

Social Networks' Impacts on Alumni Organizations: 18 Use Cases

by Andrew Shaindlin - July 2010

(with input from Andrew Gossen & Elizabeth Allen. Original version by Jeremiah Owyang: <http://tinyurl.com/alumni-matrix>)

Use Case	Opportunities	Risks	Resources Needed
Do nothing	None.	Organization bypassed by self-organizing alumni. Organization becomes irrelevant to alumni who use online tools to find one another, to communicate, and to act around shared interests (cause-driven).	None.
<i>Two-way communication:</i> Talk to constituents (alumni; students; faculty; staff; parents; other donors & prospects)	Use tools to for community management. Use tools to connect individuals (not just organizations) to alumni. Watch evolving behaviors to learn about alumni interaction preferences. Intervene with information of relevance and utility. Use tools to connect alumni to each other (e.g., Twitter Lists; LinkedIn Groups).	Delivering info with low/no relevance, or failing to solve alumni problems/meet alumni needs. Being seen as inauthentic - trying to fit in, forcing the organization's formal identity into an informal, non-organizational context (e.g., Tweeting as "the university").	Part time staff and committed resources in a budget-constrained environment. Commitment, understanding and support for this direction from senior administration and volunteer leadership (including Trustees, Regents, or other high-level governance group).
<i>One-way communication:</i> Listen to constituents	Scan selected channels (alumni on Twitter, blogs, Facebook or LinkedIn Groups and Pages) for 1) info that describes whether they think/care about the institution and 2) info that describes their real-world problems and challenges (family issues, education, business needs, professional advancement).	Risk of appearing as "creepy uncle" who is too interested/inappropriately curious about things they consider personal or quasi-private.	Social media monitoring system (sophistication needed depends on scale of effort and desired outcomes of monitoring).
<i>One-way communication:</i> Broadcast information	Additional channels for distribution of centrally-produced content.	Danger of appearing oblivious to multivocal, interactive nature and culture of Web 2.0 tools.	Accounts on main social media platforms; staff time to post content.
Manage ambassador/marketing program	Alumni recruit members, volunteers, and donors via social tools, low cost marketing. Owyang's checklist can be very useful for non-profits.	Most will not want to evangelize; limited control of message	A formalized program; compelling motivation for alumni involvement; understanding that relatively few alumni will be this engaged; public feedback to reward effective champions and advocates.
Recruit applicants for admission	Reach high school students where they spend online time; communicate in authentic medium that they already tune into. Offer recent alumni a useful volunteer role.	See "creepy uncle" above. Being overly assertive can drive away users who believe they control the research and decision-making process, and who want info from known, trusted sources (such as older friends, local families, or siblings).	Volunteer opportunity structured to allow prospects and their parents to connect with alumni online, while preserving privacy of information and professionalism of all interactions. Database driven back-end system with front-end that high school students will find appealing and easy to use.

