

How to sell to schools: September-December 2011

Introduction: selling to schools in September/December 2011

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Introduction – selling to schools in the autumn term 2011

The autumn term has traditionally been a good time for selling to schools, although there can be something of a slow start (especially for primary schools where there are huge adjustments to be made for new children entering the school).

The impact of the new budgets for 2011/2 has been fully taken on board, and schools have made their decisions. Redundancies have been implemented, where this has been deemed necessary, and schools will have made decisions as to where cuts are to be made, which subject areas are to be expanded, and overall the direction that the school will be travelling in.

Typically new heads of department and new head teachers will make a number of purchases in September, as they begin to get the full understanding of what is going on in their new schools, while at the other end of the spectrum, some departments in secondary schools and many primary schools will start thinking very quickly about the Christmas events – if they have not done so already.

We should also remember that academies are funded from 1 September and get their money directly, so they are now entering a period with new money readily available.

1. Recent changes in schools

1.1 The funding of schools

The cuts made following the general election of 2010 seem have stopped taking schools by surprise, and indeed the surprise has come with the new money that the government has found. With the successful challenge to the Secretary of State over the abolition of the BSF funding, and the much slower uptake of free schools than the government predicted, there is some spare money.

Certainly what we do know is that some schools have done the unthinkable and moved away from preserving jobs at all costs. The growth of IT in schools does mean that the model of 30 children in front of one teacher is not the rule that must always be obeyed. Since 60% of funding goes to teacher salaries this is where real savings can be made.

1.2 New money for building, and other reforms

In July 2011 it was announced that an extra £500m was available for school building funding. Mr Gove said the money would go to the areas with the greatest demographic pressure and would be aimed particularly at primary schools, where a shortage of places is most acute. He also announced the start of a consultation on school funding. Gove said this outlined 'fair and comprehensive' reform of the way schools' revenue funding is determined.

Two other consultations were also announced: one with local authorities on the funding they lose to academies, and a second on the implementation of the [James review of schools' capital spending](#).

Recommendations to be taken forward include a full survey of the school estate; the introduction of a single and clear set of school premises regulations; and greater

standardisation of school building design (the exact opposite of the BSF programme in fact).

But Gove also announced the launch of a new, privately-financed school building programme to address schools in the worst condition, despite the fact that his own watchdog warned against this approach.

'The programme will be open to local authorities and schools that had been due funding via Building Schools for the Future but, critically, it will also be open to those who, despite real problems, had never been promised BSF funding,' he said.

The programme, worth around £2bn, will cover between 100 and 300 schools, with the first expected to open in September 2014.

So as normal there are promises, developments and opportunities, but not a lot of clarity!

We have also all got used to the end of the Harnessing Technology Grant, and schools are now in many cases acting without any special funding for e-learning for the first time in some ten years.

The number of topics on which Ofsted examined schools was cut, and the requirement for schools to move towards sustainability was also dropped, and the special sports funding programme has been partially re-instated, as happened to the literacy funds.

The National College has become an executive agency of the Department for Education and has been told that by 2012 all courses must be charged at their cost – free and subsidised courses are now coming to an end. The College has also been told not to run courses that are already run in the public arena.

The number of academies is increasing at quite a rate, and there is a lot of interest in promoting, particularly to academies because of their special attributes.

No cuts have been announced in Wales or Scotland, and indeed both Assemblies issued a press release saying that their BSF programme would continue. Wales was hit by a dramatic decline in its performance on the OECD tables, and the minister came out and blamed the teachers rather than the policies of Wales. Cuts in education seem unlikely.

As I seem to state in each one of these reports, the situation in N. Ireland is unclear. If you want to know about school budgets in the province try <http://goo.gl/Wqne7>

1.3 Free schools and academies

All schools can apply to opt out of LA control and become academies – an idea first launched by M Thatcher and then revised by T Blair. Each new version of the plan to remove LA control from education takes some more schools out – and so we should see some further break up of LAs.

LAs are now either abandoning their education services or turning them into commercial operations, offering courses and guidance to schools in competition with other course and training providers.

On the academies front, adverts appeared in May 2011 in the British Council for School Environments website advertising the fact that Academies have just been given another £800m.

Here's a summary of the Academy list...

As of August 2011 there were 1070 academies open in England and that number increases by around 60 if annexes (the second building where two schools are amalgamated to form the academy) are included. Of these a minority (around 300) were previously "failing schools". The rest are either "academy converters" - schools that were doing well and simply wanted to get out of LA control, or excellent schools that have just moved on, on their own.

