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*Creating success through understanding*

## **How to Promote Your Language Program in a Tough Market**

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In 1998, “Asian flu” hit the markets, causing thousands of Korean, Japanese and other Asian students to stay home. In 2001, the World Trade Center in New York was destroyed, and for a time, North America was no longer considered a “safe” destination for international students; enrollments in overseas programs dropped again. In 2003, the war in Iraq had a similar effect on educational programs relying on foreign student registration.

The situation worsened in Canada when Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) caused the World Health Organization to recommend that anyone with travel plans to Toronto “consider postponing all but essential travel”.

Language programs in and around Toronto were hit hard. In fact, registration in language programs across the country dropped significantly at that time. Let’s face it, international students and their parents may not know that Calgary or Vancouver is thousands of kilometres away from Toronto, and hardly affected by SARS. The reality is that for a few months Canada was branded, how informally, as an “unsafe” country for foreigners.

As an educational consultant who specializes in helping language programs to market their courses better, this year I heard more managers than ever concerned about plummeting enrollments. Program managers from across North America have asked me, “What do we do now?” The answer is not a “quick fix”, but one focused on long-term vision and strategy.

### **Understand the effects of global events on your business**

Firstly, recognize that what has been happening recently is by no means isolated. If we take a look at history, we can see that every few years, some event occurs in the world that has a direct impact on our enrollments. What happens on the international economic front and in the markets will affect us. One mistake language program managers make is to think that education is not business. But when enrollments drop and you have to answer to senior administrators who want answers and, more importantly, want a healthy bottom line, you recognize that we are indeed in the “business” of educating students.

We need to learn to think like business people. Our programs are the services that we offer to clients. Our market is international. Therefore, what affects the global market for all goods, services, stocks and commodities affects us.

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If you have historical program statistics, review them. More than likely, all other factors being equal, you will be able to correlate significant drops in student enrollments with economic disruptions or political events across the globe. We must look at the “big picture” and recognize that, whatever it may be this time, it will be temporary.

Say to yourself, “This too, will pass.” Developing a long-term perspective will help you and your staff avoid the panic that so many program managers have felt this year. It will also help you answer to superiors who may be quick to blame lower enrollments on managers or coordinators (namely, you). If you have a clear idea of the big picture, you will be calmer, more confident, and you will think more clearly about the decisions you have to make and why you have to make them. Your staff and superiors may not like the fact that enrollments have dropped, but they will respect you more if you show strength, vision and a conservatively positive attitude in tough times.

Apart from keeping things in perspective and developing a long-term vision, there are things you can do to continue promoting your program in tough markets:

**Take the time to strategize.** Instead of flailing around to develop new courses that you hope may bring a few more students through the door, I recommend recognizing the situation for what it is: a slow market. This is the time to be pro-active, not reactive. If you complained before that you never had time to figure out a marketing strategy for your program, now you have that time. Use it wisely. Figure out where you want your program to go over the next 5 years. Realistically, you may want to factor in at least one more global event that will affect your enrollments during that time. Assess your current marketing strategy and determine what, if anything, needs to change. Instead of letting panic rule how you run things in tough times, stay calm and develop a vision that will carry you through the difficulties and into the market recovery.

**Keep your prices stable.** Now is not the time to increase your prices because you are feeling a financial pinch. Instead, maintain current price structure and keep your long term vision. Conversely, now is also not the time to lower prices, or offer “special discounts due to SARS”. Even if you don’t say it directly, prospective students and their parents will recognize a certain level of financial concern on your part. They may be intuitively turned off your program if it looks like it’s in financial trouble.

**Focus on the students you do have.** If you have fewer students, you can focus on giving them top-notch service. Remember that word of mouth is still the best promotion. Make sure that the students currently enrolled get the best quality program you can deliver. Each and every student is a prospective referral for you. No-cost or low-cost ways to focus on students include things like having every person who works in the program learn the names of each and every student. This includes correct pronunciation of their names, too! Personalized letters of congratulation to each student from the director at the end of the program is another idea.

Remind your staff that they each play a part in the success of your school, so remind them to stay positive. This may not be easy, especially if there have been layoffs due to lack of work. That's all the more reason for those who still have work to stay focused on the students and show a positive attitude around them. This will serve a double purpose. Not only will your students feel important and special, but by focusing on the students as much as possible, staff are less likely to dwell solely on the safety of their jobs or the dismal state of enrollments.

**Take time to regroup, reorganize and even have some fun!** Remind everyone that while these may not be the best of times, things will get better. There is nothing more detrimental to staff morale or to a program in general, than to allow panic or a sense of hopelessness to infect the school like a virus. We need to combat fear by maintaining a long-term vision and most importantly, by staying productive in the meantime.

This means hands-on work for teachers and staff to keep everyone busy while preparing for better times ahead. Now is the time to clean out your teachers' offices, resource rooms, filing cabinets, cupboards and bookshelves. Organize a second-hand book sale of any old textbooks or resources you really don't need. Use the money to take the students on a field trip or buy pizza for the staff on a Friday afternoon. There is still room for fun and in fact, small ways of boosting staff morale that don't cost your program significant dollars can be a huge emotional investment in the mental health of your staff.

I tell language program managers to listen to their financial planners when it comes to having their language programs make it through tough times. Sound strange? Not really... Investment planners tell us not to make rash decisions when markets fluctuate unexpectedly. We need to think long term, plan for the future and stay calm. Your program is similar to your personal investments. Stay steady in your belief that all your hard work and investment in your program will not be lost, and that the market will recover. The next time a market fluctuation causes a drop in enrollments, you will be all the wiser.

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