

Spreading the Word as a Matter of Survival:

How to Market Your Language Program

BY KRISTEN STIPE

Teachers teach, right? And marketing professionals . . . well, they promote, advertise, and sell products. In the past, there might not have been much—if any—overlap between these professions, but times have definitely changed.

As districts and institutions across the country face economic challenges and potential budget cuts, more and more teachers find they need to actually “sell” their language programs to their schools, administrations, and communities. A language program that has created excitement and captured students’ attention and focus is more likely to be perceived as being an integral part of school culture, which can be crucial when difficult budget decisions are being made.

Nicole Sherf, Associate Professor and Secondary Education Coordinator at Salem State University in Salem, MA, says, “I think of marketing under a bigger umbrella of advocacy. The school doesn’t market our programs so we have to, by getting the community into the department, getting the department out into the community, spreading the word through a variety of different strategies, and hopefully increasing enrollment as a result.”

“Growing your program is a lot of work, but the more you put into it, the more you get out of it,” says Jess Duran, a German teacher at Empire High School in Tucson, AZ. She is the only German teacher in her district and has been successful in almost doubling enrollment in only two years of the newly formed German program at her school. She continues, “It is so rewarding to see kids take things by the reins and run with it. It’s awesome to see them grow and learn and be excited about the program, getting their friends involved and taking it to the community.”



Carl-Martin Nelson, Director of Marketing and Communications at Concordia Language Villages, encourages stressing the importance of learning languages as being a valuable part of students’ futures. He explains, “I think it is most critical to not talk strictly about language, but to talk also about 21st century skills. Language is a critical and very important 21st century skill. It’s important for teachers to describe their courses in that way because it’s not just about learning Korean, for example, but it’s about preparing students for college, for employment, and global citizenship—those are the critical pieces for us beyond the language—the language is a means to that end.”

Effective marketing requires establishing a clear vision for your program as a base for promotion, building strong partnerships within the district and the community, and utilizing social media and Internet tools in order to get the word out.

Strong Programs Make Good PR

In order to make language programs more visible, teachers need to begin by making them academically strong by focusing on the National Standards and proficiency outcomes as well as emphasizing creativity through cultural learning and global awareness. At the 2011 ACTFL Convention in Denver, Sherf, along with other board members of the Massachusetts Foreign Language Association, led a presentation titled “Empowering State Language Organizations Through Collaboration.”

“I really think that a good starting point for every department in deciding what they want for themselves is to develop a solid mission

statement and strategic plan in which they envision how they want to grow,” she says. “That in itself doesn’t increase visibility but when you post your mission statement and decide what heights you want to reach as a department, it starts to get the ball rolling in terms of the various activities that you do in order to get yourself more visible.” Sherf says that the mission statement should tell the purpose of the department, allow for unique components of programming to be highlighted, unite the faculty in focus, and welcome students and the community. She adds that it is also helpful to use terminology from the Standards and the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines and to make it short, simple, and clear. Once a department’s mission is clarified and posted, the programming should be created or modified to answer the following questions: *What does your mission say that you do? What do you want to become/achieve? How do you realize this?*

“The strength of the program can speak for itself if it is communicatively based, if there is a high degree of target language interaction, and if fun, communicative, creative projects are happening within the classes and within the program that can be promoted within the school,” says Sherf. “I feel strongly that every time students, faculty, or parents pass by a foreign language classroom they should be hearing a lot of target language. In the hallways, they should be seeing results of performance activities and presentations that are ongoing within the language classroom. If we can move away from teaching about the language and really begin teaching within the language and getting students excited about learning about the new culture and interdisciplinary connections they can make, then it becomes much easier to spread the word.”

Lynn Sessler teaches Japanese at Clovis Grove Elementary School in Menasha, WI, and says that when the world language program began in their district 19 years ago, they had a vision written down for what they wanted the program to be at the end. She explains, “It didn’t end up exactly how we initially envisioned it but we always had that goal to focus on and work toward. We didn’t just throw something in and not worry about what was going to happen the next semester or the next year; we already had steps laid out for what we wanted it to look like so we felt like we always had a road to drive down and could answer questions people might have about it. You must have a clear vision: *What do you want your students to know and be able to do?* A lot of times you think about just what will happen in the classroom but you also need to have a plan for getting the kids out and demonstrating their language skills and cultural knowledge to their families and community.” [See sidebar on Sessler’s very successful program on p. 20.]