Free schools are developing slowly but the first 30 or so will open in September.

1.4 The English Baccalaureate

The government started measuring school performance in the 2010 league tables, and this caused much concern among teachers and school managers. At the moment there are no certificates for students who achieve it, but these are promised on the government website dealing with the issue <http://goo.gl/Fx4hG>

The approach puts additional emphasis on getting a C grade or better in a very limited number of academic subjects – English, mathematics, history or geography, the sciences and a language.

As a result of the retrospective measurement some schools took students out of specific subjects such as music, art, and religious studies and pushed them into history, to take the numbers up. It would seem very likely that this tendency will continue.

The government has, however, seemingly made an exception for music, and has produced the Music Manifesto and a number of other statements about music. This is available on <http://goo.gl/8V1IM> And yet it remains outside the Bacc!

2. Levels of marketing to schools

2.1 Postal Direct mail

Direct mail into schools in the first half of 2011 increased by about 10% from the same period last year, although it is still running at about 30% of that of the same period in 2006.

Both shared and solo mailings were down considerably with shared mailings running at the rate of around 15% of four years ago.

However, there is evidence that response rates to postal direct mail are on the up – especially where a postal campaign is combined with an email campaign using personal lists.

2.2 Generic lists

2011 saw the introduction of a CD selling all the generic email lists for under £50. In preparation for this launch we tested the lists with an offer of free information to drama teachers in secondary schools. The response rate was 5%. This shows that these emails are read and forwarded, and that a good reply rate can be gained with this sort of offer.

This in itself is a good way of recruiting email addresses of individual teachers. The special schools list has also been made available for £20.

The number of generic emails going to schools (i.e. those that reach the administrator with a request for the email to be forwarded) has finally stopped rising after years of increase.

2.3 Personal and subscription email lists

Personal email lists (i.e. email directed to the teacher's own email address within the school) were introduced in 2009, and their popularity increases constantly. The number of such lists has expanded greatly, and most subject areas in schools are now covered. Response rates varied depending on the way the email was written and whether the promotion was also covered in a postal campaign. Seeing a product or service advertised in both media tends to give teachers a stronger belief in the product or service.

2.4 Shared postal and shared email

Shared postal mail is making a comeback, and Hamilton House is offering a number of schemes in which companies taking a shared postal mail will also then get a free personal email campaign. This applies to both postal mailings to the 5000 largest primary schools and the 5000 secondary schools. Details are on www.shared.org.uk

Shared emails are low cost (about 1p a school compared to 4 to 7p for postal shared campaigns. Details are on <http://www.emails.gs/Email10000.html>

2.5 Email marketing reports

When you market using email you should receive a report back at the end of each campaign to tell you exactly what has happened. This should include the "click through rate". From this you will be able to judge the effectiveness of the campaign and be able to take action to improve the campaign if it is not working well. Thus if you get a poor click through rate you know that the advert did not work well. If you get a good click through rate but poor sales you know that it is your landing page which failed.

3. How schools deal with direct mail and email

Little has changed with postal direct mail over the years. Most staffrooms have a set of pigeon holes – one for each teacher - and post is put there along with internal school memos and the like. The decline in the level of postal mail in the past six years has meant that a system that was getting overloaded is once again perfectly able to cope.

Email, however, is a different matter, and both LAs and individual service suppliers have introduced sophisticated filtering systems to block unwanted emails. Because there is only limited awareness of how emails to schools can be made to work, a large percentage of emails that go to schools now appear to go straight into spam boxes or be caught out by filter systems run by the companies that specialise in supplying internet facilities to schools. Schools are particularly likely to screen out emails that:

- contain key words that are on the banned list (many of these are obvious, but it is interesting to note that the name of the last Labour secretary of state for education appeared on the list!)
- come with attachments
- appear from the subject line or opening of the email to be commercial in nature (i.e. if they speak of Discounts or have lots of exclamation marks from the start).

However it is worth noting that text based emails that then link to websites do tend to get through, providing they avoid the banned words, especially if sent from an email address that is recognised.

Research undertaken in 2010 showed that over half of the schools are using Outlook or Outlook Express, and most of the rest are using Outlook derivatives written by firms like RM for school use. Under 5% of schools are using email programs other than those based around Outlook.

4. The special issue of courses for teachers

It is now over 18 months since the implementation of the final phase of the Workload Agreement which included the “rarely cover” arrangement which effectively made it very hard for teachers to go out on courses. Many firms are seeking to overcome these problems by taking courses into schools and encouraging schools to invite colleagues from nearby schools to join in the course which is held on an in-service training day or after school hours.

