agency marketing. It has always been used as a form of promotion, and it always will be, according to Inessa Yugay of Intellect agency in Kazakhstan. 'Lots of people use the Internet to get information,' she says. 'However, published materials are still convincing because they are very accessible. I think hard

copies [of our brochure] will still be popular [in the future] along with the virtual one.'

Yugay says they print up to 10,000 copies of their brochure prior to attending an education expo, and they produce up to five different brochures each year.

Other agencies publish just one brochure per year, but they nevertheless expect the finished product to represent their agency

appropriately and capture the attention of potential language travel clients.

'I consider the design [of a brochure] very important because it gives a general idea about the agency,' says Henry Caro of Learning agency in Colombia, which produces one brochure and 4,000 flyers (small printed advertisements) each year.

Caro adds, 'The most important thing is the

content [of a brochure]. It has to satisfy the expectations of the readers.' He explains that they produce the content in-house, but use external sources for the design. 'The designers are normally very creative and can interpret our ideas and add complementary elements.'

Learning agency includes testimonies from previous clients that have used the

agency's services, as well as detailed information about all the programmes that are offered.

Sergei Makhotenkov of Meganom agency in Russia argues that, in the future, the Internet and CD Roms will mean that brochures are requested less, but Caro disagrees. 'They are different types of promotion targeted at different people,' he says.

we offer discounted prices. In January and February, we offer incentives to encourage students to book early for the summer.'

Steketee says that most marketing is done at their agency - which is part of a mainstream travel agency - between January and June. 'In these months, we also have most of our requests for brochures. From September to December, we do some marketing activities but not too many. In these months, we are busy making all the new promotional material.'

Lewis stresses the importance of a year-round marketing presence. 'Marketing is critical to any company's long-term [plans],' she says. 'This makes it

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imperative to have a continuous promotion campaign in place throughout the year.'

However they market their wares, agents all agree that their strategies must be continually revised. 'If you learn from each step in your [marketing] plan and build on it to achieve the desired goals, the end results will merit all of the previous legwork,' says Lewis. □