



The Role of Marketing in ELT

Alison McGowan offers a comprehensive guide to marketing. It is based on a seminar delivered in January 1996 and is one of the Oxford House College Marketing and Management seminars being given on selected Saturdays throughout 1996 by herself and Nic Underhill.

The Role of Marketing in ELT

With increased competition from the growing number of EFL organisations, and the rapidly changing market, there are more and more challenges to be met:

- How can you attract more students?
- How can you keep customers satisfied?
- How can you develop new markets?
- How can you market more cost effectively?
- How can you create a competitive advantage?
- ... and
- How can you be more profitable?

The seminar on the role of marketing in EFL provides the base for answering these questions, but, perhaps more importantly at this stage, it also provides participants with the 2 "Cs": Context and Confidence.

Most people who have been in ELT for some time already know a fair amount about marketing, and indeed may have been practising marketing for some time without calling it by that name. What the seminar aims to do is to put all that existing knowledge in a logical context and fill in the bits of the jigsaw to give a clearer and more complete picture. Once that is in place confidence in fighting for things which people previously only knew were right

intuitively, becomes natural.

What is marketing?

This of course is a key question, and one which crucially needs answering before any other interactive activity can take place. Even in top schools it seems there is still divergence about what the word means with some people believing it to be synonymous with advertising, some with selling, and some just plainly confused. The Institute of Marketing provides a definition which reads as follows:

Marketing is the management process responsible for anticipating, identifying and satisfying customer demands profitably.

Marketing is the management process responsible for anticipating, identifying and satisfying customer demands profitably. i.e. finding out what the customer wants, anticipating what they might want in the future, and making sure they get what they want, profitably.

In the context of a school this means

providing courses people want, where they want them, when they want them, but it also implies internal market controls which ensure students' expectations are met and external market research which indicate possible areas of growth in demand.

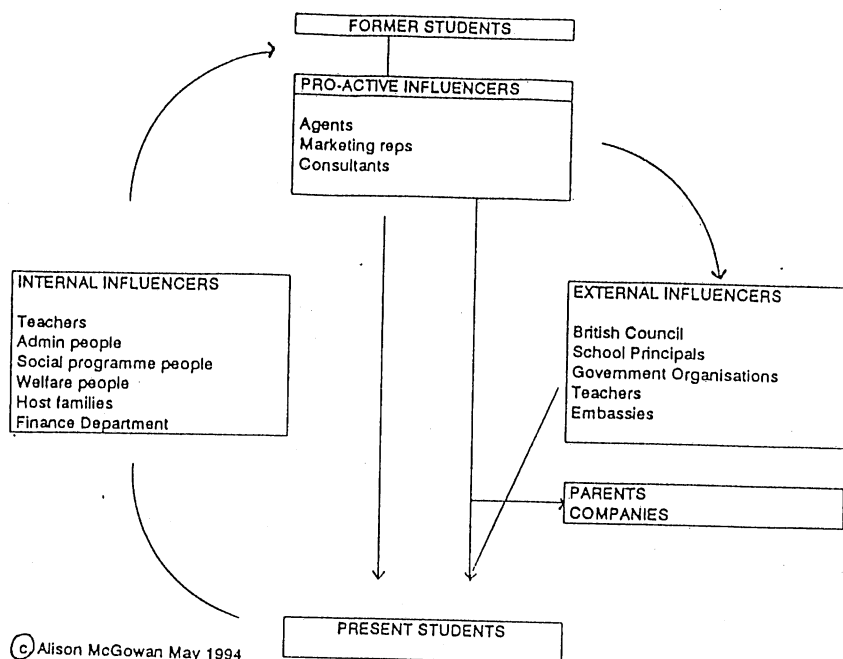
As with many definitions this one is limited in its scope, and the implication from this definition would naturally be that there is only one customer in a school: the student. In reality there are many customer groups, both external (e.g. agents, consultants, host families) and internal (e.g. staff) and to ignore any of these is to seriously prejudice the effectiveness of the marketing effort.

The role of people..

One of the key fundamental ideas running through all the marketing seminars is that everyone in an EFL organisation, from caretaker to director has a role to play in the marketing of the organisation. In many cases seminar participants have pointed to receptionists and cleaners, and even in one case the driver of the school as key people influential in the student's happiness, due to their particular nature or attitude, and it is quite clear that if any of the internal or external clients are unhappy or demotivated this can have a negative effect on future student numbers.

