

Alumni Magazines in a Time of Transition Part 2: The Future Is Here

In part 1 of this two-part series, we explored the relevance of alumni magazines in a world where print is in decline, budgets are shrinking, and electronic media is a must. In short, despite the challenges print faces, alumni magazines aren't going away any time soon—not when a solid majority of alumni still want to read them in print (according to a recent CASE survey). Now, we look in more detail at e-tools and technology by way of further defining the alumni communications landscape—and the print magazine's place in it.

ALUMNI COMMUNICATIONS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

By John MacMillan

New Landscape, New Expectations

A decade ago, the alumni magazine was considered the heart of an alumni communications program. However, the ways in which we communicate, connect with peers, and interact with information have changed immensely, even in the past five years. Email and institutional Web sites are already a bit passé, believe it or not. With the proliferation of smartphones, handheld devices, and social media sites, people have acquired new, more sophisticated tastes and expectations.

On college and university campuses across the country, communicators and alumni relations departments are scrambling to keep up with the technology that their alumni use in their daily lives—and expect dear old alma mater to use too. The upside is that alumni are reading, watching, listening, and responding to more content than ever. The downside is that their “Google, Amazon, and YouTube expectations” are creating a whole new set of pressures on communications

professionals, who suddenly find themselves charged with managing and filling the demand for content and sorting out how best to deliver it.

The Pressure to Be Everywhere

The new e-tools have created a communications environment that is much more immediate, customized, and interactive than it was ten years ago. These tools include:

- Facebook
- LinkedIn
- Twitter
- Flickr
- Text messaging
- E-newsletters
- Broadcast email
- E-invitations
- YouTube
- iTunes
- Podcasts
- Blogs
- iPhone and iPad apps

With this array of platforms comes the expectation that colleges and universities will continually feed each with fresh content that alumni can access wherever and whenever they want. “There is this belief now that we will be everywhere,” says Lars Asbornsen, associate director of advancement communications at Amherst College. “In general, people are asking for more and new things all the time.”

That's been the case at the Alumnae Association of Smith College, where I'm the director of alumnae communications. Two years ago, we surveyed more than 2,000 alumnae, and a majority of respondents expected us to communicate with them in multiple ways—in print, via email,

through Facebook—and to offer them things like podcasts, Webinars, and videos of campus life and traditions to enjoy at their leisure. They couldn't guarantee that they would take advantage of all this but nonetheless wanted to know it was all available. So we've since invested in developing videos, audio files, more effective emails, and a robust Facebook presence.

The Social Media Juggernaut

Shaping much of the new communications landscape are social media. According to the Participatory Marketing Network, about 96 percent of Gen Yers have joined some kind of social network and use it as a primary means of receiving and sharing information about products and institutions. This cohort is driving—and will continue to drive—communication strategies. By keeping up with the new tools and technology, schools and alumni associations are making good on their commitment to keeping alumni of all ages connected and engaged.

Leading the way is the trifecta of Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Andrew Shaindlin, who writes a blog called Alumni Futures (www.alumnifutures.com) and consults with organizations on their use of social technology, says social media have put a lot more control in the hands of alumni. “The role of the association/alumni office as the sole broker of activity and information has evaporated,” he says. “People are increasingly able to gather and share information directly with each other, as opposed to relying on parent organizations to do it for them.” Suddenly, the communications office is no longer the strongest voice out there.

Social media are also forcing new standards for content and messages in every medium. User-generated content tends to be much more informal, says Elizabeth Allen, an author and consultant who runs the communications and technology firm Adaptivate (www.adaptivate

blog.com). Social media conversations “have a more casual tone than traditional communications,” she says. Shaindlin notes too that anything with an institutional voice is considered suspect and is more likely to be ignored. “Alumni are more savvy now about PR-style campaigns and have less patience for patently branded information,” he says.

And don't even think about repackaging the same content and simply sending it out through different channels. Says Allen, “Instead, think critically about the best use of the tool in question for reaching specific audiences. Use your communications strategy as a basis for deploying your messages in a way that is consistent—but not repetitive—across communication channels.” Shaindlin seconds that: “If you feed the same information through all your channels, people will be annoyed or bored by the repetition and will unsubscribe or just delete content without reading it.”

How Colleges Are Using Social Media

College communications departments and alumni associations have had no choice but to embrace the new digital media culture. On the blog Mashable (www.mashable.com/2009/07/23/alumni-social-media), Vadim Lavrusik, a new media student at Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, offers a great article, “10 Ways Universities Are Engaging Alumni Using Social Media.” Among the ten:

- **Helping alumni find jobs.** Many universities are finding LinkedIn to be an effective addition to their own online databases. Lavrusik points to DePaul University's LinkedIn community.
- **Encouraging alumni-generated content.** The University of Texas at Austin built its own photo-sharing site, which encourages alumni to reconnect with the school and their fellow classmates, according to Nyleva Corley, the school's Web and social media manager.
- **Fundraising.** “Getting a tweet from your alma mater asking for a gift to the school may not be

far off,” says Lavrusik. The key to fundraising success, he notes, will be to make appeals as personal as possible.

