

## **Technology**

### **Keeping Up with Alumni Through Computer Technology**

**By Chris Gehringer**

You spend countless hours and dollars to make your students the best they can be. You nurture them, guide them, teach them, and watch them grow to become mature individuals. They grow up, move on, get jobs, and start families. As time passes, they become successful, caring, thoughtful individuals that get involved in their communities, become leaders in their faith, embrace parenthood, and move up the ladder in their careers. A recent interview with Tim Befus of Rock County Christian School reveals they hope their alumni relations program builds stronger relationships between the school and students, enrolls second-generation students, and brings more financial donations.

So, what are you doing with all these talents and resources? Do you have an alumni relations program to keep in contact with your alumni?

Alumni relations programs build and strengthen relationships with students and former students, faculty, and friends. They keep alumni informed about the institution and in contact with each other by providing opportunities such as homecomings, reunions, and alumni club events. They provide educational opportunities to alumni through continuing education programs, weekend seminars, and travel programs.

Schools across the country are increasingly ramping up their alumni programs to take advantage of what alumni offer, and they are using technology to help get the job done. We're going to explore four technology solutions that can help you get an alumni relations program started.

A majority of your graduates (old and young) have e-mail, so it's one of the most important mediums to communicate with alumni. E-mail is inexpensive (compared to first-class postal mail) and gives you the opportunity to put your message right into alumni inboxes. Messages can be personalized and allow for links, embedded videos, etc. right in the message body. Begin by collecting e-mail addresses of seniors and alumni. Then, every month or two, send out a message to those on the mailing list. Be sure to include upcoming events, reunions, school updates, photos, stories, and more in each communication. Services exist to manage mailings and lists, which makes it a very attractive and easy solution for schools.

Another popular technology is social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, and Twitter (the four most widely used services in the United States). Each has their own audience, but your alumni ARE on these networks connecting with colleagues, friends, family, and more. People that create accounts on one of these services generally have the account for life, which makes it easier to find and reach alumni. Nielsen Online reports that social networks and blogs are now the fourth most popular online activity ahead of personal e-mail.

Photos are a hot item among alumni. Photos of graduation classes, graduating students, faculty and staff, buildings and grounds, and even yearbooks can be organized into albums and made

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available on the Internet to alumni and friends. Services exist that easily allow you to upload your images and organize them into various sets and collections for easy viewing.

Finally, now that you have the basic elements of technology to help you connect with your alumni and bring their attention back to your school, you need a Web page or Web site for alumni to visit. A place on the Web for alumni gives them one central location to find everything alumni-related. You'll have the ability to post news, events, giving opportunities, photos, and more. Today, Web sites are easy to update and maintain and offer a multitude of features and functions to keep alumni interested. In addition to e-mail newsletters, photo galleries, and social networking services, your alumni Web site may contain class directories, a classmate search feature, individual alumni profiles, message boards, and administrative features, such as data exports, reports, and statistics of who is visiting your site. If you don't have the resources to create a Web site yourself, there are plenty of organizations dedicated to helping non-profits and the education sector get online. The best part is that any alumni Web site you create is easily linked to/from any existing school site, which makes it very easy for alumni to find both you and the alumni section. In less than a year, more than 100 alumni and parents have signed up at the online community of Oklahoma Christian School, while close to 300 have joined the site of Houston Christian High School.

Your alumni are a powerful and valuable resource. Make it easy for them to keep in touch with you and each other. A good majority are already giving to countless organizations (non-profits, faith-based, etc.), and your school should be on their list, too. By giving alumni a place to share stories, reminisce, find each other, get information, plan reunions, and more, you are more likely to develop a better relationship with your graduates. And, studies show that these better relationships yield better donations and investments by alumni in your school. Says Ed Mehlberg of Oakland Christian School, "I would like to see a living organism of communication and support that extends around the world wherever our alumni are."

*Chris Gehringer is the owner of Alumni Channel, a service provider of alumni Web sites and online communities for schools and non-profits, [www.alumnichannel.com](http://www.alumnichannel.com)*