School and Community Involvement

When a department is successful in executing their plan and students are enthusiastic about what they are learning and experiencing, marketing the program’s benefits will largely be done by the students themselves. Duran describes how she engages her students and empowers them to be active participants in advocating for the language program.

“I think most of it is the involvement of the students—they are so excited about German and having opportunities to share what they’ve learned is what makes the difference. Your class has to be

interesting enough for them to be motivated to take it to the community. Make it fun and active. I probably do something with music and dancing once per week and they’re always up and about, actively communicating.”

She started a German club, which has organized many events and activities including a field trip to a local German restaurant, an overnight lock-in, and an Oktoberfest festival for the community. Duran continues, “Making noise on campus also generates a lot of excitement. I recently did a competition in class that was a version of the game Risk where the students had to conquer the different German states from other groups. The winning groups had different props that they carried around campus, for example a huge flag, a German scarf, an Oktoberfest hat. Other students were asking about them and what class it was from. Doing things to get people’s attention and asking questions does a lot.”

In addition to encouraging student involvement, it is important for the department to ensure that the program is included in administrative and management discussions and planning sessions.

“Make sure that you or a member of your department is on every school-wide committee including the hiring committee, strategic planning committee, and accreditation committee so that foreign language doesn’t get lost,” advises Sherf. “Every mailing that goes out from the school should include information about the great programming that is going on in your department and if you don’t have a district-wide newsletter then I think a quarterly newsletter from the foreign language department is a really great marketing tool. Articles in the town newspaper are also key; the voting members of the community should be aware of the great programming in the foreign language department, even if they don’t have kids in the system, so that they will be supportive if legislation affecting languages comes up.”

Kathleen Condray, Associate Professor of German and German Section Head at the University of Arkansas also offered a session, with Alexander Ganz, at the recent ACTFL Convention titled “Professional Skills for Branding and Marketing Your Foreign Language Program.” Condray agrees with Sherf about starting the marketing within your school while also taking it to the community.

“You want to reach your local audience because those are the people who are making the decisions that affect your program,” says Condray. “Try to get something about your program out every month—whether that’s how your students scored on a national exam, projects, or activities and events that your program has hosted or participated in—talk about what you’re doing in your program. That kind of thing is very important. You want a press release about once per month. Who do you send this to? First, send them to your administration and counselors at your school because they might not know everything you’re doing in your program. If you have a PTA newsletter, send it to those people. And if you write good copy, newsletter editors are always looking for things to write about—just send them a paragraph and be sure to include photos. Our university has a newswire that picks up stories from all the departments.”

Condray provides an example for how her outreach resulted in great press without costing her or her department any money. “For

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Marketing a World Language Program: A Success Story in Wisconsin

Menasha School District in Menasha, WI, is a great example of how the marketing strategies described in this article were implemented and have resulted in a successful, deeply embedded K–12 world language program. Lynn Sessler, who teaches Japanese to elementary students in grades K–5 and is the district’s World Language Coordinator, has been a part of the program since its inception in 1992.

She tells the story of how the program began: “In the early 1990s, we had a very forward-thinking superintendent who really felt as though we needed to have an elementary world language program. We’re a public school—I think up to 70% of our students are on the free and reduced hot lunch program—so a lot of kids live at or below the poverty level. We aren’t hugely diverse but we do have Hispanic and Hmong populations and we’re getting more diverse as the economy changes. Menasha is a blue-collar town with a lot of paper companies so a lot of our students’ parents work in the factories doing shift work.”

Sessler thinks the community supported language learning because they wanted something more for their kids, feeling something like “we want our kids up with the paper executives, not necessarily doing the shift work with us.” Because the district always had Spanish and German, they wanted to add a language from a different part of the world and Japanese was one of the few languages that the University of Wisconsin certified teachers in at that time, she recalls. So the school district began offering Japanese in kindergarten and first grade and then added a grade every year. Time passed, the program grew, and now the first group is out of college.

