

mtm SCHOOL MATTERS

MAY 2011

Sixth Forms: the jewel in the crown



Students in the sixth form at Sevenoaks School—one of the independent sector's largest and most successful. But is every sixth form as secure?

Picture courtesy of Sevenoaks School

Are they in danger?

***T*he Guardian** reported just before Easter that heads of successful and popular state schools were seeing a big increase in the number of candidates from independent schools wanting to enter their sixth forms.

Norman Hoare, the Head of St George's School, Harpenden, was quoted as saying that the number of teenagers from independent schools applying for a place in his sixth form had quadrupled over the last few years. With only 10 sixth form places for external applicants, this year it has had 80 applications, half of them from pupils at private schools.

There are still a few places left on our summer seminar for heads, bursars and governors.

Strategic Planning in your School

Cavalry and Guards Club,
127 Piccadilly, London W1.
Wednesday 8 June 2011

BOOK NOW by calling Barbara Badrick
on 01502 722787

He added that, although "they had not declared this to be a reason for changing schools", many parents may be making the switch to the state sector to give their offspring a better chance of getting a place at a top university.

Well, he probably would say that, wouldn't he? State schools are having to compete just as fiercely for students nowadays, especially post-GCSE, when there are so many options available.

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But even allowing for a little marketing hyperbole, does the situation at a few very successful state schools reflect a general trend—a trend which, given the steady rise in sixth form numbers in independent schools in recent years, would be of serious concern? Do the latest statistics from the ISC Census justify the confidence of ex-Boarding Schools Association chairman Hoare and his colleagues?

At first glance, not. The size of the 16-year-old cohort in ISC schools was up by 4.3% in the latest, January 2011, Census compared with the previous year. This year's lower sixths are bigger than last year's.

Straitened circumstances

But dig a little deeper. This particular cohort—last year's GCSE contingent—has been a particularly large one throughout their senior school careers: as a Year 11 in 2010, it was 3.4% larger than the previous year. In other words, if this year's lower sixth had not been larger, serious warning signs would be flashing.

And there is plenty of anecdote about, suggesting that many schools' sixth form open events may have been attracting fewer visitors and external applications for sixth form places may have been drying up.

If true, it would hardly be surprising. Straitened economic circumstances, and the looming prospect of £9,000 annual university fees, are bound to cause parents to look hard at possible savings.

And then there's the Coalition Government's renewed assault—an assault even more enthusiastic than that waged by Labour—on top universities, for their alleged failure to admit sufficient students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Even if, in practice, most selective universities will go on admitting the best-qualified students, whatever their school backgrounds, the public rhetoric is bound to influence some parents and students. It certainly did in the early 2000s, in the wake of Gordon Brown's notorious "Laura Spence" speech.

Sixth form recruitment—and retention

If sixth form numbers really did start to fall, it would be a very serious development for the independent sector. Sixth forms have been the sector's jewel in the crown. While pupil numbers overall have stagnated for the past five or six years and even, in junior and prep schools, declined slightly, independent sixth form numbers have continued to rise. Parents and students continue to be convinced by the breadth and quality of the pre-university education they offer.

What all this emphasises is the need for senior schools to have, at the heart of their marketing strategies, sixth form recruitment and retention. Too many schools think that internal marketing of the sixth form starts in Year 11 or, at best Year 10. A high-profile event or series of events to highlight sixth form

The 5P rout

Free schools and academies are at the heart of the Government's policy, but in Anthony Seldon's words, "they have not, generally, been embraced by the fee paying independent sector." Rather than raising the drawbridge, he has urged the fee paying independent sector to build bridges with the state sector and start free schools and academies in their own names.

Whatever your view, the fee paying sector will have to compete with them. You may even be considering establishing a free school or converting to free school status, so here are a few general pointers based on our experience of the bidding process.

To ensure "high quality applications" in future, the Department has raised the bar for applicants who want to open in 2012 and beyond – good news for seasoned multiple academy sponsors but bad news for parent and

Melanie Tucker identifies some important pointers for those who may be considering a Free School application



teacher groups who want to go it alone. Condensed in three stages – application, assessment and interview, the process is a competitive tendering process with bids scored against set minimum acceptable criteria, against other applications and against cost measures that ensure the school offers maximum value for money.

So what do you need if you are considering making an application? Interestingly, they are quite closely aligned to the four "P"s of business established by Harvard Business School in the 1960s, and since developed as an extended Marketing Mix

People and Passion: The right leader with the personality and persistence to lead the project and who

opportunities should be part of the Year 11 autumn term, but selling the sixth form should start as soon as pupils enter the senior school, with lots of opportunities for sixth formers to participate in lower school events and be seen by parents. The default assumption should be staying the course to A-level or IB Diploma.

And remember, too, that increasingly it is the students themselves who decide where they will study after GCSE. As often as not, that decision will rest on peer group pressure: where are my friends going? Make sure you can influence the influencers.

