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MBA in Educational Management by Distance Learning

Managing Finance and External Relations

**Preparatory School Websites:
Their present and potential use as part
of a marketing strategy**

By

Miles Berry

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Introduction

“Markets and information technology and the relationship between them are the primary forces driving educational change today” (Kenway 1995, p53)

This study seeks to address the extent to which a group of what are often regarded as conservative, traditional institutions have embraced a very new and still evolving medium as a means of marketing themselves. Marketing here should be understood in a rather broader sense than simply selling the school to prospective parents, as the Institute of Marketing has it, marketing is:

“A management process responsible for anticipating, identifying and then satisfying consumer wants and needs with a view to making profit”
(Quoted in Gray 1991, p2).

The World Wide Web dates back to Tim Berners-Lee’s work at CERN in 1990 (Naughton 1999, p234) and although it was initially confined to the academic community, it is now almost taken for granted, with access to the web from 45% of UK homes (National Statistics, 2002) and over 99% of UK schools (DFES 2002, p19) and is increasingly used as a medium for businesses to market themselves (Hofacker, 2001)

Whilst maintained schools have experienced a market-like environment since the 1988 Education Reform Act, independent schools have had somewhat longer experience of having to market themselves, as their survival depends on ensuring the school remain attractive to a sufficient number of parents (*cf* Bush 1999, p5). Attention here is restricted to preparatory (prep) schools, the term traditionally applied to those independent schools teaching the 7-11 or 7-13 age bands, and *preparing* children for entry into independent senior schools. Our attention is further

restricted to those schools, like the author's own, whose headteachers are in membership of the Incorporated Association of Preparatory School (IAPS). IAPS expects member schools to have high academic, pastoral, behaviour, staffing, and conditions of service standards (IAPS 2002) and also aims to ensure diversity and breadth in terms of curriculum, age-range, boarding/day and religious/spiritual dimensions (*ibid*). 148,853 pupils were educated in the 499 English IAPS schools in January 2002 (ISC, 2002), less than 4% of those in English maintained primary schools (DFES 2002). Although a relatively insignificant proportion of the population, prep school pupils do represent fees income of around £380 Million (ISC 2002): a market worthy of study.

The author's own school, St Ives Haslemere, with 143 pupils is rather smaller than the average IAPS school (299, *ibid*), and the school's fees are slightly less than the IAPS average (£2432, *ibid*) but broadly competitive with other local day schools for girls. The author designed the school's website (www.stiveshaslemere.com) in February 2000, between his appointment and taking up his post as deputy head. The site includes the prospectus text and photos, along with details of fees, leavers' destinations, National Curriculum test results, a staff list, the present term's calendar and a 'course details' for each class. The site currently generates around 17 hits per day, and at least three of the school's present pupils first learned of the school through the site. The site's design and content has largely remained unchanged since its initial conception and an overhaul now seems rather overdue. In part the review of literature and the survey described below were conceived as a way of gleaning ideas for ways to make best use of our website in marketing the school amongst its present stakeholders and promoting it to prospective parents, in a part of Surrey well served by independent schools and thus a highly competitive market place.

Literature Review

Markets in Education

Wringe (1994) describes the market according to Adam Smith:

“The uncontrolled rise and fall of prices according to the law of supply and demand ensure that effort and resources are directed to where that are most needed.... Producers are supposed to apply industry, efficiency and ingenuity in the process of production while purchasers become well informed, critical and judicious in their choices.” (p105)

Several of the studies published since 1988 have raised issues over many aspects of this notion: funding for places in maintained schools cannot be described as uncontrolled (West *et al* 2000); the market fails to direct resources to the place of greatest need (Ball 1993); under some circumstances the market may fail to promote industry and efficiency (Smedley, 1995); the market has failed to encourage ingenuity (Woods *et al* 1998); despite league tables, inspections, and prospectus regulation, parents rarely make informed, rational choices (Adnett & Davies, 2002); and, even if they do, such choices may not be in their child’s or society’s best interests (Wringe, 1994).

Such studies have, however, largely concentrated on the quasi-market amongst UK secondary schools. The prep schools in the UK have survived in conditions arguably closer to those described above for rather longer and, as the schools themselves would argue, provide a high quality of education with a broad curriculum. Adnett & Davies (2002, p9) indicate some of the differences between private and maintained schools, which help explain why the market model more closely applies in their case, not least of which is the existence of genuine competition for recruitment and retention (*qu* Walford 2001, p25). The private school market is, however, not without difficulties: in

particular, that selection by ability to pay (James & Phillips 1995, p78) is difficult to justify from a moral perspective. Also, it is probably harder for parents to obtain objective information about independent schools as: their prospectuses are unregulated; their inspections are carried out by an agency that could be accused of lacking independence and whose reports have only recently been in the public domain; and, in the case of IAPS prep schools, there are no exam league tables (Lumsdon & Morris, 2002). Comprehensive, accurate and accessible prep school websites should thus be a means of ensuring more efficient market operation.

School Choice

Responsiveness is an essential feature of the market:

“Schools and education authorities in market model will need to know what parents are looking for in a schools so that they can introduce policies to provide it and so ensure their own survival as well as increase consumer satisfaction” (Gorard 1999, p41)

Schools can and do carry out there own market research (Waring 1999, Smedley 1993 p3), but there also exists a body of research on the reasons why parents choose schools, why they reject them, and the often complex processes involved in reaching these decisions. Gorard (1999) provides a good overview of this research. However: the bulk of the research has focussed almost exclusively on choice of *secondary* school and it is likely that different criteria and processes will apply to choosing a primary or prep school; and most of this research took place before schools began to use the Internet as a means of marketing themselves and, whilst it is unlikely this would have had a significant effect on research findings, it certainly should not be overlooked. There is also a certain lack of consistency in the research findings and Gorard highlights some of the weaknesses in the methodology of the various studies (*ibid*, pp37-39), and indeed his own study (Gorard, 1997) is not without difficulties

due to its narrow geographical basis. What does seem clear is that the majority of parents look first for a school at which their child is likely to be happy:

“Parents seem to be looking for friendly, relaxed relationships rather like family life, feeling that if children are not happy, they won’t give of their best at school” (Smedley 1993, p5).

