

## **All the approaches for selling into schools (2011/12 edition)**

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Hardly a day goes by now without an advert being sent to firms that sell into schools, promoting one or more new approaches to marketing into education.

Sometimes we see claims for newly created email lists; sometimes there are directories or monthly publications which all teachers supposedly read. On other occasions we are drawn to websites, sometimes even mouse mats.

But do each of these types of medium work? And indeed, within each medium how does one go about getting results?

This briefing paper from Hamilton House looks at these points and considers the issue of how best to market products and services to schools. In short, we look at each process for reaching schools in turn, and then look at the pros and cons.

### **Direct mail - solo**

This is the classic way of advertising to schools that goes back some 50 years. Quite simply, you have a database of school addresses and write to the teacher you want, either by name or by title (e.g. The Head of Music). Curiously, whether you use a title or a name doesn't seem to affect response rates at all.

This type of mailing reached a height around 2004 before firms moved over to digital marketing. It is the most expensive form of marketing, school by school (costing around 45p per school), but is also by far the most responsive. Response rates in terms of orders of 2% to 3% are common, but have been known to rise to 6% or more for items being sold, much higher if you are offering something free.

Schools can be selected according to the number of pupils, the source of their funding, their postcodes, counties, local authorities, age range of pupils and specialism.

Solo mailing is thus able to deliver a very precise range of schools (e.g. all schools with 17 year olds that have over 500 pupils and which specialise in music). As such it is possible to experiment with the list, selecting perhaps just a few hundred schools to mail in order to see what results one gets. If the results are fine you can then promote across all the schools; if not, you can do another trial to see if you can get a better response rate.

## **Postal Direct mail – shared**

Shared mailing involves all schools of a certain type being mailed with maybe 10 or so leaflets from different companies all put in the same envelope. The benefit is that the cost of promotion is reduced dramatically – a typical shared mailing might cost something between 4p and 8p per teacher reached depending on whether you put one or two leaflets in a pack.

Most firms put the title of the teacher that the leaflet is for in big letters on the top right of the leaflet.

Shared mailings have been running for some 30 years, so all schools are well used to handling them. By the late 1990s there were occasions in which Hamilton House was sending out half a dozen shared packs a week. By 2006 shared mailing had virtually ceased, but now companies are returning to it following the failure of generic email campaigns (see below.)

With postal shared mailing the flexibility of the solo mailing is lost, but you can still select schools by these criteria:

- Schools with sixth form (3500)
- All secondary schools (5000)
- The largest 5000 primary schools
- The largest 10,000 primary schools
- All primary schools (24,000)

As a bonus Hamilton House also offers free email campaigns for customers in the postal shared mailings. We've been doing this for a couple of years, but it is noticeable that other firms have started to follow us. Nothing wrong with that of course, but we have had a couple of calls suggesting that the email lists that are being used are not always as good as one might imagine. We use our Personal email lists (the ones that go direct to teachers, not via the school office). It is worth checking exactly what you get in terms of the free offer.

## **Email**

With solo and shared postal mailings your success rate in the mailing will be measured by the number of orders or enquiries you get after sending out the mailing. With email the response can also be measured by the number of people who click through from the email onto your website.

Where the click through rate is low we know that the advert itself has not worked. Where the click through is high but the number of orders is low then we know that people are getting stuck at the website, and not going on – so we know the problem is there. In this way it is possible to unpick any problems and work back through the campaign to put right any difficult areas.

Because of this it is not a bad idea to work with someone who is able to write and re-write emails and landing pages, in order to get the whole thing flowing neatly from one part of the campaign to the next.

### **Email – generic**

This is the most common type of email marketing to schools and involves sending emails to the general school addresses (i.e. those that begin office@ or admin@). Generally the title of the teacher is put on the subject line.

The problem with this approach is that schools are often overwhelmed by generic emails, and many now simply ditch most of them without even looking. However some generic emails are read – and offers of free products can get response levels of 5% or more, showing that some such emails certainly do get through. (However the free offer must be real. Something that is advertised as free, but is in effect only free if the school buys something, tends to get very low responses and can get you blocked by school email systems.)