Other courses are being transferred to on-line materials, and this is a growing area of interest. The Hamilton House company, The School of Education Administration, opened its third on-line course in 2011 and enjoyed considerable success with it.

This final point is of interest in that it shows that a course advertised totally through email and postal mail can attract sales at a considerable level even in this difficult financial period.

5. The appropriate style of advertising – and why so many firms have reported having problems.

A large amount of research has shown that advertising to teachers that is based around a gentle conversational style and approach works very well. However, only about 10% of advertising going to teachers is written in this way – which is why so many people have reported having problems in selling to schools.

The message from our research throughout 2010/11 is clear. Teachers want the choice of how to communicate with companies – they want the option of a phone conversation, email communication, on-line details and on-line ordering, and fax (a huge percentage of orders are still placed via fax).

And in all communications, teachers appreciate the conversational style, rather than any formalised approach which tells them that this is “award winning software” or that a product is “awe-inspiring,” etc.

The advertising that is working and achieving ever higher response rates is written in a way that is appropriate to teachers in schools in 2011 – and not the advertising that worked in 2000.

6. Selling to schools: September to December 2011

Through its Velocity programme (see www.velocity.ac) and through the sale of our own books and courses for schools, Hamilton House monitors school buying habits. There's no doubt that there is money available, and schools can and will buy if the product in question is perceived to be relevant to the school in 2011.

Quite simply school managers with money to spend are asking, "Why should I buy this?" and "why should I buy this from you?" They are getting more sophisticated in their purchasing, and they are looking for a combination of quality and a good deal.

7. The creative approach

Observations from the past year suggest that the companies that used all forms of direct marketing to schools did best of all, reflecting what we have known for a couple of years – that some people respond to direct mail and others to email. Even generic email – the most difficult approach to use - can prove successful. But the key issue is the creative.

If the advert is written in accordance with the conversational style and the laws of the psychology of perception it is possible to get results in all media. But the dominant factor (other than the product itself) is the creative element.

Most direct mail and email sent to schools in the past year has followed the "announcement" approach – an approach which is proven to be the least effective approach to advertising to schools. About 70% of emails to schools had an inappropriate use of colour or design.

There's more on Announcement advertising at <http://www.theory.bz/factor2.html> and a complete review of creative issues in direct mail and email in <http://www.theory.bz/factors.html>

We also have regular updates on creativity in direct marketing on www.goodad.co.uk and on the Creative Direct news service (which is free). To join just send an email to CreativeDirect-subscribe@yahoogroups.com and then click reply when you get a confirmation email back. You will get 2 or 3 emails a week, and can of course leave the service at any time.

8. Effective approaches often omitted

Looking at the way many companies undertake their direct marketing it is increasingly apparent that two of the most effective ways of enhancing the effectiveness of marketing to schools are often omitted. These are:

- a) Undertaking a trial solo postal mailing. Quite often a mailing of 300 or 500 schools selected at random will indicate if such a promotion can work. Many firms are saying "solo postal mail is too expensive" without actually considering that they

might be able to make a profit at (say) a 2% response rate – something that is achievable in many cases and which can be verified through a trial mailing of a few hundred. For similar reasons it is also worth trying a shared postal mailing (which can be arranged for no cost other than printing) if you undertake a personal email campaign with us for over £375.

- b) Setting up an email list of interested teachers, and mailing them every two or three weeks with information. The objection here is that people will protest if they get emails every couple of weeks – and yet our experience is the reverse, especially if the information is of direct relevance and interest to them. This is obviously a major issue with a lot of technical and creative elements within it, but our experience is that this form of marketing can be just about the most effective there is. There's more on the practical side of this type of work at <http://www.emails.gs/ownlists.html>

In recognition of point a) customers of our Velocity site are now able to undertake shared and solo postal direct mail campaigns as part of Velocity. (www.velocity.ac)

9. Summary of postal media

9.1 Solo postal mailing

This is the most expensive medium (around 45p a school in many cases) but it can bring in the highest response rate of any approach. What's more, as noted above, it is ideal for testing. If, for example, you are looking for a 3% response rate then it is perfectly reasonable to mail 200 schools from your target, selected at random. The cost will be under £100, and some of this will be recovered even if you only sell to 1% or 2% of schools.

If it works you can then roll the whole mailing out, but if not you will have gained information about how your promotion needs to change to make it work.

Because a trial solo really does give you information for such a limited cost, this is where most companies who are seriously looking at selling to schools choose to begin.

