

“Risks in advertising to teachers, and how to avoid them”.

Part 1:

What are the risks in advertising to schools at the moment, and how can they be mitigated?

I am writing this short paper at a time when the coronavirus is spreading across the UK, parts of Europe are in shutdown, the USA has stopped travel from all of Europe to America (except for from Britain), and there is talk of shutting schools. (Indeed so fast moving is the situation that by the time this article appears on our website, schools may already be shut.)

The instant implication for any company that sells to schools, or offers products to schools free of charge, in such circumstances must be to consider saying, “STOP”. Everything in that first paragraph above suggests that this is not the time to advertise to schools.

After all, why would anyone choose to advertise to schools at this very moment when there is so much uncertainty?

Why take the risk?

In fact, the answer to that question in broad terms is surprisingly simple. Some organisations are finding it is worth taking the risk, simply because there is a crisis, and most companies are pulling back on their advertising. So in taking the risk, they are finding gaps in the market and making a profit.

But there is more, and what I want to do here is set out a few of the reasons why some firms are not just taking the risk of advertising to schools, but are actively stepping up their advertising.

1: The competition is absent

In every sector, whenever there is uncertainty some advertisers stop advertising, waiting for the market to pick up again.

There is a certain logic in this, but there is also a problem and a missed opportunity. The problem is that just as many firms independently reach the conclusion that this is not the time to advertise, those same firms also tend to move back into the market as one when the crisis is over.

Thus when the waters clear, the potential customers can be swamped with advertisements. While response rates might rise because the crisis has now passed, the sheer level of the number of adverts that will hit schools in the immediate resumption of normal procedures in a post-virus world, will mean that it will be harder for teachers to take each advert in. It will therefore be harder to make a sale.

Thus those who are continuing to advertise at this time of crisis are doing so on two bases:

First, they are doing so from the viewpoint that regular advertising helps cement the name of the advertiser and the details of its product in the potential customer's mind. If one stops advertising, then the possible buyer starts remembering competitors or starts thinking that other products and services are of more importance at this moment.

Second, advertisements should always bring in some sales – the level of response may not be as high as normal but it should be enough to make a profit. If it is not, then this is a time to experiment to find if there is a different approach to advertising which can return the advertising to profit.

The response to “we sold very few last time” from some companies is to stop advertising, but from others it is to try advertising in a different way. Which is why we always offer to help re-write any advertisement that we send out and which doesn't meet our customer's reasonable expectations.

2: There is new money

No matter what the virus does, schools are getting more money, as a result of the changes to school funding made by the government after the December 2019 general election. That increase in funding is happening, and the money is being spent somewhere (and, as we see below, it is not being spent on salaries). The issue is not that schools have no money but rather that they need to be persuaded to spend it with you, rather than spend the money elsewhere.

3: Some schools might well shut

At the moment of writing this report, no schools have shut because of the virus, but it is possible that some will do so.

However, if this happens teachers will continue to be paid and will be expected to carry on with some duties. For example, they will be planning future lessons, considering which products and services to buy, preparing and presenting lessons that pupils and students can do at home on computer, and so on.

4: A chance for teachers to think of something else

Part of the summer term has traditionally been a time for heads of department to consider what products they need to buy ahead of the next school year. Unless the whole exam timetable is changed (which at the moment I am writing this has not been mooted as a possibility) that time will again be a time for teachers to plan for the future. And if the teachers have seen information on certain products or services ahead of that time, it will influence them further.

5: Advertising can be done for free.

There are many different ways of advertising to schools, and one of them ([The Payment by Results service](#)) is free. Companies using this service have their advertisements sent to schools in the normal way and fulfil the orders in the normal way, but instead of paying for

the advertisement itself, pay a commission on sales at a rate agreed before the advertisement is placed.

And if the number of sales is very high, resulting in a higher than expected commission, the advertisements can be stopped and instead moved across to payment per advert in the conventional way. Other services, such as the [4 Email Programme](#), are highly discounted. Please do call 01604 880 927 if you want more information.

6: The shortage of teachers continues to increase

The government often makes the point that it is employing more teachers than ever before. This may be true (although there is some doubt about the figures) but really it is not the point. What is increasing the demand for teachers is the massively growing population of pupils and students in schools. Thus, although the number of teachers may have risen last year, the shortage of teachers grows even more acute at an astonishing rate.

Since the amount of money a school gets (and this is true for all types of school) depends fundamentally on the number of pupils and students in the school, this means that schools are getting more and more money each year. However, as schools increasingly have a teacher shortage (and thus are starting to close on Friday afternoons, cut lunch hours, etc, etc) they are spending less money on salaries.

