

RE-FORGING THE BOND

A New Approach to Alumni Communications

A White Paper
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INTRODUCTORY MESSAGE

As part of one of the oldest university's in Canada, the UNB Associated Alumni has seen many transformations over its long history. From its conception as a small representative group advocating on behalf of a few hundred members to its modern day mandate of engaging and connecting UNB's 80 000 alumni in support of the institution worldwide, the Associated Alumni is one of UNB's most integrated and senior advisory groups.

With over half of the universities alumni having graduated after 1990, UNB has an enviable combination of both history and youth. However, in this age of instant messaging and consummate information processing, ensuring that the goals of the Association are heard and supported requires a sophisticated and contemporary set of communications and engagement strategies.

It was with these thoughts in mind that the UNB Associated Alumni began the development of its new strategic plan in 2009. Once completed, Giving Back, Going Forward clearly identified four main imperatives – all of which required a deep engagement with its constituents. In order to achieve this, the Association knew it required two things. First it had to have a benchmark of where it was currently on the engagement scale. Second, it had to develop a plan to use that benchmark as a starting point and increase its success towards the overall goals. With the first requirement completed in the spring of 2010, the Association began looking at the second.

The process of developing a communications engagement strategy was one that provided immeasurable levels of insight in to where we have been, where we are and where we want to be. In the end, after all the reflection, discussion, development, and planning we have a clear road map which allows the UNB Associated Alumni to implement and deliver on its mandate for years to come. It was a pleasure working with the Wright Agency to develop New Beginnings and the Association extends its sincere thank you to them for their guidance and support throughout the project.

Robb Parker

Executive Director, Associated Alumni



INTRODUCTION

What do alumni want and how can we give it to them? That was the question the University of New Brunswick Associated Alumni asked in 2010 when it selected The Wright Agency to create a new communications strategy for its 80,000 members. The result was an innovative new strategy, called New Beginnings. This paper gives a brief summary.



What do Alumni want?

Alumni communications has undergone a great deal of change in the past few decades. Most of this is due to advances in technology. The way we communicate, the method, the frequency, the technique – all of this has changed. We now have graphic websites with all sorts of information, Flickr pages full of pictures, Facebook pages full of fans, powerful databases full of all kinds of information and more. That is the What, but what about the Why? The one thing that has not changed are the assumptions universities have made about why alumni want to have an ongoing relationship with them.

We know what universities want from their alumni –, support, connections, affinity. But many alumni leaders have trouble defining what the alumni want from the university. Many say it is an issue of “pride”. The graduate supports their university because of the positive bonds that were created during their undergraduate education. They feel proud of their time at the university. Another theory is that graduates are part of the university’s “family”. Like any family, they share common experiences and connections. Others say it is an issue of “maintaining the value of their degree”. The graduate supports the university because in so doing they maintain or increase the value of their education. A final reason is that graduates feel an affinity with younger students who are “walking in their shoes” at their university. This is often cited as the prime motivation for making a donation to a university.

Times have changed. As a result, many of these theories no longer explain the alumni connection. Pride may still be felt, but there are few studies which find pride is a primary motivator. In fact, while the word “pride” is used extensively by most alumni associations, there is no easy way of measuring it. As a result, most universities don’t define “pride” in their research. They ask if graduates are “proud” and leave it at that. Pride could in fact mean many things, including their own personal achievement. Worse, the amount of pride is not defined. So, when asked questions whether they would wear their university’s colours with pride, most people say yes. But is that an equal a test of pride compared to a question about whether they would share their pride by helping recruit new students. Here, most alumni usually are only somewhat interested. Does that mean they have less pride? It is hard to tell. Pride is more a buzz word than an effective measurement.

The “family” connection is also hard to define. Universities often refer to the alumni as part of their extended family. Again, there is little to point to in measuring the family connection, positive or negative. And even if they do consider themselves part of the family, it is hard to tell what that actually means in real terms.

The “value” theory may appear like a measurable economic yardstick, but it in fact also lacks detail. True, many universities ask this question and measure the answers. What are they measuring exactly? The true value actually depends on a number of factors, such as the type of degree, the career choices graduates make, the job market and more. Asking an engineering

graduate about value may be different than asking an arts major, even if both university experiences are the same. Then there is the issue of the type of value. Many people derive personal value from an undergraduate experience. For others, a degree is a job ticket.

The question of supporting students is a good one. There is much evidence to support the idea that alumni give of their time and money to support students. However, the real question should be why alumni support their universities as opposed to other worthy causes. Certainly, helping students is an opportunity, but it is perhaps too much to call it a motivator for alumni engagement. If not, then why don't alumni give more to scholarships?

