

stand out f

Marketing] is the reason we [survive],' points out Enrique Corrales of Kino Travel in Mexico. 'The more we market our agency, the more we are well known and respected.'

Annette Duerdoth, of Interstudioviaggi in Italy, continues, 'Marketing means clients... which means business, means a healthy company, means jobs are secure and personal satisfaction.'

One of the most important client recruitment methods noted by agencies worldwide is word-of-mouth recommendation, but in such a competitive environment, this cannot be relied on by agencies as the sole method for recruiting clients and maintaining a company's profile in the market. As Dorioara Pinku, CEO of Amerispan agency in the USA puts it, 'How else do you prosper as a business if you don't stay in peoples' faces? If you don't, somebody else will.'

There are various combinations of marketing media that are employed by agents, but the key promotional mix includes a website, brochures and/or flyers and, very often, seminars in the local area outlining an agency's services to potential clients and parents. Agents are also keen to stress a rather less high profile strategy, but nev-

Marketing is not only about promoting products, but also about projecting a company's profile in the marketplace - an imperative for agencies that want to reap new business as well as to encourage repeat bookings. AMY BAKER reports on trends in the business of agency promotion.

from the crowd

Nevertheless one of their most important marketing assets: customer service.

Client satisfaction

Along with attending exhibitions, a website and word-of-mouth recommendation, John Smith of Ukeas in Taiwan mentions their 'first-class services' as an important additional way of attracting students. Candy Lin, from Best Education Studies, which has branches in Taiwan and Indonesia, adds, 'We promote a high level

'We continually look to enhance our programmes. Even our bestsellers will be reviewed and re-examined on a regular basis.'

of customer service and treat every customer as if it was the first time they made an enquiry.'

At EduPort agency in Indonesia, Johanes Jasim says that each potential client always receives advice from the same member of staff, 'so we know the customer data'. And Hary Ibrahim, from Edukarsa Overseas Education Consultants in Indonesia, explains that his agency keeps in contact with all past and present clients by sending them a newsletter every six months.

For students using an agency for the second time, some companies also offer discounts to encourage repeat business. 'We offer discounts for returnees as well as having a wonderful 'passaparola' system - recommendation from satisfied clients,' relates Duerdoth in Italy.

The importance of word-of-mouth recommendations cannot be underestimated. Ibrahim estimates that one satisfied client can bring in five new customers. His agency focuses on maintaining good communication networks with potential and ex-clients, because he says 'the size of our company [means] we are not able to compete with industry giants' on an advertising level.

Competitive arena

Strong competition in the marketplace has made many agencies around the world turn to innovative marketing strategies to make them stand out from the crowd. Hugo Galindo, Director of Grupo Gales Educacion Internacional in Colombia, says that he finds the competitive environment an incentive to excel. 'Competition is always there, breathing over your shoulder,' he says. 'I find this an advantage. This way, you need to keep up the quality of your courses on offer, and in the long run, the students benefit.'

Assessing and overhauling the product range at an agency is another way of maintaining clients' interest and a reason to target clients. In the same way that schools introduce new courses to interest agents, agents like to pass on the news about new programmes to potential clients. Agency Surveys in *Language Travel Magazine* indicate that agencies add new school partners to their portfolio on a regular basis.

Lucy Lee of KC Holiday Tours, based in both the USA and Taiwan, says that one of the key ways her agency attracts bookings is by introducing new products. Lin agrees. 'We continually look to enhance our programmes,' she says. 'Even our bestsellers will be reviewed and re-examined on a regular basis.'

Using the web

One of the easiest and most cost-efficient ways to publicise new programmes is by amending an agency's website. The degree to which an agency uses its website as a marketing tool can depend on their country and the typical usage of the Internet across the population. For example, Jasim says that using a website to promote services and attract clients is 'not a trend in Indonesia'.

Ibrahim explains further. 'In our country, [an] Internet connection is quite expensive and not all students or parents want to get information from the Internet. They would like to have face-to-face interaction with the agency.' Nevertheless, his agency hopes to establish a web presence by the end of the year. In Russia, Tatyana Kromchenko of Takt & Partners says her agency established a web presence just this year.

