

# How to sell to schools: Summer 2009

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## **1. Coverage of this report**

In what follows, unless otherwise stated, I am referring throughout to schools in England. Education in the UK is administered separately by the DfCSF (for England), the Welsh Assembly, the Scottish Parliament and the N. Ireland Assembly. The DfCSF (previously 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 DfCSF decisions and those of the local authorities in England impact on the massive majority of the UK.

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.

## **2. Do schools have money to spend now?**

Over the past five years there has been a huge change in the way schools are funded – changes which have combined with several sudden reversals of policy by government, a wholesale row between central government and local authorities as to who had the money, and an enquiry by the audit commission.

New systems of funding are now in place – but some of the arguments continue – most particularly about schools holding back on some of their annual funds.

The key point to remember, however, is that the huge increase in school financing that started in 1997 has continued, and schools now have twice as much to spend as they did 10 years ago. What's more, this money is allocated over a three-year period, and so schools are secure in the money they are going to have to spend not just this year, but next year as well.

So to make the key point: the basic funding is high and is in place. There is an on-going argument, but it is about one fairly modest point: whether the schools can hold money back "for a rainy day".

As the rules stand in England any secondary school that wants to hold over more than 5% of its budget (8% for any primary school) needs to get permission to do this, by declaring which major project the money is being held for (e.g. the building of a new language lab).

Some schools have been ignoring this rule and some local authorities in

England have started to take action against schools that have kept back budget "illegally".

These local authorities are recovering the money from the school budgets and then spending it themselves - often on upgrading IT services across all the local authority schools, particularly in relation to new government requirements for "real time reporting" in schools which come into effect in 2010.

Other local authorities are taking the money and then redistributing it to other schools that have spent all their money. Gloucestershire, Peterborough, Middlesbrough and Staffordshire have been mentioned as adopting this approach.

So the key point is that the schools are not losing the money – even if it is being clawed back, it is still going into the schooling system.

The number of schools that have balances beyond the allowable level is certainly down on the 40% of schools that had this situation two years ago. Of those who have held money back, most have specified that it is for long term projects.

What is also clear is that the amount of money being talked about is only a tiny percentage of the £55bn a year of taxpayer's money handed out by the Dept for Children. £42bn of this goes on salaries, leaving £13 billion to be spent. If all the secondary schools kept the maximum allowable the amount carried forward would be £325 million or £65,000 per school.

For the primary schools similar calculations would give a carry-over (or "surplus") of £21,000 per school.

Against that we have a report in the TES saying that 9.1% of schools have budget deficits. As the TES says, where a school is in deficit, it must agree a recovery plan with the local authority to eliminate the deficit, normally over three years.

So at this moment, there is a mixed picture made up of:

- Around 72% of schools that receive their budget and spend it within the rules
- About 2% of schools that hold onto money, and then have money taken back by local authorities and used for central purchasing.
- Another 2% of schools having money taken by local authorities and given to other schools.
- About 15% of schools with surpluses over the allowed area but no action being taken

- About 9% of schools with deficits.

There is, however, one PS to be added here. While increasing numbers of administrators are becoming trained in their job, many remain untrained, and are, in essence, left alone to run the school office as they wish. Some of these individuals adopt rogue policies of their own to reduce their own work levels. One that is doing the rounds at the moment is to say to anyone phoning the school looking to make an appointment or talk to a teacher over the phone, “the school hasn’t got any money” – as an excuse for not passing on information to teachers. There are ways of overcoming this – but it is worth noting that it is just a ploy by out-of-control admin staff, and not a reflection of the real situation.

### 3. Special funding

While most of the money for schools comes through central and local authority funds to the schools, there are always a number of special funds around which are aimed at specific projects.

These special funds come in all shapes and sizes, and Hamilton House can undertake searches to find such funds as part of the “Velocity” programme. But two funds in particular are of note to many companies.

