

How to sell books to schools

1. The central problem

Schools have books. Lots of them. They've spent money on them. Yes, they know that they need to update and bring in new items to reflect the ever changing syllabus and the ever changing world, but basically most schools could exist for a year without buying many new books.

And so we have the central problem: how to convince the teacher that the books that already exist should be abandoned and new ones used?

There are four options:

- a) Stressing that this book (or this series of books) can be used alongside existing material, as a supplement, as a way of getting better results than by using the existing book or series on its own.
- b) Stressing that this book is so much better than anything that has gone before, that it should be brought in and the other material thrown out.
- c) Appealing to people who are running a new course or adopting a new syllabus – external situations that will force the teacher to consider new resources.
- d) Stating that this book in itself tackles existing issues in a new way. It offers something new, or covers ground which has never been covered before. (But remember, just saying this won't work – too many publishers do it. You have to go a lot further.)

The central problem is therefore this: if the people you want to reach in school are already receiving a range of emails, leaflets and catalogues dealing with books, then you have to ask: why should they read your leaflet and then (even if they do read your promotional literature) why should they buy any book/s at all?

And even if they are going to buy why should they buy yours rather than someone else's?

Of course, almost certainly you will get some people buying your books simply because your promotional material happens to land in the teacher's pigeon hole at exactly the right moment. They feel a bit dissatisfied with what they have in the school, and they just can't be bothered to search around. So they buy yours, and that is an easy sale. But normally you will need more than the occasional sale that you can get through this route.

You need people to see your promotion and to decide that this is a book or a series of books that they should be using.

Most companies promoting books simply announce that they have new books available and hope for the best. But the firms that succeed most of all consider the following issues...

- a) How to get the teachers to read your promotional material (which involves considering both the medium you use and the way in which you get the teacher to read the promotion).
- b) How to get teachers to stay focussed on your idea.
- c) How to get teachers to decide that this is an area where a purchase is needed.
- d) How to get teachers to choose your product rather than someone else's.

Of course, you might be helped at once by the fact that your book is unusual – unique even. But I would offer a word of warning. I regularly talk to publishers who provide books for schools and who tell me that their product is unique. Undoubtedly some are, but there are two problems with such claims. First of all, you need to be sure that your book is truly unique (a lot of claims are made concerning uniqueness which are based on belief rather than research). Secondly, you need to ensure that teachers recognise that your book is unique

and just what they want. If the teacher doesn't appreciate that this particular book is exactly what is needed and that it is not available anywhere else, then your uniqueness goes to waste.

I will give just one example here. A client of Hamilton House used our service to send out an email promotion concerning some new materials, but got no sales. I had nothing to do with the writing of the advert – but of course I was concerned about the failure and asked for more details. I found that the statement had been made that the book was unique – that no other book covered this particular topic.

I had my doubts and so sent out a questionnaire to subscribers to the relevant edition of Education Management News (a series of free email newsletters for teachers that we run and in which some of our clients advertise) which simply said, "If you were faced with problem X (the problem my client was addressing) what books would you use?" I got around 50 replies giving me the details of five different series of texts. No one said, "I'm glad you raised this, we don't have any decent resources – can you or your readers suggest anything?"

Of course, it is possible that the product that was being advertised was different from those nominated by teachers but, if that were the case, the publishers needed to make this point very clearly in the advertisement, because the potential buyers saw this as an area that they already had sorted.

2. Methods of marketing books to schools

The two prime approaches for advertising to teachers are direct mail and email. In direct mail you can use solo mail (your leaflet on its own – high response rates but the highest costs) and shared mail (lower cost but with less flexibility and lower response rates). In terms of email there are several lists, ranging from teachers who have asked for information on particular topics to be sent to their personal email address to emails to the school's general address.

There's more detail on the media in section 7.

3. Making them choose you

One of the great benefits to any company that is attempting to launch a new book or series into schools is the fact that most publishers working in this field don't maximise the effectiveness of their advertising. This is because they tend to copy most other firms and drift into a standardised mode of announcement advertising which basically says:

- a) This is the book title, this is the author, this is the ISBN, this is the price.
- b) This is the syllabus or area that it covers.
- c) These are the people it is aimed at.
- d) The author has written this, done that, etc.
- e) It is NEW! (capitals and exclamation mark seem obligatory).

This approach is fine if there are large numbers of people who want your book or if your book or series is genuinely new and answering an obvious need. These people will see your advertisement and think, "at last," and sign up.

So if you have just published a course book that fits exactly with GCSE Business Studies for the Edexcel syllabus, and no one else has done that, you don't have to worry. But of course such good fortune is not the norm.

Teachers receive lots of announcements about new books and most pass them by. If you really do believe that your product is unique and that everyone is waiting for it, then yes, you can offer your announcement and it should work. But most of us are not in this position.