You can buy a list of generic email addresses of all schools on disk for unlimited use for around £50. You will then need either to have your own software for sending the emails out or use another firm's system.

If you do use an approach like this it is probably worth buying an updated list at least once every six months, if not once a term, as you can find that whole areas can suddenly change their addresses on occasion.

It is also worth watching the bounce backs that you get through your system. We have had reports of some systems that bounce back anything sent to a generic address (office@), and it is clearly important that you don't use such a system.

Hamilton House offers such a list on disk for £49.99 plus VAT, as well as an emailing system. We also run a system for sending out the emails for you – details are at <http://www.emails.gs/ownlists.html>

But here's a basic point: response rates on generic emails will always be low, so it is hard to make your business grow very much just by generic emails. You can make a profit, but the business rarely develops much in this way.

### **Email – personal**

Personal emails (which carry a person's name at the start, as in [Tony.Attwood@aisa.org](mailto:Tony.Attwood@aisa.org)) get a much higher response rate than generic emails as there is no administrator in the way.

The problem with such lists is that there are a lot of people around offering them who claim to have telephone researched tens of thousands of people in the past month to verify the addresses. You need to look at such claims seriously and see if such a level of research is likely to have happened. (We've seen claims made that 80,000 teacher addresses have been

individually researched in the “past month” (i.e. in early September) – and yet it is simply impossible to research this data in August!

Most personal email lists include some email addresses that are in effect generic lists with the name of the individual teacher on the subject line. These addresses (known as preference addresses) are better than generic, but not as good as personal addresses. They are generally included in school lists because some schools either have not allocated personal addresses or refuse to give them out.

Personal addresses can be selected in the same way as direct mail addresses (that is selecting by postcode, county, school type, age range, etc), and thus it is possible to do trial mailings.

Addresses are charged at anything from 5p upwards depending on the volume purchased and the time of the mailing. For example, Hamilton House offers the secondary lists at 5p for use in the school holidays if you are undertaking a full list mailing to a particular teacher and 7p if you are a first time user.

Normally speaking it is worth emailing about 1000 addresses to see if you have got a reasonable response – although obviously much depends on how many responses you need to get in order to call the campaign a success.

If you are paying £150 for your promotion to 1000 addresses, and you make £40 gross profit every time the average person buys, clearly you need 4 replies to break even (0.4%). 8 replies (0.8%) would give you £170 profit.

What’s more, you will also collect for yourself the email addresses of the people ordering, and so be able to promote again to them as past customers, probably making further sales later on.

### **Email – subscription**

Subscription services are those in which teachers have agreed to receive emails on a particular subject from the publisher – usually for nothing. The only problem with these comes where companies boost their circulation by calling potential “subscribers” and asking if they want to subscribe for free, and then putting them down. Such pressure can result in a much-boosted rate, but a low readership rate as the subscribers were never really much interested in the first place.

There are usually restrictions on how subscription lists can be used – and quite often the language used has to be in the house style or format.

### **Email - shared**

Shared emails usually cost around 1p per email sent. They can be sent to personal, preference or generic addresses, and generally include up to four or five companies. The amount of text you can include is restricted, and it is worth asking to see a sample of the shared email format before you book in.

General notices (“your one stop shop for all school maths equipment”) tend to do less well than specific adverts for individual products, so it is best to aim to sell one particular product and perhaps aim for little more than break even, but use the service to collect email addresses and names of people who will buy, and then aim to sell them something else.

### **On-line databases**

There is an advert doing the rounds at the moment that says that when teachers want to buy something they go on-line and search for a directory of school suppliers, and then use the directory to find the right product – and then buy on-line.

None of this claim reflects the world that I see, and certainly the experience we have through our own on-line shops is that we only sell a small percentage of products on-line. Most orders come in via fax, post, phone or email, but not via an on-line store.

Indeed, where we sell books that are only available as downloads we tend to get teachers phoning up asking how they can place an order using a school order form!

Part of the problem is that fewer than 10% of schools have a school credit card which teachers can use on-line – so most purchases made in this way tend to be made by teachers who buy using their own money, perhaps with the option of claiming the sale back later.