Marketing in ELT

CLIENTS and INFLUENCERS



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The "leaky barrel theory of marketing" illustrates this quite graphically if you imagine 2 barrels, one small, and one big with the smaller feeding new students into the larger as a result of mailing, promotion, selling, brochures etc. Having arrived in the big barrel (i.e. the school) holes emerge through which students escape, for example, there isn't a class at the right level; classes are demotivating; the family is unhelpful; the food is bad; the social programme doesn't come up to expectations..

It is interesting to note that marketing effort in many schools continues to focus on external promotion- i.e. brochures, mailing, sales trips and hugely expensive advertising and conferences, rather than truly recognising the importance of the existing students, staff and host families to future "word of mouth". Pro-active influencers such as agents, and external influencers such as teachers in the student's home country are very important in producing new students, but it is the internal influencers like staff and families who get students to extend their stay, and promote the institution

when they leave.

Internal customer satisfaction is frequently only monitored by questionnaires filled in by students at the end of their course by which point it is too late to rectify anything. Even when they are given out earlier it is quite evident that information collected is not necessarily the truth. Ex students with the worst complaints are often actually found to have given "goods" and even "excellents" on questionnaires because they do not want to hurt anyone's feelings whilst they are still in the country, or because the questionnaires themselves are badly worded.

Marketing Jargon

Marketing is full of jargon and acronyms, which often confuse the non-marketer, even more so when they are used incorrectly. The term "cash cow" is one that is frequently bandied about incorrectly. However some of the acronyms are a useful check for anyone following a logical approach to marketing, and it is part of the confidence building of the

seminars that participants should feel comfortable with the major ones used. Before returning to the definition of marketing and looking at ways to ensure that you get the right product (course) in the right place at the right time, at a price which people are willing to pay, it is useful first to look at the USPs or unique selling points of the institution. This often proves to be an interesting exercise as it forces people to think about what their institution has that no other institution has, and in turn why students should choose them rather than anyone else. Interestingly the first thing that everyone always wants to put down is quality of teaching- yet if we look at how students actually choose schools it is generally assumed that teaching will be fine in recognised schools. It is a myriad of other factors, including whether they like the agent or school representative that influence students' decisions. It is a people's business and it is critical for "word of mouth" to reinforce the USPs of the school.

Getting the product right..

If we are actually going to provide courses and teaching that students want (and not necessarily what we think that students need) then it is clear that research in the form of audits needs to be completed at regular intervals.

The internal audit

The internal audit consists of 2 parts:

- i) statistics
- ii) evaluation

On the statistical side it is essential first to decide on what you actually need to know to run the business effectively, and then to get the systems for monitoring the statistics in place. Although this seems obvious it is quite clear that in many schools information is still difficult to retrieve and year on year statistics impossible to compare. At the very least student numbers and weeks should be monitored, by time of year, age, and course type. Agents' bookings and the % of agents' to direct

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bookings is also useful. In terms of pure business enquiry monitoring can frequently point to increased or decreased demand in a market, and indicate areas for expansion.

On the evaluation side, students and staff comments need to be evaluated in relation to the 4 Ps- to which incidentally I always add another P and an S:

- Product
- Price
- Place(Location in this context)
- Promotion and
- People (Staff)
- Service

The last P and S do not appear in any marketing textbooks but in view of the nature of the business and the fact that the "product" is actually a service, the people that perform it and the service that surrounds the delivery are crucial. Those schools which do provide a relative service on the administration side are not only a pleasure to work with, but also invariably full.

External audit

The external audit can also be performed in relation to the classic external marketing acronym- PEST. However again I add another 2 letters relating particularly to the ELT business: E and C.

Hence the evaluation undertaken is of:

- Political factors (e.g. wars, internal conflict)
- Economic factors (recession, devaluation, unemployment)
- Social factors (changes in fashion)
- Technological factors (the use of email, CD ROM) plus..
- Educational factors (changes to the year students start learning English in-country)
- Competition - which of course is key if you are always trying to keep one step ahead

The right place, the right time, the right price...

