
INNOVATIVE STRATEGIES FOR ANNUAL GIVING AND ALUMNI RELATIONS: LESSONS FROM THE CORPORATE WORLD

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By

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INTRODUCTION

When I attend annual giving or alumni relations conferences, I am often struck by some of the great work done by so many colleges and universities. There are always so many new and different ideas out there. There are schools that have created unique giving challenges, schools that have instituted complex volunteer structures that clearly have a huge impact on reunion fundraising, alumni associations that execute social media engagement campaigns that go viral within their alumni communities, and new events that increase the connection between the alumni base and the institution. As a collaborative environment, higher ed could learn from these great new ideas. However, ideas don't always spread like wildfire throughout the industry. The market for each institution is somewhat distinct, so when a great new program or creative idea is introduced, it doesn't always spread from coast to coast and infiltrate the strategy of other annual giving or alumni relations programs.

To learn the most from the innovations of others, annual giving and alumni relations departments should continue to share ideas with each other through conferences and webinars, but should also look outside of the higher-ed industry to find marketing techniques and processes that are transferable from the corporate world. This book will use these transferable ideas to help shed light onto three different areas of higher education:

- Marketing and branding of an institution
- Creating unique, memorable ways for alumni to give to their alma mater
- Offering personal and engaging experiences for alumni, parents, and friends

It will show how new, popular marketing techniques are being translated into these three areas of higher ed and will leave you with a bevy of ideas to implement at your institution.

ENGAGING ALUMNI EXPERIENCES

Personalizing an Experience

In 2011, Australians were the first to be treated to the now famous “Share a Coke” campaign. Coca-Cola launched the campaign in order to connect with younger people on a more personal level since young people did not feel connected to the company in any way.¹ In order to create this much needed connection with younger consumers, Coca Cola’s South Pacific marketing department began printing, in the iconic Coca-Cola colors, many of the most common first names in Australia on the sides of Coke bottles and cans. Individuals not only wanted to purchase Coke cans that had their own names on the side, but people also wanted to purchase the bottles and cans that had their friends names on the sides, as a gift. Over the course of that summer, Coke ended up selling over 250 million named bottles.² The campaign has since been launched in many other parts of the world, including the United States.

Personalization is a very powerful marketing strategy and product selling point. Companies like Build-A-Bear, American Girl and Ridemakerz have capitalized on children’s desires to have something that is unique to them, focused on their individual preferences. But, what can colleges and universities do to personalize the donor experience? Are there ways to make our donors feel unique without breaking the bank? To be able to personalize an experience for a donor is a way

1 Moyer, Jay. 2014. *Share a Coke: How the Groundbreaking Campaign Got Its Start ‘Down Under’*. September 25. Accessed September 11, 2015. <http://www.coca-colacompany.com/stories/share-a-coke-how-the-groundbreaking-campaign-got-its-start-down-under>.

2 Moyer, Jay. 2014. *Share a Coke: How the Groundbreaking Campaign Got Its Start ‘Down Under’*. September 25. Accessed September 11, 2015. <http://www.coca-colacompany.com/stories/share-a-coke-how-the-groundbreaking-campaign-got-its-start-down-under>.

to create a long-lasting, compelling relationship between the donor and the institution. Perhaps a personalized experience or stewardship opportunity cannot be created for every donor, but a campaign surrounding personalization could be created for a recognition society or a unique, one-time fundraising campaign.

Georgetown University

Georgetown University found a very powerful and simple way to allow donors to express themselves, while also benefitting the alumni association. It was called the Alumni House fundraiser.

The Alumni House has been used by the Georgetown alumni association for about fifty years. It houses a library, a boardroom, employee offices, the annual fund phone-a-thon center, Georgetown memorabilia, and space that can be used for lectures and special events. In 2005 however, it was in desperate need of repair. Approximately \$7.5 million was needed to complete the work and to create a permanent endowment.

Bill Reynolds, associate vice president of alumni relations and the annual fund at Georgetown, was tasked with figuring out how to raise the necessary funds on top of the lead naming gift secured by Mike Goodwin and Joe Kender, senior advancement leaders at GU for the Alumni House. While this was a tall task, he knew that there was great opportunity, as the Alumni House was a high traffic area, and visible for alumni coming back to campus. Traditional brick and paver campaigns were planned, but Reynolds wanted to do something different as well. After some brainstorming, one of Georgetown's volunteer leaders mentioned his affinity for the Palm Restaurant, the acclaimed steakhouse that started in NYC. The Palm is known for the caricatures that are on its walls, of both notable locals and also regulars of the restaurant. What if Georgetown created a similar display in the Alumni House, for supporters of the campaign? The Alumni Association ran with this idea, even going so far as to hire the artist who draws the caricatures at the Palm Restaurant to draw for the Alumni House.