First, the **Harnessing Technology Grant**. This Grant is available to every non-fee-paying school – including the academies. 75% or more of the fund goes straight to schools, and the allocation for the next three years has been made. Up to 25% can be held back by the local authority for major authority-wide purchases. It is used for IT, and effectively replaces E-learning credits.

This funding therefore starts with the local authority, who then pass it on. They may take a little while to pass it on, but on it has to go, and most schools are now getting their funds. From now on the LA has to pay the schools from the fund each quarter – a regulation that stops LA’s holding back money (if for example they have invested a lot of their funds with Icelandic banks.)

There is a complete analysis of the Grant and the way it is working on the BECTA site at <http://publications.becta.org.uk/display.cfm?resID=39756>

Second, **Building Schools for the Future**. This is a massive programme for rebuilding England’s schools – and similar programmes are running in the rest of the UK. In England the programme has got off to a slow start, but money originally allocated for future years is being pulled forwards, and the programme is going ahead.

#### **4. If there is so much money around why are some firms successful at selling into schools and others not?**

The big problem in selling to schools is that while teachers have become increasingly sophisticated in their purchasing, while school management systems have become increasingly exotic and high tech, and while some companies have pushed forward and developed modern forms of selling which would not be out of place in other industries, a large number of suppliers have stuck with the traditional approach to selling.

As such, their advertising appears to be irrelevant and out-of-date to many teachers. But because these companies generally just see what other firms do, and so often see other adverts that look just like their own, they don't realise quite how far the market has moved on.

There's also another factor. If you have an advertisement that is really fairly poor, but a product that is good, the chances are that you will find that you will get some sales. So it often won't be the fact that sales are non-existent, but rather that they are not as good as you'd like them to be. And that can be a hard problem to resolve.

What we are not talking about here is the medium – it is not the case that suddenly shared mailing is doing worse than it ever did before or that schools are blocking out all emails. Rather we should look at it like this...

- In the past ten years the amount of money available per school has increased dramatically.
- In the past ten years schools have totally reorganised themselves and the way in which they handle purchasing and management.
- What's more, academies have now come into being and they represent a totally different model in terms of education. If you have never been into one of these new style schools, it is worth doing so, just to see how incredibly different they can be.
- But despite all these changes, the advertising of many firms still has the look and feel of ten years ago. Worse, some firms are using advertising styles that go back twenty years.

Here's another way of looking at this. If you were to see an advert which appeared on TV in 1997, you would (in most cases) find it looking a little old fashioned or out-of-date. An advert from the 1980s looks quaint, humorous or even preposterous.

## **5. So what is the new style of advertising that is appropriate to 2009/10**

In essence, contemporary advertising is based around a very simple idea: all adverts are conversations.

At the start of the digital age, the idea was that we could get rid of conversations, and instead just tell people what we had, and force them to reply on-line. Phone numbers were not displayed, and if you had a question or a complaint the chances are that you would get an automated answer.

Companies put in telephone handling systems that shut people out, customers had to wait an hour to get through to the bank, and even then had to speak to someone whose accent made it hard to understand them.

Then it was realised what a mistake this all was – customers need to be talked to, and the system changed. Want to buy your CDs on-line – no problem, the system is there. Got a problem with an order you placed with play.com? Phone them, and they answer within 5 seconds, and can tell you about your order within 10 seconds. (And I don't have shares in play.com – it's just my experience).

If we take this a step further, the reason why so many companies report that their response rates in selling into education have gone down becomes clearer.

When faced with a potential customer most of us are able to speak in a fairly normal, friendly manner about the benefits of our product, how well it is going, why people buy it, and so on. We smile, look the customer in the eye (although not too much as to make them feel uncomfortable) and by and large aim to come across as a friendly sort of person who it is good to do business with.

What we don't do is...

- a) Bore the customer to death with talk about when our company was formed, the fact that we are a small family business or a vast plc, and the like
- b) Use some sort of convoluted double speak such as "This award winning bit of software...."
- c) Shout "NEW!" or "DISCOUNT!" in the customer's ear.

