



The language school leader's guide to BASIC marketing planning

Peter Cornish provides us with the ABC of effective marketing planning.

Confronted by an increasingly competitive and continuously changing market place, the language school leader faces more challenges than ever before if their school is to survive and prosper. With these challenges come four questions that many feel ill equipped to answer or, worse still, choose to ignore:

1. Where are we now?
2. Where are we going?
3. How do we get there?
4. How do we know we have arrived?

To help answer these questions, language school leaders are being forced to adopt new management practices that many feel uncomfortable with or have little understanding of. Topping the list is marketing which, despite on-going evidence as the most important of business activities (Simpson & Taylor, 2002), is frequently given low priority by the language schools.

Reasons for this are varied: some find it too time consuming and beyond their means whilst others argue that they have done well without so it must not be needed. Some equate marketing with selling and rely on their natural charisma to strike deals with overseas agents. "I can sell ice to Eskimos" they happily proclaim with little understanding that Eskimos don't need ice and will eventually stop buying.

Those that do embrace some nature of marketing do so with varying degrees of formality and planning, arguing that day-to-day constraints of running a language school combined with an ever changing environment do not allow for much more than developing agendas of objectives (Simpson & Taylor, 2002).

However, adopting a formal and planned approach to marketing enables the language school leader to identify options and choice for the future direction of their school. A documented marketing plan ensures that targets are achieved and provides early warning of things going wrong.

The steps to producing a marketing plan are as numerous as the authors who present them and to the uninitiated the prospect of writing a plan can be daunting. With limited budgets, employing a marketing agency to complete the planning process is an option that many language schools can ill afford.

But by following a series of tasks outlined in Brooksbank's (1996) **BASIC** approach to marketing planning, leaders of language schools can develop effective plans that will underpin the continued success of their school. According to Brooksbank (1996), effective marketing planning involves following a framework of five phases, the end objective of which is the

satisfying customer needs, profitably:

Business-customerising
Analysis
Strategy
Implementation
Control

The first phase calls for development of a customer driven culture that must be supported by the leaders of the school. The second phase advocates careful analysis of the school's internal and external environments where student needs are identified and compared with core capabilities.

Stage three defines marketing objectives including customer segmentation and positioning of the school's products and services. From these objectives, the school develops its marketing mix in line with its organisational structure and differential advantage. Finally, performance is measured against objectives so that goals can be set.

Business-customerising

Business-customerising your school calls for adopting a marketing orientation and showing organisation-wide commitment to satisfying the needs of your students. In following this approach, there is a need for school staff to accept ultimately that they are working for the student.

Task One – building a market-led school culture

Through recognition and satisfaction of student needs, a school is said to be market-orientated (Blankson & Stokes, 2002). Schools that adopt a market orientation are likely to perform better than those that don't (Simpson & Taylor, 2002).

In-school promotion of customer awareness, involvement of staff in the planning process and training sessions for staff will focus and encourage staff awareness to this need. However, a school cannot fully become market orientated if leader support is not visible.

Task Two – developing a customer-driven mission statement

Despite the opportunity mission statements provide to highlight school strengths and give staff a shared objective, few schools produce one (McDonald 1999).

An effective mission statement should identify your school's core competences – its differential advantage - and relate to how these impact on customer value. Without covering greater details of the marketing plan, your statement should be clear, realistic, specific, based on distinctive competencies and motivating for those it is aimed at (Kotler *et al.*, 2002).

Analysing

The second phase of Brooksbank's framework examines your school's operating environment, both internal and external, and your school's competitive position. The information collected through this auditing process provides the foundation on which to develop and launch your marketing plan and is critical in forming the future direction of your school.

Task Three – conducting market research

Ultimately, research conducted should assist in identifying the students that are able to provide high volume and value, both in the

present and the future (Chaston & Mangles, 2002); these are your target markets. This calls for examination of your school's existing and potential customers and the activities of the competition.

The information audit process has four stages that can be addressed in a series of questions:

1. What does the school need to know?
2. What does the school already know?
3. What is missing?
4. How can these gaps be closed?

To start the ball rolling, Question 1 can be broken down into a further four questions:

1. What do my students need?
2. Who are my students and how much can be found out about them?
3. What is my competition?
4. Are there any gaps in the market?

The research you conduct should be looked at as an investment rather than a cost, so it is essential to set and define objectives before embarking (Blythe, 2001). This serves two purposes: firstly, it makes sure that the benefits gained from your research outweigh the cost of collecting it; and secondly, helps determine if the sought data is available from secondary resources or if it requires you to conduct primary research.

Task Four – examination of internal and external factors

The key objective at this stage is identification of your school's core competencies – what you are best at – and how these impact on customer value. You will also examine your competitors' strengths and weaknesses to identify potential for creating and sustaining your school's competitive advantage – why students choose you and not the competition.

