

The Customer is King!

'The customer is king' is one of the golden rules of business. However, how do you apply this principle to the situation most school owners face: namely that the person paying for the education is not the person being educated?

Some schools adopt an open door approach and allow parents to participate fully in the school's activities. Others are much more cautious and see the involvement of parents as meddling and fraught with misunderstanding.

In this internet 'panel discussion,' Chris Sato put questions to 4 school owners, who aired their views on some of the problems which can arise with parents and how to deal with them.

As a first question, could you each briefly summarize the relationship you enjoy with the parents of your students?

Peter Lutes:

Well, I think that it is worth pointing out that we are in a situation where 'the Teacher is King,' at least to some extent. We are fortunate in that the concept of the customer being king is somewhat diluted by the high regard Japanese have for teachers and the concept of *gaman* (patience/endurance).

That being said, I think that as



*moderated and edited by
Chris Sato
Nikaho
Akita Pref.*

operators of private schools, we need to balance the educational needs of our students with the commercial aspect. I have found that taking a teacher-parent/business-customer approach has worked well for me in the past and try and avoid the friend-neighbor role. By keeping the relationship with parents (who are often also neighbors) as a teacher/business person relationship, I have found that it is much easier to handle 'situations' that arise in a manner that is satisfactory to both the parents and myself.

David Lisgo:

I am very much at ease in my teacher-parent role, but I feel most

uncomfortable in my business-customer role and generally only fall into this role when absolutely necessary. My wife also is a natural at the friend-neighbor role. What is the friend-neighbor role? Well, in our case it means the kitchen often ends up as a waiting room where parents (mothers) are served tea and have the sympathetic ear of my wife (we run the school from part of our rented house). Generally speaking, most parents don't abuse this privilege and only pop in from time to time, though some seem always to be here and others never.

Sharon Abe:

Once a child becomes my student, I focus on that person and not the parent. I don't want to lose any source of income, but catering to the parents' whims undermines my purpose of teaching. If the parents are unhappy, they may feel free to withdraw their children at any time. I don't need or want that kind of problem.

Joshua Myerson:

At New Leaf Academy, we focus mainly on what goes on inside the classroom, rather than on school-parent relationships. As a result, the relationship that we have with the students' parents is quite an elementary one.

Do we really need to improve our



*Sharon Abe
school owner
(ABCDEnglish)
Yokkaichi
Mie Pref.*



*Peter Lutes
school owner
Takamatsu
Kagawa Pref.*



*David Lisgo
school owner
Shibushi
Kagoshima*



*Joshua Myerson
school owner
(New Leaf Academy)
Nagoya
Aichi*

school-parent relationships? I think that the answer is that we don't. We can continue to teach children and increase our student populations by having active, well-taught sample lessons and/or open house lessons. We can do this because as Peter Lutes commented, 'The teacher is king.' Everybody wants their children to learn English either to get a head start in school or because learning English is a hobby that is valued in Japan. In addition, parents often enroll their children in a school or program and continue to send them there until a change in schedule occurs, or the interest of the student wanes. We are in a school market rather than a consumer market here in Japan.

DL:

Yes, I agree. The long-term aspiration of the parents is that they want their children to do well at school, in English, and they expect that sending them to a private English school will give them a leg up.

Do you allow or encourage parents to observe or participate in classes?

DL:

The first time I ever tried teaching English in Japan, I refused to start until the parents left the room; it took me sometime to realize observing lessons was the norm in Japan, but I don't ever remember seeing a parent watching a lesson when I was growing up in England. In April we started a new class with eight elementary school children and all of their mothers entrenched themselves in the classroom before the start of the lesson. My wife asked me to speak to them before the start of the lesson; this was something I didn't usually do. I, with my wife as interpreter, explained to them my plan for the first year, giving it a real personal touch and letting them see that I do really care about their children. One mother even shed a tear, when I said I would give her daughter extra help (she's the youngest in the class), should she be unable to keep

up. The next week all of the students returned and remain, thankfully.

SA:

With new students, I allow parents to attend only if they feel their child will be too nervous without them. In general, this goes on for the first month only. When the month is up, I tell any attending mothers that it is time to drop off their children and pick them up later. I have never had any arguments about this. I also basi-

We can continue to teach children and increase our student populations by having active, well-taught sample lessons and/or open house lessons.

—Joshua Myerson

cally ignore the mothers during class; I am not there to teach them.

JM:

We invite all parents and prospective students to come in to participate in a sample lesson. Once the parents have observed the children participating in a lesson, we explain about the textbook and the style of teaching etc. We tell the parents that if they would like to, they are welcome to come to observe their children once a month. If they come to watch the classes, we ask them to sit quietly in a chair along the wall inside the classroom, and we

caution them against interacting with their children while the class is in progress. Once a parent has observed a class once or twice, they rarely ask any questions or come again to observe. Other than this, we have very little contact with the parents.