Whilst most parents give the highest priority to intrinsic-personal/social factors such as these (Woods *et al* 1998), Smedley suggests that there is one group of parents, “active choosers” for whom “quality of education and academic excellence are what matter” (1995 p98). He describes parents of “high socio-economic status” (*ibid*) as being much more likely to be in this category, suggesting that they are likely to be targeted by prep schools in their marketing. Gewirtz *et al* provide a somewhat different perspective:

“[Privileged chooser's] sympathies are certainly liberal, if not progressive. That is to say... there is little evidence of the rampant traditionalism that Conservative commentators perceive among parents.” (1995, p38)

Both Gorard (1997, p171) and Woods *et al* (1998, p171) maintain that occupational class accounted for no significant difference in factors.

The Independent Schools Information Service) also commissions detailed market research into these areas. Their findings suggest that the three most important reasons for choosing a particular *independent* school are: “[It] prepares pupils to fulfil their potential”, “Small class sizes” and “Quality of teachers” (MORI 2001, p35), all of which might be seen as falling within Woods *et al*'s instrumental-academic dimension (1998, p191).

Promotion

The most powerful marketing tool seems to be the school’s reputation:

“ ‘Word of mouth’ is the most important influence on choice for all ages and stages of the AIDA process.” (Foskett & Helmsley-Brown 1999, p218).

Almost all parents choosing a school regard prospectuses as valuable sources of information (MORI 2001, p33). There have been a number of studies of school prospectuses over recent years, both for their own sake and “As evidence of how schools are and/or as evidence of how they would like to be” (Knight 1992, p56). Prospectuses have now become increasingly ‘glossified’, commercial productions (Gewirtz *et al* pp127ff), featuring broadly the same elements (Gorard 1997, p137), often with similar designs, text and pictures. (Hesketh and Knight 1998, pp30-33, *cf* Headington and Howson 1995, p91). This study seeks to address the extent to which the same could be said of the much newer medium of the school website. Several authors (Symes 1998, Copeland 2001, *qv* Gewirtz *et al* 1995 p126), have attempted a semiotic analysis of prospectuses, which suggest that prospectuses have now evolved their own symbolic language. Recurring themes seems to be the perceived need to maintain a balance between the traditional and innovative (Symes, 1998), and an emphasis on the academic as opposed to the affective/pastoral (Woods *et al* 1998, p191, Gewirtz *et al* 1995, p138). This study will examine whether the same is true of prep school websites.

In developing promotional material such as prospectuses and websites, schools need to be wary of producing material that is too glossy or over designed, as this can provoke a negative reaction from some parents

“As a general rule, the more a school is in demand the less money it feels the need to spend on its prospectus” (Rae 1998, p73, *qv* Copeland 2001, p90).

Such material is all too likely to favour design over content, making the process of informed choice harder (Gewirtz *et al* 1995, pp133-136). Of course, “In educational

strategic marketing, honesty and integrity count” (Hanson 1992, p263), and given the prevalence of the preferred format, “A format which was different could make an impact on the reader” (Copeland 2001, p90).

Websites

The World Wide Web is a relatively new medium and there are consequently few academic studies of its use as a marketing tool in education. Hesketh & Selwyn’s (1999) study provides a snapshot of a medium in its early stages of development. They found that most sites

“offered little more than prospectus style information, news for present students and parents about the school, and occasional examples of students’ own work” (p508).

They identified a wide variation in the nature, complexity and purpose of the sites, (*op cit*, p510). Even at this stage, they were conscious that

“The increasing glossification of prospectuses... is clearly taking place on a number of school websites” (*op cit*, p514),

yet nevertheless felt that schools displayed “a lack of innovation... in the design of their web pages” (*op cit*, p508). This study indicates the extent to which the same findings are true four years later on.

They highlight the lack of formal *regulation* of cyberspace, and in particular as this applies to schools (*op cit*, p505). There is now, however, a range *guidance* from various government agencies on the design and content of school websites such as: Forster & Powell (2001), Falconer (2001) pp119-126, BECTA (2001), BECTA(2002), and NGFL(2001). Recommendations on design largely follow those found in more general texts on web design (*eg* Hofacker 2001, pp51-55, Ollier 1998, pp83-93, Alsbury & McManus 2002, pp53-59), although there is a greater emphasis on accessibility

(BECTA 2001, pp2-3) and on the need to protect children (NGFL, 2001). The extent to which prep schools follow such guidance is addressed below.

Investigation and Methodology

Like prospectuses, websites on their own can provide the researcher with much information about a school and its perception of itself and its place in its market. (Hesketh & Selwyn, 1999). School websites also implicitly (and often explicitly) make statements about the school's response to information technology and the modern world (*ibid*). Johnson (1994) indicates several of the strengths and weaknesses of an essentially document based approach such as the one outlined here. Admittedly, this approach would produce a rather one sided view of the state of prep school education today; it can however provide a view of how schools wish to be perceived and thus can illuminate the aspects of education that these schools regard as important, or believe that prospective parents would view as important.

Attention was restricted to schools in IAPS as this would simplify the process of obtaining a list of schools, and make comparisons somewhat more meaningful.

