



Successfully Advertising and Marketing Your Language School in Japan

by Aaron Anderson

Congratulations on starting your English language school in Japan. Your school will likely be one of the most rewarding experiences of your life. Not only are you helping adults and children learn English, but you are helping to build the community in which your school is located! Schools and other learning orientated businesses bring a value like no other to a local community. Know the value you bring, and build on that value to have a successful business. This article will review some of the basics you should already know about marketing and advertising your school, and also touch upon a few ideas you may wish to give more thought to. By the end of the article you should have a firm grasp on how to successfully advertise and market your English language school in Japan.

Business and Marketing Plans

As with any business, and a school is after all a business, you need to have a solid business plan in place before you begin. There are many books and software packages available to help you to write a concrete business plan. It is imperative you take advantage of the resources available today and write a business plan you can work with. Your business plan does not have to be terribly complicated or involved, but simply designed to be a roadmap for your business success and growth. In addition to a solid business plan you will want to write a marketing plan. In your marketing plan you will include your thoughts and plans for advertising and marketing your school. You may choose to use each or any of the following categories to get you started: publicity, promotional events and items, joint ventures, Internet marketing, and referral programs. In each category you will want to define how you will go about marketing and

determine your budget for each specific area. One of the most important things to remember for your business and marketing plans is that they are working documents. Make sure you refer to them and update them with what is working for you and what is not. For example, if you decide to print a flyer to be inserted into your local newspaper, and this brings you zero new students or inquiries, you may decide not to do it again. You should stick to advertising that brings you something back for the money you put out for it, and tracking what you do will maximize your return on investment (ROI). I'll discuss tracking shortly. Your business and marketing plans, then, are your roadmaps similar to your own personal family budget. They need to be changing and evolving with your circumstances and goals. Lets look at a few ideas.

Publicity Marketing Plan

It is a rare business which can survive without any publicity. While word of mouth is excellent advertising for your school, you will also want to make sure you get your school's name and information out into the public eye on a regular basis. To do this you have many options, some of which are:

Flyers and Brochures – One of the most common ways to advertise a small business is through flyers and brochures. You can have these inserted into a local newspaper, place them in local stores, stuff them in mailboxes, chirashi-hand them out to everyone you meet, and set them out for people to pick up. Flyers can be printed for a cost of

about 15,000 yen for every 5000 flyers. Track that flier! Be sure to have a special code for each advertising piece so that you'll know how the prospect found your school. A common way to do this is to simply type a number on the flyer's bottom right corner. For example, you could type "0214a" on the first 1000 flyers, and "0214b" on the 2nd batch of 1000 flyers. When prospects call, ask them what number is on the flier. 0214 refers to February 14th, the day you passed them out, while "a" or "b" refers to the specific version of the flyer. Having two versions of the same ad is called "Split Testing". Always split test your advertising to know what "pulls" and what doesn't. But remember to only test one point at a time (e.g. test photo, or headline but not both) so you know exactly which factor was responsible for "pulling". Some schools tell the prospect to, "Bring in the flyer for a free gift or lesson". One reason for writing this sentence is to track advertising.

Business Cards – By carrying business cards at all times you can easily pass along information about your business without seeming to be overtly selling something. Hand out a business card to everyone you meet and know that if they know someone looking for your services they will likely pass it along to them. Business cards can be ordered online very inexpensively and even printed on your computer. You may be surprised how a simple 5000 yen investment in cards can bring you back 500,000 yen in new students over a year or two.

Newspaper Articles and Advertisements –Another way to get your business name out into the public is through newspaper and/or magazine articles and advertisements. While advertisements in print can be expensive they show people your school is legitimate and professional. If you do not have a large advertising budget you might try and get the local newspapers to do a story about you and your school. If they will include your contact information this can be a great way to obtain free advertising. Often times, they'll give you a significant discount if this is the first time doing business with them. Don't be afraid to ask for a discount as a first timer. If your school is new, try to ask them if they have a "New Businesses" discount. "New Businesses" are also sometimes a featured section of magazines and the ad agent may suggest placing your ad there.

Local Free Information Magazines – Johoshi publications such as "Hot Pepper," "Pado," and "Living Shinbun" can be good places to advertise at a lower cost than a traditional magazine or local newspaper.

Sponsor a Neighborhood Map – Another form of publicity is to place your advertisement on a neighborhood map or local publication through sponsorship. By sponsoring you are helping the community and getting your name out at the same time.

Yellow Page (a.k.a Town Page) Ad – Every business should be listed in the local Yellow Pages. If you register your school name with one of the first letters of the Japanese alphabet you will likely be the first one called when someone is flipping through the Yellow Pages looking for an English language school. A simple Yellow Pages ad will run you about 15,000 yen per month.

School Signage – You should have a large sign at the front of your school, or in your front window if your school is held at your home. Let everyone passing by see your school and know you exist. You can create your own sign inexpensively or purchase one. Just be aware that over time, your sign will become invisible to people walking by. To thwart this, try to change your sign every 3 months. If that is not practical, you could light up the sign with different colors (an orange light for 3 months, a blue light for 3 months, etc), or at least change the sign's angle.