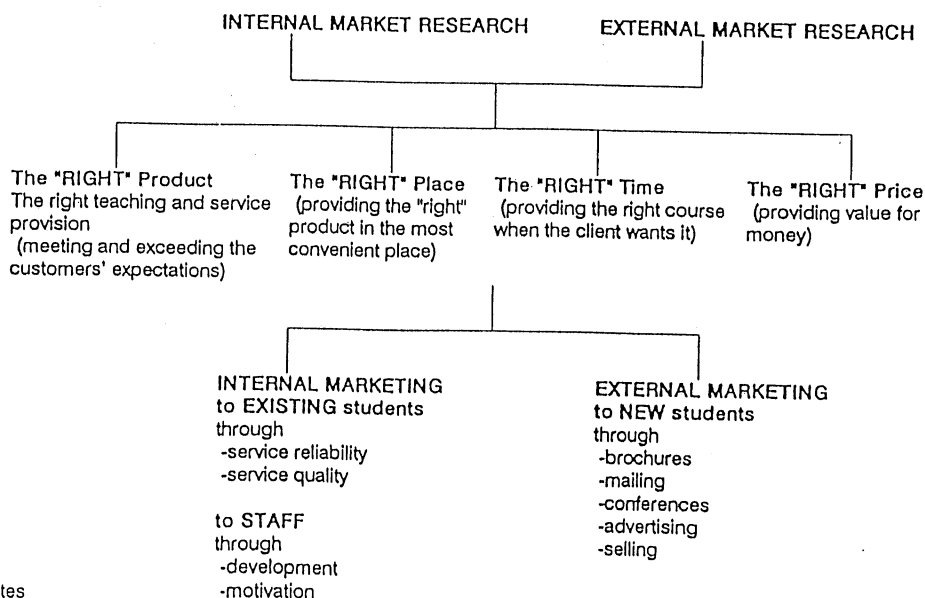
Again it might seem obvious, but it is

crucial that a school is located in a place where students want to come, or are able to come. One school in Brasil situated itself in an amazing building right in the centre of town. The trouble was they were catering for kids and parents did not want to come to the centre as there was nowhere to park. Elsewhere schools have sprung up in areas which were dangerous, or isolated with similarly negative effects. Good premises are not simply not sufficient to counteract a bad location.

Clearly in terms of time no-one is going to run afternoon classes when people only want the morning or vice-versa, but the wrong, or inflexible start dates can have a terrible effect on bookings if flights don't match for example. Where course dates are fixed in advance working with key agents to find the most convenient dates for both parties is invaluable.

The right price is a difficult one, particularly if quality is being aimed for as quality does not come cheap. The important thing in this instance is to provide clearly perceived value for

MARKETING in LANGUAGE SCHOOLS



Marketing in ELT

A selling approach is "This is what we've got - do you want to buy it?" and a marketing approach is "What do you want and can we provide it?"

Internal marketing

As with the internal audit, internal marketing or promotion refers to things within the school or institution's control.. Again there are two parts to it:

- i) marketing to existing students
- ii) marketing to staff

Marketing to existing students

This seems to imply a pro-active approach to dealing with the student, and in a sense I think this is what needs to happen if students are to leave entirely satisfied. We have already touched on some of the problems with questionnaires, and ways must be found to monitor the reliability of the experience the student is having more effectively, either by tutorials, or focus groups or the monitoring of complaints made to staff, or indeed all.

Two of the key reasons why reliability seems to fail are due to communication problems and the unkept promise, the latter when students are promised something either in their own country or indeed once they are in the school, which then does not materialise. Ways need to be found not of encouraging complaints for the sake of it but of discovering any valid or indeed invalid complaints a student might have and dealing with them effectively and immediately.

At the same time marketing to existing students implies an open and non-defensive attitude. Most problems can be solved, but a confrontation, or an exchange implying it is really all the student's fault rarely helps the situation.

Marketing to staff

On the side of marketing to staff, a well motivated, happy staff where people feel appreciated and valued is invaluable in terms of creating happy students. It sounds trite but like this but the opposite scenario can reduce

student numbers in droves. Generally speaking people in EFL like other people, so the attitude does not start off wrong. However, things can change markedly where staff are allowed to stagnate or not given the developmental opportunities they need, or when they are not consulted on possible changes which will affect them.

External Marketing

If someone comes in new to marketing, this is invariably what they think they should be doing: producing brochures, mailing to everyone on the mailing list, organising conferences, producing ads, and possibly doing a few trips abroad. And much of this is useful. But this is where the problem of semantics comes in. Although this may be referred to as external marketing it is really **promotion**, and all the activities contained here are **tactics** rather than **strategies**. Tactics can keep people busy for years, but any results are extremely difficult to see if there are no benchmarks for evaluation and if promotion is not seen against the backdrop of clear objectives and wider strategies.

