

# Marketing Awareness in UK Primary Schools.

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## Keywords.

Primary Schools, Marketing Awareness, UK / Staffordshire

## Abstract.

UK primary schools now operate in a competitive environment, with successful recruitment of children being critical to their ability to survive. A sample of primary schools from Staffordshire was questioned about marketing activity that took place within. It was found that whilst most recognised the importance of recruitment, few had any idea about planned and structured marketing activity. If those who manage schools can gain marketing skills and knowledge, they could well give their schools a clear competitive advantage in the future.

## Introduction.

As the role of competition and competitive practice gradually permeates all aspects of society and life, driven apparently inexorably by political philosophy, few, if any providers of goods or services, be they centrally or privately controlled, are exempt or immune from the implications and realities of this cultural change. Where no natural market exists internal ones have been created, driven by the vision that subjection to market forces should lead to the more effective, efficient and economical use of resources. Implicitly, it is assumed that users will act and react 'rationally' when confronted with choice. This logic infers that ultimately, quality thresholds should be driven upwards as consumers become ever more demanding in their expectations, and that providers will have to recognise this and be able to respond positively and innovatively if they are to thrive (or survive).

## The 'new' operating environment of primary schools.

At a macro level, since 1979, education in the UK has been subject to an ideology that encourages such a consumerist approach. Six key changes have taken place that directly relate to this and are central to all others, embodied in various Education Acts between 1979 and 1996. Many of the key decision making processes relating to the management of schools has been delegated to newly structured Boards of Governors which includes the headteacher and a variety of other interest groups including local authorities, school staff, the local community and perhaps most important, elected parents. Their task is to oversee the efficient and effective operation of a school, and to ensure that legal requirements such as the national curriculum, testing and safety, amongst others, are delivered. This new structure delegates responsibility down to the individual unit level, including financial liability, and they are ultimately held to be responsible for success or failure. The second important change relates to that which is expected to be taught. This is now much more prescriptive, being laid down in the national curriculum with clear attainment targets for all subjects and levels. The third important change concerns the way that schools are funded. This is now on a per capita basis, whereby revenue increases in proportion to the number on the register. Thus, if a school is successful, it might attract more children, which in turn will yield more money. Whilst some of this will have to be spent on the marginal cost of the additional child, a significant proportion could be available for making 'whole school' improvements, as determined by the governors. Fourthly, parents have been given the nominal right to choose the preferred school for their child, breaking down the traditional catchment area based system of allocation. No schools have infinite capacity and there are set physical parameters in which they operate. Where there is over demand, selection criteria are introduced which can include proximity, ability, siblings or parental background. In the case of primary schools, the implications of the new marketplace can be a theoretical possibility or a very hard reality. In more remote areas, the reality of choice is tempered by distance and travel considerations, but in urban areas, these constraints are less significant, and genuine parental choice exists as to whether to apply to school 'x' or school 'y'. In such areas, schools now have to compete actively for children and this has (or should have) strategic and operational implications that those managing a school cannot afford to lose sight of. The fifth major change has been the introduction of national testing, and the publication of unadjusted results, giving existing and potential parents an information stream that hitherto was not available. Finally, OFSTED has been created, and put at the heart of the quality control mechanism. Their individual school inspection reports are now in the public domain, thereby giving more detailed information to those that are interested.

### **The impact of the 'new' operating environment.**

The cumulative effect of these changes have been far reaching. Inter and intra relationships between local authorities, governors, teachers and parents have fundamentally changed. The local power base has been shifted, moving from a top down model to a bottom up one. Parent power is now a reality and the implications of this are important. Schools that are perceived as successful by parents frequently become oversubscribed, giving governors more strategic options in the medium term, if not immediately. The beginnings of virtuous circles can be formed, making the strong, stronger. By definition, either in relative or absolute terms, other schools that are correspondingly seen as being less good, perhaps even inferior, are thrust into a potential vicious spiral downwards. It is not within the scope of this introduction to comment on the virtues of the new paradigm. The purpose is to establish what the present operating environment is, and to relate this to the responsibilities of this to those charged with running schools, and to highlight some of the activities that they might undertake to make them (more) competitive (*Foskett, 1995*).

It is perhaps only in more recent years that the real impact of the many legal, structural and operational changes that have taken place in our educational system have become evident, within schools in general and in primary schools specifically. System and process changes take time to become embedded, particularly when they necessitate the replacement of long standing traditions and cultures with those that are new. Schools that now have recruitment difficulties are beginning to see, first hand, the implications and realities of this. Put bluntly, winners and losers are beginning to appear and for the purpose of this paper, it is assumed that individual schools would prefer to be in the former category. It is argued to achieve this, they will need to have a clear strategic vision and a proactive approach towards operational activities, including marketing. This paper aims to look at how a selection of primary schools in North Staffordshire have responded to the marketing challenge that has been thrust upon them.