The bottom line appears to be that universities know more about what motivates them than what motivates their alumni.

Generational differences

One of the biggest demographic trends for university alumni associations is age. Every year, alumni memberships are getting “younger”. In 1950, Canadian universities granted degrees to 17,000 undergraduates. In 1960, there were 19,000. By 1970, the number had risen dramatically to 67,000. In 2008, the number of undergraduate degrees awarded by Canadian universities was nearly 250,000. The demographic shift means that Canadian alumni associations have more “younger” graduates today than ever before.

At some point in the near future most alumni associations in Canada will begin to have more “younger” alumni than “older” ones. At the University of New Brunswick, the number of alumni who have graduated in the last ten years is now roughly equal to all the living alumni that came before. The people that defined the modern Canadian alumni association, the Boomers, will soon be outnumbered by alumni who graduated after they did.

Today's graduates are the products of a much different university system. Their experiences, their expectations and their outcomes are all different from the older alumni who have been the backbone of most Canadian universities.

To the boomers, the 60s and 70s were a time of “pride”. Their experience as students was much more intimate than their counterparts of today. They knew more people. Their status in society was different – a university degree was not as common as it is now. And because of demographics and the status of university degrees, alumni from the 60s and 70s found it easier to find jobs and start careers than the graduates of today. Their time at university was mostly positive.

Contrast this with the graduates of today. The Canadian Council on Learning found in a recent study that the average debt load of university graduates in 2009 was \$26,680. Undergraduate student debt reported in Canada doubled during the 1990s,

from \$12,271 in 1990 to \$24,706 in 2000. Unemployment and underemployment rates have also risen. Their fathers and mothers graduated from university sometimes with one or more job offers, but many of today's graduates are lucky to get a part-time job. Other factors are important, too. The university experience has become bigger, but not necessarily better. University campuses are crowded compared to the 60s and 70s. There is less contact with other students and faculty. For today's graduates, the university experience can sometimes be a negative one.

Commoditization of the university experience

The switch from the intimate experience of the 50s and 60s to the sometimes institutional experience of today has had an impact on the universities themselves. One is that the unique qualities that make each institution special – the culture of the institution – have been become muted. Most of today's students don't sing the school song, they don't attend the big school hockey or football game, they don't wear the school colours. The unique university culture that was so evident in the 50s has now faded into the background. There are some remaining orientation rituals and a few "identity" events, but they are limited and happen only once in a while. The full indoctrination to the institution that used to be the hallmark of a university education has passed.

One major casualty of this commoditization of the university experience has been alumni associations. Alumni were once a prominent part of the university experience. But now, with institutional culture waning, the alumni association has been harder to find in the daily lives of today's students. The move to include alumni associations in the university advancement portfolio has been a two-edged sword. It has raised the effectiveness and the efficiency of the entire alumni, communications and development effort. But it has also closely allied alumni affairs with fundraising. As a result, many students consider alumni programs and events to be a "front for fundraising". And for those students who have massive debts when they graduate from a Canadian university, a fundraising pitch is one of the last things they want to hear upon entering the ranks of the alumni. Truth be told, many alumni associations across Canada put more effort into fundraising-related activities than anything else. They do many other important things, but these activities don't always get the recognition they deserve from either alumni members or the rest of the university community.

A related problem is that students themselves have only a limited grasp of what an alumni association is or does. The consistently low profile for culture, including the alumni, has robbed students of first-hand knowledge about the alumni association. Many students do not hear from or talk to their alumni association until the day they graduate. In short, they are unprepared to be the alumni members their universities want them to be. To a lesser extent, university officials and faculty also are in the same boat. For many of the same reasons, interacting with alumni is often not a priority for them. This further isolates the alumni portfolio.

HOW TO RE-FORGE THE BONDS

A changing framework. A different generation. A much different sense of culture. These are the issues The Wright Agency dealt with when creating a new strategy, called New Beginnings, for the UNB Associated Alumni. The association needed a new and innovative way to reach members across Canada. The solution was a new way of thinking, better messaging and more effective measurement.



Start at the beginning

The most important and immediate change that New Beginnings called for was a new role for the alumni association in student's daily lives. This started with a re-framing of the relationship to make membership in the alumni the start of a student's journey with the university, rather than the end. All indicators point to the conclusion that many university students are oblivious to their alumni association until the day they graduate. It's natural for them to think of an alumni association as something that happens after their degree. That way of thinking explains why many universities find integrating new students into their alumni association a challenge. The answer is to make the alumni part of the student experience from day one.