A comprehensive database of IAPS schools, including website addresses, may be searched through the association's website (www.iaps.org.uk). Davd Leaffe of IAPS, kindly supplied the author with a spreadsheet extract from the underlying database, which was used as the basis for this study. Some general questions were answerable immediately from this data.

To investigate the comprehensiveness of the IAPS list, the search engine Google (www.google.co.uk) was used to do a school name search on a random sample of 20 schools that had not registered a website with IAPS.

The main part of the study concentrated on a random sample of 20 UK schools that had registered their website with IAPS. This allowed statistical techniques to be used to make inferences about the population from which the sample was drawn and eliminates any bias which a cluster or area based approach might produce (Blalock,

1970). The sample size of 20 was chosen as a figure large enough to reduce the effects of sampling errors whilst still providing a manageable sample for this relatively small scale study. A larger sample would have allowed quantitative inferences to be drawn with greater confidence.

Information on age range, setting, religion, roll size, maximum day and boarding fees, day/boarding ratio and boy/girl ratio was obtained on each of the 20 sample schools through the ISCIS website (www.iscis.uk.net). This enabled comparison of sample data with ISCIS census data (ISC 2002), to judge the extent to which the sample was representative of IAPS schools and to allow analysis of the websites against these indicators of the schools' nature.

Because of the potentially ephemeral nature of the websites, a mirroring program was used to make a local copy of the websites. Mirroring all sites on the same date made comparisons between sites fairer. The local mirror facilitated a statistical analysis of the sample websites. For each website, data was obtained on total size, number of pages, page size, the number of images, image size, and the dates of creation or modification of the oldest and most recent objects on the site. The Internet Archive (www.archive.org) was also used to identify earlier versions of each website. Technical reasons prevented two of the 20 sites from being mirrored, however these sites were included in the analyses of accessibility, style and content described below.

To judge the accessibility of each website, each site's homepage was submitted to the World Wide Web Consortium's HTML validator (validator.w3.org) and Watchfire's Bobby Scan (bobby.watchfire.com), which is designed to "help web page authors identify and repair barriers to access by individuals with disabilities." (*ibid*).

Each website was carefully studied with a view to its style, content and purpose. Notes were made on each site's start page or homepage, to allow semiotic analysis such as Copeland's (2001) or Hesketh & Selwyn's (1999). The author's subjective

impressions of the sites' design were noted, alongside indications as to the website's designer and the relationship of the website to the school's prospectus.

The inclusion on each site of key elements such as a staff list, fees, exam results, policy statements, school calendar, newsletters, pupils' work, or links to other websites were recorded. The extent to which a site conformed to guidance on Internet safety was recorded.

Notes were made on the way schools used their website to emphasize a traditional or modern approach to education and the academic and pastoral dimensions of school life. Where possible, illustrative quotations were recorded. Formal content analysis (Scott 1990) seemed inappropriate in a small scale study such as this.

Some judgement of the target audience of each page was made. This allowed some view to be formed of the extent to which the sample schools were using websites as part of a wider, relationship based, marketing strategy (Stokes, 1996).

Statistical tests such as analysis of variance, Pearson (product-moment) correlation and chi-squared contingency tables were used extensively on numeric and dichotomous data. The analysis reported below highlights only results significant at the 5% level. The author found Clarke and Cooke (1983) a useful reminder on these techniques.

Analysis

IAPS Schools

Of the 583 schools on which data was provided, 392 (67%) had registered a website with IAPS. Comparing IAPS with UK schools as a whole (table 1), suggests that websites have been taken up with particular enthusiasm by these schools ($p=0.000044$).

Table 1

Group	IAPS Schools	UK primary schools	UK schools	Websites worldwide
<i>Source</i>	<i>IAPS, Internet Archive</i>	<i>DFES (2002)</i>	<i>DFES (2002)</i>	<i>OCLC (2002)</i>
Websites in 1999	84	3 800	5 970	4 662 000
<i>Proportion</i>	<i>14%</i>	<i>21%</i>	<i>26%</i>	<i>N/A</i>
Websites in 2002	392	10 100	13 300	8 712 000
<i>Proportion</i>	<i>67%</i>	<i>56%</i>	<i>59%</i>	<i>N/A</i>
Annual rate of increase (1999- 2002)	67%	38%	30%	23%

Comparative statistics for IAPS, UK schools and worldwide websites, 1999-2002

There is no significant difference in website take-up between regions (Table 2), nor is there any significant difference due to a school's entry and leaving age. (Tables 3a, 3b).

Table 2

Region	Schools with websites	Schools	Proportion
London North	36	58	62%
London South	54	83	65%
Kent	19	25	76%
Sussex	25	33	76%
South West	27	38	71%
South	29	37	78%
Midlands	27	43	63%
North West & Wales	12	22	55%
North East	34	52	65%
East	42	50	84%
Oxford and Reading	54	78	69%
Scotland	13	19	68%
Abroad	20	45	44%
Total	392	583	67%

Analysis of IAPS school websites by region

Table 3a

Starting age	Schools with websites	Schools	%
Under 4	239	297	80%
4 plus	54	81	67%
Older than 5	49	58	84%
Total	342	436	78%

Analysis of IAPS websites by joining age

Table 3b

Leaving age	Schools with websites	Schools	%
11 or under	116	167	69%
13 plus	214	252	85%
Older than 13	12	17	71%
Total	342	436	78%

Analysis of IAPS websites by leaving age

The IAPS data also allows an analysis of the choice of domain name by schools. (Table 4)

Table 4

Domain	Number	Proportion
.co.uk	125	32%
.sch.uk	85	22%
.com	63	16%
.org.uk	48	12%
.org	30	8%
ISP's own webspace	27	7%
Overseas	8	2%
.net	4	1%
.ac.uk	1	0%
.info	1	0%
Total	392	

Analysis of domain names used by IAPS schools

It would seem Nominet are rather optimistic in their expectation “that by 2003 all schools will be using their .sch.uk domain name” (Nominet, 2002). The .sch.uk domains may have proven less popular due to their increased length.