“We’ve learned a lot during the process,” says Sessler. “I think our presence being everywhere helped. Keep that idea and mission going because when you’re part of something, you’re looked at as being important, which is a great marketing tool. We had a new elementary

report card during the first couple of years of including Japanese and one of our elementary world language teachers sat on that committee and we got ourselves on that report card. If there’s some big volunteer activity going on at the high school, we make sure that the world language teachers and kids are a part of it. It’s very important to have a constant and consistent presence.”

The district has five elementary schools with one language (Japanese, Spanish, or German) being taught at each school. Now, 19 years later, the three languages are fully articulated and, as Sessler puts it, “they are part of everything we do.”

She notes, “We don’t have a specific German Day or Japanese festival, but our German program is a part of every music concert. It is incorporated and expected at any event. They’re always singing songs in the concerts and there are dedicated language areas in the libraries. When you walk into our school, you know that we learn Japanese because it is everywhere; it’s not a separate entity. It has really made our program marketable and successful and people know that it’s just going to be part of their child’s elementary experience. People move into our community and realize, ‘Wow, kids study world language from elementary through high school.’ It takes time to seep through to the community but you need to be consistent in order to do that.”

Along with the programming piece, Sessler stresses the importance of having solid assessments. “You need to be able to show what kids can do in the language,” she says. “That comes with the community piece, too—getting your kids out in the community using their language skills because then people are going to realize, ‘My gosh, these kids really are learning their language!’ and that’s very impressive. A lot of times in world language, parents might not have had much experience with it and think we’re just going to do it in the classroom and keep it there.”

Instead, says Sessler, “I have my kids go home (and I know the middle and high school Japanese teachers do too) and speak Japanese for their parents all the time. I suggested to them to sing songs to Grandma and Grandpa over the holidays. The grandparents might not



First graders at Clovis Grove Elementary School perform a fan dance for the cultural topic of the Moon festival in Japanese.



Third graders at Clovis Grove Elementary School practice writing Japanese characters and celebrate by writing the last character of the alphabet they learned on a cupcake.



Fourth graders at Clovis Grove Elementary School taking a break to “welcome” you to their class after studying the solar system in Japanese.

care what the song really says, but they're still impressed that their grandkids are actually learning Japanese."

Sessler echoes the belief of framing language learning in the context of being a 21st century skill and how important it is to be strategic in highlighting a specific language when it will be most beneficial for the entire program.

"We don't talk to the parents about how to conjugate verbs, we talk about how their kids are going to be able to go into a restaurant in Tokyo and order a meal and go sightseeing and experience the culture in the language and have a great time. We carefully watch the trends—Chinese is very popular right now, so we talk about how some of the characters in Japanese are the same in Chinese so really you're learning two languages. You have to use whatever language is most advantageous at that time or in that situation that is going to get you the most press," she advises.

"Of the three languages we offer, Japanese is the most uncommon. A lot of schools in Wisconsin offer Spanish and German (because of our heritage with Germany). So when the timing is right, we highlight Japanese as being different if we need that 'Wow' kind of press. If we need to tap into a heritage community, then we highlight the Spanish program. So we use that marketing tool very carefully and thoughtfully."

She stresses that it is important to not be in competition with other languages but instead to cooperate as a united front. "If they're having a special fundraiser for a Spanish trip and it involves serving a meal or something similar, the other world language teachers are always there, either buying the meal or helping to serve. We go to each other's concerts and special events—we really support each other. Even if Japanese gets more of the attention because it is unique, that press only helps to strengthen the whole language program in general."

Also impressive is the fact that the language program was not on the list of district cuts last year.

According to Sessler, "When budget cuts first came along, our district took hits in all areas—our class sizes are huge at the middle and high school levels. But we weren't even on the list of cuts last year. We've built a program that is so integrated that we really don't cost our district that much. We look for outside resources when we can, especially in German and Japanese—there is money available if you're willing to look for it. We just received a grant from a large foundation in Japan and one of the things we're going to do with the money is to hire a web designer who will design a Japanese website for students and parents. Once we have it designed and set up, we're going to use it as a model to hopefully eventually incorporate German and Spanish in the same way, to create a World Languages website for our district."



