

How to reduce the number of communications that arrive in the school office for teachers

The amount of time you spend processing emails and letters for members of staff each week can be huge.

And, given that you will often be short of time, it can be very tempting to abandon the process completely, either throwing all the mail into a bin or deleting all the emails that come in marked “Attention Head of...”

But, unfortunately, there is a second issue hiding behind what seems to be a fairly simple decision, and that is what this article focuses on.

Teachers and managers in schools across the UK spend around £8 billion a year on products and services ranging from pencils to electricity, from software to desks.

93% of this money is provided by tax payers, and all of us want to know that the money we hand across to government each month is going to be used properly.

Teachers therefore have a duty to ensure that they are buying the best products and services for their lessons. They might of course choose to stay with the same firm as their supplier year after year– but they also must be able to justify the decision – ensuring that the products they buy are the right ones at the right price.

One way of trying to solve this problem is to suggest that the teachers can go searching for information about products and services via the internet. That is possible – and we have set up a website to help make this easier. It is at www.top5.org.uk - and teachers can simply look for suppliers from a huge index of subject areas.

But if that site doesn't hold the answer, they can be in for a long search – spending hours and hours on search engines trying to find the right product, printing out pages of documents, in an attempt to evaluate each one.

This is, of course, not a very productive use of teachers' time, and not surprisingly many resent having this extra workload added to their already busy lives.

For this reason, the SEA has sponsored an approach which allows teachers to get information about their subject and the products and services related to it, directly to themselves – via email – without the information coming via the school office.

We have moved a long way towards implementing this approach – as you will see from the details below - and as a result of this the amount of direct mail that is reaching school offices now is far less than it was four years ago.

But, although the process is taking time to implement, you can already start reducing the number of messages that you have to process each day. And, if we can turn our new email system into something that becomes the norm for teachers seeking information, eventually the number of mailshots and emails that you get through the school office can be reduced to near zero.

We can't achieve that straight off – because of the need to keep up the supply of information to teachers so that they can fulfil their legal duty of making sure that school money is spent properly. But with your help we can achieve this over time.

Here are the details...

First method: check your details on the Schools Directory.

Every week thousands of parents look up the details of schools on the Schools Directory. The Directory, which is housed within the www.schools.co.uk site, allows parents to type in the school name, or the name of a town or a postcode, and find the match.

Parents find the site because on some search engines (for example Google) if you type the word “schools” in as a search, the Schools Directory comes up near the top (on some machines it comes out at the very top) of the 29 million listings that match that word.

What also makes the site important is that not only does it list every school, but also well over half of the schools in the UK now have their own website linked to the schools.co.uk site. To find out if your link is there and working, simply go to www.schools.co.uk and click on The Schools Directory (second item down on the list on the left). Then type in some details of your school in one field and click the button. Details will appear below.

Now click on the link to your school and then check the details – including the website link. If anything is wrong, or if there is no website link or if it doesn't work, go to the top left box, click on “Update school details” and then complete the pop up form and click the “submit” button when done.

There is evidence that schools that have all the correct information listed do get fewer irrelevant enquiries because the parents can learn more about the school on-line before making the phone call.

Second method: join Corporate TPS. Like the Schools Directory, registration with CTPS is free.

It is an offence for a company to make a sales phone call to a school that is registered with the Corporate Telephone Preference Service, so registering can have an immediate effect. What's more, if you do get any calls that relate to advertising you can simply say, “Calling this number with a sales-related call is a criminal offence,” and leave it at that.

To register just go to www.tpsonline.org.uk and then click on “What is Corporate TPS?” and you can register on-line. That will cut the number of sales call you get.

But please note, if in the past you have registered with TPS, rather than Corporate TPS, you must now register with Corporate TPS to avoid getting sales calls at the school.

Third method: dealing with faxes

The receipt of unwanted faxes is easy to control simply by registering with the Fax Preference Service – that will cut out most of the fax adverts you get. It won't cut them all, but if you are really keen on this you can forward faxes that you get after you are registered to the FPS and they'll take the matter up with the company concerned. You can register free at www.fpsonline.org.uk

Fourth method: dealing with emails

There is no regulation that allows you to stop emails being sent to the school's general address, although emails sent to an individual's email address from within the EU are controlled by law.

This is a problem for admin, because the emails you don't see (the ones that go straight to the teachers) are the ones controlled by legislation.

However there is one way around the email problem – and that is to invite all teachers to sign up to receive emails from an opt-in news service at www.schools.co.uk/aboutEMN.html I must admit that this won't have an instant effect, but over time the move across to opt-in lists is reducing the number of emails to teachers sent via the school's address. We've almost certainly hit the peak of general emails to the school address, so we should be seeing a significant decline in numbers in the coming months.

Fifth method: cutting the direct mail

This move across to email is also helping to reduce the amount of post going to teachers via the school office. This year the amount of postal information sent to teachers by post is running at around 50% of the amount of 4 years ago – a huge drop in a short space of time. The more we can persuade teachers to accept incoming information from opt-in email services the more it will help everyone.

I do hope you find this information helpful. I fully appreciate that the methods of controlling the amount of promotional material reaching schools are not yet removing all the problems from school administrators, but given the huge impact we've had on direct mail, I am hopeful that in the next few years the problem will be resolved totally.

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