While social media and technology are certainly key to our communications strategy at the Alumnae Association of Smith College, we’ve had considerable success with tried-and-true methods like broadcast email. Last spring, an online Webinar series with a career coach garnered close to 1,500 participants over the course of a month. And we’ve moved toward promoting reunion almost exclusively via email and Facebook.

Some institutions are recognizing the importance of social media technology by hiring staff to manage it. Shaindlin points to Stanford, Berkeley, and Cornell as places that have invested in staff whose job it is to figure out how new media can be used to build support and affinity for the institution. The result? Creative and innovative new approaches to conveying information to alumni. Cornell’s reunion app for the iPhone (www.alumni.cornell.edu/reunion/mobile-information.cfm) lets alumni download details about the festivities, add their own itinerary, view campus maps and local restaurants, and share photos. Then there is Oregon State University’s incredible online community, Powered By Orange (www.poweredbyorange.com/), a comprehensive Web site, blog, and more that collects stories and videos of university students, faculty, and alumni who are doing inspiring work in Oregon and beyond.

Oregon State University has also demonstrated the potential power of a coordinated approach to communications by going one step further: they’re employing user-generated content and images from the site as branding materials that pop up all over the state.

More Tools, More Opportunities

All of this change in the air may seem overwhelming, but it presents plenty of opportunities.

No longer limited to one medium, communications departments can be much more nimble. As the communications toolbox grows—print and email alongside Facebook and Twitter, alongside whatever’s next—so does our ability to communicate with alumni better, faster, more effectively, and more meaningfully.

The Ongoing Evolution of Print Magazines

Looking ahead, one thing is certain: new tools will emerge (think mobile technology), and alumni will adopt them and expect their alma mater to do the same. Some of the old tools will no doubt become obsolete, but others will adapt—as print is now doing. How is the new communications landscape shaping print magazines?

First, magazine staff need to understand e-tools and social media. You can’t understand what your magazine should be, and shouldn’t try to be, unless you understand what new media is and isn’t. That is, the context in which your magazine operates.

The magazine has become the last bastion of brand control. All the new tools out there let alumni be our best advocates—and our worst enemies. It is increasingly difficult for campus communicators to manage what’s being talked about. A negative or misinformed post or video can go viral in minutes and potentially destroy a year’s worth of good messaging. As Allen puts it, “Controlling the message is an exercise in futility.” But because magazines are not directly interactive, their messages at least can be managed. They can play an important role in ensuring that there is enough accurate, upbeat information out there to offset the negative.

The new interactivity demands content that talks with, not at. Says Allen, “Communication has changed from ‘official’ to ‘conversational,’ and alumni expect to be part of that conversation.” That extends to print. The editorial voice is still

strategic marketing
and branding

focused, but increasingly, it's expressed by "unofficial" as well as official voices, and with a less formal tone.

New media takes the fast lane, which leaves the slow lane open for print. Electronic communications convey a sense of urgency and can do a lot to help create excitement around a new initiative or cause. Print, then, is an opportunity to balance that out, to offer a respite. Electronic media offers the quick hits that keep alumni up-to-date and in the loop, while a magazine can be the equivalent of that occasional long, bonding conversation with their old friend.

There's more pressure to be fresh. The new media make it possible to keep a constant flow of new, up-to-date information going—and cultivates expectations of that. Your print magazine can't compete in the realm of timeliness, but it can and must be fresh and unique to have any value in the new media landscape.

Quality design and writing is more important than ever. For all of new media's benefits, its pace can compromise quality. Good, professional design and writing can set print apart and add to its perceived value.

Information overload works in print's favor. Most of us are bombarded with electronic information every day. To cope, our information filters are getting finer and finer. When we as communications professionals add to this barrage, we run the risk that our alumni will simply tune us out. A magazine doesn't add to the e-load, has real presence, and can't be deleted with a single impatient keystroke.

More than ever, the primary issue is value. It's value that keeps the email out of the "trash" and the magazine out of the recycling bin. Whatever form it takes, information must be relevant to alumni's lives. Sometimes that might

mean pointing them to an organization that isn't affiliated with your school for help. "The old model of trying to get alumni hooked by a school-centric answer to every question is already dead," Shaindlin says. "[Alumni] will respond much more gratefully to pointers that solve their real problems if those pointers are designed to be effective and not just designed to drive traffic to the school's home page."

The feedback made possible by interactive media must be applied to print. The new interactive media may be impinging on print, but it can also help it. Instant easy feedback from alumni about their lives, needs, and expectations can only help our magazines stay relevant and deliver that all-important value.

Strategy First

The reality is that campus communicators will continue to juggle an ever-changing mix of obsolescent, evolving, and brand-new tools. But we shouldn't necessarily continue trying to be everywhere and to use every tool at our disposal. Think strategy rather than specific tool. If something isn't working for you, don't be afraid to let it go. As Allen advises, "Make smart choices about the platforms being used, rather than seeking to be everywhere at once."

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