

Best Practices & Trends in Alumni Communications

- 1. Alumni associations have reshaped themselves in the past decade to deliver market-focused programs, and strategic communications approaches and plans are central to their ability to reach their multiple audiences for all activities and build and foster relationships.** Increasingly associations are rebranding themselves as the lifelong link between alumni and the university, shifting perceptions of the association's role and its importance within the university.
- 2. Because they are in tune with their constituencies, alumni communications offices bring great value by strategically anticipating issues, informing their audiences, and solving problems.** Getting the right message to the right people at the right time is crucial to strengthening alumni relationships with the university, the association, and each other. Increasingly alumni communications offices are refocusing their activities on strategic priorities versus simply reacting to and serving all the organization's communications demands. Staff know-how can be particularly valuable in supporting institutional and association priorities and bridging the institution's interests with those of alumni.
- 3. Alumni associations have used various forms of market research to identify their key value to their alumni and reinforce that value consistently throughout all forms of communications – print, online and through personal visits, events, and presentations.**
- 4. As associations are reshaping themselves as lifetime links between alumni and the university, association websites are repositioning themselves as communications portals between alumni and their alma maters.** As hubs of information, alumni websites offer university news, events, and issues, along with association activities and programs to build and foster alumni connectivity. Without duplicating roles, alumni professionals are collaborating with other marketing and communications offices to create more seamless engagement between alumni and the university.
- 5. Alumni communications professionals are serving more strategic roles in the overall advancement operation as chief alumni communications and marketing officers.** They develop comprehensive strategies and programs, ensure that efforts to promote individual programs and events align with overall advancement goals, and work with central and decentralized public affairs, alumni, and development offices to ensure impact and alignment. Assisting other parts of the advancement operation, including public affairs and development offices, with consistent messaging that speaks to alumni interests is a high-value activity by alumni communications professionals in their collaborative roles with other campus partners.

6. Integrating alumni communications into overall advancement and/or institutional marketing communications offices is increasing as universities have become more market-focused. The “outside-in” emphasis on the customer – alumni – rather than the “inside-out” view from the institution makes this case more compelling as alumni communications must compete with all the other messages bombarding their audiences and other organizations seeking “share of the customer.” Varying forms of structural and collaborative arrangements have emerged, in all cases raising the profile, importance, and professionalism of alumni communications activities.

7. With higher-level leadership roles, association communications professionals are evaluating and measuring the effectiveness of traditional and emerging communications methods. They are guiding the realignment of print, electronic, online, social media, and the promotion of events and other activities to balance association goals and the ability to achieve communications outcomes through people (staff and volunteer), and financial resources. The management, strategy, and form of printed alumni magazines are changing at many institutions.

8. The rapid rise of new technologies, such as social media and mobile communications, are powering alumni networks. This requires that alumni professionals understand how best to use them strategically within the overall marketing mix, including targeting alumni segments. Multiple communications channels are designed to reach alumni according to their communications preferences (lifestyle, age, geography, etc.). Understanding each new technology is a new requirement for alumni professionals.

Because alumni are automatically engaged in social media through their personal and professional lives outside the campus, the challenge is to determine the smart and cost-effective role for alumni associations and communicators as part of this mix. Social media requires staff and time – and clarity around the right marketing mix for the alumni audience. Related Internet-facilitated technologies include blogs, podcasts, video, mobile communications/text messaging and alerts, interactive website features, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Flickr, and YouTube.

9. Despite the high-tech rage, alumni magazines have value at many institutions and are becoming more strategically focused to boost loyalty, participation, and giving. Studies show that certain topics are particularly important to alumni as they form their opinion about how well the university is performing overall, particularly the caliber and success of current students and faculty and the institution’s ongoing focus on preparing students for a complex world and advancing careers. Associations are figuring out how best to use these multiple communications methods to reach their various audiences on the “lifetime” alumni continuum.