

THE PRINCETON REVIEW: A NEW APPROACH TO COURSE STAFFING

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This case is based on an actual situation involving a director of operations for The Princeton Review in a regional office in Columbus, Ohio. The director is faced with scheduling conflicts each time she and her staff must schedule upcoming courses. Since teaching staff work on a course by course basis, there is no consistent scheduling devise. The director has always had to rely on teacher requests to fill the substantial number of courses. In desperation, the director has developed a plan that should eliminate the problems of the past.

Note: This case was based upon an assignment from a graduate management strategy course. Student authors were: Mark Adkins, Dustin Holston, and Melissa Langford.

INTRODUCTION

Jane Kerner is the Director of Operations at The Princeton Review's (TPR) Columbus, Ohio branch office. This morning, the office's Executive Director has called a last minute staff meeting to discuss the upcoming course season. Jane knew that this was her opportunity to propose some changes to the current course staffing procedure. She had been working on a new approach for a few weeks and was hoping that the changes would eliminate the problems they have had in the past. As she sat down to have her morning coffee, she sifted through her notes on the current staffing policy as well as a folder that she had been using to collect ideas from the teachers who worked in the area. Her main focus was to increase the efficiency of staffing teachers for upcoming courses.

COMPANY BACKGROUND

The Princeton Review had very humble beginnings in a Manhattan apartment in 1981. John Katzman began preparing students for the SAT by using talented teachers, focused instruction, and computer analysis of student's strengths and weaknesses. He developed strategies that eventually became the backbone of TPR.

The company has grown over the years and has become the leader in test preparation. The company also provides after-school tutoring for elementary students in subjects such as reading, math, and English. However, the largest portion of TPR income comes from test preparation. John Katzman's strategies have been adapted and are now used to help students prepare for the SAT, ACT, GMAT, MCAT, LSAT, GRE, and other similar entrance exams. The company has spread to over 150 cities and has prepared tens of thousands of students for their examinations.

COMPETITORS

As colleges ratchet up the recruiting efforts for attracting more diverse students, the market for test preparation and educational services are growing. TPR is one of many companies offering their services to students, school systems, and other interested parties. Two other companies are considered TPR most serious competitors: Kaplan and Sylvan Learning Centers.

KAPLAN

Kaplan considers itself to be a provider of lifelong learning opportunities. Although the company began as a provider of test-preparation manuals, Kaplan now provides millions of students with a variety of training courses. Kaplan divides itself into four areas: Kaplan Kids and Schools, Kaplan Test Preparation and Admissions, Kaplan Higher Education, and Kaplan Professionals.

Kaplan Kids and Schools is a program that utilizes after-school learning programs for kids in elementary through high school. Kaplan utilizes over 160 centers nationwide to provide remedial help in subjects such as mathematics and English. Kaplan Test Preparations and Admissions is a program that helps students prepare for entrance exams and other types of standardized tests. Kaplan Higher Education offers online classes for university credit. Kaplan Professional helps individuals obtain professional licenses in careers such as: insurance, securities, real estate, financial services, and information technology.

SYLVAN LEARNING

Sylvan Learning was founded in 1979 and is North America's leading provider of private tutoring for children in kindergarten through 12th grade. There are more than 1,100 Sylvan Learning Centers across the United States and Canada that provide private tutoring and test preparation.

Sylvan offers private tutoring for students who need help with math, reading, writing, or study skills. Sylvan's private tutoring utilizes specialized tutoring sessions based

on individual student needs. Sylvan's test preparation services provide tutoring for students looking to maximize their knowledge of ACT/Sat coursework and to help them get into college. Sylvan provides small class sizes, personalized teaching methods to focus on individual weaknesses, and practice exams. Sylvan estimates that 3 out of every 4 students that use their services will increase their SAT scores by more than 160 points.

CURRENT PROCEDURES

As Jane prepares for the upcoming staff meeting, she re-examines the course staffing procedure that is already in place. Currently, teachers in the area are allowed to request courses at any time by phone or email. Two weeks prior to a course's start date, Jane checks to see how many students are enrolled and decides, based on this information, if the course is likely to run or if it will probably be cancelled. Also, if enrollment is high enough, a course may be split into two sections, and will need another teacher to teach the second section. If a teacher has requested to teach the course, Jane will then notify him or her of the current enrollment. If no teacher has requested the course or the course may be split into two sections, she begins looking for someone that may be available to teach.