A second important step was to change the way the alumni association thinks. Instead of focussing on what the university wants, the alumni association has to take a stakeholder-centered approach and focus on what students and alumni members want. Members must see a communication from their alumni association as something that gives them value in their own lives as well as the life of the university. Instead of talking about what the university needs from the alumni members, the alumni needs to talk more about what the university can do for the members.

Connected to the change in focus is a need to define what the university wants from the alumni members. Too many graduates and some university leaders wrongly think that the answer to this question is fundraising. This is not surprising because of the low profile the alumni association has and because fundraising tends to be a topic that is given priority at many university alumni associations. This perception must be changed. Instead, a new, larger purpose must be created – one that supports fundraising, but is not dominated by it. This purpose must be bigger than the university itself and it must have a strong call to action.

All of these ideas were addressed in one new communications plan for the UNB Associated Alumni, called New Beginnings.

New Beginnings

The New Beginnings consisted of three major strategies.

Journey

The idea behind this strategy was to establish the UNB Associated Alumni as a lifelong partner in the journey of life. The message to students and alumni members was simple: the alumni association is there to help you find your way and provide valuable things that you will need, when you need them, along the journey. Particular focus was paid to positioning the UNB Associated Alumni as the start of that journey.

The first action item in the Journey strategy was to refocus the UNB Associated Alumni to give members value at different stages of their life. So, for example, benefits will be retooled to provide more “everyday” value, such as discounts from national retailers and restaurants. That way, benefits will be more universal, especially for new graduates who don’t own a house or need insurance.

The university is in the learning business, but most of the learning stops once someone graduates. Offering learning opportunities to alumni members is a natural extension of the student experience and a fit with the new idea of providing value. Journey called for the UNB Associated Alumni to offer easy-to-use learning opportunities targeted at specific segment groups. Topics would be selected by asking the membership what they’d like to learn and when. To keep costs low and the value high, the plan recommended creating audio and video podcasts of existing lectures or to commission new ones.

Another important part of the university experience is to be exposed to new ideas and to discuss them. Journey called for the UNB Associated Alumni’s existing communications platforms, especially their magazine, to carry health, career and lifestyle advice using the university’s research and faculty expertise. For example, instead of highlighting a key researcher on diabetes, the magazine would feature a self-help article on diabetes aimed at educating and informing alumni members. It would still feature the researcher and their work, but with a more alumni member focus. Coupled with creating information that alumni members can use, the plan also called for the discussion of ideas. Specifically, Journey created a plan to promote the exchange of ideas on important popular topics. Twice a year, the UNB Associated Alumni would create a “great debate” on a single issue. There would be online discussion, webcasts featuring UNB researchers and more. Alumni members would be encouraged to listen, watch and join the discussion.

A major emphasis in Journey was placed on re-establishing the Alumni association as a pivotal player in the lives of students. The first step was to create two new events. One was designed to create a special, unique role for the association at orientation. Called the Sunset Ceremony, the plan called for a bonfire and candle light event one evening during orientation week where students will be “initiated” into the university by the alumni. The other event will be aimed at graduating students as a transition into the association. Many alumni associations try to fit this transition into graduation ceremonies, with only limited success. Graduation is a busy time, and students are usually distracted. A message about the alumni here would be too easily lost. Journey called for a special breakfast or other event just before final exams. Both events would be supported by contests with suitable prizes to get students’ attention. And both would use online and smartphone text-based marketing to get students where they live – on the Internet.

As well, Journey also called for a series of initiatives designed to bring alumni members and existing students together. This included everything from an opportunity for alumni to go online to send a welcome message to new students to a series of contests designed to share alumni and student stories. Existing mentoring programs would be strengthened and marketed more widely to both students and alumni members.

Starting Something

The second platform in the strategy was designed to give the alumni association a new, broader role in both the lives of its members, the university and the world. Called Starting Something, this initiative called on members to make the world a better place in their own communities and in the university community. A major part of the program called for annual service projects for the entire alumni as a group and as individual chapters. The alumni service project would be selected for both general interest and its tie in to the university, such as promoting literacy or planting a tree. Alumni would be encouraged to take action on each issue and to share their experiences with each other through stories, pictures and YouTube videos. Likewise, chapters would also be asked to create a local service project and to share results with the rest of the association. Challenges between chapters would be encouraged. Stories of community and university service by members would be featured in the Alumni magazine, but also in regular university communications channels so that students could see them. At the end of the day, Starting Something would show members and students that the role of the alumni is more than just fundraising.