In short, when we meet someone we talk to them in a fairly nice, normal way. But somehow a lot of educational marketing has slipped into strange shorthand phraseology such as "by teachers for teachers" or "award-winning" that ultimately becomes meaningless to the reader because it is seen so often.

The advertising that is working and achieving ever higher response rates is written in a way that is appropriate to teachers in schools in 2009 – and not to teachers in 1997 or even 1987.

## **6. The methods of advertising in summary**

The main ways in which products are sold to schools are

- a. Direct mail
- b. Email
- c. Via internet sites
- d. PR and advertorial sections in magazines

Other methods (such as educational shows, telephone selling, fax selling, and straight magazine advertising) tend to account for smaller amounts of turnover, although there are, of course, some firms that focus totally on one or more of these minority approaches.

## **7. Direct mail in detail**

There are two types of direct mail – solo mail (which is the conventional approach) and shared mailing (in which material from a number of companies is sent out together in one envelope).

Prices of course can vary depending on what you are sending out, but often the price will be around 45p per school for a solo mailing and 7p per school for a shared mailing.

Shared mailing always gets a lower response rate than solo mailing – but of course is a lot cheaper in price. It is particularly good for bringing in customers on a regular basis and reminding them that you are there.

Solo mailings need mailing lists, and there are a lot of companies on the market offering these. Prices vary dramatically – and it is always worth being careful if one is offered a list that is particularly low in price, since an error rate in a list of over 5% will wipe out all the advantage from the cheapness of the price.

## **8. Email in detail**

There are four types of email lists available

- a. Subscribers to email newsletters. These get the highest response rate of all because the readers tend to be interested in what the newsletter says.

- b. Personal email addresses. These are the addresses of individual teachers at the school address. Some companies seem to offer this but in fact only supply school addresses (see d) with the title of the teacher in the subject line (as in Attn: Head of Maths). It is worth checking in detail what you will get.
- c. Preference addresses. Some schools don't give out personal email addresses but do give out the names of the teacher, so it is possible to email the school office and put in the name of the teacher in the subject line.
- d. School addresses. These are the lowest responding addresses but can be used to reach all schools, and they consist of the address of the administrator or school office.

There's more information on <http://www.yesmail.org.uk/Schools.html>

## 9. Web sites and blogs

It is very hard to sell to schools without a website. Not impossible, but hard.

However it is now possible to attach a few pages to an established website, such as [www.schools.co.uk](http://www.schools.co.uk) so that your address might be [www.mysite.schools.co.uk](http://www.mysite.schools.co.uk) If you are interested in this low cost option please do call Hamilton House on 01536 399 000

The blog is the latest area of development and expansion – blogs reflecting the interest of teachers. In 2008 a series of experiments relating to blogs were set up. One appeared at [www.blog.schools.co.uk](http://www.blog.schools.co.uk) and another at [www.blog.admin.org.uk](http://www.blog.admin.org.uk) (for administrators).

Different formats have been tried. The schools' blog reported on issues in a middle-of-the-road way for a while with modest results, but when a stronger line was taken, with the blog having an opinion, monthly readership rates doubled. The Admin blog started off dealing with administrative matters, but when it in turn moved over to the writing of a diary of an administrator, readership shot up until around one third of all the schools in the UK were reading the blog at least once a month.

A number of other blogs have been developed outside of the educational area, one gaining over 60,000 readers a month. If you would like to know more about blogs and how they can be used, please do call 01536 399 000. Our guess is that in 2009 blogs in education will become major players in the marketing mix.

