Success factors in adopter recruitment: Insights from adoption agency social work managers and marketing officers

This research was commissioned by BAAF who are working with the Department for Education to advance the adoption reform process as set out in government publications such as An Action Plan for Adoption: Tacking Delay (DfE 2011) and Further Action on Adoption: Finding More Loving Homes (DfE 2013) specifically in the area of improving adopter recruitment. The study was carried out in 2013 by Dr John Clifton and Dr Elsbeth Neil at the Centre for Research on Children and Families at the University of East Anglia. This is a summary of the full report; it reviews the methodology and findings and highlights the key messages for practice from the research.

Goals of the study
One of the objectives of the Adoption Reform Process is to share effective practices that reduce the time children wait before placement. The goal of this qualitative research project is to highlight examples of good practice in recruitment of adoptive parents. The research attempts to identify key success factors in the adoption process, drawing together any common themes or triggers, as well as highlighting any significant barriers to success and how these have been overcome.

How was the study carried out?
Qualitative telephone interviews were carried out and audio recorded with 25 key professionals each representing an adoption agency or adoption consortium. Thirteen adoption managers and 12 marketing officers took part. They came from 18 local authority adoption agencies, five voluntary adoption agencies (henceforward VAAs) comprising a mix of sizes of agencies from different areas of England and two adoption consortia. The sample was identified by staff at BAAF who also obtained their consent to take part in the research. Questions focused on the successful recruitment and retention of potential adoptive parents from encouraging the first contact with the agency, through to the stage of approval to adopt.
What were the four main themes?

Four main themes emerged in the study:

i) that marketing should be integral to the agency plan;
ii) the growing importance of the agency website and web presence (e.g. social media and geotargeting) in recruitment;
iii) the need to cherish enquirers on their journey towards adoption
iv) what can be done to encourage adopters to consider more complex children.

These themes are placed in the context of the nature of adoption agencies, the geographical areas in which they recruit, their degree of cooperation with other agencies in local consortia and national factors affecting recruitment.

Findings in more detail

1. Adoption agencies differ in their approach to marketing. Some have detailed and active marketing plans; others have less formal plans or carry out only a modest amount of proactive marketing.
2. Although most agencies make use of marketing expertise, in some agencies marketing is fully integrated into agency planning; in others it is somewhat peripheral.
3. Marketing personnel bring a distinctive customer focus to agency work encouraging consideration about the ways in which enquirers prefer to receive services from the agency.
4. Although adoption agencies share many of the same “selling points” in their advertising to potential adopters, agencies do make some differing claims about their services and are conscious of the need to build their reputations.
5. A few agencies base their marketing on sophisticated data; most have access only to partial or limited data.
6. Agencies use a variety of advertising media but no one method or combination of methods is regarded as effective in all contexts.
7. The agency website has now become the most important single source of adoptive enquirers and most agencies seek to guide enquirers to their websites in all their other media advertising.
8. Websites need to be lively, interactive and informative comprising a “brochure” for the agency’s service to adopters.
9. Some agencies are struggling to achieve “brochure” websites because of corporate communication policies, management reservations about marketing and lack of investment. There are, however, examples of agencies overcoming these obstacles.
10. “Word of mouth” recommendations of adoption agencies by existing adopters are second only to websites as a source of enquirers.
11. VAAs in particular, are beginning to use web optimisation and geotargeting techniques to enhance their online presence.
12. Some agencies, particularly VAAs, are also using social media as a way of drawing enquirers into the ambit of the agency and accompanying them on their journey to adoption.
13. In the course of a gradual “journey” towards adoption, enquirers will typically have done much research and soul searching before
approaching an agency. They will often approach the agency with a sense of excitement and anxiety.

14. Agencies therefore take care and make various arrangements to welcome enquirers warmly and listen to their questions and concerns.

15. Agencies have identified certain key messages of encouragement and inclusion which it is important to communicate to enquirers in person and in agency information.

16. All agencies sometimes agree with enquirers to defer applications because of prior issues the enquirer needs to resolve before adoption is possible.

17. It is of critical importance to keep enquirers fully informed in the application process and provide them with clear information.

18. The timeliness of the assessment process as experienced by enquirers is more important to the outcome than speed per se.

19. Agencies who are successful in helping enquirers to consider more complex children accept enquirers with their existing aspirations rather than expecting them to want complex children at the start of the process.

20. These agencies find ways to enable enquirers to encounter children as “real” rather than as a repository of problems. This can lead enquirers to imaginatively consider children previously thought to be beyond their scope.

21. Contact between enquirers and established adopters is critical at various stages in helping enquirers to identify with the role of adopter and feel that adoption is achievable.

22. Successful agencies provide opportunities for prospective adopters to learn and reflect and reach realistic assessments of their own capabilities and desires.

**Implications for practice: Key success factors in recruitment**

1. Marketing needs to be integrated into adoption agency’s business plan rather than being seen as a “bolt on” function.

2. Agencies should welcome and learn from the customer focused perspective of marketing staff in its efforts to reach out to potential adopters.

3. Agencies should consider improving their capture and organisation of marketing data and use it to plan their marketing.

4. Existing adopters’ good opinion of the agency is a precious asset for recruitment, encouraging potential adopters to come forward, and therefore relationships with existing adopters need to be nurtured.

5. High priority needs to be given to establishing and maintaining a vibrant “brochure” website as a key marketing tool for the agency. This may mean taking action at higher management and local political levels to loosen corporate controls on adoption recruitment sites.

6. Particularly those agencies that recruit at some distance from their main base may want to consider web optimisation and geotargeting techniques to enhance their web presence.

7. All agencies should consider using social media to help adoption recruitment, providing training for agency staff in appropriate and responsible social media use.
8. Take care to listen to enquirers’ questions and concerns at the point of entry rather than attempting first to gather data from them or inform them about adoption.

9. Identify the core messages that the agency needs to communicate to enquirers. These need to feature in all the agency’s media but also to inform the agency’s culture and the genuineness of its welcome for enquirers.

10. Timeliness of service is more important than speed *per se*. Consult enquirers/adopters in assessment about the speed of assessment that is appropriate for them.

11. It is of critical importance to keep enquirers fully informed in the application process and provide them with clear information.

12. At each stage from information meetings onward give enquirers/adopters in assessment opportunities to encounter children as real personalities as well as providing accurate information regarding their needs.

13. Use encounters with children to foster “the idea of possibility” in the minds of adoptive enquirers/applicants, i.e. encourage them to imagine what it might be like to parent that particular child.

14. Enable enquirers to meet, hear from, and be buddied/supported/mentored by successful adoptive parents.

15. Train and equip adopters to prepare for difficulties they are likely to encounter.

16. In meetings with the assessing social worker, provide opportunities for enquirers/adopters to reflect in depth about their encounters with real children, the feeling that these meetings engendered encouraging them to think about those feelings and realistically assess their own capacity to parent.

**Strengths and Limitations of the study**

Key limitations of the study are that the views expressed are limited to those who participated; the sample was selected on the basis that participants were likely to have positive examples to share, and so practice reflected in the report may not represent practices nationally. Other important perspectives in adoption recruitment, such as those of enquirers and adopters, are not represented. External data evaluating “what works” in adoption recruitment were not gathered.

Key strengths of the study are that it is harnesses the expertise of professionals thoroughly experienced in the field of adopter recruitment. It has a focus on successful practice, enabling the sharing of positive ideas. It includes the complimentary perspectives of social work managers and marketing officers. It was carried out independently by an experienced research team. The findings from the study can contribute to forming research questions for the systematic evaluation of adoption recruitment practices.