

‘ENTREPRENEURIAL MARKETING IN THE PUBLIC  
SECTOR:  
THE LESSONS OF HEADTEACHERS AS  
ENTREPRENEURS’

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## **ENTREPRENEURIAL MARKETING IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR:**

### **THE LESSONS OF HEADTEACHERS AS ENTREPRENEURS**

#### **Abstract**

This article argues that headteachers of primary schools have been at the forefront of the marketing/entrepreneurship interface since attempts to introduce competitive market forces into the maintained education system. It examines primary school headteachers' marketing strategies and compares them to those of owner managers of small firms. Case studies of ten schools illustrative of a variety of provision and market conditions provided the empirical data over a five year period. The headteachers shared many of the marketing problems of owner-managers of small firms. Headteachers found that the most effective marketing strategies consisted of: i) marketing to improve relationships with existing parents, staff and governors as an essential precursor to any external marketing effort; ii) parental involvement in the school which improved the likelihood of word of mouth recommendations; and iii) influencing such recommendations by marketing to improve parental and other involvement in the school. As word of mouth is also the most important source of new business for small firms, there are opportunities for lessons from the public to the private sector.

**ENTREPRENEURIAL MARKETING IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR:  
THE LESSONS OF HEADTEACHERS AS ENTREPRENEURS**

**David Stokes**

**Introduction**

Research at the marketing/entrepreneurship interface is not restricted to the marketing issues of owner-managers in small businesses. It also investigates marketing issues faced by entrepreneurial managers working in the public services, not-for-profit organisations and large companies (Chaston, 2001). This paper considers entrepreneurial marketing in small, public sector enterprises, reporting on how the managers of primary schools responded to legislative changes designed to stimulate competition and marketing activities. In England and Wales, several Acts, including the Education Reform Act of 1988 (ERA), introduced the principles of competitive market forces into the structure of compulsory education. The intention was to reward schools on the basis of market-based popularity by giving parents and pupils the theoretical right to choose which school to attend, and allocating financial resources on a per-pupil basis. This paper reports on how headteachers responded to such change, comparing their marketing practices to those of owner-managers of similar-sized, private companies in order to consider any lessons across the public/private sector divide.

Certainly, there was no shortage of advice for headteachers from both private and public sector perspectives. Many writers sought to advise education managers on how to use marketing to benefit their school in a more competitive environment (e.g. Gray, 1991; Kirby, 1992; Barnes, 1993; Evans, 1995; Needle and Stone, 1997). But little of this was

based on empirical evidence of what actually worked in enterprises of a similar size or context to schools. Some authors attempted to fit the educational 'product' into a private sector marketing framework, importing language and models from traditional marketing concepts. In particular, they fell into the same trap as other management commentators of an “almost exclusive focus on large organisations” (Goffee and Scase, 1998: xiii).

Primary schools are mainly small management units. Using the European Commission's employment parameters to define Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), some schools, especially infant schools in rural areas, fall into the 'micro-enterprise' bracket (less than 10 employees) and most other primary schools come into the 'small' category (less than 50 employees). Despite this, advisers and policy makers looked first to corporate examples of best practice for school managers to emulate. For example, Bottery (1994) used the examples of Marks and Spencer, BP Chemicals, East Yorkshire NHS Trust, and only one small business, as case studies from which to draw lessons for the management of schools.

This approach overlooked an emerging concern in the development of marketing theory over differences arising from the size of the organisation. Research into marketing in small businesses has led to challenges to conventional marketing theory, particularly as a result of improved understanding of the role of the entrepreneurial owner-manager (Shaw and Carson, 1995). Managers in small firms exhibit a “distinctive marketing style” (Carson et al., 1995: 155) and carry out very different marketing activities to those implemented by executives in large companies. Research at the marketing/entrepreneurship interface has identified such differences throughout the

marketing process, including: opportunity recognition and new product development (Hills and Singh, 1998; Hulbert and Brown, 1999; Schwartz and Teach, 2000); strategy formulation (Covin and Miles, 1998; Mumby-Croft, 1999; Turnbull and Macleod, 2000); marketing methods and implementation (Fraser, 1999; Stokes, 2000); and information gathering and networking (Shaw, 1999; Chaston, 2000). These distinctive aspects of entrepreneurial marketing emphasise the need to modify the education and development of managers operating in entrepreneurial contexts to ensure they have relevant marketing competencies (Carson et al., 1995; Collinson, 1999).