It is worth being included in an on-line database – you should be able to get on for around £20 a year – but the key thing to ask is how the on-line database is being publicised to schools. The notion that school teachers just go and find it is not one that I find very convincing.

### **Magazines and newspapers**

The dominant magazine/newspaper in the teaching world is the Times Education Supplement. In terms of a daily the most popular paper for teachers is the Guardian, which has regular teacher sections.

However, although both carried many product or service adverts 20 years ago, today this is not the case, and their main form of income from education are job ads. If you are tempted to advertise here, or indeed in any other publication, do have a look at the publication first and see how many other firms are advertising to schools.

There are regular telephone campaigns to get companies to advertise in magazines that are given away to teachers – or to other people working in the public sector – and it is well worth demanding a copy of the last couple of editions if you are propositioned on this subject.

The problem with free publications is that it is difficult to know how many are sent out and what level of readership they have. Certainly most of us have the experience of being sent utterly irrelevant publications which we bin each quarter without opening – and I fear some publications are using this route to boost their credibility.

You might be particularly careful about high pressure selling – we have certainly experienced some of this, and it has always come from sources that we think from the start are dubious. Certainly do ask for past copies.

## **Yearbooks**

A similar situation arises with yearbooks, and we think the answer is to ask oneself – why and when and how would a teacher pick up one of these yearbooks?

Yearbooks which offer adverts across a range of subject areas seem particularly dubious, for mostly where they are bought by a school they seem to be bought by the head or end up in the head's study. But the head won't be ordering specific products for certain subjects – so quite how the yearbooks are effective as advertising tools is hard to say.

There are several yearbooks around which claim to be related to exhibitions, and yet are nothing officially related to the exhibition. There are also others that send out details of a listing and say it is free. But hidden in the very small print is the fact that if you make a change there is a charge of 400 euros! Also sometimes the publisher is outside the EU so you have no chance of taking the firm to court. We have been told that such companies can be highly litigious if you try not to pay.

## **Mousemats**

The mousemat campaign has been around for a while. The advertisements suggest that in a short while all schools will be required to become part of an inner circle of sites, and only those companies that had sites within the firewall would be accessible. Quite where the mousemat fitted into this scheme of things was never clear.

There were claims that the scheme was supported by various charities, but we could never find any evidence for this – but whether or not this was a scam, it just didn't seem to be a very good place to advertise. But of course that is just my opinion. I am not saying this, or anything else mentioned here, is a scam. Rather I just couldn't see quite how one might get one's money back from such advertising.

## **Websites**

You must have a website to sell to schools. It must be lively, up-to-date, and growing all the time. We estimate that every extra 5 pages of text is worth another customer each month.

Text is what the search engines search for and the more you can write around the key phrases in your subject area the more you are likely to be found. Hamilton House can help you set up your own website if you don't have one – the starting price is £175 plus VAT, including all the set up and hosting fees for a year. After that it is £50 a year. See <http://www.hamilton-house.com/webdesign.html>

## **Blogs**

Well over 80% of firms selling into education don't have active blogs – and yet they can be incredibly helpful at selling to schools. They are, in fact, the 21<sup>st</sup> century equivalent of PR.

As an experiment in 2010 we set up the blog [www.blog.schools.co.uk](http://www.blog.schools.co.uk) and placed on it nothing other than the text of email adverts that we sent out for clients. After six months of just placing the adverts, but with no advertising for the site being run at all, we were getting 30,000 hits a month.

These hits came from one source only – searches using search engines. And yet despite this finding most firms still don't run blogs and still don't expand and expand again their websites.

We have experimented continuously with blogs both within and outside of the education area, and our most successful blogs now get around 500,000 hits a month. If you would like to explore what blogs can do for you please do have a look at the blog above, and for a variation on the approach also take a look at [www.blog.educationmarketing.org.uk](http://www.blog.educationmarketing.org.uk) and for something quite different (and nothing to do with education, but an example of what can be achieved) see [www.blog.emiratesstadium.info](http://www.blog.emiratesstadium.info)

## **Trade shows**

Trade shows have long been established in the education sector, and there are shows for IT (the BETT Show), for education in general, for special needs and for individual subjects.

