

ALUMNI RELATIONS

Hard to Build Up, Easy to Tear Down

In the face of budgets cuts, keep in mind a fundamental truth: Alumni relations is about strong relationships between people and the institution.

By Sherry Cameron

Every year *BusinessWeek* magazine ranks the best “Customer Service Champs” among for-profit companies. The 2009 winner? Amazon.com. Not surprisingly, in this challenging economy the best-performing companies – as judged by their customers – were doing a great job of looking for smart ways to cut costs without cutting customer service. I think this data has “lesson-to-be-learned” written all over it.

Alumni relations can be best summed up by the two terms friend-raising and fundraising. It’s about engaging alumni and your institution in a life-long exchange of mutually positive value. While most alumni relations programs are facing budgets cuts, it is vitally important to keep in mind a fundamental truth: at its core, the alumni relations function is about strong relationships between people and the institution. And while relationships take a long time to build up, they only take a short time to tear down.

Admittedly, quantifying the power and growth in alumni relationships is very challenging. A strong alumni effort can bring the admissions office more qualified students. It can provide the school and career office with more expertise and mentoring, and of course raise vital funds. But how do you quantify those results in a way that the people making the budget decisions can understand? The answer is clear: Alumni relations must be viewed as a long-term investment.

Investing in building a strong relationship from the moment a new student arrives on campus pays off with life-long relationships with alumni. Investing in building a sense of community and engagement with students ensures strong alumni involvement into the future. Every time you engage your alumni – through events, online social networking, webinars, mentoring programs, professional development groups – you create bonds with the institution, as well as among the alumni themselves.

The simple lesson to be learned here? Don’t gamble on the short term, invest in the long term. When constituents’ expectations are being met, you’re creating an environment conducive to turning alumni from mere past-students into friends and donors to the institution. Remind everyone you can: alumni hold the long-term key to successful fundraising in education.

Oh, and when the administration asks for budget reductions, tell them the school should learn a lesson from *BusinessWeek*’s “Customer Service Champs” ranking, by looking for smart ways to cut costs – without cutting alumni service.

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