Primary schools and small businesses might be expected to share common marketing issues as both are constrained by their size and resources, and have a management structure reliant heavily on one individual. In small firms, these issues are epitomised by the owner-manager who has a limited conceptualisation of marketing, thinking of it only in terms of promotions, and who relies on word-of-mouth recommendations to attract new customers (Barclays Review, 1997). Have headteachers, as managers of small enterprises in a competitive environment, adopted a similar approach, or have they some lessons to offer to their private sector counter-parts?

### **Methodology**

The literature raises an important methodological issue for a study aiming to compare the marketing practices of headteachers with those of entrepreneurs in small firms. There is evidence that entrepreneurs practice forms of marketing but do not call it that (Carson et al., 1995). Similarly, headteachers' own accounts of marketing could be limited by their perceptions of the marketing function and its terminology. A case study approach was

adopted to address this issue through triangulation of data and the use of critical incident technique in interviews. Three principle sources of data were used in this study: interviews, observation and secondary reports. Interviews with headteachers, other senior managers and governors (55 in total) provided important data for this research. These were supplemented by direct observation during meetings and other school events, and by reports produced during the time of the study. In particular, market research on parents of the schools, undertaken as course projects by University students, provided data on parental perceptions. (For a more detailed description of the research and methodology, see Stokes, 1999)

From initial interviews, it emerged that headteachers had narrow and often hostile conceptualisations of marketing. Further interviews took place which used a 'critical incident technique' to build a more complete picture of marketing activities. Critical incident technique may be used in interviews as a way of obtaining detailed descriptions from respondents of events in defined situations (Hussey and Hussey, 1998). Developed from the widely cited work of Flanagan (1954), the technique is not a set of rigid rules, but a line of questioning which aims to elicit narratives from respondents about a particular observable activity (the incident), with details of critical aspects, such as motivations to action, specific activities and the outcomes (Curran et al., 1994). The technique was used in particular to gain greater understanding of what prompted, or triggered specific marketing activities in primary schools. Because of conceptualisation issues, the term 'marketing' was avoided in eliciting incidents from headteachers. Instead, headteachers were asked to think about an occasion when they were particularly

concerned about other people's perceptions of their schools, and invited to describe the actions that followed. From this line of questioning, a list of motivational 'triggers' to marketing actions emerged which is reported on here. In order to explore targets of marketing activities other than prospective parents, they were also prompted to think about incidents involving other specific groups. In this way, a summary of attitudes to marketing and the triggers and targets of marketing effort could be drawn up.

The research adopted a 'collective case study' approach (Stake, 1994), studying ten primary schools and their market environments in order to investigate potentially important similarities and differences between the individual cases. Data collection took place during visits to the schools over a five-year period. The selection of the cases depended on three main criteria: access, type of school, and market situation. The type of school took into account two principal variations in the provision of state-maintained primary education in England: the sector (e.g. infant/junior schools or all-through primary schools) and status of schools (e.g. church aided, grant maintained or LEA maintained). The ten case studies were within three adjoining LEAs in the south east of England: an inner-city conurbation, a suburban centre and a large county of mixed urban and rural areas. The three LEAs were selected to provide examples of the two principal influences on educational markets: the density of local populations, and the socio-economic profiles of the catchment areas (Foskett, 1995). Data was analysed using 'general analytical procedures' (Miles and Huberman, 1994), assisted by the qualitative data software package, NUDIST (Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorising). The documenting and index search systems of this programme assisted

not only with the management and indexation of text-based documents but also in the building of theory through testing linkages in the data.

## **Results**

The results presented here evaluate how headteachers responded to changes in their marketing environment on three levels:

- a) The scope and conceptualisation of marketing in the case study schools
- b) The marketing strategies adopted in terms of the triggers and targets of marketing activities.
- c) The implementation of strategies, especially the use of word-of-mouth marketing.

These responses are compared to the attitudes and marketing activities of owner-managers of small firms by reference to relevant research.