### **Research methodology.**

Initial primary research was undertaken in North Staffordshire. This includes both rural and urban areas and has above average unemployment [8.4%] compared to national statistics [7.1%]. (*Staffordshire TEC, 1995, DFEE, 1996*) There are significant areas of deprivation. The traditional pottery based industries are still major employers in the region, but in recent years, there has been diversification within the local economy. The culture of the past is still strong in the region, reflecting itself in deep rooted values and attitudes.

Twenty five state funded primary schools participated in the research (from 120 initially contacted). This was a small sample chosen to give a cross sectional perspective in terms of size, geography, social and economic factors. It is not fully representative. Research was conducted between October and December, 1996. Data collection included formal interviews with headteachers, governors, parents, teachers and local education officials. Simple questionnaires were distributed by headteachers to 250 parents (83 returned, 33%). Many informal, but useful discussions took place with parents and guardians waiting to collect children, and 'eavesdropping' of conversations outside the school gates took place. The informally given views gave an interesting (albeit unscientific) insight into their perceptions, expectations and aspirations (and concerns). Valuable data was therefore gathered from a variety of sources, the analysis of which gives rise to important issues, and allows for some tentative conclusions to be reached. Further research is needed to cover more schools over a wider geographical area before it would be prudent to make more pronounced and definitive statements.

### **Results from the research exercise.**

All of the headteachers and governors interviewed recognised the shift towards a competitive environment and they saw the immediate implications of the changes on their own schools, although many were less sure of the longer term effects. Most heads and teachers interviewed do not feel comfortable with the changes, and their vision of the impact is mainly negative. All had been trained to teach, and none had worked in any other area for a significant period of time. They were steeped in a culture of pedagogy and basically viewed the concept of operating primarily as a business, as anathema to their ideals. Having said that, most liked having greater say and influence as to how money was spent within their schools. Many classroom practitioners felt alienated by the process of change, and the fact that they had had little or no impact on decisions made. These had been forced on them from above. None genuinely believed that children's education had benefited from the overall change, although individuals did have (qualified) supportive views on some specific aspects of change, for

example the publication of results. Many held the negative view that most changes were a hindrance, with time, effort and money being 'wasted' on activities that were seen as peripheral to the educative process. Expenditure on 'marketing' activities such as the publication of glossy prospectuses was viewed as a necessary evil; money that in an ideal world could be better spent. However, in general, there was a resigned and pragmatic acceptance that whether or not it was liked, the new operating environment was not going to go away, irrespective of 'colour' of government, and that to survive, many schools needed to adopt new management strategies and tactics.

When asked about their role, headteachers commented that they had become accountants and administrators and all said that they now spent much less time on traditional 'educational' activities. Governors interviewed were more positive in some respects, believing that they could help to make better decisions relating to the operation of individual schools than previous systems had allowed. They had more personal commitment to the school, and in some cases, expertise that could be used to good effect. It is worth noting that one (professional) parent governor commented that schools that were able to attract dedicated and skilled governors would give that school an advantage over those less fortunate, which in itself would reinforce the virtuous and vicious circles. However, it was also emphasised that even the most able governors could not compensate for gross and continued underfunding, even within a school with high and sustained rolls. There was general recognition that schools had to keep their rolls high, and that failure to achieve this would have dire and immediate consequences. It was also clear that many parents did have high expectations of what their children would achieve and experience at school and that they are aware of strengths and weaknesses of other local primary schools. Many parents have become sophisticated consumers of education, knowing what they are looking for and many are not being afraid to ask questions that previously might have been thought of as impertinent. Some of the most important factors that they seek assurance on are class size, discipline, continuity and experience of staff, safety, good quality teaching, extra curricular activities, opportunity for involvement and a warm and happy atmosphere. Other factors include after school child minding facilities, school trips, ease of access, special needs provision, the physical condition of the buildings, whether children's work is displayed and school uniform. Some parents employ a 'shopping list' approach, rating and ticking, and comparing notes with others.

From the research undertaken, it became clear that the selection of a primary school for a child is an emotive issue for many parents, and mothers especially are sensitive to the issues involved. Perception is often as important as reality, and there are many factors that influence this. Paradoxically, it could be argued that the publication of quantitative data based on individual schools' performance has reinforced this. On the one hand, politicians and the media have raised the profile of individual schools' performance using the new quantifiable indicators, and thereby encouraged some parents to take a more proactive and hands-on approach to selecting a school. On the other hand, the data is not easy to understand, particularly with the many arguments that surround its validity, and often, the relative quantitative performance of nearby schools is so close as to make the use of test results as the key selection criterion, problematic. Therefore, many parents start to look to other factors. That is not to say that published results do not matter. Many parents do monitor them, and they provide a starting point in the choice process. If there were significant differences in results in nearby schools, then this would probably make a difference. So, it is important that there is no complacency over these issues. They are a hygiene factor that schools ignore at their peril. However, choice is made for many other reasons, and those that run schools need to be aware of these and their relative importance to potential parents, and to act in accordance with these (*Foskett, 1992*).

