

How to promote catalogues of resources and equipment to teachers

1. The central problem

Most schools and most teachers receive multiple catalogues on most topics. Whether the subject is chemistry, cleaning materials, software for English lessons or safety equipment for design technology, you can be sure there are a number of companies pitching for the teacher's attention.

The central problem is therefore this: if the people you want to reach in school are already reading two other catalogues, why should they read yours?

Your catalogue might have the biggest range of products, these products might do things no one else's products do, and they might be cheaper than anyone else's products – but if I already have five catalogues on my shelf, I simply won't look.

And if I don't look, you have no chance of a sale.

Thus, sending out catalogues and expecting to get sales en masse simply won't work. Yes, you will get some sales because there will always be new teachers reading who have no allegiance to any particular catalogue company, and there will always be a few who are disaffected with their current supplier and so looking for someone new.

But that is never enough for you to build a business.

What you need to do is break into the elite group of two or three catalogue companies in your field – the two or three that are always read. And that requires specific tactics which go beyond the notion of simply sending out a catalogue from time to time and hoping for the best.

2. The solution

There are in fact a number of solutions. For most firms several solutions will be available, and the most successful catalogue companies use a combination of approaches, while continuing to experiment with others in the meanwhile.

2.1 Highlight one or two products.

It is a mistake to think that you must promote your entire product range in every mailing. The reason the catalogue is likely to be ignored by teachers or administrators is because they have never bought anything from you, and so have no idea of your catalogue as a unique concept.

But when you send out a promotional leaflet focussing on just a few products – ideally ones that you know are in high demand and which you know you can offer at a good price – then you can draw people in to make their first purchase. You might not make much profit out of the promotion – but you will bring new teachers into your arena as purchasers (see paragraph 4 below.)

Shared mailings are particularly good for this type of “extract” promotion.

2.2 Change pictures

Many catalogues use pictures that are supplied by manufacturers and, as such, are the same as those which appear in other catalogues. It is surely worth asking the question – why should anyone buy from me rather than from

Company X if we are both using the same pictures to illustrate the same products?

Of course it will be impossible to change more than a handful of pictures, but you really should try – including the pictures you put in your “highlight mailings” (see 2.1 above).

When bringing in new pictures do make them realistic and not idealised. Idealised school pictures (with one or two lovely children plus a single teacher, the children paying attention and everything well ordered and smart) can actually put the teacher off because it is so removed from real, everyday life. Teachers need to know that the product is relevant to them – so have a picture taken in a real classroom with a real teacher. (Offer to give copies of all such pictures to the school for use on their website and prospectus as well – that will help smooth your way into the school).

2.3 Consider the text

Most catalogues in most fields are written in the same stylised way, which generally has nothing to do with the way most of us talk to teachers in real life. We don't say “NEW!” or “BY TEACHERS FOR TEACHERS” when we meet teachers in the classroom or at a show. So why do we say this in catalogues?

A text which is written in a professional manner, reflecting the way in which we speak with teachers, will greatly improve response rates.

2.4 Background communication

Background communication is the most powerful method of breaking through when selling through catalogues.

It is a system of communication which uses email and which brings relevant information (not just adverts) to readers on a regular basis. Many firms collect the email addresses of teachers, but simply write to them each week or month with more SPECIAL DISCOUNT! offers and the like. After a while the teachers get bored and stop reading. If they want your product they might have a look and see what you have got on offer this week, but the emails themselves do nothing to bring in new custom.

If, however, instead of writing to them with sale offers each time, you write to them with news about their area of interest (be it physics, furniture or IT systems) then they will start to read, simply because what you say is interesting.

Obviously, in this report I can't give an example for each and every subject area that has a catalogue (although if you give me a call I will give you some examples appropriate to your business). So for now I'll give one example, which would be relevant for people who are interested in the IT system that runs across the whole school. In England in 2010 all secondary schools in the state sector will have to introduce systems that allow parents to see up-to-date information about their own children on-line, at any time. Most schools don't have a system that does this, and have not started to think through the implications, and so there are potential problems ahead. A discussion of the problems and issues, the timetable, and how schools are solving the problem would be welcomed at this time by many people involved in school IT systems.

Two issues arise here – the quality of the writing and the ability to gather news. The messages have to be written in a language and style that the teachers will appreciate, and they have to contain news that the teachers won't have picked up from the front page of the TES. They have to be pro-teacher or pro-administrator, and they have to make the reader feel that this newsletter is looking out for their interests.

All of this can seem impossibly complex – and so the vast majority of firms don't go near this project. And yet it can bring in better results than any other promotional activity when it is done well.

2.5 The cover page with the catalogue

To return to the issue of sending out the catalogue, one of the simplest ways of re-invigorating your promotion is to put a covering letter with the catalogue. But it must be a covering letter that excites and stimulates the reader.