Jane reviews her notes to see if she has left out any points she would like to make at the meeting. She looks over the list of pros regarding the current staffing procedures: being able to give teachers guaranteed work because she is confident that a course will run; allowing teachers to request desired courses; ability to match students with appropriate teachers; and the ability to control course load without a high level of cancelled courses. The cons of the current procedures are: limited availability of teachers because of prior commitments (to other TPR courses) due to last minute scheduling delays; delays in sending out teaching materials with course confirmations to teachers; and lack of control over teacher preferred courses.

After reviewing this procedure, Jane is confident that her new proposal will be well received. She feels that she can eliminate the problems involved in the current procedure and create a better system for staffing courses for the upcoming season. She checks the clock and sees that it is time to go, so she gathers her notes and heads out the door.

PROPOSED CHANGES

At the meeting, Jane waits patiently for her turn to speak. When the time comes, she begins to explain that she has developed a new procedure for staffing courses in the area. For courses or events that require special staffing, she plans to staff them as

early as possible. For example, a school-based course usually requires an experienced SAT instructor or someone with teaching experience. As soon as a schedule is written for these types of courses, she tries to staff them with the appropriate people. She will then pull all other SAT course schedules that begin within a certain timeframe, usually three to four months, and divide them by city/geographic location.

Jane continues to explain that she will then compose a geographic-specific email to all teachers in that area. The email will include all the courses available, an abbreviated schedule (start/finish dates), a glossary of terms to help teachers identify material covered in the course, and a set date for teachers to either call or email their requests. She plans to send the email out at least one week prior to the date set in the email so that teachers have enough time to compare the course schedules to their own personal schedules. She also plans to copy the email to all TPR office staff so that they can be prepared to help coordinate the phone and email requests on that day. Jane plans to also spend “teacher request day” organizing requests (on a first-come, first-serve basis) and making sure that teachers do not sign up for courses that overlap. In cases where more than one teacher requests a course, the second teacher is placed on a reserve in case enrollment is high enough to split the course into two sections.

Jane still plans to look at courses two weeks in advance as she has in the past to review enrollment numbers. She can then keep the scheduled course teacher up to date on student profiles and any anticipated changes (like room reassignment). Jane can also send the teacher the course material in time for sufficient preparation. In cases where a course is overenrolled and needs to be split, the second teacher would have sufficient time to be notified of the assignment and receive the course material.

Jane believes strongly that the advantages of these proposed changes will greatly enhance the efficiency of course scheduling. Teachers would receive more advanced notice of scheduled courses available for request, office staff would have one day when the majority of teacher requests would be made, and course material could be shipped to teachers in a timely manner. Jane expects her proposal to be well received by the other staff members and she will recommend that they implement her proposal for the upcoming course season.

UPDATED INFORMATION

Jane has been using the new procedures for two course seasons and is pleased with how well it is working. The majority of staffing is done one to three months in advance of a course’s starting date so she rarely has to worry about whether or not she will find a teacher for an upcoming course. Delays in shipping out course materials

to teachers have been minimized now that scheduling is more long-term. Unexpectedly, this has created an even better process for sending out materials. For example, if a teacher is scheduled to teach two upcoming courses, materials only have to be sent out once. Finally, the changes have helped teachers who also serve as tutors in TPR after school tutoring program. They are better able to plan their schedules since they know farther in advance when they are going to be teaching.

The new procedure has also created some problems, but they are minimal compared to the old procedure. First, Jane must prepare the emails for each city/geographic area which are often extensive and take hours to construct. Second, there are one or two “crazy” days when teachers are calling and emailing to reserve courses. Staff refers to this time as the “war room” but they clear their schedules to prepare for these days. Finally, if a course cancels, Jane may not be able to immediately find other comparable work for the teacher who was put on the reserve list.

Overall, the new system seems to be working quite well. The first time Jane used it the teacher response was weak and she had to do a lot of follow-up with teachers who had not responded. Currently, the process has gone much smoother with a large portion of the upcoming course season already staffed. At this point the new system seems to work better in areas that have a large number of teachers. Jane is already brainstorming on ways to continue to improve the course staffing process.

ADDITIONAL READINGS

Dapper, G. and Murphy, J. "Part Time Teachers and How They Work." (www.eric.ed.gov) ERIC #ED028533.

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