

Hard-to-reach markets

A How to do more business with business mini-guide

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It doesn't matter whether the search is for more fee income, Train to Gain starts, apprentices, or work placements for hard-to-help youngsters, every learning provider knows that some parts of the economy are more difficult to do business with than others.

Yet, as providers seek to rely less on LSC funding, there is more competition for business in existing markets, so inevitably more providers are seeking their new business in those hard-to-reach sectors.

For any provider contemplating such a strategy it's probably a good idea to resist the temptation to send out brochures and prospectuses, launch cold-calling campaigns and make speculative visits to large numbers of organisations. Investing time in segmenting markets thoroughly, and identifying **groups of real employers who have pressing and shared needs**, is almost certainly the best place to start.

This means it's time to forget about rural businesses as a market sector, and to think, instead, about groups of employers working in the rural economy, for example, agricultural suppliers or guesthouse owners. Both groups are rural businesses, but each group will almost certainly be tackling very different business issues, not least because one is selling products to business, the other is selling services primarily to consumers. Hence they will also be looking to make different types of purchases.

Finding what is the most pressing issue for each group of employers identified in the segmentation activity is the best way to begin to tackle any new market

Getting to know them

Building relationships with businesses is the next step. It takes time, but the principles are the same with any group of employers, be they defined as hard-to-reach or not.

These are:

1. Be clear about the group of employers you wish to target. Segment ruthlessly.
2. Read their journals and newsletters, visit their websites, and become well versed in their concerns.
3. Find their local networks. (Most groups have them. Just think about the plethora of FE/provider networks in your region.)
4. Find ways of getting invited to attend network events, or maybe even host them.
5. Find opportunities to talk to employers about their business issues **not about your offer**.
6. Be helpful to the network without promoting your own products.

7. When the network regularly discusses the same problem, and you think your organisation can supply a solution, ask permission to submit a proposal.
8. Keep on building the relationship.

Does this approach work?

Yes, it does, and being helpful to employers starts to build a working relationship, a necessary component of doing business with business.

Helping the agricultural supplier to know more about the environmental agenda, and to promote products in an environmentally friendly way, addresses an on-going business need. Guiding owners of local guesthouses on how to promote themselves to their customers helps first to build, and then to cement, relationships between business and providers. These tactics also ensure that learning providers are well placed to quote to deliver bespoke programmes that will meet these businesses' needs. And, somewhere down the line, when it is clear that the relationship with the provider delivers business benefits, there might be the opportunity to interest both these groups in other learning products.

What is being built using this approach is a sustainable business relationship, to be refined as the provider's understanding of the employer group develops.

In the end the hard-to-reach market is no harder to reach than any of the learning and skills sector's traditional markets. However, having mastered the art of selling into "difficult" markets, perhaps learning providers should keep the secret of their success to themselves.

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