### Scope of marketing: responsibility, training and budgets

Owner-managers of small businesses tend to assume responsibility not only for the determination of marketing strategy but also for the implementation of marketing programmes because they have neither the inclination nor the means to devote more resources to this function (Carson, 1985). Stokes et al. (1997) found that 95 per cent of small business owners made marketing decisions either by themselves or in consultation with a partner in the firm. At the primary schools within this study, headteachers followed this private sector pattern. At nine of the ten schools, the headteacher was considered to be the person who had the overall responsibility for determining and implementing marketing strategies and activities. At the remaining school, marketing

activities were implemented by the deputy-head. Overall, the responsibility for initiating and carrying out marketing activities was seen to be part of the headteacher's job.

Several studies (Carson and Cromie, 1989; Barclays Review, 1997) have pointed to the lack of marketing planning in small firms. Marketing activities were also relatively unplanned, ad hoc events in the case study schools. Only two of the schools had produced written marketing documents of any sort and these were related to specific fund raising activities.

Stokes et al. (1997) found in their research on small firms that only 20 per cent of business owners said they had any type of formal or informal training in marketing.

Again, the research on the case schools closely mirrors this finding. During the period of the study, only 2 of the headteachers within the 10 case schools attended training courses in marketing. Among small businesses, Stokes et al. (1997) found that relatively little money was allocated specifically to marketing: 50 percent of small firms had no marketing budget and 35 percent budgeted less than £10,000 per annum. Schools in this study were even more reluctant to budget funds specifically for marketing. All of the case schools produced detailed budgets each year which included elements of marketing expenditure, although they were not always labelled as such. Marketing activities, usually under £1000 per annum, were found contained within budget areas such as 'stationery and materials' or 'supplies and services'.

In summary, marketing responsibility was tacked onto the headteacher's already heavy workload. They received little, if any, training. Only minimal financial resources were

allocated to marketing which was not planned in any detailed, structured way. This is perhaps surprising, considering that a school's financial health, post-ERA, could be said to depend on marketing to potential parents and pupils.

### Conceptualisation of marketing

Stokes et al. (1997) claimed that a key reason for the low perceived importance of the marketing function amongst small firm owner-managers was their limited perception of what 'marketing' actually entailed. In their research, the definitions of marketing given by most owner managers were limited to selling and promotional activities.

Headteachers of the case schools closely followed owner-manager unprompted definitions of marketing, linking it only to marketing communications, such as selling, promoting, or publicising the school.

Two other factors conditioned headteachers conceptualisation of marketing:

- a) Marketing was closely linked to notions of competitive market forces that have negative connotations amongst most primary school headteachers.
- b) The culture of collaborative networks amongst schools survived the changes. Some established networks thrived and new networks also emerged post-ERA as a way of overcoming what was seen as the fragmentation of the education service. Although it was by no means uniform in its effects, this ethos of co-operation rather than competition further conditioned attitudes towards marketing which was linked inextricably to competition.

Thus, headteachers shared the limited conceptualisation of marketing exhibited by many small business owners. In addition, their perceptions of marketing tended to be negative. But, as with owner-managers, we should be wary of forming too many judgements concerning headteachers' marketing responses based only on their personal explanations.

#### Marketing strategies: triggers to marketing activities

Headteachers' descriptions of critical incidents, supported by other documentation and observation at the case study schools suggested a much broader approach to marketing than the one they themselves described as 'marketing'. Their responses, supported by other documentation and participant observation, indicated that events in the schools' environment acted as triggers to a wide range of marketing effort using broader definitions of the term. Stokes et al. (1997) conducted similar critical incident analysis amongst small business owners. They reported specific triggers to marketing effort particularly market and product changes, losing important customers, loss of key partners in the business, and even an element of chance. The overall picture was of owner-managers reacting to their environment rather than attempting to exert more control over it.

To some extent, the case schools seemed to follow this pattern of reacting to changes in their environment. Marketing effort was often triggered by direct challenges (e.g. proposals to close or amalgamate schools) or indirect threats to pupil enrolment (e.g. alterations to the admission policies of feeder schools).