The worst kind of covering letter is the one that begins, "I am delighted to enclose a copy of our new catalogue."

Equally useless are covering letters that talk about when your company was formed, who does what in the company, what awards you have won and the new products in the catalogue. None of these will make any impact.

The cover letter that does make an impact will start with an exciting, stimulating, mind-grabbing headline that raises issues that are relevant to the reader. (Here's a clue – "10% off all books" is not a headline of this type. Nor is "Welcome to our 2010 catalogue!" The headline, "What is the simplest way to be ready for the new GCSE science curriculum?" is better. And "Is it possible to take every grade D up to a grade C in next year's GCSE?" is better still.)

(If you don't think it is possible to write exciting headlines for your product, do give me a call. I've not been defeated yet, and although yours might be the first product range to defeat me, I'd like to give it a try. No charge – just give me a call.)

Secondly you need to use a style of writing that is professional, informed and friendly. It can't use standard catch phrases like "award winning" and "family

owned business” – it has to use the professional language you would use if you were having a conversation with a teacher in the staff room.

Thirdly, the format needs to be based on the recognition that most people won't read all the text on a page, but will subliminally take in much of the message. This is done by ensuring that the opening of each short paragraph contains key words. A 300 word letter can work, even though 250 of those words are not looked at by 90% of the readership.

And finally, you need a really exciting PS that makes the reader feel that this is exactly the sort of firm they should be dealing with.

If you have written a cover page and would like to discuss it, or if you would like to talk about what sort of cover page could go out with your catalogue, we're happy to take a look and give free advice. Just send a copy of your catalogue to the address at the end of this article. If you just want to discuss your current sales letter, email it to the address at the end of the article.

3. Who are you writing to?

Sometimes the person to whom you should send your catalogue is obvious, but not always. Firstly, don't try to get people within a school to circulate a catalogue – it simply doesn't happen very much, and it has the negative impact that no one takes ownership of the catalogue. If it says “History, PSHE, Humanities, Behaviour, please circulate,” no one believes it is for them.

Instead, have a look at the options and look at who actually places the orders. If you are selling history books it is obviously going to be the head of history, but if you are selling furniture the person ordering might be the bursar, a head of a teaching department, the administrator, the head, the deputy head...

Many of the firms with which we work closely tell us, when we ask who places an order, “it could be anyone” – meaning that different job titles appear on order forms. However the name on the order form is not necessarily the person who actually decided to place the order with you.

If you find that you get orders from a range of people you should undertake research to find out who it is in the schools that makes the decision. If you don't have the facilities to do this yourself, please do talk with Hamilton House – we'll be happy to give advice or to set up the research. Such research need not be very expensive, and yet it can bring in absolutely vital information.

4. Who are you sending your catalogue to?

A key element in this type of work must be the development of separate lists of potential customers and actual customers. Quite how the arrangement is made depends on the way your business works – but I have yet to see a business where such a division is not possible or helpful.

A typical example of a divided mailing list might look like this

- a) Those teachers who have bought in the past two years
- b) Those teachers who have enquired but not bought
- c) Schools from which you have had no enquiry thus far.

Clearly the teachers in group a) should be given the full treatment – receiving the catalogue, the updates, the special offers.

Teachers in group b) should be edged forward – they know you, they have looked at your promotion, but they have not bought. You might take it that these people have compared prices or quality or something else, and found you wanting. So with them, you need to give them an extra reason for buying. Just sending the catalogue out again and again probably won't do it, but it might be

worth sending out very special offers just to get them to buy for the first time and to encourage them to read the catalogue.

Finally group c) teachers need to be taken up the list. What you will probably find works best here is a regular general mailing of special offers and the like – perhaps through different media such as shared mailing and email which, although not specific to your list, will reach everyone on that list.

Typically you might end up with 5% of teachers on your potential list buying from you last year, another 5% enquiring and 90% doing neither. This shows why type c) teachers can be reached through general mailings such as shared mail – such mailings are cheaper to organise, and if the 10% already with you see the promotion it doesn't do you any harm.

Occasionally I am told that these figures “don't apply to us” because the company “sold to 70% of all schools last year”. This may well be true, but in essence one should be careful to differentiate between teachers and schools. If you have a catalogue that could be of interest to 20 different individuals in a secondary school then you should be counting individuals not schools – and 70% of all schools might well equate to just 5% of the individuals to whom you could be selling.

5. The media

There are six major ways of reaching teachers directly. In the list that follows we exclude shows (where you can back up your direct marketing, but you are selling in a completely different way and only to those who turn up at the show), telephone selling (which reaches only a tiny number of teachers because of the difficulty of getting through and the growing use of CTPS by schools) and fax marketing (which is also undermined by the use of FPS). CTPS and FPS make it illegal to get in touch with schools through the medium of phone or fax (respectively) if they have registered.