A random sample of 20 schools that had *not* registered a website with IAPS showed eight to have websites indexed by Google. Extrapolating this proportion suggests that the number of IAPS schools with websites is around 468 (± 41 , 95% confidence) that is about 80% ($\pm 7\%$, 95% confidence).

The Sample Schools

Details of the 20 schools in the random sample of those which had registered a website with IAPS are included in the appendix. Only six are exclusively day schools compared to 54% of UK IAPS schools, a significant difference ($p=0.027$), suggesting that websites are more prevalent in the less geographically determined boarding market.

Table 5

Statistic	Sample mean	Sample S.E.	IAPS mean (ISCIS, 2002)
Pupils	307	37	298
Day fee per term	£2759	£114	£2293
Boarding fee per term	£3954	£161	£4068
Number of boarders	37	14	25
Number of girls	106	14	127

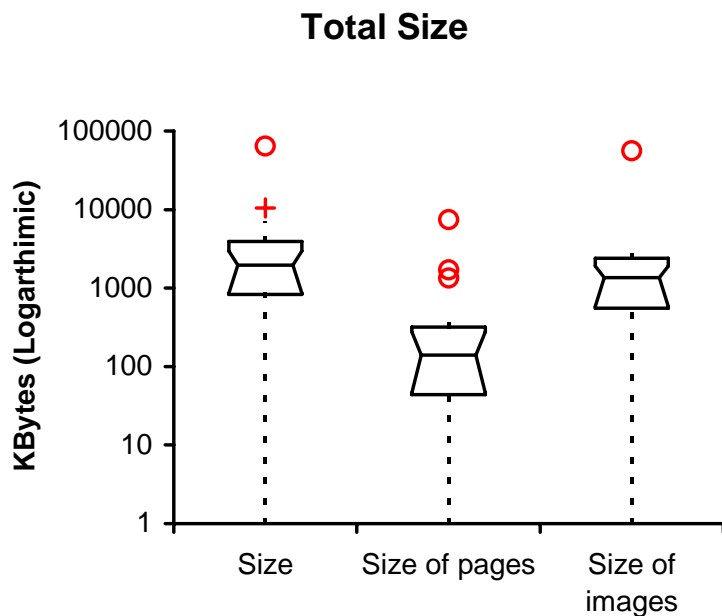
Comparison of sample statistics with population.

The comparisons shown in table 5 suggest a reasonably good match between the sample and the population; the difference in day fees is because the fees noted for the sample are the maximum per term, whereas ISCIS record the average fee.

Statistical Overview Of Sample Websites

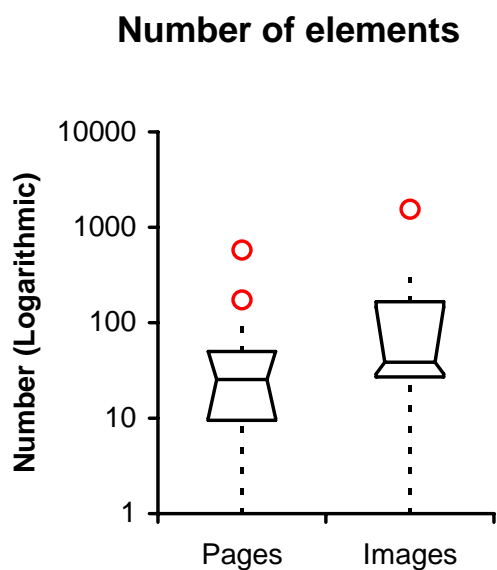
There was a wide variety of websites in the sample, ranging from simple 'flat' sites designed in house to sophisticated websites containing much information about the school for a range of different audiences. One site, Prince's Mead, was essentially empty. All the other sites extended beyond a single page. Charts 1-3 illustrates this variety.

Chart 1



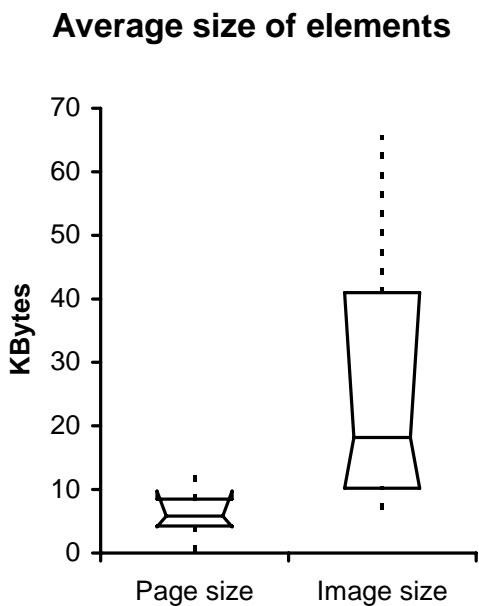
Box-whisker plot showing total size for sample websites (logarithmic scale)

Chart 2



Box-Whisker plot showing number of elements on sample websites (logarithmic scale)

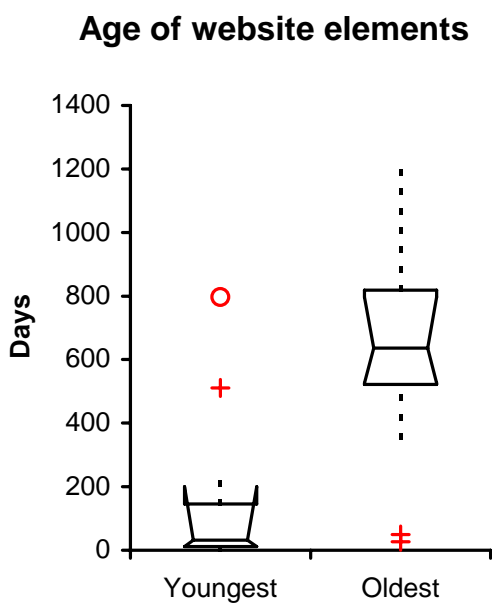
Chart 3



Box-whisker plot showing average size of elements on sample websites.