Donors responded in droves. The Alumni House's winter garden room is now festooned with over 160 drawings of alumni who have donated at least \$15,000 each in support of the Alumni House campaign. "Our alumni love this opportunity to permanently connect themselves to the campus of Georgetown," Reynolds said. "Many alumni not only immortalized themselves, but also chose to have their caricature include their spouses and children. One family came down in a small bus in order to see the caricature of a recently deceased alumnus whom they knew as father, grandfather, uncle, and brother." Alumni were allowed to display their own unique relationship to Georgetown as part of the caricature. Different drawings highlight an alumnus or alumna's time on one of Georgetown's athletics teams. Other drawings feature alumni in Georgetown clothing. Still others showcase the alumnus or alumna's major while in school or chosen career path post-graduation.

This campaign assisted Georgetown in raising funds for its Alumni House and had a much longer lasting effect. The personalized nature of the stewardship has connected alumni to a physical place on campus that they want to come back and visit when they are in the area, which allows for the Alumni Association to continue to foster relationships as alumni visit the building. It also acts as a conversation starter. How many times has the alumni association been mentioned by an alumnus who wants to talk about his or her caricature? This type of word-of-mouth awareness is invaluable to a higher-ed institution, and while the effect cannot be directly measured, it is surely having a lasting impact on the university.

Coordinating Thank-you Campaigns

Personalization helps alumni feel that their alma mater knows them and values them. Numerous schools have thank-you campaigns where students pen notes of gratitude to recent donors to their annual fund to express how donations have influenced the student's time on campus. The Corby Society, Notre Dame's young alumni recognition society, handwrites thank-you cards to an alumnus when he or she joins the society. Student "thank-a-thon" campaigns are simple to execute, and like the Alumni House fundraiser, they have multiple benefits.

You can set up in high traffic areas on campus; students are often willing to write two or three cards when they come in since it does not take a lot of time. And this is often a low cost initiative. With a little bit of on-campus advertising, emails to your student listserv, some free food, and the ability to have any student workers employed by your development/fundraising department advertising the event via social media, you can have a fair share of students stopping by. The end result is that alumni feel that their donation was meaningful because a student took the time to write a note. The additional benefit is that annual giving teams get to have direct interaction with future alumni, educating them on the importance of making annual gifts to their alma mater, and showing them, in a public way, just how many alumni make these gifts.

Personalization can also affect your direct mail and email pieces. Many schools include variable text in letters and emails based on class years, activities and majors. However, a more influential use of variable information is on the outer envelope or the subject line. Variable imagery used on envelopes—showing a different building depending on an alumnus's chosen major, or a different dorm depending on where the alumnus lived—often results in more alumni opening a direct mail piece because the imagery will have a positive impression on the alumnus and make them feel that their institution knows and values them. This is also a minimal investment when it comes to cost, resources, and time.

Key Questions to Ask Right Now

- What are you doing to personalize the donor experience? Can you segment this approach to ensure that there are appropriate levels of personalization for annual donors versus recognition society members?
- How do your alumni identify with their alma mater (Do they consider themselves band alumni, engineering alumni, resident hall alumni)? This will help drive how you would segment a thank-you card campaign.
- Can you create personalized segmentation based on imagery? In order to create a higher open rate for direct mail pieces, using personalized imagery for alumni based on the major, activities, or residence halls for each alumnus can peak their interest before they even open a direct mail piece.
- How can you create a unique, personalized experience for recognition society donors or major donors of a one-time fundraising appeal? Is there an opportunity to do something like the caricature initiative in your alumni relations office, or in a high traffic area like a stadium, student center, or administration building?

 ACADEMIC
IMPRESSIONS

Businesses have long excelled at customer service and engagement, and higher education can greatly benefit from these lessons. Gain best practices to keep your alumni connected and giving to their alma mater by applying key marketing lessons from the corporate sector.

Entice alumni to do more to help spread your institution's brand. Look to *Innovative Strategies for Annual Giving and Alumni Relations: Lessons from the Corporate World* to explore:

- Concrete examples of programs your institution can use to promote your brand
- The interrelation of marketing, alumni relations, and annual giving
- New and proven marketing techniques that can greatly benefit your department
- Institutional examples of applying marketing techniques with greater impact.
- Key questions to ask yourself and your school before moving forward

See how these ideas can be applied to every institution and are accessible to any school regardless of size and background.

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