DL:

In general we only have parents in the classroom at the beginning of a new class. If a parent persists in observing the class, or rather, his/her child, then I explain to the parent that s/he is making me nervous and that the children too feel uncomfortable. I think that many schools cater too much for the parents and that instead of teaching the children English, they end up teaching them how to perform for their parents.

PL:

Yes, for the same reason I do not like parents to join classes (including classes I have for 3-4 year olds). I, too, found that it puts pressure on the students to put a show on for their parents. These kinds of 'shows,' I feel, are counterproductive in that the teacher feels unnecessary pressure to orchestrate a good performance for the parents and valuable 'teaching/learning time' is wasted in prepping for these events.

Many parents, I'm sure, have misgivings or doubts about what their child gets up to in their English class. Do you have any ideas for overcoming this?

JM:

An ideal situation might be to have a room next to the classroom with a large window in it, or a classroom door with a large glass section, so that the parents could come to the school and observe without distracting the children. I also recently toyed with the idea of writing a student report about each student's involvement in class. I think parents would be happy to have some feedback about their child.

DL:

At one time we did try giving out

student reports but very soon the parents began to compare their own children to others, which was fine for the students who were doing well. Now, whenever my wife is about to telephone a parent, she will ask me about that parent's child, hoping that I have something good to report.

SA:

I never get calls from parents wanting to know how their child is doing, though when I meet parents at the shopping center or elsewhere they may ask. Before the child joins, I meet with the parent(s) and child, and explain what I will do and how the classes are run. I give the parents the opportunity to ask me anything, and they usually ask if I think their children's learning English would interfere with learning Japanese. Because I myself have bilingual children, I can honestly point out my experience with this, and this immediately calms the parents' worries.

PL:

I realize that parents do want to see what is going on and be informed of their child's progress. To satisfy this legitimate need/request I provide an outline of the curriculum, and a video of the class in action. (I have a lot of experience in digital video editing and the equipment.) This video, which I give to parents every year, lets them see a variety of activities and lets me 'edit to provide the orchestrated performance' without using class time to prepare. An additional benefit is that the parents show their friends the video (which is quite professional with logos, labels, and contact info for my school) and I get a lot of free publicity.

JM:

I like that. A video is a wonderful PR device. Most of us however, could not create something so professional on our own. However, a simpler version of the sample lesson video is probably worth its weight in gold.

Are there any unacceptable requests you have had from parents, and how did you deal with them?

SA:

I think I have only had one unreasonable request, and that was for an older boy in a carpool to wait in a younger boy's class until the next class, then have the younger boy wait in the older boy's class. If the mothers wanted to pay for two classes each, no problem.

PL:

Most of the 'unreasonable' requests I have had from parents come from the neighbor-type impositions, such as can I bring my child 30 minutes early because they know I am there early preparing. I do not have the facilities to baby-sit for them, so I tell them that. I also had someone ask to use my office for their own 'arts and crafts' group when I wasn't using it and someone asking to use my parking. These are neighbor-type requests not school-type issues.

Finally, could you give some tips on maintaining good relations with parents of students?

JM:

I think that it is to our benefit to keep in mind the Japanese translation of this discussion's theme, 'the customer is god.' By doing so, we can only strengthen our relationship with the customers/parents and provide them with a better, more thorough service. A strong relationship in Japan is not something to be overlooked. Japan is a country where relationships and obligation are valued highly. And good relationships at all levels are something that make people feel good and that build strong reputations.

DL:

It is important to remember, too, that most parents are perceptive and intelligent and they will soon suss out the ill-prepared and unprofessional teacher.

SA:

For one, I have found Japanese language ability makes a big difference. I make a lot of mistakes in Japanese, but I can basically carry on a decent dialog

with the parents. This makes them more comfortable with me, and in my opinion, boosts my dependability level with them. I am able to explain more fully what my school is all about before they even sign up their children.

PL:

For the most part I find parents very supportive of their children and of my efforts. I always emphasize that I expect parents to make sure that their kids do the homework, and to express an interest and support the kids in doing it. I think most parents are genuinely interested in their child's education, and we should build on this to our own advantage.

DL:

How much time and effort should we give to our 'customers?' A lot depends upon the teacher-owner's ability and knowledge, resources, personality and character. I'll give some brief examples. Japanese language ability: the higher your level, the easier it is to deepen the 'relationship.' Knowledge of your job: at the very least you should come over as professional. Special talents such as Peter's videotaping or being able to create your own Web site can be put to good use. Resources include such things as a waiting room, refreshments, car parking, a play area, a secretary and an understanding partner. We can all work on our characters and personalities; I remember going to someone's house for years to give a lesson to a group of children, and always feeling unwelcome because the mother rarely greeted me and never offered me a cup of tea. On my drive to the house I would practice smiling in the car just so I wouldn't look sullen when I arrived. Being sociable even if we are naturally introverted is a very important part of this 'relationship.' •

Chris Sato edits the 'School Owners' section for The ETJ Journal.