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# Chapter 15

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## Promoting Intensive ESL Programs: Taking Charge of a Market

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### THE IMPORTANCE OF PROGRAM PROMOTION

Becoming a leader in English language program administration is filled with accomplishments and challenges. Trained mostly in Applied Linguistics and TESOL, many English language program leaders face program promotion issues with little or no prior training. Questions we face include: How do I recruit more students? Where should I advertise the program? What are the best types of advertising agencies for my program? How do I promote my program and still maintain its academic integrity? Depending on how a given pedagogical institute organizes and funds language programs, the English language program administrator may find that he or she alone is responsible for both the academic oversight of a department as well as the financial well-being. Bringing in resources whether via grants, university/corporate budget allocations, or tuition may be among the most daunting tasks an administrator faces, as both teacher salaries and overall program viability may depend on this funding. Recruiting students and bringing in tuition monies are fundamental to sustainability.

Despite the importance of program promotion, in a recent survey of English language program administrators, I found that program leaders ranked marketing as the third most important issue in their daily operations. However, more than 65 percent reported that they did not have any training in program promotion prior to starting their first administrative positions and that training in marketing continued to be the most desirable training area identified by these "on the job" leaders. Clearly there exists a gap in our professional training about program promotion. Paradoxically, while our field has recently asserted the need for professional credentialing among English teachers, we are often lax in the professional training in program promotion that we require of program leaders in our field.

In this chapter, I introduce some current methods of promotion and suggest steps for establishing a promotional plan for a typical intensive university English as a Second Language program. Even though attracting students may be more critical in IEP contexts, particularly in North America, the recommendations provided here are transferable to promoting other types of educational programs and events. In times of economic fluctuations and shrinking school budgets, the marketing of all educational programs becomes imperative. As program leaders, it is beneficial to have a fundamental understanding of the promotional process.

### **BACKGROUND LITERATURE ON PROGRAM PROMOTION**

At first, English language program leaders may fall into two traps if they avoid active promotion. The first trap is that they do not want to be tainted by considering the "selling" of any product, and the second trap is the misnomer that no promotion is required of a quality English course or service. To mitigate this hesitation, I find it helpful to consider two similar terms: *marketing* and *selling*. Marketing includes the analysis of the needs of any given market and then the decision whether filling the niche needs of the market is both feasible in terms of program strengths and profitability. For instance, there may be a need to offer English training for nursing students in a given university. The English department may find that it can offer affordable convenient classes for the students and may choose then to promote that program. *Selling*, on the other hand, refers more to creating a product and then going out and selling it to consumers (White, Martin, Stimson, & Hodge, 1991). In fact, the marketing research that an English language professional might do is quite similar to an academic needs analysis of a single student in one's class but merely expanded to a group of potential students. Taken this way, the marketing of a given program may be more familiar to an English language professional. *Promotion* can then be viewed as the direct or indirect advertising of any given program or event. This can be as minimal as reminding a student to register for class or as advanced as a major advertising campaign.

Once a decision has been made to market and promote a program, the choice of promotional approach falls into two categories: *direct* or *indirect*. Direct promotion is more commonly thought of as advertising via brochures, posters, print advertisements, commercials, videos, and increasingly electronic campaigns via email or webpage listings. Both Miller (1997) and Jenks (1991) review various direct promotional tools and give suggestions for tools created in-house. Numerous professional advertising agencies now specialize in creating direct promotional tools to recruit English language and international students as well. Active recruitment of students via educational fairs and tours with direct contact with potential students is another common direct form of promotion.

Indirect promotion relies more on *viral* advertising, where an idea is spread person to person or via a relationship that in turn benefits a given program. Often "word of mouth" recommendations might fill this role for a program.