But in countries such as Korea, Japan or the USA, where Internet use is widespread, a website may need 

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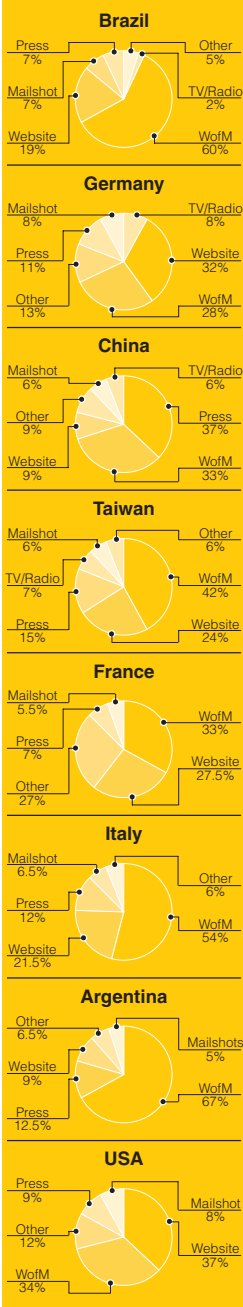
'Our target groups are young people - high school and university students - which we attract mainly by holding presentations in their schools'

Aside from waiting for marketing efforts to bring clients to an agency office, many agencies also go out to find potential clients. Anna Jackova, Director of Bakalari agency in Slovakia, says, 'Our target groups are young people - high school and university students - which we attract mainly by holding presentations in their schools.'

to be updated as often as every day. While agents agree that many clients like to have face-to-face interaction with someone at the agency, they say a website is imperative in order to provide background information

Lee at KC Holiday Tours relates that her agency conducts a form of market research before holding presentations at a school. 'We visit school principals first to present our products,' she explains, 'and after the principal's approval, we give students a reply sheet to [find

Client recruitment



National trends

The importance of a particular marketing tool to the recruitment of agency clients depends largely on the agent's national market, as revealed in *Language Travel Magazine's* regular Agency Surveys. In newer growth markets where the public requires general information about the

opportunities of overseas studies, agencies are less likely to rely on word-of-mouth recommendations. This is borne out by the results of our China survey, in which press advertising was the most significant marketing medium for agencies, followed by word-of-mouth recommendation.

In the Latin American countries of Argentina and Brazil, word-of-mouth recommendation dwarfs the other marketing methods used as the main way of attracting clients (see left). In more mature markets where competition is intense, the Internet has become the most important way of recruiting clients, although word-of-mouth recommendations are often

in a close second place. Even so, compared with Latin American countries, the importance of word-of-mouth recommendation in Germany, for example, is much lower at 28 per cent, compared with 67 per cent in Argentina. The importance of websites depends on the population's web usage in a country. Websites are important to German

about the company and the programmes on offer. '[Our website] content is constantly being updated in some form or other,' says Pinku at Amerispan. 'Several staff members are also responsible for updating content in their area.' Ken-ichi Inaba, from K-Max agency in Japan, reports a similar approach. 'We put some new things on our website every day,' he says, pointing out that in his opinion, the website is the most important marketing tool for this agency. 'Most people who contact us look at the website.'

Corrales in Mexico says that his website is updated 'every time we have a promotional offer, or a discount, or something like that'. He offers another good reason for having a comprehensive and up-to-date website - actually lightening the workload of agencies. 'Our website, which is very simple, doesn't give us new students,' he says, 'but it helps us a lot in [explaining] detailed information that it could take us several hours to explain to our clients.'

Face-to-face marketing

Managing an agency's website can involve considerable resources (see box, page 26), but the rewards make it worthwhile. Nevertheless, most agencies combine their online presence with meeting potential students face-to-face, although the website can act as the agency's initial calling card. At K-Max agency, Inaba says, 'Our website encourages our clients to come to our office.' And in Canada, Ivan Galileos of Team Galileos advocates di-

rect contact as the best way of recruiting student clients, as well as word-of-mouth recommendation.

out] how many possible clients are interested in our products. If the number of clients [matches] our goal, we then organise presentations.'

Takt & Partners organises seminars and meetings for potential students, and Kromchenko relates, 'We invite our students who have studied on different programmes to come and share their experience.' In Colombia, Galindo holds seminars at his agency. 'The most useful marketing method for us is our free weekly seminars,' he says. 'This is because only real potential students would attend a three-hour seminar about international education. Of the people who attend, 10 to 20 per cent travel, which is very good.'

Other ideas

Although there is more choice of marketing media than ever before today, the traditional agency brochure, which is updated at least once a year, remains one of the industry's main marketing tools. Some agencies produce one or two key brochures with all the information in, while in Interstudiaviaggi's case, for example, Duerdoth reports 'We produce a new [brochure] for every programme we sell so we are pretty focused.'

'We update yearly with some publications, more often with some, less with others,' relates Pinku in the USA. 'It's more of a [case] of having to do it [when] the material simply gets outdated.'