What you need to do is ensure that your promotional materials are read and considered and that some really good reasons are given for purchasing what you have on offer. Sending out a leaflet from time to time showing the contents,

author, ISBN and price, and simply hoping for the best, doesn't often get great results.

4. The solution

For most firms, several solutions will be available, and the most successful publishers use a combination of approaches while continuing to experiment with others in the meanwhile.

4.1 Promote the benefits from using this publication in a concrete manner.

This will immediately separate you from the competition – and the more you can talk about the fact that this publication works in a different way and does different things rather than it being a book which “looks” or “explores” then the more likely you will have success. If you can say that because of approach x or style y this book is likely to raise everyone's grade by one position, better still.

4.2 Use various media

Not every medium will work for you every time, but most companies find that several approaches can work. It is worth trying both direct mail and email simply because different schools and different teachers have different approaches to the two types of promotion. Some schools will say, “we don't forward email to teachers”, while others will state that they prefer email and applaud its more environmentally-friendly credentials.

However, you cannot use the same marketing approach in both email and direct mail. Email will need a link to a website; direct mail will need to be complete in itself. As a general rule, don't try to use direct mail where the link to the website is an essential element in the push to get the reader to buy.

4.3 Experiment with the text

No matter what you are advertising, no matter what the medium, there is never just one way of writing the advertisement. Because you are selling a book or series of books to teachers the text is going to be more important than any pictures, not least because your potential customers are highly educated, literate people who place a high value on the written word. What's more, the product you are selling is normally much more readily described in text. (Of course, this is not the case with a book that is highly illustrated or in which the illustrations are a fundamental part of the product, but it is generally true).

But what text? There will be many ways of approaching the text – even if you stick to our idea of focussing on the benefits. What's more, you will need to change the text as you proceed because it is impossible to keep selling books using the same advert over and over again. And you should experiment continuously so that when an advertisement's response rate starts to decline you have a new advert ready to replace it.

4.4 One book or several books in each advert?

If you offer a range of books it will be tempting to advertise all of them all the time, getting the most out of each promotion. But it is often more productive to focus on just one title or one series per advertisement and this is normally the most successful approach.

If you wish to try a variant, consider offering two books on one leaflet (but not one on the front and one on the back of a leaflet – for the direct mail advertisement print on one side only with the adverts in two columns so both are visible at once).

An alternative approach to advertising more than one book in one promotion involves once more focussing on one book, but listing the other options at the

end, with a link to details about them on a website. However, always remember that the more alternatives you mention, the more you are encouraging the reader to delay and look at alternatives rather than placing an order here and now.

In a series of experiments carried out by the publisher First and Best it was discovered that with solo mailing the best approach by far was to offer either one or two titles in the advertisement and nothing else (two worked best only when the two were related and there was a chance of a teacher buying both). In a shared mailing advertisement it was best to offer six books. More than six and the overall sales level dropped. Less than six and again the overall sales level dropped.

Most advertisements for books in most subject areas are written in the same stylised way, which generally has not developed as a result of experimentation and research. Often there is a focus on the contents list, the author, the price and the ISBN. But this is not necessarily the right approach simply because it sells features rather than benefits. While you most certainly should focus on the author if the author is nationally famous, there is no point in doing this if the reader will not have heard of the author. Just saying that the author has spent 10 or 20 years teaching a subject is no real benefit – the reader may have done this as well.

A much more exciting alternative involves getting the reader so enthused by the book that he or she will not even think “how much” but rather will say, “I must get this.” In other words – sell the benefit of the book, nothing else.

If the book you are offering is new, there is still little point in saying that it is “NEW!” because that is not what normally makes a teacher buy a book. Teachers buy a book because of the benefit they perceive that they will get from it, nothing else.

A text which is written in a professional manner, reflecting the way in which we speak with teachers, will also greatly improve response rates - but most of all you must answer the question, why should I use this book rather than any other.

The implication of the above is that one should not rely on sending catalogues of titles into schools. Catalogues can be used, but there is no doubt that they are at their most effective when approaching existing customers who value the books published by this particular publisher. In terms of finding new customers it is better generally to focus on one product, and then provide the catalogue with the sold item, rather than use the catalogue as a means of getting the first sale.

The psychology of the situation is simple. When a teacher who is not focussed on your publications receives a catalogue he/she will at best flick through the listings rather than study anything in detail. But if only one book is promoted then the same amount of time is focussed entirely on that one title or series.

4.5 Study the psychology of perception

When planning the layout of your leaflet or your email, consider the psychology of perception – the way in which people look at leaflets and emails, what they see first, and how they react. It is not possible to explain all the details here, because it is a major area of study in its own right, but if you want to learn more you can look at www.theory.bz – a website devoted to this study. Alternatively you can send a copy of your most recent leaflet to Hamilton House and we'll take a look and let you know about any changes you might want to make. (Call 01536 399 000 – there is no charge for this service).