## 10. PR and advertorial sections in magazines

PR is becoming an increasingly significant part of marketing to schools – although it is quite expensive. We have a website dedicated to PR at [www.voom.org.uk](http://www.voom.org.uk)

## 11. The “when to mail” chart 2009

*April* – Most schools are taking a holiday either side of the Good Friday / Easter Monday weekend, so the chaotic situation of 2008 where various schools were on holiday over a 5 week period will not recur. The new financial year will start April 5, and there is likely to be a delay before money starts being spent again. But schools don't return until the last week of April, so most of the downtime is also the holiday. However, as with all holiday periods, see note 2 below about school administration and the growth in its work. It is also worth noting that in 2008 for the first time companies were emailing teachers at their personal address right up to the last minute – and with some success.

*May* – traditionally May has been an average month for response rates, but the new system of finances may well improve the response to mailings at this time. Avoid mailing at the end of the 3rd week of May as the mail will arrive in the SSY holiday which commences on the Bank Holiday Monday. Rather, mail during that week for delivery in the following week. Certainly by May senior managers will have their money allocated and be able to spend.

*June* – normally an excellent month as many teachers have reduced timetables because of pupils taking exams and school trips. Teachers will often place orders for items that they want delivered at the start of September. Scottish and N Ireland schools finish at the end of June.

*July* – it is possible to have some significant success in the first week of July – although not for private schools. In general, mail in early July only when you are looking to achieve the placement of last minute orders or for delivery next term. Term ends mid-July in England and Wales, although it should be possible to continue to email teachers direct through the summer. Again see my note about emailing teachers at their personal address. This does not have the restrictions that apply elsewhere.

*August* – in general we do not recommend mailing English and Welsh schools in August, and the success that we previously had with late August mailings has faded away. There are, however, some exceptions. First, with more and more work (timetabling, exam arrangements, school visits, etc) moving across to the school office, administrators and bursars are worth mailing as they are still in school. Secondly, it is worth doing mailings to coincide with the release of A level and to a lesser extent GCSE results.

Thirdly, Scottish and Irish schools return in August and yet receive very little mail then. They are certainly worth mailing.

*September* – for the last two years the first week of term has caused difficulty for some but has been ok for others. Schools in England and Wales can start at any time between September 1 and 5, and as a compromise we suggest mailing at the end of this week to reach schools during their second week - unless you feel sure you will benefit from being in the school at the start of the term. In 2008 one mailing house was telling people to mail schools right at the start of September, saying “if you don’t get a sale then, you’ve lost it for the year.” This is twaddle, and it’s really rather sad that such misinformation is still being put out.

In 2008 we had the summer audit in place for the first time, and it caused some disruption in September, but we suspect that was teething troubles, and most schools will do the summer audit when they should do it – in August. (It was the new Financial Management Standard which requires 6 month audit. Some administrators and bursars issued notices saying “don’t buy in September” so that they could audit then.)

*October* – with September being poor in recent years October has been much better for response rates. Avoid mailing so that the material hits schools during the autumn half term. Instead mail early in the month, or towards the end of that week for arrival the following week.

*November* – normally a reasonable month for promotions – teachers are well established with the classes they took over in September and able to consider new materials required for these particular pupils for use perhaps from January onwards.

*December* – avoid mailing primary schools after the first week of December, and avoid mailings to secondaries after the second week. The idea of mailing straight after Christmas, to have the mail in the school for the start of the new term appears attractive but has not produced particularly brilliant results in our research. It can work, but is not an automatic goldmine. What did work for the first time in 2008 was emailing to the teacher’s personal email address right until the end of term – that could be worth doing again.

## **11. The changes in responsibilities**

Starting around 2005 schools began to change the way in which their administration systems worked, largely under the influence of training done by the National College for School Leadership and the School of Educational Administration.

As a result a huge array of work previously undertaken by heads, deputies

and senior managers moved into administration. Timetabling, organizing supply teachers, health and safety, staff induction, building and site contracts and maintenance, liaison with parents... These and many other tasks now reside entirely with the school administrators, whose position in the school has started to change.

The implication for sales is dramatic. Administrators get very little promotional mail (because most companies have not caught up with this development) and they are there all the time (including school holidays). There are email and mailing lists for them – they are easy to reach. (In one promotion in 2008 a document about the school's central computer operating system was sent to various parties by email. The school admin promotion was opened four times more often, when compared to other promotions.)