Many of the outliers on the above charts are for Monkton Combe Junior School (MCJS), where the inclusion of pupils' own web pages has resulted in increased size on these measures.

Chart 4



Box-whisker plot of age of most recent and oldest sample page elements

There was significant *negative* correlation between the school's fees and how recently the site was modified, ($r=-0.57$, $p=0.016$). Perhaps those schools with greater income have more resources available to keep a website up to date.

Accessibility

All of the sample schools' homepages failed to achieve even one 'A' on Webfire's Bobby scan, mainly because they failed to include 'alt' tags for images. Steps such as this could easily be taken to make websites accessible to more individuals. Submission of homepages to the Worldwide Web Consortium's HTML validator produced similarly dispiriting results; none of the homepages' underlying HTML was error free.

Website design

Most sites, particularly those developed 'in-house', made explicit reference to their designers, in other cases indications in the source code or WHOIS entries allowed the author to be deduced. Eight sites had been designed by external agencies, these generally had a glossier appearance. Of the remaining 12, only Woodcote House, indicated that pupils had been involved in the design of the site, although MCJS also included pupils' webpages.

Most of the schools' homepages included all the expected elements of contact details, a brief description of the school and navigation menu. The school crest or logo was found on 17 of the 20 sample sites (*qv* Copeland 2001). Only four of the sites did not include some picture of the school building on their homepage, including both The Dragon and Lambrook Haileybury, whose appeal rests more securely on their reputation. Pictures of old school buildings make reference to tradition as well as a school's facilities (*ibid*).

11 sites included pictures of pupils on their homepage. The children generally have smiling faces and were engaged in activities other their studies. The semiotics here signal the school as a place where a child will be happy.

Eight sites included a slogan or motto on their home page; the Hawthorns including two such phrases: “Love God, love thy neighbour” and “A happy child learns”. Three sites included a Latin motto. (*qv* Symes 1998, pp138-139).

Homepage designs varied widely. Some were sleek pages, whose design suggested professional involvement, such as The Hawthorns. Others had a rather cluttered layout, still others felt decidedly homemade; whether this was through a conscious desire to avoid the negative association of “PR” or through a lack of technical or design skill is unclear.

A similar picture emerged when the design of the site as a whole was considered. Many designers showed evidence of having read advice on webdesign and some sites demonstrated a simple effective design. Very few of the sites here were entirely successful in addressing the difficulties of navigating a large, multi-layered site. Some of the in-house sites suffered from poor layout and at least nine sites were inconsistent in their use of fonts. There were a few instances of sites being determined by technical wizardry rather than a designer’s eye. Several sites included elements ‘under construction’ or broken links, provoking a negative response.

Twelve of the sites contained text, and usually pictures, of the sort typically found in independent school prospectuses (Symes 1998, Copeland 2001). Of the remaining eight, three provided an on-line form to order a copy of the prospectus. Three of the sites went further and included a registration form. This raises the question of whether sites aimed to raise attention, create interest, generate desire or provoke action (Foskett & Helmsley-Brown, 1999). None of the schools included on their website the range of factual information which maintained schools are required to include in their prospectuses (DfEE 1998).

Key Elements

Only four of the sites (all in-house designs) included a staff list, with only St Aubyn's listing academic qualifications (*cf* Copeland 2001). Five of the sample schools included an indication of their fees on their website; the fees in these five schools were significantly lower than in the other schools ($p=0.0008$), suggesting that these schools wished to be seen as providing particularly good value for money.

Just three schools included details of their National Curriculum Test scores. Other schools in the sample claimed exam success, and several schools included lists of senior schools where their pupils had won places or scholarships, perhaps because "Choice ambitions at 11 often shape choice of primary school for 4/5 year olds" (Foskett & Helmsley-Brown 1999, p218, *qv* Rae 1998).

Few schools included school policy documents on the publicly accessible portions of their websites. Only Kingswood House made any reference to bullying (*cf* Rae 1998, p74). The absence of such policies from websites suggests a strong focus on selling the school to prospective parents, rather than a more encompassing view of marketing.

Twelve schools included some form of calendar information, although three of these were more than three months out of date, nevertheless calendars were more likely to be found on the sites that had been updated more recently ($p=0.02$). News of 'recent' events was made available by nine of the schools, four of which were similarly out of date. These calendars and newsletters conveyed some sense of the wide range of activities that make up prep school life, although sporting fixtures did tend to dominate.

Only seven of the sites included examples of pupils' work. The work on view was of an impressive quality, although it lacked the inclusiveness of a good classroom display. The larger websites were more likely to include pupils' work ($p=0.02$).

Most schools took their responsibilities for pupil safety seriously, although a couple included reference to pupils by their full name and several included pictures of pupils in swimming costumes or other PE kit. Most did include pictures of individual pupils, although in no case were photographed pupils identified (NGFL, 2001).