However, evidence also emerged of more pro-active marketing strategies, and of targets other than potential pupils and parents. Many of the case study headteachers felt the need to 'turn the school around' when they took over. This triggered a reappraisal of the schools' position in the market place. In each case, the headteachers acted positively, tackling key internal issues, before turning their attention to external marketing issues:

“The school still has a poor reputation. So we need to do some serious marketing to improve our image. But I have told the governors, it's no use marketing ourselves if we have nothing to market. We must make sure we have something to talk about first.” (Headteacher).

However, the internal actions they initiated often had a marketing component.

Headteachers singled out three issues in particular as critical to improving the image of the school: getting the right staff, upgrading buildings and facilities, and involving parents. Marketing activities were part of their attempts to make improvements in these areas. For some schools, recruitment of staff itself became a marketing exercise as there were difficulties in attracting and retaining teachers in several areas. Headteachers emphasised the importance of the physical environment of a school in any efforts to improve its image. Schools' buildings and facilities prompted marketing action with two main objectives: a) to obtain funds for improvements and b) to promote new facilities to parents and the community.

However, the greatest stress was laid on parental involvement as a way of improving a school's image. 'Involvement' has become an important concept in both the marketing

and education literatures. Relationship marketing practitioners seek to involve organisations not just in their customers' purchasing habits but in their lives and lifestyles as well (File et al., 1992). This is based on the assumption that the most profitable, long-term partnerships develop when customers not only identify with the image of an organisation, but in some way become more involved with it (Cross, 1992). Involvement in education emerged as important for educational, rather than marketing, reasons. The idea of closer ties between parents, pupils and teachers received considerable encouragement and publicity when it became clear that it did make a significant difference to children's learning (Bastiani, 1993).

The main thrust of legislative changes was to allow parents to become more involved in the management aspects of schools as governors. There was no compulsion on parents to become involved in other aspects of their child's education, such as homework or helping in the classroom, which would arguably have a more beneficial effect on learning (Cowan, 1993). The headteachers of the case study schools acknowledged the importance of the parents' role in these respects, but also recognised difficulties in involving some parents in anything other than a negative, complaining role. Several barriers to parental involvement were cited, ranging from the socio-economic background of parents to improved security measures (e.g. higher fences and locked doors) which discouraged access into schools.

Problems such as these did act as a particular spur to significant marketing efforts because headteachers increasingly recognised a dual significance to involvement. First,

they welcomed parental involvement because it had educational advantages and gave schools access to additional human and financial resources. Secondly, most headteachers believed that parents were more likely to have positive impressions of their school once they had become more involved with it. One headteacher summed up this feeling:

“We try to get all our parents involved in the education of their children, not just through homework, but other things as well. This all helps to build up their perceptions of the school” (Headteacher)

A parent governor endorsed this view:

"I think the more involved you are, the more content you are." (Parent Governor).

In summary, marketing activities were triggered by a range of factors in both the internal and external environment of the schools. Headteachers were particularly prompted by the need to improve parental involvement as this was perceived to have both educational and marketing advantages.

#### Marketing strategies: targets of marketing effort

These marketing triggers led to marketing activities targeted at a wider audience than just potential new parents and pupils. Specific target markets were identified as shown in Figure 1.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ‘Schools’ Marketing Targets’ NEAR HERE

The priority order of targets that developed at most of the schools was:

- i) Internal relationships (e.g. existing parents, teachers, governors): headteachers looked to internal improvements before considering external marketing strategies, particularly in recognition of the influence of involvement of existing parents.
- ii) Recruitment markets (e.g. potential parents, feeder schools): if numbers on role were below capacity, recruitment markets were the next priority.
- iii) Education relationships (e.g. education agencies, other schools): in order to attract more resources to the schools, the third priority tended to be relationships with education agencies able to provide or influence those resources.
- iv) Community relationships (e.g. local media, business sponsors): finally influential members of the local community were targeted to generate publicity, sponsorship and goodwill.

