

FAM tours take agent-educator relationships to the next level

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More and more, international educators realise that FAM (familiarisation) tours are one of the most effective ways for education providers to strengthen their working relationships with student recruitment agents. These hosted tours give groups of education agents or other partners the opportunity to visit a campus or school, as well as the city in which it is located and the surrounding region.

A recent study from the International Association of Language Centres (IALC) found that agents consider FAM tours to be one of the best ways of establishing and strengthening relationships with an institution or school; for responding agents, these tours were second only to meeting at a networking conference or workshop.

Why is the FAM tour such an important tool? There are three main reasons:

1. Agents get a real sense of the institution they are representing – not the institution on paper or the web, but the people and passion behind it, from school staff and professors to current students. This allows the agent to speak about the school with much more authority and credibility to prospective students and parents.
2. Institutions can convey to agents just what it is that makes them special – sometimes the only way of doing that is to *show*, rather than tell. In an increasingly competitive marketplace, brands are pressed to show how they are different than other choices, and what makes them the best in certain areas. The FAM tour allows institutions to demonstrate their difference to agents, who are then equipped to pass it on to students.
3. Related to both of these first two factors, agents who attend well-executed FAM tours gain first-hand knowledge of an institution, and this provides the foundation for them to be confident and accurate in representing an institution – and better able to determine which students would be well-suited to apply to the institution.

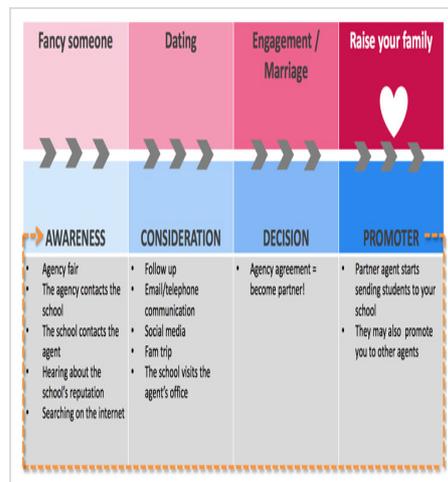
How do FAM tours work?

FAM tours can be organised by institutions

and schools, associations, governments – or third-party tour organisers under contract. They typically include seminars, staff presentations, campus and surrounding tours, and socio-cultural activities. They are often scheduled in conjunction with [major workshops or conferences](#) for which large numbers of qualified agents are already travelling to a given country or region.

Shoko Morimoto and Christina Thatcher, both of [Celtic English Academy](#), gave [a compelling seminar on FAM tours](#) at the 2015 English UK Marketing Conference last February. Their session was inspired by a seminar the year before from noted author and speaker [Geoff Ramm](#) and they drew from Mr Ramm's ideas, and their own experience, to illustrate the role of FAM tours in the agent-educator relationship via stages likened to a romantic relationship.

The first stage is when the agent and institution first connect, often at a networking event, and get the sense that they like each other. The second, "Dating," is where the FAM tour shows up alongside follow-up contacts via email, telephone, or social media, and a school representative visiting the agent in their office. Ideally, "engagement" and "marriage" (contracts, long-term partnership) follow – with a "family" (the agent sending students to the school) following.



The life cycle of the agent-educator relationship. Source: Shoko Morimoto and Christina Thatcher

Running a successful FAM

Ms Morimoto and Ms Thatcher offered these tips for organising a successful FAM tour:

Six to nine months before:

- Arrange the tour around a fun local event/time of year.
- See if other schools want to participate, to promote the destination as a whole.
- Design a quality experience – it doesn't make sense to try to do it as cheaply as possible, since you want agents to feel special and excited to represent your institution. This could involve a gala dinner, nice accommodations, special

activities, etc.

- See if your local tourism board or association wants to support the initiative, via sending a representative to attend, providing gifts, etc. They emphasised how much gestures like these can make agents feel like VIPs.
- In the draft itinerary, make sure enough time is allotted to touring agents through the city or town and surrounding area.

Six months before:

- Advertise the FAM tour via the school website, social media, emails, etc.

Two months before:

- Make sure all the details fall into place, including not only flight and arrival info but also whether agents have special dietary restrictions. This is the time to make sure everything is set for success.
- Make a FAM tour handbook for agents and send it out to participants to orient them beforehand to what they can expect.
- Buy small gifts for agents to provide a tasteful (and easy to pack!) souvenir of the visit.
- Plan publicity opportunities to capture as wide an audience as possible.

For agents and students, too

At a joint presentation at the [2014 Annual Conference](#) of the Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE), ZiPing Feng of Thompson Rivers University ([TRU](#)) and Geoff Wilmshurst from [Camosun College](#) also highlighted the important role of FAM tours in education marketing and recruitment.

Mr Feng noted that TRU invites both new and current agents with whom they already have relationships to come on FAM tours. With new agents, he stressed the importance of having the agents experience the destination, as much as the school or campus – especially if the school is in a relatively unknown town or city. It reassures new agents about where exactly they would be sending students if they worked with the school in question.



A recent FAM tour at Thompson Rivers University

For current agents, Mr Feng noted that the purpose of a FAM tour is to reward agents who are performing well and provide them with an incentive for continuing to represent the university so well. This kind of FAM tour also provides agents with the most up-to-date programme information, further strengthens their knowledge of the institution and working relationships with staff, and reinforces their commitment to representing the university.

TRU also hosts FAMs for prospective students, especially those in pathway programmes, to provide a preview as to what life as a student at Thompson Rivers would be like. An audience member at the CBIE seminar described a recent FAM tour for 80 students which yielded several new applications shortly after.

Mr Wilmshurst added that in his opinion, FAM tours are one of the best marketing investments an institution or school can make.

Focus on experience, and focus on making it special

The discussion during the CBIE seminar turned to the question of the main goal of a FAM tour. Mr Feng answered: "Have them see what they cannot see any other way, what a brochure or website cannot provide: an experience." Audience members agreed, and noted how many agents tell them that what they need more of to be supported is not "details," but more of a "feeling" about a school and destination.

Running through both the Morimoto/Thatcher presentation at English UK and the Feng/Wilmshurst seminar at CBIE was a common theme: to make the FAM tour worth the investment, and to have it be deemed a success by participants, it has to be done with great care and generosity.

As Mr Feng was speaking about Thompson Rivers' approach to FAM tours, a member of the audience spoke up about having been on a TRU FAM tour several years ago. She

remembered everything about the tour, from the beautiful basket of local food every participant received to red carpet treatment with a photographer capturing it all. She summarised: "They take *such* good care of their visitors."

And that's really the point. The FAM tour is a school's chance to jump out of all the brochures and competing websites and stand out as a truly special, exciting place to be. Making FAM tour participants feel special – as honoured VIPs visiting your institution or school – is a critical step toward that goal.

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