However, here are a couple of key points to consider from the start:

- On a sheet of A4 the eye starts about 30% of the way down the page – and that is where you need your headline in large type.

- The eye finds it easier to read a page which has plenty of white space around the text – large margins, short paragraphs with a double space between them. Excessive use of bold or italics does not help, nor does having illustrations behind the text or different colours. The best approach involves black text on a suitably coloured background. If you are using any pictures don't let them get too close to the text otherwise they will distract. In email certainly try to avoid all illustration – if you must have illustration for your product, then have a link to your website and put the illustration there.

4.6 Getting a response

You should always offer the widest range of responses: allow the teacher to write to you, fax you, go to your on-line shop or call you.

5. To whom are you writing?

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

Instead, you will need to do one leaflet for the head of history, one for the head of PSHE and so on. What you certainly can do is include several leaflets in an envelope together, each for a different teacher.

You should also consider writing to the librarian if there is any chance that the book will be of use there, and if the book is on a subject such as behaviour and discipline you can consider writing to the deputy head and experiment with writing to heads of the teaching departments too.

6. When to mail, how often to mail?

On the website www.hamilton-house.com you will find the “How to” section listed on the left side, and within that there is an article called **How to Sell to Schools**. This covers a range of points about when to mail, and it is updated each term as new information about teacher purchasing habits emerges. It also contains the latest information on school finances – and you may find that it will provide more accurate information than the general rumours that can circulate about what schools are spending their money on.

7. The media in detail

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 where 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 advertising books where you want to get the highest level of sales. With direct mail you can select the regions and type of school to promote to and, of course, direct the advertising to the teacher most likely to buy.

You can also analyse your customer base to see what type of schools your customers come from. I am often told by companies that “we sell to everyone”

but it is extremely rare to find that an analysis of their buyers 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 clients come from this group. And so on. There are many analyses to be undertaken, and invariably one of them finds you a way of significantly cutting your marketing costs. If you would like to discuss with Hamilton House the undertaking of such analyses, please do call 01536 399 000.

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

Another feature of solo mailing is that it 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. You should not be afraid to try several different advertisements for a book to see which one works. For example, if you have 1000 schools that you are promoting to, you might create four separate advertisements and send each one to 25% of your prospective clientele. That will show you which of your four adverts works best. Then, for your follow up mailing, the three groups that did not get that best performing advertisement can get it, while you send the second best performing advert as a follow up to the schools that got the best performing advert first time around.

b) Shared mail

Shared mailing is ideal for reaching different teachers each week and for putting new book details to teachers on a regular basis. If you have two or three leaflets for different teachers, shared mailings can be exceptionally powerful as a way of promoting because the second and third piece will be sent at a very discounted price.

In a typical scenario you might have books which you know sell to the Head of PSHE, the Head of the Healthy Eating Programme, and the Librarian. You can send out a leaflet to one of these for around 7p per teacher reached. But if you mail two of them at once the price might come down to maybe 5p per teacher, and if you go for three, then you might go down as low as 3p per teacher. (These prices are dependent on a number of factors – please do get a quote first).

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 downsides are that you cannot email them over and over again and that you cannot select regionally. You might be able to get a piece in a subscription email service once every half term; and you have to recognise that you are emailing to the whole UK. However, you can reach your selected teachers more often if you really do have a wide range of products to sell and can keep writing about different items.

Subscription lists should be used to promote a single book or series, nothing more, and must include a link from the email to the website page that describes the book/s in more detail. From that website page you should also have a link to an index of your whole book list or your on-line shop.

There is the added benefit that advertisements placed on the subscription lists of Hamilton House also appear on www.blog.schools.co.uk or other specialist sites, 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. These teachers have not opted to receive these emails but their personal in-school address has been made available by the school. 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 various email lists. This list can be selected regionally.

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 and once again can be selected regionally.

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 over-mailing), 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, giving insights into how your advertisements could be changed to be more effective.

g) Response rates, costs, and where to start

If possible you should start with a Subscription mailing list (the Hamilton House subscription service is “Education Management News”) for emails and with a solo mailing.

The subscription email will cost you around 20p per teacher and the solo mailing around 45p per teacher. Although sales rates vary dramatically between products it is not unknown for publishers to achieve 3% or more with solo mailing and 2% or more with subscription email. As noted before, with the solo mailing you should start with a trial of just a few hundred schools to ensure that you are getting the right result.

Shared mail usually gets a response rate of around 25% of a solo mailing, and a school email will get a response rate of around 15% of a subscription list email. But do remember that these are generalised response rates, and vary enormously from product to product.

8. 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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