Here are the six methods and their applications:

a) Solo mail

Solo mail is the obvious method for distributing catalogues – but it also has some additional attributes that many firms ignore.

Firstly, you can – and indeed should – always analyse your customer base to see what type of schools buy from you. I am often told by companies that “we sell to everyone” but it is extremely rare to find that an analysis of purchasing shows this to be the fact. A typical analysis might show that while 10% of secondary schools in England are specialist arts schools, only 1% of your sales come from this group. Or while 60% of schools on your list have under 100 pupils, only 5% of your purchases go to this group.

When such information arises you can use solo mailing to target schools more precisely – either by removing underperforming groups or by creating promotional material specifically designed for them.

Secondly, solo mailing is ideal for testing. It gets the highest level of response rates and has the highest level of flexibility, and so it can be used to undertake all types of test. To give an example from First and Best, the Hamilton House-owned publishing company, we would often devise four or five versions of an advert and send each one out to 300 schools, in order to find out which one worked best. Once we had such an answer we would then roll out the campaign across the country, knowing it would work.

b) Shared mail

Shared mailing is ideal for reaching different teachers each week and for putting new offers to teachers, so as to interest them in your catalogue. One way of doing this is to offer some highly discounted lines, and then supply the full

catalogue with the ordered product. This reduces the catalogue cost (the catalogue postage charge is partly covered by the fact that an order is going out at the same time) and encourages the customer to read the catalogue, having received a product.

An ideal approach is to have a different leaflet going out to schools each week in a shared mailing, and the catalogue only mailed upon publication to people who have bought in the last year – all the other catalogues go out with orders received as a result of shared mailings. There's a huge saving here – in that you print fewer catalogues and have a much lower postage bill. But your sales go up, because you reach people through shared mailing.

c) Subscription email

Subscription email lists are by far the most responsive of email lists – with response rates often approaching those of solo mail. They are made up of teachers who have asked to be on a mailing list (that is, they have chosen to be on it; they have not joined by simply ticking a box saying “yes send me other people's adverts”). The only downside is that you cannot use them over and over again. You might be able to get a piece in a subscription email service once every half term – certainly no more.

Where you can get such a piece listed you should use it to describe a particular product (not the whole catalogue) and link from the email to the website page that describes the product. From that website page you should also have a link to an index of the whole catalogue on-line.

There is the added benefit that advertisements placed on the subscription lists of Hamilton House also appear on www.blog.schools.co.uk, thus adding significantly to the readership level.

You can read more about emailing teachers at

www.yesmail.org.uk/schools.html

d) Personal email

Personal emails go directly to teachers' email addresses at school – but these teachers have not opted in to receive these emails. If you make the subscription list work (or if there is no subscription list available), it is worth moving on to this list and using it in the same way as the subscription list. It is the second most effective of the email lists.

e) Preference email

In some schools, teachers' email addresses are not released and the administrative staff are instructed to receive all emails centrally and then forward them to the relevant member of staff. The preference list excludes schools that have personal email lists (see d) above) and uses the school's preferred address, with the name of the teacher and the job title of the teacher put on the subject line. If you are finding the Personal List works for you, this should be your next choice. It also has the benefit of being a lot cheaper than subscription and personal email lists.

f) School email

If Personal and Preference email address lists are not available, or if you are not able to book space in them (and both lists are restricted to avoid overmailing), or indeed if you have used other options with success, it is always worth trying the school email list. Here the school's general email address is mailed and the title of the teacher required is inserted into the subject line. This type of list will generate the lowest response rate, but it is also the cheapest, and some companies do find it works.

In all email mailing you should get details of the open rate and the click through rate for each promotion. We keep details of the rates we have achieved recently, and it is therefore possible to compare the results of your promotion with that of other companies immediately, and this will give insights into how your advertisements could be changed to be more effective.

6. More help and support

- a) Daily report on education marketing can be found on the Education Marketing news report. Just email education-marketing-subscribe@yahoogroups.com
- b) A selection of the articles from the daily email report also appear on www.blog.educationmarketing.org.uk
- c) To discuss any specific aspect of your promotions or campaigns please call 01536 399 000, or if you would like a commentary on your current marketing promotions to schools, email Sales@hamilton-house.com or fax 01536 399 012 or write to Hamilton House Mailings plc, Earlstrees Ct, Earlstrees Rd, Corby, Northants, NN17 4HH
- d) For more information on solo mail please visit www.solo.ac
- e) For more information on shared mail please visit www.shared.org.uk
- f) For more information on email please visit www.yesmail.org.uk/schools.html
- g) For more information on how to write and design mailshots please visit www.theory.bz

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