## **12. SSY**

The changes mentioned in part one have given us a significant move towards conformity in schools as they are all brought under the same system of financial controls. Simultaneously, growing numbers of schools in England and Wales (but not Scotland and N Ireland) have moved over to the Standard School Year (previously known as the 6 term year)

What this means is that, whereas in the past schools in different parts of the country (and even within the same local authority) could have holidays that were quite different from each other, more and more schools started to coincide their holidays.

This had a significant impact on the effectiveness of various promotions to schools: in the past it was often worth mailing schools in a holiday period (particularly half term) as quite a few schools would not be on holiday. Now that is less productive because almost all the local authority schools in England will be on holiday at the same time. What's more, as we shall see, teachers have changed the way they treat holidays, especially half term holidays, and again this has meant a reduction in the effectiveness of mailings which reach schools during half terms.

## **13. Admin control of mail received in the holiday**

The past 10 years have seen a significant change in the role of administration in schools, as administrators have taken on more and more responsibilities. As the Deputy Heads have lost control over finances, so the Bursar's department (what we used to call the school office) has grown and grown.

In 2003, as the government set out its aim to have a qualified bursar in every school, the DfES began to fund a series of bursar training courses at

the National College for School Leadership. Then the School of Educational Administration was funded by the DTI to provide training for the administrators working for the bursars. Suddenly the school secretary was no longer a mum working part-time, but a trained and qualified professional with a proper job title.

Two events occurred in 2007/8 which affected the way mail is handled by schools. First, Royal Mail introduced Keep Safe – a system through which they do not deliver mail to schools when the school is shut but will return it to the sender. (The situation is complex but the core of the situation, however, is that you cannot guarantee that mail sent to schools during the holiday will be left until staff return after the holiday. Where there is only a single administrator in a school this might lead to Royal Mail seeing the school as “shut” and thus returning the mail. Email addressed to the teacher by name is a way around this of course.)

Secondly, the SEA began its campaign to build email lists of teachers, so that as much advertising as possible could go direct to the teachers, rather than coming via the admin staff. This campaign is continuing (Hamilton House as a partner of the SEA is involved in developing this campaign, and we can let you know how many mailing lists are available) and it is not only changing the way in which teachers are mailed, but also changing the opportunity for mailing in the holidays.

One particularly interesting point is that prior to the summer holiday 2008 the SEA emailed the 2500 administrators who have opted to receive its regular email information and asked if there was a demand for news during the summer. The result was a resounding yes, and for the first time the SEA continued with its news and advertising service through much of July and August.

## **14. Helping schools find suppliers**

All companies that use Hamilton House for a solo or shared mailing are given a listing on the School Procurement Web Site, [www.top5.org.uk](http://www.top5.org.uk). Other firms that are not clients of Hamilton House can buy onto the site for a modest fee.

The School Procurement Site is advertised regularly through the use of teachers' own email lists and on websites such as [www.schools.co.uk](http://www.schools.co.uk)

## 15. More help and information

Please call Hamilton House on 01536 399 000  
Or email [Sales@hamilton-house.com](mailto:Sales@hamilton-house.com)

Or visit...

For shared mail: [www.shared.org.uk](http://www.shared.org.uk)

For solo mail: [www.directmail.org.uk](http://www.directmail.org.uk)

For email: [www.yesmail.org.uk/schools.html](http://www.yesmail.org.uk/schools.html)

For other topics in education: [www.educationmarketing.org.uk](http://www.educationmarketing.org.uk)

For the Velocity marketing programme: [www.velocity.ac](http://www.velocity.ac)

For PR work: [www.voom.org.uk](http://www.voom.org.uk)

To receive daily emails about selling into education send an email to [education-marketing-subscribe@yahoogroups.com](mailto: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](mailto: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  
Chairman, Hamilton House Mailings plc