

## Budding actresses



Merchant Taylors' Girls' School, Liverpool, GCSE pupil Sophia Hinton Lever has beaten over 500 young hopefuls nationwide to win one of only 28 places at the Arts Educational School in London. Sophia, 16, will now study subjects such as acting, singing, dancing, body conditioning, tap, ballet and audition technique alongside her more traditional A Level choices of English Language and Literature, Classical Civilisation, Drama and Music when she starts in September.



A pupil at Manchester High School for Girls, Apurva Jain, 15, won the Pam Young Challenge Shield at this year's Alderley Edge Festival. Apurva has completed her grade 6 London Academy of Music and Art (LAMDA) examination and is now working towards grade 7. In other festivals she has won awards for solo acting and monologues, including 'Junior Solo Artist of the Year' and 'Best Junior Monologue.'

*Churchill once said, Headmasters (and I think we can now safely include Headmistresses!) have powers at their disposal with which Prime Ministers have never been invested.*

I'm sure that he could never have envisaged the sort of powers 21st century PM's appear to need and equally sure that he was alluding to the responsibility of educating future generations. However in the current economic climate, arguably the most important power at Heads' disposal is that of clearly differentiating and branding their schools.

Now more than ever before it is essential to understand your market, which should determine both what you say and how you say it. Many organisations spend a lot of money building a profile of their customers. They know everything about them; they know what newspapers and magazines they read, even what cereals they eat for breakfast. They will also know who will actually be writing the cheque. If the fees of some of your prospective parents will be paid by grandparents, what do you do for them - both before and after they join you? I am not suggesting that a school necessarily needs to spend large amounts on market research. Marketing is about a mindset, not a budget. However all schools gain by honing their materials so they address not the world at large but their target markets specifically.

Those same organisations also understand exactly what they are offering and exactly how it is different from what their competitors are offering. They understand the importance of communicating a clear message and positioning, accurately defining all that makes the school special and distinctive - the values at the heart that run through like the lettering in a stick of rock.

By knowing who you are talking to and what you are offering, you should be able to tempt a very

particular audience into your school to arrange a visit and find out more. As such what you may need is an emotional trigger driver rather than a rational one. If this is true, then knowing the emotional decision drivers of your particular group of prospective parents - and pupils and grandparents - is critically important in shaping the form, content and feel of your marketing communication material. We need to get under the skin of the audience and really see the world from their point of view. What are their fears about the decision to choose an independent school? What are their anxieties about choosing your school? And, how can we allay these concerns?

Retaining integrity is of course essential, but so too is tapping into your customer's dreams. When Range Rover launched in North America the product was fairly well defined in the UK and Europe but not really understood there. Some awareness of the Land Rover as a 'poor relation' of the trusted Willy's Jeep was all we had to go on - but this was a start and enabled us to position ourselves in the Sports Utility sector and tapped into the car's off road capability.

However, it did not really differentiate the vehicle from the Ford Explorer, numerous trucks and a variety of 'reliable' Japanese imports, particularly as Range Rover was price positioned as a premium product. We also knew that, as in the UK, only 3% of the vehicles would ever be taken off-road - and even then not in anger!

Extensive research and a host of clinic sessions with a clearly defined

target audience helped identify what really made Range Rover different in the consumer's eyes.

It would be bought as a third, or even fourth, car by individuals with a net income of over half a million dollars in today's terms. It would be used mainly by mother to take children to school(!). It would be a luxury vehicle and as such a status symbol. And, most important of all, particularly in its adopted homeland of New England, it was British.

This provided the real key. Americans were not buying a car at all, or a truck, or a sports utility. What they were buying was a piece of a huntin', shootin', fishin' English Country lifestyle. Or at least their perception of it!

We asked the late Patrick Lichfield to do the photographs. Patrick's photographs of Cotswold landscapes, fly fishing on the Tay and a number of pillar and telephone boxes and his presence at the launch, brought a certain something to the party. And the combination of all these things and some excellent copy-writing ensured we exceeded all sales targets.

The challenge for all of us is to work out how we can use such insights to market our schools. Those who answer the question first will inevitably fill their schools fastest. Certainly throughout the whole marketing process, the place to be is very firmly in the mind of the buyer.