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National German Unity Day, the university and all the local junior high and high school programs held a German immersion picnic and played games in German. The whole thing was conducted in German so you had people from different areas and at different levels on teams. I put that in our university newsletter and the local editor of the newspaper picked up on it. They sent a photographer and it was on the front page of the newspaper the next day. I took just five minutes to send off a paragraph to the newsletter about the event and not only was it in the paper, but it was also the front picture on their website for the day. So we were front page news and it was absolutely free.

"Get yourself in the paper as much as possible," she advises, "because that's what the school board, parents, and voters are reading."

Another resource for increased visibility is partnering with other local schools, colleges, and universities to strengthen and reinforce the broader foreign language community.

"Inter-level programming is also a really great marketing tool," notes Sherf. "Any time you can have upper-level students either going to the elementary school and giving presentations or foreign language instruction in some capacity it gets kids, parents, and the community talking about languages. BA students can go into schools and do internships, peer tutoring, or community service—it all helps. I start my methods classes by saying that no discipline is like languages because we have to work harder to get the word out. We have to know the research and benefits and be able to speak for foreign language because it can be a forgotten discipline and we have to make sure that doesn't happen."

Nelson agrees and says, "If there's a Spanish culture reading at the local university sponsored by the Spanish department, go to it and bring your students. It increases your visibility in the community and raises your profiles." Sherf also feels that, for K–12, connections with nearby universities can be very helpful by having college students come into the school and talk about the program and possibilities for a bachelor's in a foreign language or how it contributes to another degree, or to generate excitement about going abroad. "It really does create enthusiasm for the lifelong learning that we're trying to establish," she says.

Nelson suggests stressing the potential benefits of how learning a foreign language can have a dramatic impact on students' futures by having alumni tell of their real-world experiences with the language and how it has affected their lives.

"Say one of your former students graduated high school and then studied abroad in college in France and is now working in Cameroon as part of a non-governmental company or organization," he says. "Get that former student's e-mail address and have them explain how they are using French today and how it has been important to them and their career choices. Have them make the case about 21st century skills and describe the opportunities that have arisen because of their French learning. Get that on the blog, on the website, or in the newsletter. Profiles of

alumni who can demonstrate the value of their language learning are very powerful. Get those personal stories out through the media; it is very immediate and very real.”

Language clubs not only promote camaraderie among students who are studying a language as part of a common goal but can also provide students with opportunities to demonstrate what they are learning by creating activities and events that can be shown to the community or to which the community can be invited. According to Sherf, “An ‘International Week’ can take place in which some kind of demonstration is presented to the community or inter-level within the district or you can request guest speakers from the community to talk about the use of foreign language in careers or travel. The bond

that is created back-and-forth between the language department and the community really helps to spread the news.”

Nelson also encourages language departments to reach out to local businesses since they can be powerful allies for advocacy when planning events for the community. The business may provide monetary support as a sponsor for the event and promote attendance to their customers and in turn the business gets exposure to the public by advertising at the event. Some businesses might also have a connection to the native country and they can provide cultural insight through the products and/or services they offer. Students could partner with the company for a field trip or invite a representative to class to explain their association with the country. These experiences,

Marketing 101: Best Ideas in Brief

See how many of these great suggestions you can incorporate into your own marketing efforts. It's not as hard as you think and can pay off with great dividends.

Kathleen Condray:

- If you can write good copy, newsletter editors are always looking for things to write about—just send them a paragraph and be sure to include photos.
- Try to get out a press release about once a month. Send it to your administration and counselors at your school, PTA newsletter, local newspapers, and other media.
- Get yourself in the newspaper as much as possible because that's what the school board, parents, and voters are reading.
- Be on the lookout for ways to create marketing materials such as flyers, posters, and banners using free or budget-friendly online resources.

Jess Duran:

- Involve students. If they are excited about learning the language, they will enjoy sharing what they've learned. Your class must be interesting enough for them to be motivated to take it to the community.
- Make some noise on campus to generate excitement. Use competitions, games, props, etc. Other students will ask about them and what class the students are from.