That money goes somewhere – and in fact it goes mostly into buying new resources that can teach larger groups and be used by pupils and students at home.

There can be some rather contradictory statements resulting from this. For example, class sizes might not increase, while the number of teachers declines and the number of pupils or students increases.

And the explanation for that is that some pupils or students are getting fewer lessons per week, often working a four-and-a-half-day week. Although technically the inspectorate could make it clear that a school was not meeting its statutory duties, there is also a significant shortage of inspectors due to the reduction in the budget given to Ofsted in England. So generally the matter is let pass.

Part 2:

Is there a risk in not advertising?

First, although teachers may well remember your product or service and how to order it, other companies will be vying for their attention and making special offers in order to get the first order out of a school. They can and will distract the teacher.

Second, teachers expect products and services to develop and change, and so they expect to see new announcements and updates coming through regularly. Anything that doesn't change risks being seen as out-of-date.

Third, because of the decline in the number of teachers available to schools, combined with the government's 2020 increase in school funding following the 2019 general election, schools do have more money, and thus can be looking around for new products and services to purchase.

By not advertising, companies are effectively acting in the manner of a high street shop that decides to close on Wednesday mornings when all the other shops are open. Yes the shop is open the rest of the week, and yes the regulars will quickly learn that this shop does not open on Wednesday mornings. And yes indeed the notice on the door clearly says that the shop is shut on Wednesday mornings, and yes of course the potential customer can come back that afternoon. Or the next day.

Or the potential customer could just walk along the street and go and buy the product elsewhere. Or an alternative product. Or decide she or he doesn't actually need the product after all.

Not advertising (like not opening on Wednesday mornings) does save money (unless of course you were using the Payments by Results programme, in which case you would not have been paying for the advertising anyway). But it invariably also loses sales.

If you have not been advertising and not seen any decline in sales then either that is simply because the decline hasn't set in yet, or because the market is growing and you may not be taking part of that growth. In the end, not advertising always catches up with you.

Part 3:

The risk of keeping the advert the same

1: You might get a better response from another advert

If you test out your advertising in various styles and approaches you will quickly see which approach works best for you.

You might, for example, emphasise the product in a headline at the top of the advertisement on one occasion, or perhaps a key feature within the product another time. On yet another occasion you might stress the price. In another advertisement you might lead with the benefit of the product or service. On yet another occasion you could try leading with an interesting open question such as, "What is the most effective way of raising the grades of at least 50% of Maths GCSE students?" – the sort of question that doesn't directly announce your product but which draws readers into the text. Or you might lead with some pictures or...

There are generally accepted to be five broad (and each very different) ways of creating adverts for teachers, and then a myriad of ways of using these approaches. Only by experimenting can you see which ones work best for you, although there are some general

rules, such as the fact that open questions work better than closed questions, and that benefits work better than features as selling tools.

2: Your competitor might copy you

But even when you have found the right approach for your advertisements by experimentation as noted above, you might then find that a lazy competitor simply copies your style and/or approach.

If you don't have something else ready to roll in terms of an advert, you can well be overtaken by such a competitor. Or at least have some of your sales taken by him or her.

3: Your competitor might change

Although selling on price (for example) is rarely the way to make bigger profits, it can harm your sales if another company suddenly reduces his price for a near identical product or service.

Such a drop in price could mean that a price war breaks out (if you or another competitor responds) or it could mean that teachers stop buying, in the expectation that further price cuts will occur.

The way around this, however, is to have a style of writing that suggests that your product or service has elements within it that your competitors' products don't have. In other words, yes, you suggest, teachers can save money by going to a rival, but it will be a false saving, because that product or service may not work so well.

But, of course, if you keep your advertising the same, there is no chance of doing this.

4: People get bored

All adverts come to the end of their useful life some time, but the longer you have been staying with one advert the harder it can be to find another one that works as well as that original used to.

Even though people are no longer buying, they are used to your old style and approach, and can become suspicious of change.

That does not mean that each advert has to be radically different, but it does mean that you need to keep up the potential customer's interest by changing your style and approach from time to time.

Part 4:

Want to know more?

We're always happy to look at individual adverts, or collections of adverts, and give our thoughts on how they might be developed in order to increase sales.

There is no charge for this service. Simply send in your advertisement to Stephen@schools.co.uk with your phone number and email address, and any other information you want to provide us with, along with a note asking us to review the advertisement, and we'll send you a written report, free of charge. (We need the phone number in case there is something we don't understand and need to ask a question at the start before we can create our report.)

If, however, you want to talk to us about our services in general or you have a specific question, please do call 01604 880 927.

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