Other marketing techniques used include taking out newspaper or magazine advertisements or, to a lesser

extent, promotion via the radio or television. Agencies also employ their own individual methods. At Best Education Services, which conducts targeted press, radio and TV advertising, Lin explains that they have organised

agencies, accounting for 32 per cent of enrolments, and in the USA, where they attract an overall 37 per cent of clients. But in Argentina and China, websites account only for nine per cent of client enrolments.

Interestingly, TV and radio advertising is more prevalent in the Asian countries of China and Taiwan, while in Italy and France, no such advertising was undertaken.

promotional trips to the UK and encouraged partner schools to visit Taiwan to attend presentations.

In Mexico, Elizabeth Madrid of Cultural Alliances says her agency runs a poster campaign in schools and in some public offices, as well as newspaper advertisements. 'This year, we will contact some [companies] to offer language courses for their executives,' she adds.

Corrales in Mexico recounts how he once learnt sign language in order to talk to a group of deaf students who wanted to learn English in Canada. 'It worked!' he exclaims. Pinku simply says, 'We are always open to new marketing ideas.'

A healthy mix

While there are many marketing options for agencies to choose from, three factors remain vital, whatever meth

When is a good time to market?

All agencies acknowledge that there are typical 'booking seasons' for their clients, but opinion seems to be divided over whether it is best to market year round or only during certain seasons.

One ideal seems to be a year-round presence with, in the words of Dorioara

Pinku from Amerispan in the USA, 'extra pushes a few months before typical booking seasons'. On the other hand, some agencies pinpoint seasons during which they focus their marketing efforts.

'Our high season is in the summer vacation period and we usually start marketing in

October of the previous year [until] the next March,' says Lucy Lee of KC Holiday Tours in the USA and Taiwan. In Mexico, Enrique Corrales of Kino Travel says he believes it is difficult to see good results from marketing in the high season.

'Marketing is a good tool to attract new students but this should [take place] in the low season,' he argues, 'as we have to put all our efforts

in since this activity requires your best [efforts]. In the high season, I think the results are not the same.'

Corrales advocates the last few months in the school term as a good time to target potential clients. Elizabeth Madrid of Cultural Alliances, also in Mexico, echoes these sentiments. 'More marketing is required during the months of March and April for summer departures.'

Overall, however, most agencies agree that a continuous marketing presence is preferable, so that potential clients don't have the opportunity to forget about an agency.

Even during an economic downturn when business is slow, agencies say they keep up marketing activities, although Hugo Galindo of Group Gales in Colombia mentions that he might try to reduce costs. Candy Lin, from Best Education Services in Taiwan and Indonesia, comments, 'We remain active in our campaign... if you miss the opportunity, you lose a whole year.'

Web tactics

For agencies based in countries where web marketing is competitive and progressive, simply having a good website may not be enough to stay ahead of the competition. Agencies need to make sure that their site is easy to find and user-friendly.

John Smith, of Ukeas in Taiwan, says, 'Our website features highly in all the search engines and directories for key words', while Anna Jackova from Bakalari agency in Slovakia adds, 'We promote our website mainly by sponsored links on search engines'.

In addition to maintaining and updating the website, a company's web presence may need to be promoted via relevant links and listings. Candy Lin of Best Education Services, which has offices in Taiwan and Indonesia, reports that they link their website to other related sites in the industry, such as general travel and newspaper websites. 'This allows

enquiries through other sources,' she explains.

In Colombia, Hugo Galindo, of Grupo Gales Educacion Internacional, invests 'a considerable amount of money' in his company's website, in order to take advantage of the best and most up-to-date technology available. He reports, 'We change the website every six months. We ask navigators their

opinion about it and follow their advice.'

And in Korea, SJ Han of Kokos International Company reports that web tactics are essential in such an Internet-rich country. 'About five years ago, our website was not so refined,' he reports. 'Our website performed simple roles.' Today, he says, many clients pick their agency from its website, so having an

informative and practical site is the best way of attracting clients.

mains known in the public domain, whether they promote their business year round or primarily at certain times of the year (see box overleaf); and third, excellent customer service and product knowledge. Galindo com-

ments, 'We maintain our student [numbers] by giving them the right information from the very

beginning.' Lin adds, 'We provide a thorough training for our travel study counsellors so they are much more knowledgeable about our programmes and content.'

When asked what proportion of business they felt they would lose, if they did not have a good marketing and customer strategy in place, agents estimated a figure anywhere between 20 per cent and 90 per cent of total sales. Such a figure is unquantifiable really, but all agen-

cies acknowledge that marketing themselves is an essential part of operating and improving their business. As Ibrahim puts it, 'If we did not use a marketing strategy, we would lose our market [share] and slowly disappear from the industry. We would lose everything that we have created.' □