School Character

Many of the schools made some reference to tradition such as their foundation date or their history. Most included photographs of old buildings. The Dragon displayed sepia photographs of the school, a long list of impressive alumni, and a list of headmasters back to 1877, thus promoting the sort of education of which parents themselves had happy memories. (Wringe 1994, p111).

Schools were eager to point out their readiness to embrace the modern age. Some alluded to a more progressive approach to education, *eg*:

“[Our children] experience satisfaction and success from the multi-sensory teaching and child-centred classroom. Work is collaborative and co-operative.” (Woodleigh).

Schools often featured photographs and description of extensive ICT facilities, and many made reference to their development programmes. (*qv* Hesketh & Selwyn 1999).

Most of the sample websites strove to maintain at least the impression of balancing the traditional with the modern:

“Teaching techniques embrace a combination of traditional and modern methods.” (Woodleigh, *qv* Symes 1998)

Most schools emphasised academic life as a strength and indicated that their approach had particular merit. For example,

“[We provide] a relaxed and comfortable learning environment where your son will be challenged and stimulated academically” (Kingswood House)

Several sites referred to provision for the more able, including extension maths lessons at The Dragon and classical Greek at Handcross Park, and most sites mentioned provision for children with special educational needs.

Schools also seemed eager to present a caring face and there was repeated mention of the schools as extended families. Many schools claimed to be happy places where children were valued and secure. Phrases such as:

“The Headmaster and his family, together with several members of staff, live within the School, creating a supportive, nurturing relationship between themselves and the children in their care.” (Old Buckneham Hall)

suggest that schools have some grasp of the findings of school choice research (*eg Woods et al 1998*).

It seems that Gewirtz *et al's* (1995) view that

“there is less emphasis on schools as friendly and caring institutions, on the process of teaching and learning, [and] on provision for children with special needs” (p138)

is not the case in this particular market segment.

Target audience

That prospective parents are the principal audience for prep school websites seems clear from even a cursory glance at the sample sites. Three quarters of the sample included some information of interest to present parents, although this was largely limited to calendars and newsletters. This audience is particularly important as a school's present parents are often its greatest advocates (*Anderson et al p56*).

Only three sites provided resources for pupils. On-line copies of lesson notes, homework assignments and links to educational websites were largely absent. Such

resources would foster closer home-school links and involving pupils in their production would be of benefit to all involved. Four schools also provided areas for *former* pupils, but these were of a relatively limited nature.

Few of the sites included much of interest to other teachers, although four schools allowed space for job adverts. The schools in the sample seemed happier to use their websites to compete than to collaborate (Preedy 1999).

With the exception of Bedale's listing of events in its art gallery and theatre and MCJS' desire to promote local broadband, there seemed little else of interest to schools' local communities.

It seems clear that the schools in this sample are not using the Internet to best effect in meeting the needs of all of their stakeholders.

Conclusion

Some themes emerge in the above survey of present use of the internet in marketing: IAPS schools are making extensive use of websites; there is a wide variety in the design and technical sophistication of the websites studied, many of which remain 'home-made', unlike the dull uniformity of commercially produced prospectuses; there is less variety in the message which schools seek to convey – nearly all seem to be happy, busy places with a perfect match of the traditional and modern, excelling academically and providing good pastoral care; and most schools limit the function of their websites to promoting the school to prospective parents, rather than marketing the school amongst a wider stakeholder group, which would provide further conduits for feedback and thus improve responsiveness.

In considering the *future* use of prep school websites as marketing tools, it is perhaps easiest to consider St Ives' own website and explore some of the ways in which this should evolve.

In the school's own market research amongst present parents, one parent expressed particular concern about an increase in promotional activity:

“I do feel that you should be very careful about too much marketing. The parents of St Ives do not want the school to change and therefore [it is] a mistake to bring in children from outside the local area. Word of mouth has to be the best but if class sizes keep expanding, then we will all be tempted to guard our well kept secret!” (Anonymous St Ives parent).

Development of the school website in ways that involve existing stakeholders as well as interest potential customers seems to be the way forward. The Internet provides the opportunity to place the school at the centre of a virtual learning community.

Attention does need to be paid to the 'look and feel' of the site, and in particular to accessibility. The author is determined to continue development of the site 'in house', and whilst

“Time taken in image-making and public relations exercises is time taken from the vital core task of making schools better places for children”
(Sullivan 1995, p97),

it is felt that some pupils could and should be involved in the construction of the website (*qv* Kenway 1995, p57).

The website should certainly be developed to include most of the elements mentioned by Forster & Powell (2001), such as pupils work, a virtual tour, newsletters, policies, schemes of work, learning resources, homework and extensive links. However, there is opportunity to go beyond this. A broadband Internet connection and suitable firewall security would enable the boundaries of the school's network to be extended into the homes of its various stakeholders, making an enhanced *intranet* available via the Internet. A vision of pupils, staff and parents being able to access the school's network resources, home, safely meet in virtual chat rooms and contribute to discussion boards, collaborate on homework assignments (by design!) and access assessment and lesson planning information, all from home is quite inspiring (*qv* Kenway 1995, pp56-57). Moreover, some resources could be made available, in a carefully controlled way, beyond the school's immediate family to the local community and, in particular, to prospective parents. All this is technically feasible already and would be a distinctive and educationally worthwhile use of the Internet, as well as an impressive marketing tool. How technology will develop in the future is uncertain, but it seems likely that more educational institutions will use the Web, or its successor, to extend the boundaries of the institution way beyond their local area. What seems certain is that

"High-tech education is here to stay... educational institutions that are aggressive in using modern technologies continue to prevail and succeed in an age where admitting and retaining students is essential for the existence of most educational institutions" (Reddy 1997, p106)

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Appendix

Details of the 20 schools in the sample

School: Bishopsgate School

URL: www.bishopsgate.surrey.sch.uk

Number on roll: 294, joining age: 2.5, leaving age 13,

girls 33%, boarders 3%, setting: Rural, religion: Christian,

maximum day fee: £2750, maximum boarding fee: £3660.