Solo mailings are most affected by the text that the reader sees on opening the pack – which is often a covering letter. A mailing of a leaflet can move from under 1% to 4% by having the right covering letter in place.

9.2 Shared postal mailing

With a cost of around 4p to 8p a teacher reached, this is ideal for sending out a single lightweight leaflet on a regular basis. The best approach is to have three different leaflets and vary the approach mailing by mailing. Shared mailing packs a few years ago were in danger of being overwhelmed by the number of leaflets seeking to use the service. Now that the volume is down to around 10% of three or four years ago, there is a much greater chance that the administrator will pass your leaflet on.

Hamilton House is now running a series of shared postal mailings in which customers get a free email campaign as well. Companies are able to choose which email list they want to use, and are able (should they wish) to use the campaign to promote a different product from that in the postal shared mailing.

This is proving to be very successful for companies, and what started as a short-term experiment is being continued. Details of all the dates of our shared mailings appear on www.shared.org.uk - including a specific page on the dates when a free email campaign is available. This page is always advertised on the home page of the site.

9.3 Mailing lists

All Hamilton House postal mailing lists are available for purchase either for once only use, one year's use or with an eternal licence. Details of all our lists are given on <http://www.hamilton-house.com/gateways/lists.html>

Purchasers of our mailing lists now also get the generic email address and phone number available free of charge with their purchase.

It is possible to interrogate our schools' mailing list in relation to individual schools at www.schools.co.uk by clicking on Schools Directory.

It is also possible to check exact numbers of schools in certain areas, or schools of certain types with our on line service at <http://www.shop.firstandbest.co.uk/sch/>

9.4 Email lists

These are covered in section 2 above.

10. Websites

10.1 UK Education News and The Schools blog

This service at www.ukeducationnews.co.uk was introduced in November 2009 as an expansion of the subscription email service. Every news story from the mainstream news sources (the BBC, Guardian, Independent, Education Today, and significant regional papers and educational magazines) is listed. Readers can click on that story and be taken to the website with that story on it.

During 2010 the service was expanded to allow schools to post their own press releases on the site, and to allow them to advertise job vacancies free of charge.

All clients of Hamilton House who buy into one of our services listed above, spending £200 or more, can also have their story listed on UK Education News.

This means, in effect, that your story will appear on one of our cumulative news websites (where it will get a significant number of hits) and appear on the rolling UK Education News. Because it will appear alongside stories from major news sources, this seems to give the story extra credence. (www.blog.schools.co.uk for example, is where a number of these stories are placed, and that site gets about 30,000 visitors a month.)

It is also possible to book into an appearance on UK Education News either as a news story or a listing in the resources section or on one of our banners. If you have a regular news section on your website we can also pick up that page each time a new story is added, and run it automatically. A basic listing in both UK Education News and the schools blog will cost £25 plus VAT.

10.2 Website landing pages

Research during the past two years has revealed just how important the landing page of a website is. Time and again we have found situations where an email advert to schools can generate a significant number of hits on a website only for no orders to be placed.

The text and design of the landing page is as vital as any other part of the mailing process, and yet it is often left or ignored by customers. The companies that have done well in the last year with email advertising tend to have focused as much on their landing page as on their email advert.

Unfortunately, many website designers seem to be good at designing websites that interested people will read, but have little knowledge as to how landing pages can work. HHM now has a team that works on websites, and indeed we have managed to get significant results on some sites, getting them up the Google rankings and getting huge audiences for them. It is, as with so much in this area of work, down to creativity.

11. Blogs

The educational blog has grown massively in importance in the last three years, and blogs which are written on a regular basis with interesting, engaging and conversational copy can build up huge audiences if marketed in a positive way.

Blogs don't automatically sell product, but they can help, and they will generate extra awareness and a positive feel for your company if you can get the tone right. But they are a major commitment in terms of time and cannot just be fitted in occasionally. A blog that is intermittent in providing new copy will not build up a regular readership.

It is, however, possible to make a blog so popular that people check it each day, and it ends up on the first page of a google search.

Despite the incredible success that blogs can achieve, many firms simply don't explore the idea. It really is worth exploring. Audiences can reach surprisingly high numbers.

In the past three years Hamilton House has conducted a series of research programmes into the ways in which blogs operate and has succeeded in creating one blog that gets over 300,000 hits a month, and another which is deliberately not advertised at all, and which gets 40,000 hits a month from people finding it through search engines.

Both show that blogs can work incredibly well in terms of selling products – but there is one key element that is needed: a constant stream of new information on the site. If you would like to know more, please do get in touch.