*Paul is a branding specialist working in the independent education sector.  
Tel. 01242 672200 Mob 07831 332904  
www.kilvington.com*

# Escaping the Classroom

*Are school trips a road to nowhere or a vital educational tool? Philippa Scudds reflects...*



In the Manifesto of the Council for Learning Outside the Classroom published by the DfES, one of its aims is to provide "all young people with a wide range of experiences outside the classroom throughout their education". Taking this one step further to domestic and foreign trips, it says: "Staying away for a few days or more is a powerful way of developing key life skills, building confidence, self esteem, communication and team working ... taking part in expeditions, summer camps and sports events and through cultural, language and fieldwork visits abroad".

School trips do seem to have become more and more exotic in recent years helped largely through the advent of more affordable air travel. Yet in the current economic and ecologically aware climate, are these trips still justifiable? And with the ongoing debate about independent schools and public benefit, should the subsidies for such trips be better spent on providing bursaries for children from poorer families?

### Economics

Nine out of ten teachers in a survey at the Education Show in Birmingham this year said that the current economic climate would make it harder to arrange school trips in the future. A trip to Vietnam costing £2,995 per child, a week in China £1,000 and a four week trip to Tanzania £3,200 were just some of the recent foreign trips organized by independent and comprehensive schools in the London area. With many parents struggling to pay school fees and facing economic hardships due to the current recession, can schools

justify asking parents to provide the money for these trips?

The arguments in favour are generally focussed on expanding young minds and learning about new cultures. Could they have had similar educational experiences closer to home? The head of education for Historic Royal Palaces, Susie Batchelor believes this is possible: "We have a wealth of fascinating stories with which to spur interest... it's the excitement of a journey and learning in new places and through new experiences... that is the key to the school trip".

### An environmentally friendly age

So there is a valid educational argument for getting out of the classroom, but staying closer to home and this is encouraged by increased awareness of the environmental implications. A flight to Australia is increasing your carbon footprint considerably more than a coach ride within the UK. However, if the carbon emissions can be offset then this argument carries less weight. Perhaps the school trip of the future will be a balance of learning and protecting the world we are exploring.

### Public Benefit

At the Independent Schools Council's annual conference this year, a speaker claimed: "Some schools could (even) cut out rugby tours to foreign countries to save money for bursaries".

In order to meet public benefit guidelines, schools might have to raise more money to fund places for poorer children and this could mean

*Philippa Scudds founded and runs Cathcart Communications, a Marketing and Public Relations consultancy based in Hampshire. She has advised on strategic planning, public relations and brand management for a range of independent Prep and Senior schools. www.cathcomms.co.uk*

the end of subsidised trips abroad. Is it therefore right that a school should help fund a sports tour to Australia?

### Conclusion

Whilst schools are very aware of the need to provide educational opportunities for all, surely in this very statement lies the key - 'educational opportunities'. With government backed initiatives to get out of the classroom and make the most of the world around us in educating our children, this gives weight to the view that school trips should undoubtedly be both encouraged and planned for.

Foreign travel broadens the mind and provides experiences which perhaps children would otherwise not have. It is often more cost effective for your child to participate in a school ski trip via a group booking, for example, than to arrange a private holiday. Sporting and cultural experiences and meeting people from other parts of the globe are fantastic and inspirational opportunities and modern air travel has made these trips possible and affordable. It is important to remember that these trips are almost always voluntary. Schools cannot force children to go. So in the end, parents have the choice and right to decline the offer.

In today's world it seems there is a need more than ever for equilibrium - between foreign and domestic travel, value for money excursions outside the classroom and environmental issues. The key is to ensure that every school gets this right in order to fulfil its aim of providing a broad and balanced education.

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# PR ~ Public or Parent Relations?

*The role of Marketing and PR in an independent school has traditionally been to promote the school to potential new customers through press coverage, advertising and print collateral. However, particularly in the current economic climate, many schools are wondering if the 'P' in PR should really stand for 'Parent' rather than 'Public'. Are the existing customers not the priority with respect to both retention of the pupil roll and the school's future success? Should schools be focusing all their energies on their current customers? And if so, how is this best achieved?*

*Philippa Scudds reports....*

The Americans seem to think that establishing good parent relations is a very simple accomplishment. The Washington Post has actually published an article citing 10 ways to improve parent/school relations. So, all you need to do is:

- 1) Stop using jargon
- 2) Visit parents on their turf
- 3) Ask parents to teach what they know
- 4) Welcome complainers
- 5) Hire parent-friendly principals
- 6) Seek parent volunteers
- 7) Offer activities for parents and children
- 8) Get parents to observe classes
- 9) Provide courses for parents
- 10) Create a great school!

