I have one objective: to drive up applications.

number of existing teachers, it has failed in its campaign. In February, UCAS reported that all secondary PGCE applications were down year-on-year by 2.5%. So not only has the government’s campaign not worked. In the comparative time last year – was a whopping drop of minus 27%.

So what has happened since March last year not just to halt the decline in RE applications, but deliver such a remarkable U-turn in its fortunes? The answer is a smart, cost effective targeted recruitment campaign called Beyond the Ordinary, initiated by some key RE stakeholders, tightly funded by a couple of small charities, and built and delivered by boutique PR agency 3:nine.

Get into Teaching centred around an expensive blunderbuss TV campaign, built on a quantity approach: hit all TV viewers, and you will hit all potential teachers. In contrast, Beyond the Ordinary – launched in March 2015 and making an almost instant impact, which has been sustained to date – was more thoughtfully targeted: quality over quantity. It worked.

The right questions

At the outset, we took time – and put in the effort – to understand the motivation of teaching applicants generally, but RE applicants in particular. What makes so-called Millennials tick? What do they want? And what gaps can be identified in their knowledge to help them decide? For example, many did not know that a theology degree or even having a faith were not prerequisites of a good RE teacher. Great RE teachers come from a range of backgrounds. This became a key part of the message.

Next, we took the message to where the target audience was. We made direct approaches via UCAS, we partnered with The Guardian and The Student Room, and we used social media to support these efforts: LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter. We wrote blogs and journalistic articles – from case studies to opinion pieces – and worked with sometimes sceptical editors to get them placed. Radio, television, print and online – every angle was cost-effectively worked to the advantage of the campaign.

We also set up a discrete website where more information could be found, or questions could be asked of, and answered by, practising RE teachers. Visit www.teachre.co.uk/beyondtheordinary and check out the video there – just as sleek as the Government’s (and award-winning), but costing much less and with the added bonus of more verifiable claims.

Not least, we worked with the existing RE community. NATRE – the National Association of Teachers of RE, the Religious Education Council, and the Association of University Lecturers in Religion and Education for example all encouraged members to spread the word, retweet campaign messages, and attend Train to Teach events, where we used banners and flyers to give a strong visual presence. In short, we borrowed from best classroom practice. We will learn later on this year what legacy the campaign has left on recruitment figures for 2016-17.

Could other subjects benefit from RE’s experiences? Absolutely. Whatever recruitment crisis your own specialist subject is facing, positive opportunities can still be generated and exploited. Tap into the mindset of potential recruits, use existing networks, and above, all stay focused!

Campaign trails

However, the 2.5% downturn in applications is an average. Individual subject performance varied. And one clear winner over the same period has been Religious Education. Despite RE teacher trainee numbers being in decline for a couple of years, due in part to the removal of the bursary (now reintroduced, but at a paltry £9k versus STEM’s generous £30k), over the same period RE applications have increased 35%.

To show how truly staggering this growth is, the year-on-year change from February 2014 to February 2015 – so the data for the comparative time last year – was a whopping drop of minus 27%.

I was showman PT Barnum who said, “There’s no such thing as bad publicity”. Or did he? The truth, of course, is that he said no such thing. The phrase has just been attributed to him. So, we have a double whammy of wrong going on here – firstly, there is such a thing as bad publicity (ask Volkswagen cars about the recent coverage of its diesel emissions scandal if you’re not convinced); and secondly, the point of publicity is to extend or improve perception of the seller and his or her wares.

As I am writing this today, a recent BBC news article stays fresh in my memory. The Advertising Standards Authority dismissed 140 complaints (including one from the NUT on behalf of its 370,000 plus members) that the government’s Get into Teaching glossy TV campaign was misleading in its claims about teachers’ salaries.

Now I’m not here to get into the rights and wrongs of this particular debate. But I can say that whatever those might be, the single and unequivocal fact of the matter is that the campaign did not work. In February, UCAS reported that all secondary PGCE applications were down year-on-year by 2.5%. So not only has the government’s campaign annoyed a large number of existing teachers, it has failed in its one objective: to drive up applications.

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