Size of website: 1114KB, size of page: 46KB, size of images: 1068KB

number of pages: 8, number of images: 38

average page size: 5.8KB, average image size: 28.1KB

date of earliest reference (website/Internet Archive): 22/10/2000,

date of most recent element (as at 29/10/02): 09/09/2002.

School: Dragon School

URL: www.dragonschool.org

Number on roll: 837, joining age: 4, leaving age 13,

girls 32%, boarders 33%, setting: Urban, religion: Anglican,

maximum day fee: £3460, maximum boarding fee: £4960.

Size of website: 6691KB, size of page: 223KB, size of images: 3796KB

number of pages: 50, number of images: 209

average page size: 4.5KB, average image size: 18.2KB

date of earliest reference (website/Internet Archive): 27/11/1999,

date of most recent element (as at 29/10/02): 28/10/2002.

School: Dumpton School

URL: www.dumpton.com

Number on roll: 259, joining age: 2.5, leaving age 13,

girls 31%, boarders 0%, setting: Rural, religion: Anglican,

maximum day fee: £2995, maximum boarding fee: £.

Size of website: 720KB, size of page: 29KB, size of images: 165KB

number of pages: 7, number of images: 21

average page size: 4.1KB, average image size: 7.9KB

date of earliest reference (website/Internet Archive): 03/10/2002,

date of most recent element (as at 29/10/02): 04/10/2002.

School: Dunhurst (Bedales Junior School)

URL: www.bedales.org.uk

Number on roll: 283, joining age: 3, leaving age 13,

girls 52%, boarders 25%, setting: Rural, religion: ND,

maximum day fee: £3239, maximum boarding fee: £4377.

Size of website: Not known, size of page: Not known, size of images: Not known

number of pages: Not known, number of images: Not known

average page size: Not known, average image size: Not known

date of earliest reference (website/Internet Archive): 14/09/2000,

date of most recent element (as at 29/10/02): .

School: Feltonfleet School

URL: www.feltonfleet.co.uk

Number on roll: 308, joining age: 3, leaving age 13,

girls 28%, boarders 11%, setting: Rural, religion: Anglican,

maximum day fee: £2850, maximum boarding fee: £3990.

Size of website: 5348KB, size of page: 278KB, size of images: 1784KB

number of pages: 50, number of images: 100

average page size: 5.6KB, average image size: 17.8KB

date of earliest reference (website/Internet Archive): 04/03/2001,

date of most recent element (as at 29/10/02): 18/10/2002.

School: Gresham's Preparatory School

URL: home.btconnect.com/prep/prepwelcome.html

Number on roll: 314, joining age: 3, leaving age 13,

girls 45%, boarders 16%, setting: Rural, religion: Anglican,

maximum day fee: £2185, maximum boarding fee: £4150.

Size of website: 2135KB, size of page: 330KB, size of images: 1437KB

number of pages: 28, number of images: 146

average page size: 11.8KB, average image size: 9.8KB

date of earliest reference (website/Internet Archive): 10/09/2002,

date of most recent element (as at 29/10/02): 20/09/2002.

School: Handcross Park School

URL: www.handxpark.com

Number on roll: 297, joining age: 2.5, leaving age 13,

girls 40%, boarders 2%, setting: Rural, religion: Anglican,

maximum day fee: £3049, maximum boarding fee: £3574.

Size of website: Not known, size of page: Not known, size of images: Not known

number of pages: Not known, number of images: Not known

average page size: Not known, average image size: Not known

date of earliest reference (website/Internet Archive): 25/02/2001,

date of most recent element (as at 29/10/02): Not known.

School: Holmwood House School

URL: www.holmwood.essex.sch.uk

Number on roll: 388, joining age: 4, leaving age >13,

girls 38%, boarders 5%, setting: Rural, religion: Christian,

maximum day fee: £3192, maximum boarding fee: £4127.

Size of website: 1000KB, size of page: 95KB, size of images: 891KB

number of pages: 29, number of images: 65

average page size: 3.3KB, average image size: 13.7KB

date of earliest reference (website/Internet Archive): 25/02/2001,

date of most recent element (as at 29/10/02): 24/06/2002.

School: Kingswood House School

URL: www.kingswoodhouse.surrey.sch.uk

Number on roll: 200, joining age: 2+, leaving age 13,

girls 0%, boarders 0%, setting: Urban, religion: Christian,

maximum day fee: £2250, maximum boarding fee: £.

Size of website: 966KB, size of page: 382KB, size of images: 585KB

number of pages: 35, number of images: 29

average page size: 10.9KB, average image size: 20.2KB

date of earliest reference (website/Internet Archive): 26/07/2000,

date of most recent element (as at 29/10/02): 12/04/2002.

School: Lambrook Haileybury

URL: www.lambrook.berks.sch.uk

Number on roll: 398, joining age: 4, leaving age 13,

girls 26%, boarders 10%, setting: Rural, religion: Anglican,

maximum day fee: £3100, maximum boarding fee: £4300.

Size of website: 491KB, size of page: 37KB, size of images: 450KB

number of pages: 10, number of images: 33

average page size: 3.7KB, average image size: 13.6KB

date of earliest reference (website/Internet Archive): 19/06/2000,

date of most recent element (as at 29/10/02): 26/09/2002.