Conducting a **SWOT** analysis for your own school as well as competitors' will help identify

internal Strengths and Weaknesses and external Opportunities and Threats. To assist in this process, Brooksbank (1996) suggests some further questions to be answered:

1. What is our marketing mix offer?
2. What is our competitive advantage?
3. How well are we performing?
4. How are we likely to compete in the future?

Of equal importance is analysis of your potential and existing students. Questions such as; who are they, why do they buy and what benefits are the seeking will help you develop profiles of your students and segment them into different groups.

Segmenting your students helps you gain a better understanding of the particular needs each group has. With this knowledge you can identify which segments' needs you are best able to meet and which segments are most profitable to your school. This allows you to be more precise in what you offer to whom and also makes it easier to recognise and combat competition.

Strategy

With a greater understanding of the environment you are operating in and how your school is best able to compete, you are now able to define your objectives. The objectives of your plan will spell out what you hope to achieve, the strategy will explain how you hope to achieve them.

Task Five – setting objectives

When deciding on objectives, consideration needs to be given to levels of achievement for both demand and supply. Demand typically relates to target profit levels and sales goals whilst supply relates to your marketing costs and the use of other resources.

Objectives need to be set that consider your students as well as your school and acknowledge that both will have benefits and goals that they wish to be met. Whatever objectives you decide on, they

should be set on the basis of what is quantifiable within a given timescale – **SMART** – Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timed.

Task Six – positioning strategies

The term ‘positioning strategy’ refers to the target customer your school chooses to serve, the competitors you will vie with and the competitive advantage you decide to compete with (Brooksbank 1999). The key to success is through identification of a differential advantage that distinguishes your school from your competitors and is of superior value to your chosen target market.

Establishing your school’s differential advantage calls for accurate identification of your desired student segments and determination of the services you offer that best match their needs. From here, close examination of how the services you offer differ from those of the competition will identify potential gaps and reveal positions of advantage.

When segmenting your students and identifying your differential advantage, you must be able to provide services of high value to the customer and that competitors will find hard to copy. In doing so, you will be able to focus your potentially limited resources on a group of students whose needs your school is best able to meet.

Implementation

This stage of the planning process will help you develop a marketing mix that your potential students will perceive as superior to your competitors, primarily through the reflection of your school’s differential advantage.

Task Seven – the marketing mix

The marketing mix, or 7Ps – Product, Price, Promotion, Place, Physical evidence, People and Process – determine what you offer your students, how you offer it and

how they perceive what it is you are offering. The golden rule is to combine them in such a manner that they complement each other and support your positioning strategy.

Your product should clearly satisfy the needs of your students and should be priced in a way that is attractive but also reflects its quality. Your promotional activities should stress the merits of your product, highlight its benefits and persuade students to buy it.

Products should be available to your students at the time and place they want it. The physical evidence, such as premises and course materials should reinforce your school’s image, as should the people your students come into contact with and the processes they encounter throughout their experience with your school.

Task Eight – the marketing effort

Transforming your marketing strategy from a documented plan to a working application means allocating tasks to complete in a given timeframe. This calls for specific tasks to be defined, timings decided on and then made the responsibility of a staff member.

As well as assigning individual responsibilities to staff members, successful implementation of the marketing plan is dependent on procedures to manage specific marketing tasks. Introducing clearly defined processes for tasks such as generating and tracking sales leads, following up enquiries and capturing customer information helps ensure consistency throughout the processes,

Controlling

The final stage of your plan involves setting up systems to monitor and control changes in your school’s environment so that strategies which go wrong or become inappropriate can be changed and adapted to accommodate the school’s changing objectives.

Task Nine – marketing information systems

By harvesting and collating information related to your marketing activities you can assess the results and ensure that changes are introduced at appropriate times. This also helps you take a broader, long-term view of your school’s objectives and match them with your students’ needs.

A good marketing information system is capable of capturing information from your school’s financial records as well as on-going intelligence from the market place. In designing a system suitable for your individual school, Brooksbank (1996) suggests three questions to answer:

1. What type of information is needed and how much?
2. What information sources should be used?
3. What is the best way of storing / accessing it?

Task Ten – comparing reality with objectives

Use of a suitable performance tracker enables you to measure events in the operational environment against those of the plan. In order to achieve this, an effective performance tracker must accomplish two tasks:

1. Establish the performance levels to be achieved, at what time and to which levels
2. Enable logging of plan performance and environmental factors at pre-determined regular intervals

Such a system will enable you to assess your school’s performance levels at a glance and take corrective action where necessary. By conducting ‘in action’ controls, your plan becomes a living document able to evolve over time to meet your students’ needs, organisational objectives and environmental changes to your best advantage.

Brooksbank’s BASIC framework for marketing planning provides

language school leaders with a simplified yet practical set of tasks and guidelines for the effective planning of their marketing operations. He places strong emphasis on schools adopting a marketing-led approach to their operations. Through commitment to identifying, satisfying and exceeding student needs, schools can be more confident in their future growth and success.

References

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