Renewal

A critical piece of the new strategy was to ask alumni members and students what they want from the association. Called Renewal, this plan aimed to deliver the association's new emphasis on engaging stakeholders. A student/alumni committee would be created to begin a discussion on designing an alumni association that students want. The committee would help design and lead the discussion. And the first topic of discussion would be a five or ten year moratorium on asking new graduates for donations. This would give the university a unique and powerful opportunity to explain why fundraising is so important. A frank discussion would dispel the stereotypes students have created about fundraising and alumni affairs and replace them with a reasoned, logical appeal for support. Alumni members, too, would be given more opportunities to give input into the association. A new editorial board would advise the association on what communications members want. A series of surveys would ask for new ideas and rate existing ones. And, for the first time, the association would publish a separate annual report.

One key thing missing in many universities is a formal day of recognition for the alumni membership. There are many events that alumni are invited to, but not many that actually celebrate their continuing contribution to the university. Homecoming-type events are more focussed on celebration than recognizing their role in the university community. At best, homecoming events attract only a small sliver of the overall membership. They don't involve alumni with students as much as they should. Renewal called for a special Alumni Day every year where the university would celebrate the alumni. A key audience would be students. Alumni Day would give them a strong message that the alumni is a valued part of the university community and an organization they should look forward to joining. A key feature of the event would be the use of online technology to project the "thank you" to every alumni member in the database, where ever they live. This would be done through special messages, videos and events both on campus and online hosted by the university leadership. Contests would be aimed at alumni members and students to get their attention.

Chapters are the building block of any alumni association, but chapters also pose challenges. The biggest challenge is scale. Chapters as they exist now only work when they are located in large urban areas with a large number of graduates. Renewal called for the formation of new regional online chapters to fill in the gap between city chapters. Based around Facebook pages, these chapters will use mostly online activities. Once a year, each chapter will plan at least one major live event involving multiple locations linked together via Skype. Also, because many alumni members relate more to their faculties than to the university, Renewal called for the creation of special interest group chapters by faculty or department or other special interest.

Gateway Strategies

The mechanics of the greater role that New Beginnings gives alumni associations was addressed in three Gateway Strategies. The first called for better cooperation between the alumni association and other communicating arms of the university, including corporate communications, marketing, fundraising and athletics. The second called for all university departments and faculties to coordinate with alumni association about when and what communications they send to the alumni, directly or indirectly. The third, and perhaps most important, was a call for a greater role for the alumni in the university's communications with students, especially through student services. The university must recognize that the association has a role to play in the lives of students.

THE WAY FORWARD

New Beginnings is a new way of thinking about alumni communications. It recognizes the changes that have been impacting alumni operations across Canada and capitalizes on them. The framework that the plan provides can be applied to almost any college of university alumni association, large or small. More details on New Beginnings is available from The Wright Agency.



ABOUT THE UNB ASSOCIATED ALUMNI

The UNB Associated Alumni was founded in 1862 for “the advancement of the interests of the University of New Brunswick by all honourable means.” Its membership consists of all those who have attended at least one academic year at UNB and now numbers more than 80,000.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Stuart is a non-profit marketing and communications expert. He is currently Director Non-Profit Sector at The Wright Agency. John is the author of the Non-Profit Marketer Blog (<http://johnstuart.blogspot.com>), the moderator of the Canadian Non-Profit Marketing Group at LinkedIn, a marketing columnist at CharityVillage.ca and a guest blogger at the Guardian Newspaper in London. He is the author of two influential marketing communications white papers: the 2010 Non-Profit Marketing Year-in-Review and Page Not Found: Canadian Hospitals & Their Websites. John has more than 15 years of working with and working for non-profit organizations, including universities, hospitals, governments, charities and more. An award-winning journalist, his experience includes almost every facet of communications and marketing, from making award-winning websites to producing complete advertising campaigns



ABOUT THE WRIGHT AGENCY

The Wright Agency is a national marketing and communications agency that specializes in non-profits, especially universities. Based in Saint John, New Brunswick and with a satellite office in Kingston, Ontario, The Wright Agency serves clients across Canada, including local governments, provincial governments, federal agencies, crown corporations, universities, hospitals, charities and more. The Wright Agency is expert at helping organizations reach stakeholders without spending a fortune. For more information on The Wright Agency and the New Beginnings strategy, please contact us.

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