Alexander Ganz:

- Keep your website up-to-date, current, and interesting. Content is king. Think of your website as your hub for everything else.
- Give the power of marketing to students. If students produce and update the content (such as on Facebook), then they share parts of themselves, which really works.

Carl-Martin Nelson:

- Don't talk strictly about language, but also about 21st century skills.
- Reach out to local businesses to create partnerships within the community that will promote events and help get the public invested in your program.
- Stress the potential benefits of how learning a language can have a dramatic impact on students' futures by having alumni tell of their real-world experiences with the language and how it has affected their lives.

Lynn Sessler:

- Have a clear vision: What do you want your students to know and be able to do? Have a plan for getting the kids out and demonstrating their language skills and cultural knowledge to their families and community.

- To fight budget cuts, look for outside resources when you can. There is grant money available if you're willing to look for it.
- Do not compete with other languages but instead cooperate as a united front. Support their special events and programs.
- Pay attention to trends and use whatever language is most advantageous at that time or in the situation that is going to get you the most press.

Nicole Sherf:

- Develop a solid mission statement and strategic plan in which you envision how you want to grow.
- Move away from teaching about the language and really begin teaching within the language and getting students excited about learning about the new culture and interdisciplinary connections that can be made.
- Make sure that you or a member of your language department is on every school-wide committee including the hiring committee, strategic plan committee, and accreditation committee.

again, get people talking about different cultures and increase global understanding. Partnerships between businesses and a language department get people within the community interested and invested in the kids and their language learning.

Using Social Media and Online Tools

In order to reach and stay connected with today's students, it can be very helpful to incorporate social networking into your foreign language program. Websites and social media outlets are also great tools for marketing your program's successes and announcing upcoming events to a large audience.

Alexander Ganz, a PhD student in Transcultural Studies and Marketing/Communications Specialist in the Office of the Chief Information Officer at the University of Arizona, says that when he took over marketing for the university's German department two years ago, the first thing he did was to revise their website (german.arizona.edu) when he realized that it was not up to date.

"In the world today, if you don't receive or broadcast your information in a timely manner, you are losing against everybody else," notes Ganz. "The first step is to get your information out there on time and the easiest way to do that is with your website. Once it's good, most people will go to it regularly. We went from about 80 people looking at ours per month to now about 400–500 people; it was a huge increase. Keep your website up-to-date, current, and interesting. You first need to make it look decent and then remember that content is king. Think of your website as your hub for everything else." The next step for their German Department, Ganz says, was connecting the website to free social media outlets such as Twitter and Facebook.

"If you're a small department and the website seems like it would require too many resources to keep up, there are always tools like blogs that can be used in the same way—and these are pre-set up and very easy to use."

Once a website or blog is created, keeping it maintained and current can require too much time for just one person to be successful. Ganz empowered others to get actively involved by allowing updates of the website and Facebook page by students who have been given access.

He explains, "On a given day we might have one or two things going on so students will take photos of the project, presentation, or event and post them on the website. You designate people to write up posts and update the website as things occur and then not one person has all of the responsibility. Most everything is captured in a timely manner, and the students are invested, too. We're giving the power of marketing back to the students—which is really important, especially when you think about Facebook. People don't care as much about sharing stuff that comes from the department, but if students produce the content then they share parts of themselves, which really works." Duran has done something similar by designating one of her German club positions as the Media and Technology Coordinator, who is responsible for uploading pictures and updates on events.

Condray also advocates using Facebook and says, "As a teacher, you can set up two profiles—one as your professional page for students and one for personal use. You should also set up a page for



TOP: An example of a completed postcard created at www.picnik.com.

ABOVE: A screenshot of creating a brochure on www.picnik.com, which is free of charge. Condray adds that a good source for copyright-free pictures is to search by country or word at capl.washjeff.edu.

your program. Anyone can start a Facebook Group and if you don't do it, someone might do it for you and then your program might not be represented the way you want it to be. I use it all the time—for scholarship announcements, gatherings, public lectures, community events—people can see how active your department is but another important part of that is that your students' friends see that in their news feed. So, they see the students taking the language and enjoying it (because otherwise they wouldn't be a fan of the page). You want to be seen as a cool subject."