*Dick Davison
Head of Strategic Consulting*

e to FREE

is not shy of overcoming barriers, together with steering group members who have the time and expertise to make a successful application. Not just anyone – these people also have to pass the vetting process and be prepared to be involved post application. Useful areas of expertise include:

- ◆ Project management;
- ◆ Educational expertise—professionals to devise a high quality curriculum and pastoral structures;
- ◆ Property and planning expertise;
- ◆ Employment expertise, especially in education;
- ◆ Financial expertise to ensure a robust business plan;
- ◆ Legal input to assist with company status, finding your way through documentation and compliance;
- ◆ Marketing and communications expertise to deal with surveys, market analysis, media and community communications, and devising a robust marketing strategy to ensure recruitment is in line with strategy;
- ◆ Someone with first-hand experience of successful bids for Government contracts, to act as a critical friend and review the application before submission.

All this depends on a strong vision for the school, shared by all on the steering group. The vision must state clearly why you want to set up a free school and make clear its defining features which accord with the aims of the free school programme. Strangely, it is one of the hardest documents for some groups to complete. You have to be able to justify it with hard evidence.

Product (for a school, Service): A great deal of effort has to go into developing the structure of the school and defining the experience you want pupils to have: what they should achieve, how they will achieve it

and how their performance will be evaluated. This includes setting out your admissions policy, curriculum model, and pastoral aspects. Be clear about what differentiates your school from other providers.

Place: The starting point is to establish that there is a need in the area: that there is a big enough population for the age range that you want to serve as well as parental demand. Clearly you have to be prepared to compete for pupils, but equally there have to be enough who are accessible to the school to make the business model work. The DfE places great emphasis on parental demand, but applications will fail unless there is a sound business model

Promotion: A critical success factor is evidence of demand from parents with children in the relevant age: equivalent to a minimum of 50% of the first two years of operation. This requires organisation of events and activities that inform the public about your intentions and really good evidence achieved using surveys.

Good communication and presentation skills are vital to deal with the media and the wider local community, some of them hostile to your school. Toby Young, no stranger to controversy, has said that he has only become truly despised since doing something meaningful (ie set up a free school). You will need a robust marketing strategy that is in line with the business plan.

Price (ie right cost): There is a great deal of emphasis on meeting Government value for money criteria. Your bid will not succeed unless it does.

And a fifth P: Personal attributes: Persistence, ability to deal with uncertainty and conflict, feeling comfortable when the goal posts move around you, a talent for form filling, accuracy and creativity, generosity (with your time), being a good team player, a good communicator and bloody-minded for when things get tough

Does any of this feel familiar to those who work in the fee-paying independent sector? Not a bad experience curve then and maybe some of you will consider....

For more information on our free school advisory services, contact Melanie Tucker, on 01502 722787 or mtucker@mtmconsulting.co.uk

Online Helpline

It's frustrating, when you have refined all the questions for your parent survey, when you've given clear instructions to parents on how to access the questionnaire online, and all you have to do is wait for the responses to roll in, to have those nagging phone calls and emails: "I can't log in," "The survey form doesn't seem to work", "It doesn't recognise the password."

Our Online Survey service has become very popular with schools and we have a great deal of experience in dealing with most of the problems parents encounter.

So now we are offering a **FREE helpline for parents** having technical problems with accessing the surveys. This takes all the stress and hassle out of the survey process for schools.

Since introducing the online survey service, we have also refined the process with some simple alterations:

- ◆ clickable links in emails to save respondents from entering the address wrongly (or into a search engine!)
- ◆ removing full stops to reduce opportunity for errors.

Response rates have improved as a result.

For more information on our parent survey services, email office@mtmconsulting.co.uk



Turn on, Tune in, Drop out

Here at MTM we like to talk about the marketing pipeline that encompasses everyone from the parents in your target market to your alumni (and everyone at every stage in between). Thinking about it, though, it's not a great metaphor. "Pipeline" implies a steady progression that only happens in a minority of real life cases. Not everyone who enters the pipeline comes out at the other end: there are leaks along the way.

But "leaks" implies passivity on the part of those in the pipeline – something that happens to them rather than something that they actively choose. Rather, parents opt to leave your marketing programme. 'Programme' is the right word. These people are channel surfing – they are looking at you and at a number of other broadcasts all at the same time.

So what makes someone turn off your school? It could be that they didn't like something about you, or that something elsewhere particularly grabbed their attention. You need to know what it was, otherwise you are destined for a season of repeats.

Research sweet spot

There are several places that you could research those parents that are tuning out. (OK, that's the very last TV analogy – I promise.) There are those that are aware of your school but don't consider you – but they are expensive to find and interview. There are those that research you but don't visit. And there are those that visit (and perhaps sit an assessment) but don't choose you. These latter categories are prime research

opportunities. They sit at the sweet spot between providing minimum cost-to-research and yielding maximum insight.

As long as you have contact details for people who got prospectuses or visited the school, we can interview them on your behalf. The benefit of using us (rather than doing it internally) is that the honesty of parents' comments is increased.

