

Notre Dame's Alumni Social Networking Program

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Written by Pam Baker

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The brouhaha surrounding Web 2.0 applications has largely spun around the novelty of social networking wherein the likes of MySpace, Facebook and LinkedIn have jumped to the fore. Despite the successes of all three of these destinations, many continue to debate the value of this technology to academia and non-profits. Perhaps doubt springs from the increasing distance placed between human interactions by prevailing technologies that are now largely accepted as normal. This in turn may have created a perception that undervalues natural human social behavior.

“The concept of social networking is as old as humans,” says Oliver Young, an analyst at Forrester Research. “That’s why it makes perfect sense for social networking tools to be used in groups where there is already a robust social aspect such as is found in non-profits and universities.”

A case in point: the University of Notre Dame which recently deployed the Kintera Sphere platform to deliver next-generation alumni engagement and social networking to over 120,000 graduates active in more than 300 alumni clubs, classes and affinity groups worldwide. Notre Dame, largely considered a thought leader in engaging alumni, has expanded far beyond the traditional alumni directory with these new social networking tools. Graduates can create, update and link to personal Web pages to stay connected with friends and the university at large. Alumni can also access advanced career and professional networking resources such as personalized online job searches, custom job boards and mentorship opportunities.

“Notre Dame also benefits from instant access to new and updated alumni data by developing data integration with the University’s SunGard Banner and Advance databases,” said Chuck Lennon, executive director of the Notre Dame Alumni Association in a prepared statement.

It all sounds good, but can social networking actually deliver in this context? “Yes, it can,” says Young. “Social networking is absolutely mainstream in many demographics and there is good overall adoption.”

According to Forrester’s research, only 17% of 18-21 year olds are completely inactive in social networking, meaning 83% are engaged in some form. However, baby boomers in the 51 to 61 age group are the exact opposite; 61% do not use Web 2.0 tools.

Does this mean that Notre Dame’s fancy new alumni tool will miss a large chunk of its target, and completely ignore what is arguably the most wealth-laden segment of its graduate community? Not necessarily, says Young. “Social networking does have value for older alumni. They are slowly working their way to accepting these tools. At Forrester, we expect the rate of adoption in this group to increase to 50% in the next five years and it will continue to climb after that,” he says.

Young also pointed out that there is a correlation between education levels and technology adoption, so it is quite possible that universities, like Notre Dame, will see better adoption rates than the market as a whole.

Even so, social networking tools are only one channel of communication. “Social networking tools add efficiency to human communications as opposed to sending letters, making phone calls and the like,” says Young. “But fast may not be the best attribute to be chasing.”

However, efficiency has its pluses too. For one, implementers can reach more people faster to pump-up event attendance, disseminate breaking news, or make a tsunami-like push to meet goals and deadlines on fundraisers.

“I believe social networking will become an even greater way for nonprofits and educational institutions to foster online communities of supporters, which will lead to increased affinity toward the organization’s mission,” says Darryl Gordon, Kintera’s vice president of marketing. “I also think the industry will start seeing increased constituent participation via social networking and that user-generated content will play a more important role within the organizational dialogue.”

Forrester agrees, saying that social networking will continue to grow but will settle into niche markets tailored to very narrow verticals targeting everything from alumni, and specific professional groups to single moms. “The good news is that we don’t see any fundamental technology changes on the horizon. There will be more features and functionalities, but otherwise, the investment in technology should not be outdated very fast,” says Young. “The bad news is: how many of these networks can one person belong to and still be fully engaged with them all?”



Pam Baker

About the author:

Pam Baker, an American writer, is the author of six books and numerous analytical studies on various technologies for VisionGain Research, headquartered in London. Her published credits also include hundreds of articles for national and international media such as Wireless IQ, Telematics Journal, IT Business Insider, Institutional Investor Magazine (covering the U.S., UK, Belgium, Ireland, Brazil and Turkey), Success Magazine, E-Commerce Times, I Six Sigma Magazine, CIO Today, NewsFactor.com, Enterprise I.T., BPM Today, MacNewsWorld, LinuxInsider, CRM Buyer, CRM Daily, SCI-Tech Today, TechNewsWorld, Georgia Trend Magazine, Economist International Business Magazine, and Knight-Ridder/McClasky newspapers.

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