School: Monkton Combe Junior School

URL: www.mcjs.co.uk

Number on roll: 354, joining age: 2, leaving age 13,

girls 37%, boarders 10%, setting: Rural, religion: Anglican,

maximum day fee: £2970, maximum boarding fee: £4270.

Size of website: 64421KB, size of page: 7448KB, size of images: 56115KB

number of pages: 578, number of images: 1541

average page size: 12.9KB, average image size: 36.4KB

date of earliest reference (website/Internet Archive): 05/01/2001,

date of most recent element (as at 29/10/02): 28/10/2002.

School: Old Buckenham Hall School

URL: www.obh.co.uk

Number on roll: 239, joining age: 2.5, leaving age 13,

girls 38%, boarders 37%, setting: Rural, religion: Anglican,

maximum day fee: £3500, maximum boarding fee: £4400.

Size of website: 2960KB, size of page: 1693KB, size of images: 1267KB

number of pages: 173, number of images: 178

average page size: 9.8KB, average image size: 7.1KB

date of earliest reference (website/Internet Archive): 30/06/1999,

date of most recent element (as at 29/10/02): 14/10/2002.

School: Orley Farm School

URL: www.orleyfarmschool.org

Number on roll: 492, joining age: 4, leaving age 13,

girls 28%, boarders 0%, setting: Rural, religion: Anglican,

maximum day fee: £2490, maximum boarding fee: £.

Size of website: 867KB, size of page: 118KB, size of images: 748KB

number of pages: 15, number of images: 17

average page size: 7.9KB, average image size: 44.0KB

date of earliest reference (website/Internet Archive): 02/05/2001,

date of most recent element (as at 29/10/02): 01/03/2002.

School: Prince's Mead

URL: www.PrincesMead.btinternet.co.uk

Number on roll: 288, joining age: 3.5, leaving age 11,

girls 52%, boarders 0%, setting: Rural, religion: Anglican,

maximum day fee: £2380, maximum boarding fee: £.

Size of website: 1KB, size of page: 1KB, size of images: 0KB

number of pages: 2, number of images: 0

average page size: 0.5KB, average image size: 0.0KB

date of earliest reference (website/Internet Archive): 05/06/2001,

date of most recent element (as at 29/10/02): 05/06/2001.

School: St Aubyns School

URL: www.st-aubyns.brighton-hove.sch.uk

Number on roll: 169, joining age: 3, leaving age 13,

girls 27%, boarders 7%, setting: Rural, religion: Anglican,

maximum day fee: £2975, maximum boarding fee: £4205.

Size of website: 1850KB, size of page: 259KB, size of images: 1557KB

number of pages: 32, number of images: 38

average page size: 8.1KB, average image size: 41.0KB

date of earliest reference (website/Internet Archive): 30/10/2000,

date of most recent element (as at 29/10/02): 25/10/2002.

School: St Catherine's Preparatory School

URL: www.st.catherines.ukgateway.net

Number on roll: 124, joining age: 4, leaving age 11,

girls 100%, boarders 0%, setting: Inner City, religion: RC,

maximum day fee: £1665, maximum boarding fee: £.

Size of website: 2072KB, size of page: 89KB, size of images: 1898KB

number of pages: 15, number of images: 34

average page size: 5.9KB, average image size: 55.8KB

date of earliest reference (website/Internet Archive): 23/08/2000,

date of most recent element (as at 29/10/02): 23/08/2000.

School: The Hawthorns

URL: www.hawthorns.com

Number on roll: 464, joining age: 2, leaving age 13,

girls 32%, boarders 0%, setting: Rural, religion: ND,

maximum day fee: £2225, maximum boarding fee: £.

Size of website: 10425KB, size of page: 1346KB, size of images: 2755KB

number of pages: 103, number of images: 287

average page size: 13.1KB, average image size: 9.6KB

date of earliest reference (website/Internet Archive): 02/03/2000,

date of most recent element (as at 29/10/02): 18/10/2002.

School: Treliske School

URL: www.treliske.cornwall.sch.uk

Number on roll: 209, joining age: 3, leaving age 11,

girls 39%, boarders 1%, setting: Rural, religion: Methodist,

maximum day fee: £2099, maximum boarding fee: £2886.

Size of website: 2668KB, size of page: 108KB, size of images: 2557KB

number of pages: 22, number of images: 39

average page size: 4.9KB, average image size: 65.6KB

date of earliest reference (website/Internet Archive): 09/07/2001,

date of most recent element (as at 29/10/02): 15/02/2002.

School: Woodcote House

URL: www.woodcote.cjb.net

Number on roll: 98, joining age: 7, leaving age 13,

girls 0%, boarders 74%, setting: Rural, religion: Christian,

maximum day fee: £2650, maximum boarding fee: £3750.

Size of website: 4208KB, size of page: 161KB, size of images: 2693KB

number of pages: 23, number of images: 45

average page size: 7.0KB, average image size: 59.8KB

date of earliest reference (website/Internet Archive): 21/05/2001,

date of most recent element (as at 29/10/02): 16/10/2002.

School: Woodleigh School

URL: www.woodleighschool.freemove.co.uk

Number on roll: 118, joining age: 3, leaving age 13,

girls 36%, boarders 25%, setting: Rural, religion: Anglican,

maximum day fee: £2070, maximum boarding fee: £2710.

Size of website: 2923KB, size of page: 264KB, size of images: 1754KB

number of pages: 90, number of images: 172

average page size: 2.9KB, average image size: 10.2KB

date of earliest reference (website/Internet Archive): 10/11/2001,

date of most recent element (as at 29/10/02): 28/09/2002.