Educational consultants or agents, usually abroad in the students' home country, are recruiters paid to bring students to a program or course. The English program has no contact with the student prior to arriving and generally upon registration the agent is paid a finder's fee. The benefit here is that no money is paid out until a student has actually materialized in a program. Risks, of course, include improper advertising of your program or even fleecing of potential students by the agents. Professional organizations like the Association of International Educators (formerly NAFSA, the National Association of Foreign Student Advisors) and UCIEP (a consortium of university and college intensive English programs) offer guidelines on and ethics of working with agents. A less costly indirect option often available to English language programs is to collaborate with university recruiters by piggy-backing on their recruitment efforts at university fairs, as potential visitors may lack appropriate-level English skills prior to matriculating into the university and properly versed university recruiters can promote the English program on the spot. Agreements such as conditional admission with university programs may also indirectly bring students to an English program as affiliation and leadership presentations will reflect positively on the home institution. Additionally, White et al. (1991) describe numerous academic events such as conference presentations or publications as indirect means of promoting a program. Finally, membership in professional standard-bearing organizations such as TESOL, IATEFL, NAFSA, UCIEP, or AAIEP (American Association of Intensive English Programs) may indirectly promote a program as potential students may first check these organizational membership lists for program references. Program evaluation and accreditation through agencies such as the Commission on English Language (CEA) Programs offer an indirect plug for a program as well. Both accreditation and membership in standard-bearing organizations attract students, as discerning students quickly learn to screen for programs touting these select qualifiers.

### **PRINCIPLES AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

We are surrounded by a world of advertising and marketing. Use this commercialism to spark your own creativity and as an opportunity to watch for ideas that might transfer to your own program contexts. Pay attention to how various advertising programs affect you as a consumer, and watch for innovative marketing tools you might transfer to your own context. For example, you might see a catchy TV commercial and be able to take that idea and use it for a web broadcast ad for a new course that you are offering. To find ideas specific to English language program promotion, participate in professional workshops, such as those run by NAFSA or UCIEP. Enrolling in university courses in introductory marketing may also increase your professional knowledge in marketing. Some may even offer student interns who might adopt your own program's marketing needs as a course project. Certain commercial marketing vendors targeted at international students also offer professional consultation.

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The key out of all of the commercial chaos is to create a solid logical plan to most effectively market your program and to keep the promotion fresh. Creating a promotional plan is basically a four-step cyclical process. This process is actually quite similar to a course development process where research is conducted initially via a needs analysis and diagnosis, creation and implementation of the course, and then review and evaluation of educational goals met. When preparing to launch a promotional campaign for a new program, the entire cycle is completed. Many program leaders land mid-cycle and circle continuously through the process in existing programs. It is important that you especially pay attention to the Research and Evaluation steps, as often these steps will give you the best data to make the best decisions about future promotions. Unfortunately, one must approach this whole process with the idea that this is not an exact science. Approach your own promotional campaign with great hope for success of meeting your goals but acknowledge that this may not happen. Keep a financial cushion to guard your budget and data to guide your judgments.

Before launching a promotion to bring in new students, if your promotion will be for an existing program, turn your attention to your current students to find out what suggestions for improvements they have in terms of services and course offerings. Regular ongoing surveys about the program as well as focus group discussions are helpful for gathering data. Comb through the data to sort out the immediate changes that can (and should) be made and establish procedures to follow through on longer-range suggestions. Current students and alumni are vital as they already feed your program, and "word of mouth" advertising is very powerful (Jenks, 1991). You might even consider a special discount for current students who refer new recruits.

It is helpful when beginning a promotional campaign to return to and to review your program's mission statement. Take time to reflect on the current expertise of your program, as well as to inventory the skills that can be expanded when given proper resources. A common management tool to evaluate a program is to conduct a "SWOT" analysis—Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. When starting up a new program or course, the SWOT analysis is particularly important for anticipating management issues that may come down the pike. This research should define your target audience and the parameters of any course that might be marketed.

Program promotion is an on-going task. Consider the WWW to begin your promotion—the **W**hy, the **W**hen, and the **W**here. Drops in enrollment, the launch of a new course, changes in community needs, or even shifts in world political climates might be a time when you should consider program promotion. If program enrollments are stable but heavy in one native language background, this is a reason why you should consider diversification. Diversifying student demographics in a program requires the attraction of students from varied language backgrounds or countries. This will help teachers by creating more diverse classroom demographics. This too may protect a program financially

so that revenue streams from varied origins—a take on the adage to “not put too many eggs in one basket.”