The paper says that as parents are arguably the most important teachers their children will ever have, forging good relationships with a school is essential. Teachers complain parents interfere too much while parents claim staff belittle their suggestions.

The Americans evidently do things differently. In the UK, 2) is really taking the personal touch too far! I am also sceptical about 1) as 'dumbing down' in an academic establishment really goes against the very ethos of why a school exists at all. Complaints should always be welcomed and dealt with efficiently so I can agree with 4) although 'welcome' is a rather strong word! Some schools do already provide the opportunity for observation of lessons, particularly in younger age groups and as long as this is managed correctly can be a very positive experience.

Ultimately, points 5) and 10) are the key. Heads with the personality to deal with a variety of different situations and parents in an efficient, friendly and firm manner are really all that the customer could wish for. I know many Marketing professionals in schools who bemoan their uncharismatic Head!

It does make Marketing a school a lot more difficult if the Head is not comfortable presenting to and advising parents. So this is something to always bear in mind during the recruitment process. Word of mouth is the best possible advert for a school and by the staff providing an excellent education the school is fulfilling the expectations of its customers. How you create a great school is another whole issue – but fostering sound parent relations is a very good starting point.

## Parent Associations

The fact that more and more schools and colleges now have something called an Alumni and Parent Relations team (or similar) appears testament to the view that, while the American model might take things too far, there is a need for a school to encourage former and current parents keep in touch and play a part in school life. The work of the 'PTA' or parent teacher association offers social events and information as a way of integrating parents into the life of the school. Parent questionnaires are on the increase as schools recognize their use as another way of keeping in touch with current parental views. Providing there is effective feedback, they can be a very helpful and positive exercise for both sides.

## Knowledge of your child's schooling

According to a paper by Baker and Stevenson called 'The Family/School Relation', "to effectively assist a child in his or her efforts to meet the demands of school, parents need to have knowledge about their child's schooling and access to resources to help their child." There is no doubt that ensuring your current parents are happy and in regular contact is a key priority for any school. Effective lines of communication can be maintained through newsletters, daily Prep planners, one-to-one discussions and increasingly through email contact.

If there is a continuous flow between pupils, parents and staff then any small issues can be dealt with quickly and efficiently before they become major problems. Parents are paying a great deal of money for their child's education and, as with any business, they expect results otherwise they will move them to a school which can provide what they offer. Long gone are the days of entrusting a child to a school, seeing them at half terms and in the holidays (in the case of a boarding school) or meeting staff to discuss progress at a sporadic parents' evening. Now contact is quite rightly encouraged and much more frequent.

## Communication – a double-edged sword?

However, these advances in parent communication can be a double edged sword for a school. It is important that parents remember they have chosen the school because they feel it will provide the best education of their child. To an extent, they then have to let the school do the job they are paying for. Constant parental interference can end up being more of a hindrance than a help and therefore clear guidelines must be given to parents as to what they should contact the school about.

## Getting it right

Every point of contact at the school needs to be efficient, polite and helpful – from the Reception and Admissions staff, the administrative team, to the teachers themselves, to the senior management team. Parents should also be encouraged to get in touch with the PR department itself if they have any ideas or suggestions and this can be very useful as they can often provide information about what other schools are doing in terms of Marketing. It is important to always acknowledge these suggestions, whether by email or telephone, in order to ensure that parents feel their 'voice is being heard'.



For the staff, the contact with parents will inevitably be much more geared towards the child's academic and social development and it is much better and more impressive for a teacher to raise an issue with a parent which they have noticed, rather than waiting for the parent to bring it up at a parents' evening. It comes back to ensuring that the small issues are dealt with quickly so that they don't become major problems.

## Conclusions

Schools marketing professionals are well aware of the dinner party chatter and car park gossip so it is important to harness this excellent communications opportunity to your advantage. If parents are happy with the 'service' the school is providing so they will pass this on in a positive way to other existing and potential parents. So by providing both an excellent education and regular effective communication channels, parents should feel that their expectations are being met. In the same vein, parents must realize that the school has to get on with its job. Too much interference can mean that staff spend so much time keeping the parents happy that they don't actually get round to teaching the children at all!

*Philippa Scudds founded and runs Cathcart Communications, a Marketing and Public Relations consultancy based in Hampshire. She has advised on strategic planning, public relations and brand management for a range of Prep and Senior schools. [www.cathcomms.co.uk](http://www.cathcomms.co.uk)*

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