In addition to using social media, be on the lookout for ways to create marketing materials such as flyers, posters, and banners using free or budget-friendly online resources. Condray provides two examples of sites that have been very beneficial and simple for her to use:

- www.picnik.com/ – "A completely free resource and I create the most professional looking ads with it—you can upload photos and play with all these different effects. It really is a very easy thing. I even create my own Christmas cards with it."
- www.vistaprint.com/freeoffer – "You can get 100 postcards for \$4. I made a banner there for about \$15. You can get pens with your program's name printed on them for free when you order something else."

Ganz concludes by saying, "It took us a good two years to get where we are now. You have to be consistent, involve as many people as possible, and empower your students to help with outreach. Get going! The more you do and the more you network, the more everyone benefits."

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Creative Marketing in Action



Bella Vista High School teacher and students establish Guinness World Record for language advocacy event

On October 31, 2011, Nicole Naditz, French teacher at Bella Vista High School in Fair Oaks, CA, received official notice from the Guinness World Records organization that the 24-hour *Discover Languages* webcast that she and her students hosted last February had established the first-ever record for the “longest uninterrupted live webcast.” [We have covered Naditz’s marathon webcasts in previous issues of *The Language Educator*.]

“This was actually the second year we’ve done the webcast; we did it for 24 hours in 2010 too,” Naditz says, “Since we’d been successful last year and wanted to do it again, I thought there needed to be a new twist if we were going to send out press releases for the same thing this year. So the idea for the World Record came up because I thought, ‘What do we need to do in order to generate press a second time?’”

Naditz then looked up whether there was a standing World Record and determined that not only was there no record but there wasn’t even a category that included webcasts. She continues, “I went through the application process and initially they said that it was similar to the longest radio broadcast, so to please attempt that record. I looked at those requirements, explained to them how it was different, and asked them to reconsider. They did and responded by telling me that they created the new category based upon my request. So this was born from a desire to positively ensure

that if this was going to be an advocacy event for world language education then it *had* to generate media attention.”

Naditz explains that “for languages that may be seen as being ‘less valuable,’ there is a misunderstanding on the part of the public as to how incredibly desperate employers can be for French speakers, or German speakers, or Japanese speakers.” In order to change that way of thinking, Naditz believes that teachers can create media attention by highlighting class activities and projects that are already occurring as part of the program. “You don’t have to design a whole new thing to market your program,” she says. “Take something you’re already doing and find the hook that makes it interesting and then get the word out so that it’s not just you and your students and maybe some of your colleagues at school who know how valuable your program is. More importantly, the people in the community will hear about what you’re doing and how valuable and relevant language learning is.”

She continues, “You might think, ‘I already webcast with my students.’ Yes, but chances are your local media doesn’t know your students are doing broadcasts over the Internet in French. Of course you do conversation group and you and your kids meet at a café once per month, so let people know what you’re doing. There are many smaller online local newspapers as well as your traditional media markets—let them know.”

Portions of the official press release for the webcast resulting in the World Record accomplishment read as follows:

In honor of *Discover Languages* Month, students at Bella Vista High School and their French teacher Nicole Naditz organized their second annual 24-hour *Discover Languages* Webcast. During the webcast, students served as “news anchors,” broadcasting news segments about the importance and benefits of language learning, including how language proficiency prepares students for 21st-century careers. Naditz provided the research and arranged all of the interviews that occurred during the webcast. Students interviewed authors, researchers, business owners, and entrepreneurs and other innovative leaders in a variety of professions in person or via Skype during the webcast. The students also operated the camera and audio equipment, multiple computers, and social media feeds in order to effectively display their information.

Included in the webcast were a language trivia game show, multicultural entertainment, and other activities highlighting the importance of language and culture in California’s increasingly diverse society.

Naditz shared that the event was an “opportunity for students to celebrate their blossoming proficiency in world languages and cultures and to share with others the incredible benefits of becoming multilingual.” She also stated that the event gave the students “additional experiences leading to the development of 21st century skills as the students interviewed diverse people from all walks of life, solved problems that arose during the webcast, and employed a variety of technologies to make the event a success.”



Students taking part in the world record-winning webcast.