#### Implementation strategies: word-of-mouth marketing

Although the targets of marketing were relatively diverse, the use of word of mouth communications to encourage recommendations and positive images of schools is a particularly important theme in implementing strategies. Surveys amongst parents at the case study schools generally indicated that recommendations from other parents and friends had been the most important factor in their choice of school. This supported the beliefs of headteachers and governors that hearsay was the most important form of advertising. One headteachers was surprised at its power:

"Gossip, I think, unfortunately is a large part of people's decisions. There were quite a few parents whose names I had never heard of before, had no previous relationship with the school, who didn't come to meet me, who didn't come and

look round the school, didn't come to an open day, didn't come to an evening we put on for new parents, just turned up on the first day of term. And I found that extraordinary" (Headteacher).

Headteachers believed not only that word-of-mouth marketing was the crucial influence in parental choice, but also that this was not really marketing. This echoes the theme of research by Stokes et al. (1997) into small businesses which concluded that many small business owners suggested that their business was reliant on word-of-mouth recommendations for new customers, and they therefore did not need to do any marketing. Owner-managers showed few signs of trying to stimulate recommendations as they were seen as a largely uncontrollable marketing influence. Nor could owner-managers define specific influences in the recommending process other than the need to provide an excellent service.

However, headteachers seemed to be more aware of the key influences on word-of-mouth communications about their school than owner-managers. Whilst they believed that the school 'sold itself' through informal communications if parents and children were happy, headteachers did have clear notions about the basis for recommendations and the specific influences on them. In particular, as we have already seen, they cited the need for parental involvement in order to increase the likelihood of satisfaction and referrals.

Headteachers sought to involve parents in their schools in a variety of ways including:

- a) home learning (e.g. homework, home-school contracts),
- b) school visits (e.g. parents evenings, plays, social events)

- c) in-school help (classroom assistance, school trips, fund-raising)
- d) school management (e.g. governors, annual meeting of parents)

Parents were the recipients of marketing activities which sought to increase their involvement at the case schools in a number of ways, including use of pupils themselves:

"You get the reluctant ones in by the back door. They're the ones you get in for example by awarding certificates and you make sure that most children get a certificate for something, and parents will come to see them collect them and you get them in" (Parent Governor).

Headteachers' marketing to other target groups was also reliant on informal influences involving word of mouth communications. One headteacher claimed that her marketing to business and community groups relied on the schools' reputation which was influenced by word-of-mouth communications:

"Marketing your school is your reputation out in town or at the shops or the supermarket" (Headteacher).

Headteachers also used involvement strategies to target groups in the school's external environment. A school's involvement with local bodies such as charities, public services and amenity groups could help to raise its profile in the community. Sometimes this was achieved through visits by pupils to local events and guests to the school, or by the use of school facilities by outside groups.

## **Conclusions**

Marketing has become a more important function within primary schools, not necessarily because of attempts to introduce market forces, but because headteachers were given increased responsibilities in certain areas. Their additional authority over the recruitment and retention of staff, and the additional responsibilities of governing bodies made internal marketing to achieve and maintain a motivated and balanced team an important activity. The removal of some of the formal structures within the education service meant that headteachers have had to use their powers of persuasion and presentation to achieve their objectives within the more informal associations of schools, LEAs and education agencies. Financial incentives made the development of relationships with local residents and business communities more important. In this way, ERA and other legislative changes stimulated marketing activities within primary schools not through the development of markets, but in the devolution of certain powers to headteachers, who began to act in a more entrepreneurial way.

An important motive behind changes to the management structures of state education was the belief of policy makers that much could be learned from private sector practices (Common et al., 1993). The process of change in public services has created circumstances in which the private sector can now gain from some of the experiences of services such as education. Inter-related aspects of marketing and entrepreneurship emerge from this research as worthy of consideration in non-education contexts.

Figure 2 summarises the marketing practices typical of small businesses and primary schools.

INSERT FIGURE 2 NEAR HERE

Headteachers seem to share many of the marketing problems of owner-managers of small organisations. Marketing in small firms and in primary schools is usually dependent on the skills and motivations of one person with informal training and limited expenditure. Owner-managers, like headteachers, tend to have a narrow conceptualisation of marketing, perceiving it to be related only to promotional activities to develop new business. External marketing activities are typically unplanned, reactive and limited in scope and impact, in both contexts. Owner-managers have attempted to deal with these issues by using networks of personal contacts, relying on word-of-mouth recommendations to promote their business. However there is a need to develop our understanding of how small organisations can take more control over these processes in order to stimulate recommendations. The experiences of headteachers in marketing small, public sector enterprises provide interesting examples of what works best for organisations in such circumstances.

