WHAT ALUMNI WANT

Alumni can be a great resource to help a business school's marketing messages. But, says **Andrew Crisp**, they must be properly motivated to do so

As a high-flying executive in an international business with an MBA degree, what do you yearn for – reduced-price tickets to a theme park? Probably not, though that was the highlight of an alumni offer from a business school recently.

Making the most of alumni is not difficult but it is essential. A strong alumni network offers a business school many opportunities – mentoring, attracting new students, speakers, a source of placements/jobs, fundraising and much more. What do alumni want in return?

A new report, *Alumni Matters*, by CarringtonCrisp supported by EFMD, suggests the top priority is to keep learning. But many alumni are either unaware of what their school offers or find themselves too busy to get involved with alumni activities. Just under 40% of alumni are not involved with their alumni network because they are too busy with work and other commitments. A third of alumni suggest they are not active in the alumni network because they are unaware of the services for alumni.

Alumni relations needs to be a lifestyle offer, something that works around busy alumni lifestyles, be that work or family, and continues to help alumni obtain the lifestyles they desire.

Eight business schools from Ireland, UK, South Africa and Switzerland took part in the *Alumni Matters* study, questioning their alumni and final-year students about what they want from the alumni experience. More than 2,500 respondents, comprising 90 different nationalities took part in the research.

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While alumni have a clear view of the purpose of alumni relations, it may not be the same as that of their business school. In North America, alumni relations has a long tradition of playing a central role in fundraising for a business school. In 2010 B*usinessWeek* reported that 67% of alumni of Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth University in New Hampshire made gifts at a median level of $200. More than $5 million was raised for the school's annual alumni giving campaign, making Tuck the best-performing American school that year.

With finances under pressure in European higher education, the potential for alumni as donors has come to the fore. Unfortunately, only 11% of alumni and 10% of current students believe the purpose of alumni relations is largely fundraising. Instead, alumni highlight facilitating friendships and business connections as well as fostering collaboration and networking among alumni and with their school.

The lack of expectation of a fundraising purpose means that alumni relations offices will have to sell this aspect of their work carefully if it is to be successful.

One of the problems for many alumni is that they do not know how to give or what the implications are for them personally. Close to three-quarters of alumni say they are unclear how to support their school. Some find it hard to know where or how to make a donation and more are uncertain about tax or legal questions. Making it easy, either online or off, with clear guidance is key to successful fundraising.

However, there are encouraging signs of the potential for giving. Only 20% of alumni say that they would never make a financial contribution.

High-quality effective communication is central to raising alumni involvement, whether in fundraising or other activities. However, too many schools rely on an electronic newsletter and alumni pages on a school website. An e-newsletter is often highly valued by alumni, although the quality and quantity of content can have a big impact on the success of such tools. Alumni web pages are becoming less and less relevant.

Alumni Matters found that few alumni use the dedicated pages of business school websites while around 70% are frequent users of Facebook or LinkedIn. Almost half (47%) of alumni indicate they "don't know if either the university or business school have dedicated pages for alumni".

Many alumni will be online on their smart phones or tablets throughout the day and during that time will often be connected to a social network. Fellow alumni and friends will be on the same social networks as well as a host of material that might be useful in their work or social lives. By contrast, few alumni will visit the school web pages with little interaction taking place. Much information may be hidden behind a password and the content quality may be poor.

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A strong school presence on social networks is essential to successful alumni communication. Alumni pages on a school website still have a role but that role needs to be clearly defined and other tools will be needed to drive traffic to the site.

Another reason for lack of involvement is distance from a former school, which is especially true of international alumni. Finding virtual tools to enable international alumni involvement and maximising the use of staff time when on international recruitment activity or attending conferences will be a high priority for most schools. About one in five alumni say they are inactive because "there are limited opportunities for international alumni to participate".

Social networks may also offer an easier medium for international alumni to network. Only 5% of alumni indicate that they contact other alumni through "dedicated alumni pages on the university website" while 10% use "school social media pages" and 31% make use of "other social media websites".

Just as alumni communications may have a sizeable online component, so may the services that alumni seek. Many alumni indicate that they want to keep their skills up to date to ensure their potential in the jobs market. Inevitably, alumni reunions (39%), speaker events (38%) and social events (36%) are also popular with many alumni.

Delivering development and learning is not always straightforward. For some schools this is done through taster sessions of existing programmes or by offering alumni discounts on courses. Increasingly, schools are turning to online delivery, which works particularly well for an international audience. It also offers the flexibility that many alumni seek.

Alumni were specifically asked what actions could be taken to quickly improve their relationship with their former schools. The main request, sought by 32% of respondents, was providing online learning opportunities, followed by 27% who wanted their school to "provide stronger career support/enhanced career services".

5%

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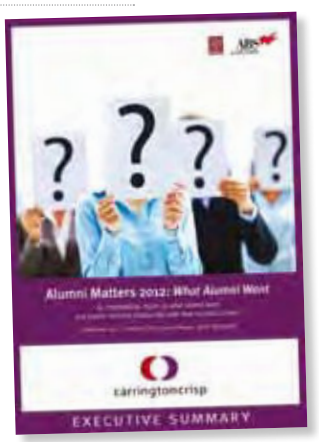

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Maintaining value in the jobs market is also something that alumni relations can support. Many alumni, but especially those who have studied part-time, turn to their schools' career support services when looking for jobs and employment advice years after graduation. A school that can support alumni with mentoring, with advice on business start-ups and with details of job vacancies as well as opportunities to post job notices will enhance its reputation with them. Many of these services can be provided by fellow alumni rather than the school having to add significant resources. Instead the school simply acts as a facilitator.

No relationship can be just one way and alumni are keen to support their school in many ways. Speaking at events and mentoring current students are popular but alumni are also keen to play an active role in recruiting new students. Almost 90% of alumni would answer questions from prospective students.

Having "been there and done that", alumni are in a strong position to validate the marketing messages that business schools put out to potential students. They can also set out clearly how their degree programme helped them with their career.

Providing information to prospective students can be done in many ways. Options for schools include virtual question-and-answer sessions, having alumni at an open day/evening, having alumni on a stand at a fair, including alumni case studies on a school website or even allocating an alumnus to an individual applicant to guide them through the process.

Building strong alumni relationships does not mean jumping straight to an American model with a strong focus on fundraising. Such an approach may even weaken any relationship that already exists.

Alumni are keen to engage with their school, to see its reputation grow and for it to succeed in the future. Alumni want to play a part in that success, even if it is only answering questions from prospective students.

Finding ways to help alumni continue to learn and grow, allowing them to network with other alumni as well as the school and doing so in a way that suits their lives are the key to strong, sustainable relationships with benefits for both sides. And, in time, that may also mean growing financial support.

An executive summary of the full results of the *Alumni Matters* research is available to download free of charge at: http://www.carringtoncrisp.com/alumni_matters **gf**

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Andrew Crisp is the joint founder of CarringtonCrisp and has worked with business schools and universities for over a decade, providing market research and marketing support to more than 100 institutions worldwide.