Deciding where to market a program requires a bit of socio-economic-political acrobatics. An excellent resource for global statistics on enrollment trends is the annual Open Doors report compiled by the Institute for International Education. This document shows economic data trends both for students coming into a country as well as going abroad to study. External issues affecting student enrollment trends vary greatly, but trends have shown that foreign policy, visa procedures, currency fluctuation, costs, and geographic location of a program may positively or negatively affect enrollments. For instance, after the 9/11 tragedy in the United States, student visa regulations became stricter, discouraging many students from applying to study English; as a result, the students sought to study English in other countries where the visa policies were more lax. Economic variations across the world may naturally encourage or prohibit students from coming to a particular program. Sudden economic changes will affect enrollments, such as the Asian economic crisis in the late 1990s that reduced the pool of students leaving Asia to study, since it was cheaper for them to study English at home rather than expend resources to travel around the globe to study.

When deciding where to market, consider the adage, “One hundred dollars spent in Europe will bring one dollar. One dollar spent in Asia will bring one hundred dollars.” Geographic factors such as weather, climate, and proximity to major urban centers may draw students in or similarly repel them. Marketing programs tuned into seasonal variations may encourage program growth. A final dilemma about where to market a program is whether to market in stable and well-established markets or to risk marketing in potential new up-and-coming markets. A possible benefit of being one of the earliest programs to recruit in an emerging market is a definite plus in initial branding of a program in a new arena.

Once you have established that it is time to promote a program, five distinct issues need to be addressed: (1) What is your budget for marketing? (2) How will you promote? (3) Will translations need to be used? (4) What will your procedures be for managing leads that evolve out of the promotion? (5) How will you evaluate the effectiveness of your campaign?

We began this chapter recognizing that financial resources secure the fiscal health of a program. All promotion involves the risk that resources may be pumped into a campaign and absolutely no leads will result. As such, a margin of cushion should be built into any new program budget to promote the program. Miller (1997) recommends allotting 10 to 20 percent of a program’s operational budget toward promotional tools. Determine the absolute minimal number of registrations that must be completed in order to break even in a program. Cost proposals from outside vendors as well as totals for internal promotional costs (such as postage, paper, copying, overhead, salaries, etc.) will help you determine the cost range you can apply toward the promotional campaign.

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When selecting how your program will be promoted, include a combination of direct and indirect promotional tools as well as a mix of cost and no- or low-cost options. Much like investing in the stock or bond market, a diverse portfolio will best position your program to endure marketing gains and losses.

Direct marketing tools might include brochures, posters, pens, t-shirts, book-marks, key chains, etc. Quantity and cost of production should be considered with these items. The advantage of buying products in bulk means that obviously the cost per item is lower; however, avoid trendy items as well as date or year indicators that may make a product appear outdated in the future. Jenks (1991) suggests that large programs might expect to distribute around 200,000 promotional pieces a year, while smaller operations might average around 4,000 to 5,000. However, programs enduring numerous changes might consider producing in-house any items that frequently change to allow for updates so as to not be left with large quantities of defunct promo pieces.

Professional vendors offer numerous marketing outlets both in print and electronic format. U.S. Journal, Study in the USA, Hobsons, and Apply ESL are marketing agencies that offer all sorts of services to promote a program abroad. Review your program’s history of working with professional vendors, and clarify legal contracting procedures before engaging a professional contract. Colleagues in organizations such as UCIEP and AAIEP are often ready and willing to offer feedback about success in working with certain professional promoters and agents.

Consider a combination of both print and electronic formats depending on where the marketing materials are headed. Certain countries are already more experienced and reliant on Internet information, while others rely still on print magazines, newspapers, and brochures. An informal survey of current students from the areas of the world where you would like to recruit students may help determine which format to use and occasionally even which press or publisher to use. Consider also publications or websites that are referenced time and again for information about English programs such as the annual Intensive English Directory published by IIE. These references are essential for advising centers around the world in selecting programs for students. Omission from a directory may spell repeated missed opportunities for a program to be promoted.