Use Case	Opportunities	Risks	Resources Needed
Aggregate alumni voices	Inexpensive way to create ongoing content and uplift existing members. Establish association role as broker or hub of alumni information and relationships - not the "owner" of the information. Example: Stanford's alumni blog directory; Community tab on Stanford Alumni Association Facebook page.	Limited message control, content will have low signal:noise ratio.	Manual or automated aggregation tools (may have a dollar cost). Reliance on consumers' willingness to filter what alumni and institution are publishing.
Aggregate campus voices	Delivers campus-centric content that reflects institutional priorities, people and activities (teaching, research, athletics).	Content may not speak to alumni interests or serve their needs; relevance will be difficult to establish unless users benefit from interacting with info. Separate campus units may resist centralized guidance or direction from your office.	Buy-in from often-decentralized campus units that may have their own strategy and personnel for social network interaction.
Organize online and real world events	Facilitate an event that's difficult for alumni to self-organize and that has value or relevance to alumni (e.g., through institution-specific content or privileged access to location or to key people).	Alumni will self-organize instead, forfeiting the convenience of having the institution do the work in order to get control over how the work gets done, who is included, when/where it occurs, and what the cost is.	Utilize existing social tools that offer events management: Facebook events, Eventbrite, Evite, Wufoo, Icebrg etc.
Develop volunteerism	See "Organize online and real world events." Enable and enhance knowledge/technology transfer. Drive content creation and management. Example: Harvard Public Service on the Map.	Lack of critical mass. Alumni will not heed call to action.	Database for brokering volunteer roles and opportunities. Two-way channel to spread, clarify and reinforce volunteer opportunities and participation guidelines.
Support fundraising priorities	Get the word out to supporters about the institution's needs and focus. Describe what matters to current leadership and how it will benefit students & faculty. Track social interaction with alumni on social media sites about specific priorities - "likes", comments, etc. - as evidence of interest and engagement in these priorities by individual alumni and incorporate this information into solicitation strategies for these individuals if appropriate.	May seem to reinforce alumni claim that "the school only contacts me when they want money." Messaging may be impossible to separate from gift solicitation, resulting in opposite of desired effect.	Collaborative and (if possible) integrated communication between social networks' alumni community managers and development office (esp. development communications).
Enhance town/gown relations	Add a new channel for connecting local community members with campus-based resources, such as public events and community service (athletics, educational programs, students tutoring in local schools). Increase awareness of outreach efforts. Add clarity to communication about sensitive or unpopular subjects (e.g., displacing residential zone with research labs, etc.).	Campus community might not appreciate/ understand need to expend resources on activities that don't relate directly to institutional mission (teaching and research). Messages might be taken out of context or used politically.	Staff time to address additional feedback and "high touch" aspect of Web 2.0 conversations. Savvy staff members who are politically astute and thick-skinned.

Use Case	Opportunities	Risks	Resources Needed
Enhance B2B relationships	Connect campus commercially with local business and government. E.g., share local businesses' info via a Twitter list, or participate in location-based discounts (see "Create location-based interaction" at bottom of this chart).	Some alumni or campus staff might criticize perceived "commercialization" of local Association activities.	Concentrated business community in or around the campus. Willingness to reach out individually to local business owners to establish connection.
Connect alumni with students	Smooth the transition from student to alumnus; create awareness for alumni activity before students graduates; satisfy alumni desire to interact with current students. Connect students with alums for career and grad school research and referrals.	Few risks that don't exist in current student-alumni programming, although increased potential for "creepy uncle" friend requests, follows, etc.	Training & clear guidelines for alumni on how to interact with students (i.e., what is appropriate; what is desirable from students' viewpoint). Structured framework for connecting alumni and students (e.g., LinkedIn Group for that purpose, with targeted discussion).
Connect alumni with each other	This is the fundamental core of alumni relations. Alumni enjoy reconnecting with people who share a formative experience. Relatively high trust is latent in shared-affinity networks (per the theory of homophily).	The risk is in failing to attempt this. If an alumni organization cannot support and foster cohesion among members, it cannot benefit the parent institution.	Staff dedicated to "network weaving," and resources deployed to communicate with network participants 1:1.
Connect alumni to employers	Serve a demonstrated need: the most basic component of alumni career services, the job search. Demonstrate coordinated collaboration with other campus units (career office). Smooth transition between student career activities and alumni career services. Take advantage of on-line tools designed to serve this niche.	Chance of turf battle or misunderstanding between alumni office and campus career office. Duplication of effort. "Hot potato" with undesirable assignments or activities. Risk of confusing students and alumni as to "who does what" related to career services. Risk of overwhelming career services staff, already struggling to keep up with demand from current students.	Collaborative relationship and strong mutual support between campus careers office and alumni office and staffing levels appropriate for dealing with increased alumni demand. Online platform that eases and enhances employer interaction with your campus.
Provide alumni with fun	Through social gaming, for example, generate engagement and interaction around an enjoyable pursuit.	Criticism by community members who think alumni interaction needs to be "serious," or focused solely on academic or professional activity.	Sense of adventure, willingness to act counter to traditional perception of alma mater as a tradition-bound, conservative institution.
Create location-based interaction	Engage alumni in a way previously not available. Emphasize ubiquity and omnipresence of alumni community.	Allocating scarce resources to deliver a product in an untested space. Location-aware functions might not tie in closely enough with alumni affinity.	Good awareness of recent developments in mobile technology and its deployment. Access to developers who understand mobile interactivity.