12. The Efficiency Issue

The coalition government has stressed the need for efficiency in education, taking up a theme of the preceding Labour government. It has, however, given schools a very limited amount of information concerning where it thinks the efficiencies will come from.

The debate originated with the Audit Commission report in July 2009 on school spending and, for the first time, they reported with more clarity and certainty on the issue of school spending. The full report (known as “Valuable Lessons” is at <http://tinyurl.com/kueubl>

It is not a particularly dramatic document – indeed it is somewhat simplistic in places – but it does, for the first time, deal with the issue of efficiency.

In essence, the view of the report is that schools could save £400 million a year if they bought equipment and services more sensibly. They also estimate (although the press reported it as a statement of fact) that schools in England and Wales are sitting on cash reserves of nearly £2 billion, with two out of five schools transferring across year on year more than the recommended amount.

They also confirm that the English primary and secondary schools’ bill (excluding private schools) topped £31 billion in 2007/08, an increase of 56 per cent in real terms over the last decade.

In a wonderful summary the Audit Commission concludes that it can’t be sure whether the taxpayer is getting value for money. The report says that school inspections focus on educational standards and what teachers do, which is necessary. They pay less attention to economy and efficiency. Councils also pay insufficient attention to value for money in their support of schools. Many school governors should be tougher in seeking value for the public purse.

Michael O’Higgins, the Chairman of the Commission, commenting on the report in an interview said, ‘Accountability for spending in schools has been weak possibly because, in the last ten years, the focus has been on results. Ofsted [the schools’ inspectorate] is planning to give a higher priority to value for money and we will be pleased to work with it.

‘Now, however, is a good time for schools to look for better value from the money they get. Budgets are growing more slowly and schools need to start planning for a more austere future. We believe savings could be made without adversely affecting pupils or their education.’

A new course for teachers, “The Diploma in School Efficiency” run by a division of Hamilton House, was launched in February 2011 (www.admin.org.uk), and its success shows just how vital this issue is.

However it is interesting to note that fewer than 1% of adverts to schools mention efficiencies, and thus those that do tend to have the market pretty much to themselves.

Appendix 1: How Hamilton House works with companies

There are two broad approaches that we adopt. The first involves us responding to your requests – you phone and ask about promoting a particular product or using a particular email service, etc, and we do our best to help and offer an appropriate service.

The second involves us taking on your marketing on a regular basis, writing copy for adverts, copy for the website (if needed), sending out the emails, writing blogs, undertaking research among teachers, preparing blogs, re-working websites, researching new lists, etc, etc. The exact fee for the work depends on the exact needs

in each case, but most clients pay £495 per month for this service. There are more details on <http://www.velocity.ac>

Appendix 2: Coverage of this report

Education in the UK is administered separately by the Department for Education (for England), the Welsh Assembly, the Scottish Parliament and the N. Ireland Assembly. The DfE (previously the DfCSF and before that the DfES and before that the DES) has control over about 90% of the UK and thus, even though the rest of the UK has chosen to go down different routes, the DfE decisions and those of the local authorities in England impact on the massive majority of the UK. In this article, unless otherwise stated, I am referring throughout to schools in England.

The changes cited here often do not directly impinge on private schools, but many do follow state school guidelines and approaches. Virtually all private schools in England follow the national curriculum of England, although a few are now opting out of the GCSE / A level system in favour of alternative exams.

More help and information

Please call Hamilton House on 01536 399 000 or email Sales@hamilton-house.com
Or visit...

- For shared mail: <http://www.shared.org.uk>
- For solo mail: www.directmail.org.uk
- For email: www.emails.gs
- For other topics in education: www.educationmarketing.org.uk
- For the Velocity marketing programme: www.velocity.ac
- For minute by minute updates on news from the world of education: www.ukeducationnews.co.uk

To receive daily emails about selling into education send an email to education-marketing-subscribe@yahoogroups.com - you'll get a confirmation email back. Just click reply, and you will receive the emails five days a week. If you want to stop receiving them, there's a message at the foot of each email telling you how to do this.

Having read this report, if you would like me to take a look at your brochure, letter, leaflet or email, and give you our thoughts on how it might be changed in order to enhance sales, just send a copy of the item as a pdf file to Tony@hamilton-house.com along with your phone number. I'll take a look, and then call you back.

This service is completely free, is undertaken in complete confidence, and is without any obligation. If you would like to talk before you send the item for comment, just call me on 01536 399 000.

Tony Attwood