When considering a show the thought must be:

- a) Are teachers liable to stop by and purchase there and then?
- b) Are the right sort of people going to the show for you? (i.e. if you are selling a £5000 piece of equipment there's no much point presenting to a load of student teachers)
- c) Is your product or service one that really needs to be seen to be understood?

If you have not got a “yes” to at least two of those three questions the chances are that you are not going to make much progress by going to a show, and you would be better spending your money elsewhere.

I have heard it said that “people would think we had gone bust if we didn't turn up at a show,” but I feel that approach is wrong on two counts. One is

that the “people” in question are probably your competitors, and the more you feed them false information the better. Second I think that one should always try to analyse what percentage of potential buyers are going to be at the show. With even the biggest of shows the level of those there is usually only around 1 or 2%.

### **How do you know if an approach is worthwhile or not?**

I am suggesting that direct marketing through emails, postal direct mail, websites and blogs is the way forward. But if you are tempted into other means I think it is worth asking these questions:

- Is it possible to verify the claims made by the person promoting the media?
- Is it possible to do a low cost trial to see if these approaches work?
- Do the claims make sense?
- Am I really reaching the right people – the people who buy?

### **Who does buy?**

This last point – reaching the right people – itself raises a whole range of questions, and sadly there are some in the education marketing world who either don't know who buys or who will twist reality to suit the media outlet they are selling.

In secondary schools purchasing decisions are made by the heads of subject departments (e.g. The Head of History), and by a few senior staff such as the Headteacher, the Deputy Head, the Bursar and the School Business Manager. Details of who has responsibility varies, but it is virtually unknown for the head or senior staff to interfere in the purchase of subject specific products. It is true that the school may have a school-wide policy to buy school texts or school software from one supplier, but even here there is usually some discretion. And the head or other senior managers would not tell the Head of English which books to buy – only that the school has negotiated a deal for buying from one particular supplier.

In primary schools there is more variation, often depending on size. In small primaries all expenditure goes through the headteacher. In the largest primary schools subject co-ordinators and/or heads of year might also have a say.

### **Conclusion**

The above gives a summary of selling to schools, but of course that is not the full picture and there are many issues that follow on from this.

Imagine you have worked out the problems and know which media work and who to buy it from - you still have to choose what is right for you. For example, having decided on your approach you must ask should you go for the cheapest approach first or the most expensive? Then, should you sell on

price or benefit, or something else? And should you imitate the competition, or deliberately seek to be different? To solve any of these questions you need some background knowledge about what works and what doesn't - and that can be hard to come by.

Even then it is not all over, for once you have studied the problems, and then worked in details through the issues, there is still left the application of your answers in terms of solutions. Here we have to consider exactly what teachers want, and how they see your product or service (no point stressing a particular benefit if they don't think it is a benefit!) and at this stage there is always a need to experiment. You also have to consider your approach to advertising, and that which your competitors are up to.

We will be publishing articles covering these areas in the near future, and will drop you a line to let you know when these are ready. But in the meantime if you have any questions, please do call 01536 399 000.

We have two broad ways of working with customers. You can buy a service (such as an email to all heads of Art in secondary schools) as a one-off. Or you can buy into our full marketing service. This commits you to more than a one-off email but the price of each email comes down by at least 50%.

This service is called Velocity – and there are details on [www.velocity.ac](http://www.velocity.ac)

Other helpful websites:

Shared postal mailing: [www.shared.org.uk](http://www.shared.org.uk)

Email marketing to schools: [www.emails.gs](http://www.emails.gs)

Postal mailing lists: <http://www.hamilton-house.com/gateways/mailling%20lists.html>

Building websites: <http://www.hamilton-house.com/webdesign.html>

We have also published a range of other free guides to marketing. They are on <http://www.hamilton-house.com/howto.html>

Finally if you want to stay in touch with us on a regular basis, and receive updates on marketing to schools, send an email to [Education-Marketing-Subscribe@yahoogroups.com](mailto:Education-Marketing-Subscribe@yahoogroups.com) When you get a reply, just click reply to that, and you will start getting our daily info. You can of course unsubscribe at any time.