Where consumers have the power to exercise choice, it is likely that the application of basic marketing principles would be of benefit to the potential provider, in this case the individual school. All of the headteachers who were interviewed were asked about their knowledge of marketing principles. Most commented quite honestly that they knew little about marketing, which they often equated with advertising and selling. All identified important activities that their schools undertook, mostly on an informal basis, including open days, parent assemblies, fund raising events and public relations activities using local media. These were widely seen as being one off events (often on annual basis), each of which had a main purpose (for example, fund-raising) but they were not viewed as marketing activities as such, and their audience tended to be existing rather than potential future parents. Only one school had a formal marketing plan and no headteachers had any formal marketing qualifications. None had attended marketing courses. Other interesting comments made included 'I cannot afford to advertise, and don't see the need', 'I shouldn't have to 'sell' the school', 'We're interested in teaching, not running a business' and 'I don't know how we are going to fill our places next year'. All saw marketing as a cost as opposed to an investment and all saw it as a short term tactic rather than as the basis for a long term strategy. None accepted (or understood?) the idea of the marketing concept as a core philosophy. Most schools had no formal marketing budget, although money was allocated for certain marketing

activities, albeit in a haphazard way. The average amount of money spent on marketing was recorded as less than £200 per annum, although one suspects that not all marketing related expenditure was 'tagged' as such in school accounts, and was therefore not properly identified. Much of this expenditure was on legally required school prospectuses, which varied enormously in quality and style. Some were glossy colour, some black and white. Some were in booklets, others on pieces of A4 paper. Some had graphics, others did not. Some had complex and technical educational language and some were bi-lingual. One had spelling mistakes! None did any evaluation as to the impact of these documents and most were designed and constructed from the perspective of what the school wanted to say, which is not always the same as what the parent might want to know! Only one school had (recently) developed a marketing plan. The headteacher of the school concerned commented that he had a practising marketing expert on his governors, and that the influence of this person had had a marked effect on the schools business strategy. The situation had been brought to a head by falling rolls. A five year marketing plan (which was part of an overall business plan) had been created that helped to give the school a clear sense of purpose and direction. The teaching staff had been involved in the development process from the outset; they understood the point and purpose of the activity, and did not feel threatened by it. Indeed, they recognised that if successful and enrolment numbers were improved, then that may lead to better school facilities and an improved working environment. The head went on to say that now, he does not know how he could operate without this marketing framework, and that it was integral to much of the work that he carries out.

All of those interviewed recognised the growing importance of image, reality and perception. Few had any real vision as to how these could be influenced and manipulated in a continued and systematic way. Yet all knew that they could not afford to be complacent and that they had to ensure that future parents would want to use their school. Following the interviews, many headteachers commented that the issues raised were both interesting and pertinent, and that they had been given 'food for thought'. They could see advantages in making better use of basic marketing strategies (provided that they did not take too much time, energy or resource!). Many considered that the biggest cultural challenge to them would be the formalisation of a process that was already informally in place. Many recognised that they may be missing opportunities, and not making the most of some of the 'showpiece' events that they staged.

### **Conclusion.**

The new operating environment for schools necessitates a fundamental reappraisal of the relationship between users and providers. Schools need to give serious consideration to becoming marketing oriented and to find innovative ways to differentiate themselves from others. Those managing primary schools need to start to build a brand image with distinctive values, attributes and features (*Lovelock, 1992*). It is questionable whether concentration on product and process with the emphasis on curriculum and teaching methods, as has often been the case in the past, will be sufficient in the future to attract new users. That is not to say that these are not important, but neither are they the be and end all. Potential users are becoming more sophisticated in how they make choices. Expectations are high, diverse and varied. Recognition must be given to this, with accompanying action.

### **The possible implications for primary schools.**

Those managing schools need to understand the consumer behaviour of their potential users, and factors, and their relative importance, that influence ultimate choice. Behaviour and activity can be influenced if it they are firstly understood, and then appropriate action is taken. It could be argued that Primary schools need to develop a core marketing strategy that places the user at the centre. Marketing plans highlighting aims, objectives and detailed tactical activities would help to give a clear sense of direction and purpose, and to inculcate a culture that is driven by the needs of the user rather than that which is convenient to the provider. Underpinning this process is the need for systematic and continuous marketing research to ensure that an up-to-date and robust data stream is available, upon which decisions can be made with confidence.

Therefore, not only do those charged with the responsibility of running primary schools need to be accountants, human resource managers, administrators (and perhaps even teachers!), they also need to be experienced marketers, equipped with the marketing knowledge that fills so many pages of text books. Entrepreneurial headteachers who understand the mechanics and dynamics of the new market place and who can use their creative and imaginative skills, qualities for which teachers have long been renowned, to develop and implement marketing strategies, may give their schools an enhanced standing in their community. Overall the research, perhaps unsurprisingly, indicates that schools now operate in a market environment but do not make full use of the marketing function. A clear gap has emerged between the expectations of the many stakeholders

and the ability of the providers to fully understand and satisfy these. It could well be that those that are able to act upon this in a positive and imaginative way, will be the ones that gain clear competitive advantage and become the winners in the 'new' educational marketplace.

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