Headteachers found that the most effective marketing strategies had two main components: i) marketing to improve relationships with existing parents, staff and governors was an essential precursor to any external marketing effort; and ii) marketing to targets other than the obvious 'customer', recruitment market was important in order to build up a supportive series of relationships in the micro-environment.

It can be argued that both components are equally important to small firms:

- a) Marketing to existing customers ought to be a first priority for owner-managers, reliant as they are on their recommendations for new business.
- b) The limited resources of the typical small firm indicate that the owner-manager should be concerned to develop supportive relationships with all influential groups in their environment, not just customers.

Both headteachers and owner-managers rely on word-of-mouth recommendations and informal information gathering to achieve marketing objectives. There are obvious advantages for small organisations which lack financial and human resources to depend on others to promote their cause and to keep them informed of developments in the market place. However, this research identified two principle disadvantages of word-of-mouth communications concerning primary schools, which apply also to other types of small organisations:

- a) It is non-controllable: managers cannot control word-of-mouth communications about their organisations. Indeed a key distinction made of such communications is that the communicator is perceived to be independent of the organisation under discussion (Arnt, 1967).
- b) It is self-limiting: reliance on networks of informal communications restricts organisational growth to the limits of those networks. Headteachers encountered the problem of recruiting parents outside of the social network of their existing parents. If a small business is dependent on recommendations for new customers, its growth is limited to those market areas in which its sources of recommendations operate.

There are few suggestions in the literature on how to overcome such problems. Bayus (1995) proposed that promotional activity can provide a stimulus to word-of-mouth communications, but his research was restricted to the specialist area of enlistment

recruiting for the military services. More recently, Shaw (1998) demonstrated that small graphic designers in the Glasgow area used bartering, hospitality, flexible pricing and differential handling of work to help in the development of their networks.

A key contribution of the research reported on here is that *word-of-mouth marketing can be stimulated through involvement*. People who felt involved with schools because they were regular visitors and helped managerially, academically or financially were more likely to be active advocates of the school. File et al. (1992) reported similar findings in relation to service participation; from a study of lawyers' practices in the USA, they suggested that the intensity and variety of client participation during the service delivery process was predictive of positive word-of-mouth and referrals. This reinforces the need for managers who wish to improve word-of-mouth communications to adopt interactive marketing practices which inform and involve customers, thereby increasing the influence of positive organisational perceptions and images in the market place.

Marketing in education is different to marketing in other contexts, although the central, philosophical tenant can be argued to apply. This reflects contextual differences which are now acknowledged to be important in small firms' marketing. This research has contributed to knowledge particularly in the field of marketing small, non-profit organisations. It has indicated that first impressions of marketing activities in this context may be misleading and that deeper, more probing research methods can elicit different pictures of what is taking place. There is a need to refine further research methods including case studies and critical incident technique, which have proven useful in this

study, so that they can be used more widely in such contexts. There has been a marked growth in interest in the interface between marketing and entrepreneurship with the establishment of special interest groups on both sides of the Atlantic (Shaw and Carson, 1995). This study indicates that the area of word-of-mouth marketing on which entrepreneurs rely heavily, is worthy of further research. It is particularly important to develop understanding of how managers of small organisations can exert more influence over word-of-mouth communications. In this respect, owner-managers can particularly benefit from lessons learned by headteachers.