Selling is actually a part of promotion, which in turn is a part of marketing, and an easy way of remembering the difference is if you imagine a selling approach as "this is what we've got- do you want to buy it?" and a marketing approach as "what do you want and can we provide it?"

Product positioning

Finally a word on product positioning where so many schools run into problems- particularly when they open branches.

One of the problems that people in marketing face when they are trying to sell courses is that the product itself is intangible. You can't see it, you

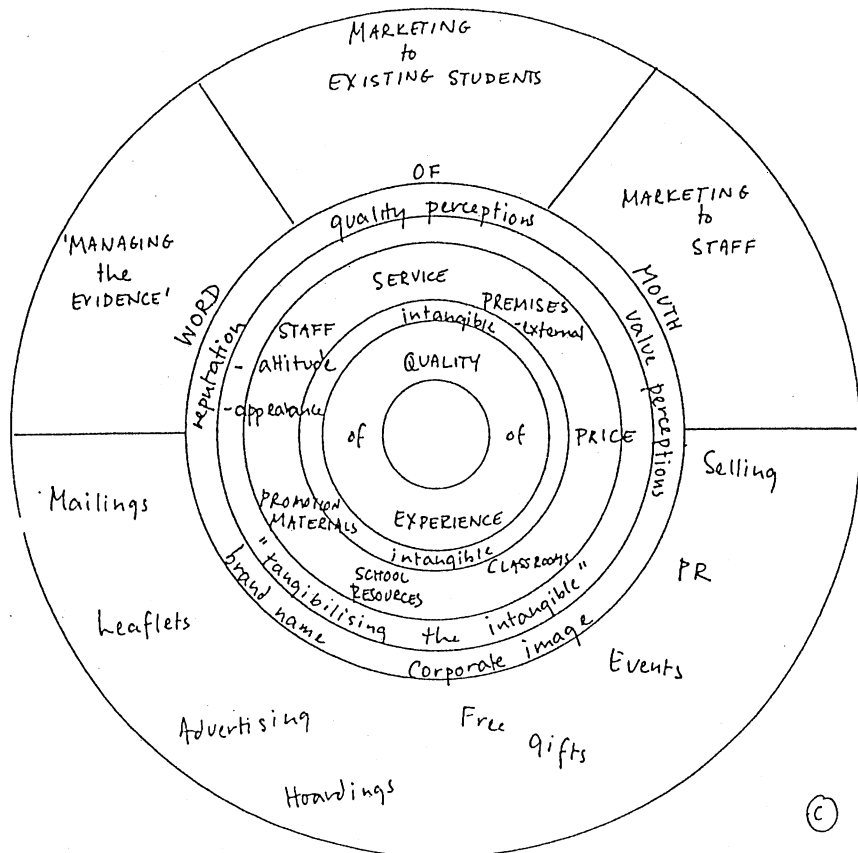
can't touch it- you really have to experience it to know it.

However expectations are created by what people can in fact see, or what they can deduce. If the price is very expensive, for example expectations of both the course, and the accommodation etc. Are correspondingly high. If the premises are extremely poor quality, or badly maintained then that is likely to give the opposite expectations of the course. Other things which influence are the service you receive when you 'phone for information, staff attitude or appearance, promotional materials, school resources or location.

The 3 crucial things to remember are firstly that value for money is generally perceived when other aspects of the school are at a higher level than the price would suggest. Secondly, a coherent image depends on all aspects of the institution being correspondingly good and in line with the price. But lastly, nothing is going to work unless the reliability of the teaching and the service surrounding it reach the student's expectations when they actually arrive. One unhappy student can tell at least 9 others. A school has to **really** exceed students' expectations if we want them to be pro-active in their praise.

Alison McGowan is an international marketing consultant with extensive experience in Southern Europe, the Eastern Mediterranean and South America. Her background is in teaching, teacher training and the marketing of ELT. She has held senior marketing positions at Oxford University Press, Longman ELT and the Bell Schools. Alison is the founder and Director of Florence Associates, an international consultancy specialising in the marketing of ELT.

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PRODUCT
POSITIONING

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