As you can easily see, there are many ways for you to get your school out into the public eye. The publicity category of your marketing plan should include a combination of the above. While you may find some of these forms of advertising do not bring you many new students, each of them serves to get your name into the public and to legitimize your school.

Promotional Events and Items Plan

Promotional events and promotional items can help to get your business name out there into the community as well. Everyone loves to get a bargain! One way to capitalize on this is to hold promotional events and pass out promotional items with your school information on them. Here are some suggestions:

Have a Party – One great way to get your school noticed, and recruit new students at the same time, is to have a party. You could schedule your party near the beginning of the new school year or around a major holiday. Have all of your existing students

invite all of their friends and family to the party. Your party will want to incorporate a lot of fun with a bit of English learning as well.

Have a “Sale” – Another way to bring in new students is to offer them an introductory reduced rate, waive your normal admissions fee, or offer them an incentive to join. Do this sparingly though – once a year maximum - or you may look cheap.

Imprinted Pens or Pencils – For not a lot of expense you can have pencils or pens imprinted with your school name and phone number. By passing these out wherever you go you help to get your name out.

Learning Flyers – Another good idea is to print a flyer that advertises your school but also teaches a bit of English as well. Learning flyers can go a long way towards “showing” what your school has to offer. You may wish to split test; one with and one without a learning point.

Joint Ventures Plan

A joint venture is where two or more businesses join together to help promote each other’s business. Because all small businesses struggle with gaining customers and growth, it can be very profitable for both companies to join together and help each other out. As an English language school you have a multitude of options for joint ventures with other local businesses. Here are just a couple of ideas:

Shop at Your Local Neighborhood Shops – By shopping locally, and becoming known by local shop owners as the “friendly local English teacher,” you can then approach them about leaving your flyers or business cards on their counter. Not only are they more likely to let you, but they are also much more likely to say nice things about you to their other customers. When you need supplies for your school you should then consider first shopping at those businesses which are helping you with your marketing.

Local Library Reading Times – Adam Duran from Apple English Network suggests a unique approach: volunteering at your local library and reading books in English to children! In exchange for your volunteer time you will likely be able to leave some of your flyers, and also talk to the parents about your school. By doing this you are helping your community and building your business as well.

Internet Marketing Plan

Every business today needs to have a website. Even a simple website with just your basic business information on it will do. While your website doesn’t have to be fancy, you really do need to have one in this day and age. Your website should have a memorable and easy to remember URL. It should also list all of your contact information and have a form for students to fill out online in case you are closed for the evening or it’s a long holiday and they cannot call you. Once you own a website, you’ll need to promote it and make sure the search engines find it. You can do this through online ads, and Search Engine Optimization (SEO). These two topics are beyond the scope of this article, but can be explored further on the internet.

Referral Marketing Plan

Kuchigomi means word of mouth, and is the single biggest marketing strategy you have. Nothing will bring you more students than positive word of mouth by other students and parents. One of your main goals for your marketing is to create a positive word of mouth network for your school. How? You can do this best by always offering excellent instruction and have positive interactions with as many local people as possible. Happy students will often tell their friends without any nudging on your part. You can also set up a referral plan, which is more on the nudging side of the coin. There are a few ways to incorporate referrals into your marketing plan. Here are a couple of them:

Offer a Discount for Referrals – You can offer your existing students a free month of instruction for each new student they refer to you. You can easily give out flyers to your existing students to pass along to their friends and family.

Offer Sibling or Family Discounts – By offering lower rates to multiple family members you can bring in other members of the families of your existing students.

Some owners disagree with incorporating a referral plan and feel word-of-mouth should be nudge-free. You may wish to try it out for one year and judge for yourself based on the merits of your results. Again, keep careful records between years to compare ROI.

As you can see there are many ways to market and advertise your business. Current school owners report

that generally flyers and print ads do little more than publicize and legitimize your school. In other words, they are a great way to show people you exist and are in business for the long-haul. However, the best advertising and marketing will naturally come from Kuchigomi. Build up your reputation by good lessons as well as through tested advertising and marketing. By writing a marketing plan, and testing your advertising you can build a school that will continue to add value to your neighborhood and one you'll be proud to own.

Aaron Anderson is a former school owner and specialist in education. His writing has appeared in such publications as The Language Teacher and Kansai Time Out. Aaron currently publishes a free newsletter for language school owners at <http://www.TheSchoolOwner.org>.

Additional Resources on this topic you may find helpful:

Business and Marketing Plan Software:

Business Plan Pro by Palo Alto available at www.paloalto.com

Marketing Plan Pro by Palo Alto available at www.paloalto.com

Books Available from Amazon.com and other book sellers:

*"101 Ways to Market Your Language Program: A Practical Guide for Language Schools and Programs"
By Sarah Elaine Eaton*

"Marketing Without Advertising, 3rd Ed." By Michael Phillips and Sally Rasberry

"Guerilla Marketing, 3rd. Ed." By Jay Conrad Levinson

"The Anatomy of Buzz" By Emanuel Rosen

"The Secrets of Word of Mouth Marketing – How to Trigger Exponential Sales Through Runaway Word of Mouth" By George Silverman