Depending on where you market your programs, you may need to consider the option of whether to use translations in your promotional materials. One school of thought expects all “sales” to be in the language of the customer; another expects that if students are to succeed in a program abroad, they must already have some English skills and thus marketing in English is acceptable. Consider the audience for the marketing tools as sponsors or parents of potential students, who themselves may have weak English language skills yet need to access the information about your program in their native language(s) in order to decide whether they want their child or benefactor to study in your program. At the same time, translating documents will limit where they can be distributed as well. Given the various dialects and stylistic issues in advertising, when work-

ing with translations, consider using professional translators to encourage best market value of the product.

Once a promotional product is launched, especially advertisements and professional Internet campaigns, procedures need to be in place to handle leads from a given promotional tool. The key is to turn cool leads into hot leads who eventually enroll and pay for your program. Establish mechanisms to collect data both for electronic and postal mail communications. Marketing experts suggest five or more communications with a potential customer before he or she applies or registers in a given program. Create a system to frequently communicate with a lead to convert that inquiry into a sale. Be sure your program database allows for tracking by country so that data subsets can be collected for targeted campaigns and future site visits.

Finally, no promotional campaign is complete without evaluation of the effectiveness of the marketing efforts. The main idea is to determine a mechanism to sort out how many student sales have resulted from a promotional tool and whether the expenses of the marketing outweigh the gains from enrollments. A common way to do this is to have the student bring or mail in the actual advertisement that drew them to the program. Similarly, a student being referred by another or an agent might list that person on his or her application. Some electronic campaigns will direct students to email addresses or websites created specifically for that promotional tool so that leads can be tallied in that manner. Promotional codes are another similar and simpler option assuming that students actively select or list on applications. Jenks (1991) suggests even low-tech tricks like marking applications with colored dots to track applications. Simpler still is to survey arriving students about where they learned about your program. Periodically stop during your fiscal year and tally and compare the leads that have come in for each advertising tool and determine whether you have reached a return on your investment. Analyze whether you have surpassed the cost expended with positive income flow for each tool. Return regularly to the beginning of the promotional process to review fresh needs in the program and opportunities for program growth. Re-balance the promotional campaign accordingly.

Promoting a language program takes a combination of research, creativity, funding, and insight into future sales. Eventually, with regular practice and involvement, program promotion becomes less mysterious and more manageable. Surround yourself with supportive colleagues and professional marketers to exchange experiences and glean wisdom from their successes and failures. Smart adherence to a regular marketing plan will make the experience more manageable and profitable in the end. And that next time a telemarketer calls, you might even feel obliged to listen—if only to fish for new ideas.

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**SUGGESTED RESOURCES**

Christison, M. A., & Stoller, F. L. (Eds.). *A handbook for language program administrators*. (1997). Burlingame, CA: Alta.

Workshops presented at annual meetings of TESOL, NAFSA, IATEFL, and UCIEP. Information available on [www.tesol.org](http://www.tesol.org), [www.nafsa.org](http://www.nafsa.org), [www.iatefl.org](http://www.iatefl.org), and [www.uciep.org](http://www.uciep.org), and on each association's electronic listservs.

Pennington, M.C. (Ed.). (1991). *Building better English language programs*. Washington, DC: NAFSA.

White, R., Martin, M., Stimson, M., & Hodge, R. (1991). *Management in English language teaching*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

**Discussion Questions**

1. Consider your own English language program. What are the current direct and indirect promotional strategies used in marketing today?
2. How do the stages of creating a promotional plan mirror those in an academic classroom setting?
3. Tracking the effectiveness of a promotional plan is important for considering future financial investments in marketing. How might you track the effectiveness of indirect promotion?
4. Program promotion is logically engrained in ESL contexts. Discuss situations in EFL environments when promotion is vital as well.

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White, R., Martin, M., Stimson, M., & Hodge, R. (1991). *Management in English language teaching*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.