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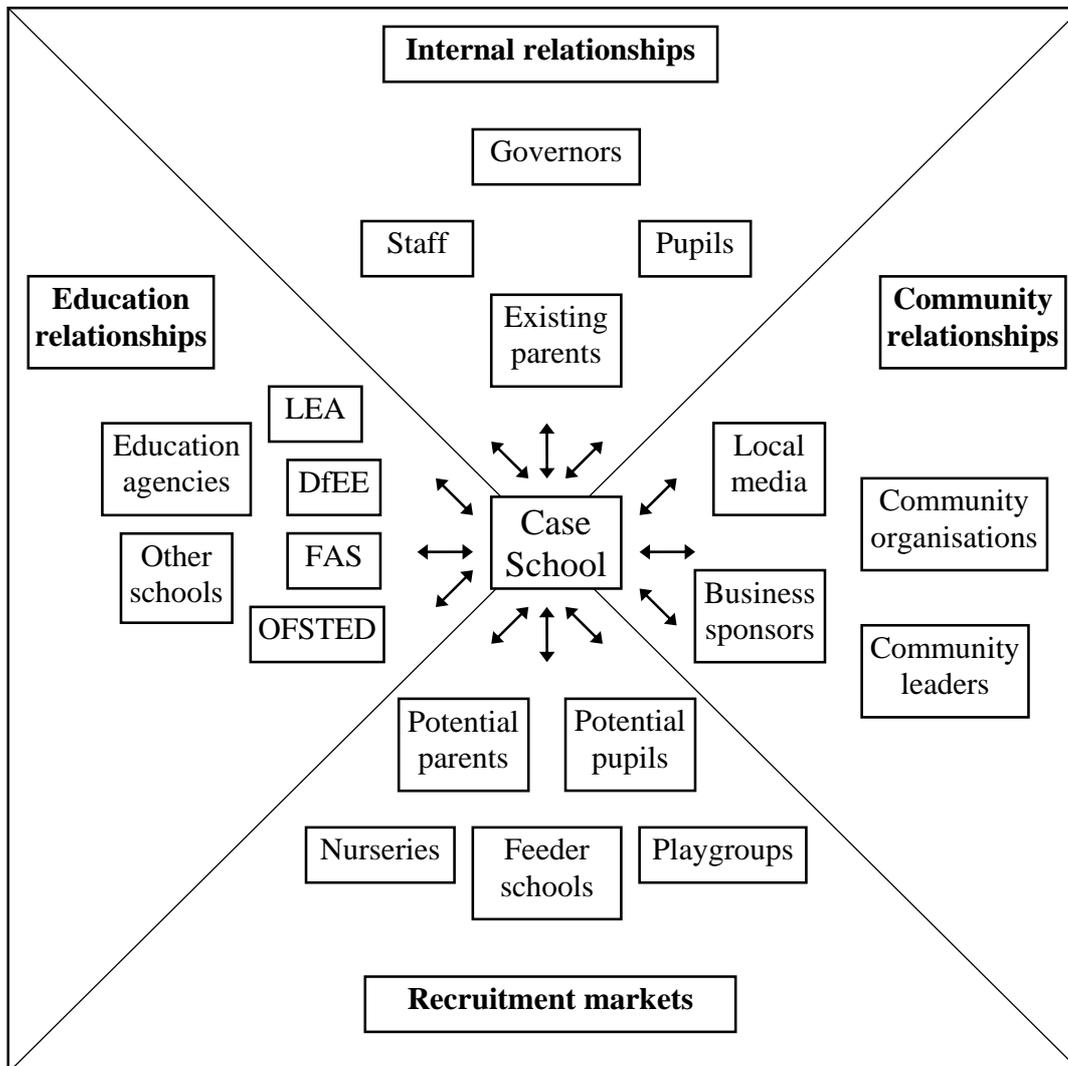
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**FIGURE 1 SCHOOLS' MARKETING TARGETS**



**FIGURE 2 SMALL BUSINESSES AND PRIMARY SCHOOLS: A  
COMPARISON OF MARKETING PRACTICES**

<b>MARKETING PRACTICES</b>	<b>SMALL BUSINESSES</b>	<b>PRIMARY SCHOOLS</b>
Responsibility for marketing	Owner-manager	Headteacher
Marketing training	Informal	Informal
Expenditure	Limited	Limited
Conceptualisation	Narrow – promotions only	Narrow and negative
Triggers to marketing	Reactive – loss of customer, market/product changes	Initially reactive – threat to enrolment, new headteacher More pro-active to encourage parental involvement
Targets of marketing effort	Mainly existing customers, and personal contact networks	Internal and recruitment markets, education and community relationships
Marketing methods	Word of mouth recommendations, mainly uncontrolled and not stimulated	Word of mouth, stimulated by involvement of parents and community