These comments can be very revealing. For instance, our research has alerted certain schools that: they were failing to put enough younger (albeit less experienced) teachers in front of prospective parents; their

taster days were not up to those of their competitors; and parents were seeing straight through their explanations for particularly small class sizes. In each of these cases a few small tweaks were all that was necessary to address the problems.

Summer term best

When we conduct decliner interviews (usually by phone, and taking up no more than 10-15 minutes of someone's time) we do so as consistently as possible. This means that, as long as we speak to at least 30 parents, the sample is large enough to start quantifying the responses we get. We are also able to make

assessments about some of the qualitative aspects of the interview. For example, we can make a judgement about the degree to which people are pushed away from a school rather than attracted to it by competitors.

The summer term is probably the best time to conduct research among decliners. Firstly because the events of the last few months are still fresh in their minds. And secondly because you get a good few weeks to address the issues raised before you are in to the open days and tours of the autumn term.

- ◆ Talk to us about your research requirements.

Telephone: 01502 722787 or

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Follow their weekly updates on

<http://www.mtmconsulting.co.uk/news/>



Gavin Humphries, Head of Research at [mtmconsulting](#), says it's important to know what parents who don't choose your school have to say about it.

More than half a billion people now have a **facebook** account, over 100 million people enhance their professional networking through **LinkedIn**, and 200 million are using **twitter** to “tweet” their way through the day.

But what does all of this mean for schools, how we promote our organisations, and the way we communicate with our target audiences?

To help you understand the role that social and digital media might play in your school's marketing and communications activities, and for your own and your colleagues' professional development, we've lined up a one day workshop for independent schools with our guest social media expert, **Tracy Playle**.

Social media networking

Our half-term workshop for schools

Euston House, 24 Eversholt St.,
London, NW1 1AD
Thursday, 2nd June, 10am – 4pm

The **morning session** will be spent looking at the reasons for incorporating social media into your school's strategy, and identifying some of the pitfalls you might face:

- ◆ benefits and challenges of social and digital media
- ◆ looking at the tools and understanding what they mean and how they work
- ◆ case studies of organisations' and individuals' successful use of social media
- ◆ the steps to take to ensure that your use of social media is aligned to the school's overall strategic objectives and your audiences' wants and needs.

In the **afternoon** we'll move from the strategic to the tactical and practical:

- ◆ exploring a number of platforms and tools from well-known sites like Twitter and Facebook, to lesser known sites: Slideshare, Quora and Animoto,
- ◆ understanding how to use them
- ◆ sparking your creativity in using them for your school
- ◆ considerations with regard to safety and security
- ◆ time-management in using social media
- ◆ getting management and staff buy-in to social media

- ◆ monitoring and evaluating social media sites and your campaigns, and dealing with negative comments.

**15 places
only; book
now to avoid**

Euston House, opposite Euston Station, is a state-of-the-art, purpose-built venue. Each delegate will work at an individual computer station throughout the day. Lunch and refreshments will be provided.

Workshop fee: £195 per person + VAT (price includes lunch and refreshments)

BOOK NOW: we are limited to just 15 places on this workshop, so please contact us now on 01502 722787 to book your place.

About Tracy Playle: Tracy's background is in working within the Higher Education sector in the United Kingdom. Formerly Head of Research-TV and a communications professional with the University of Warwick, Tracy started presenting social media use in order to help other organisations understand trends, opportunities and approaches in using digital and social media for their marketing and communications activities.

Tracy is Chair of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) Education and Skills Sector Group, the body that represents PR professionals working in the education sector, and a CIPR Council Member. She is founder of HE Comms, the online social network for marketing and communications professionals working in the Higher Education sector.

FUTURE DATES:

Further workshops will be run on 28th September and 9th November 2011. To register your interest in future social media workshops please email office@mtmconsulting.co.uk.



Practical Strategies for the New Education Market

BOOK NOW for the most vital business conference of the year for independent school decision-makers, organised by:

mtmCONSULTING
strategy for education

**VealeWasbrough
Vizards**

Tuesday 13th September 2011
The Institute of Directors, Pall Mall, London SW1

Speakers will include:

Sir Ewan Harper

Reflecting on 19 momentous years as Chief Executive of the United Church Schools Trust and the United Learning Trust and on likely future developments in the educational landscape.

Frances King

Headmistress of Roedean School

Thomas Packer

Former head of Teesside High School, who this year becomes the first head of the West London Free School, opening in September

Christopher Ray

High Master of The Manchester Grammar School

Adrian Richardson

Principal of the Cothill Educational Trust which runs five independent preparatory schools

Richard Fenwick

Headmaster of Hazlegrove

Issues:

Changing the entry points: The implications of extending your age range

Leading heads will share their views and lead a discussion on issues over transfer between junior and senior school.

The **mtmconsulting Independent Sector Report 2012**

*Head of Research, Gavin Humphries, will unveil the latest update of **mtm**consulting's authoritative sector-wide survey of the health of independent schools.*

AND

a not-to-be-missed programme of workshops on legal, marketing and strategic issues for independent schools.

Full programme and booking details are enclosed with this issue of
SCHOOL MATTERS