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## **Alumni e-Networks: Using Technology to Engage Net Generation Alumni**

*by Holly Peterson*

If I want to find my college or study abroad classmates, what do I do? I don't call them or write them letters. I log into my email, type their names (not their email addresses—the technology does that for me) into the address line of a [blank] email message and send it off. Usually it's less than four lines, and often it includes a smiley : somewhere in the message. Does this mean I have less meaningful, in-depth conversation with my friends than if I wrote them a letter or called them? Maybe. But it means that I keep in touch with friends I would have long lost were it not for the ease of communication. And I'm not even a member of the millenium generation. (Peterson and Roberts [2006](#), ¶1)

As educators and their institutions ponder the effect of technology on their ability to teach the Net Generation, they must also examine how technology changes the ways in which they interact with other constituents, including alumni. This article examines one organization's use of technology to reach alumni by presenting a case study of how [World Learning](#) is strengthening alumni relationships via Web-based technologies. These efforts have been especially targeted towards younger, Net Generation alumni, whom the organization had the hardest time engaging. These are new alumni, almost all of whom are under 25, who use Internet technologies frequently, if not invariably, for communication.

### **Background**

In late 2002, World Learning, including [The Experiment in International Living](#), the School for International Training ([SIT](#)), and SIT [Study Abroad](#), found itself in an interesting position. The organization, which provides study abroad opportunities for high school and college students and offers masters degrees at its campus in Vermont, has thousands of alumni engaged in international, intercultural, and social justice work in nearly every country in the world, but had little contact with this pool of alumni. As a result, World Learning was missing out on two fronts: first, the opportunity to advance the institution by encouraging alumni to support its efforts financially and to act as advocates for World Learning, and second, the opportunity to further the organization's mission of increasing intercultural understanding by connecting its diverse alumni with one another. World Learning needed to find a way to connect with alumni and to connect alumni with each other.

The nature of World Learning's programs and alumni makes this particularly difficult. Alumni are largely young, globally dispersed, and highly mobile—the quintessential Net Generation. Since they live in nearly every country on the globe and move frequently—as often as every few months—they are nearly impossible to reach in conventional ways. Alumni staff may have parents' mailing addresses, but rarely have current addresses or phone numbers for the students themselves. Keeping up with former students once they have been out of a World Learning program for more than one year is nearly impossible.

With that in mind, coupled with the awareness that these young, socially active alumni were also technologically savvy, we began our quest for new avenues of engagement with a simple premise: World Learning needed to connect with alumni in nontraditional ways—that is, by using current communication technologies. As we started thinking about these issues in late 2002, we realized that we did have the e-mail addresses of many alumni, and these became a gold mine in our initial efforts. In January 2003, we started an e-newsletter that was delivered via e-mail. The newsletter contained information about World Learning programs, but it also carried notices of conferences as well as opportunities for students to write about their study abroad experiences for national publications; in other words, it had value unrelated to World Learning

per se. Alumni began to read it. Within a year, estimated readership had grown from a few thousand to nearly 12,000 recipients a month.

Distribution of the newsletter also included the parents of alumni, a group largely untapped by institutions of higher education. Many universities target parents of students for support (financial and otherwise), but they often stop cultivating these relationships once students graduate. Because of the short duration of most World Learning programs (one semester), the majority of the parents in the database are parents of alumni rather than parents of active students. These parents represent an important resource in their ability to support World Learning's activities, both financially and through their volunteer support, networks, and other resources.

Readership of the e-newsletter continues to grow. While parents do opt out of the newsletter at a higher rate than alumni, many continue to receive it even years after their children have finished the SIT program. What does this new online activity mean for the organization? Most importantly, it keeps World Learning active in the minds of alumni and parents. While the impact of the study abroad experience is enough to keep alumni aware of the organization for years, parents can easily forget it. Sending parents the newsletter each month keeps World Learning firmly in their minds, even if they just delete the e-mail from their inbox. This leads to greater recognition when they receive a solicitation mailing or other "call to action," such as an invitation to attend an event. Parental financial giving increased by at least 60% each year for the three years following the introduction of the e-newsletter (January 2003-2006). While this can also be attributed to new cultivation efforts by the annual fund director, the recognition produced by the e-newsletter cannot be discounted as part of this growth. An analysis of the differences in giving patterns between constituents who receive the newsletter and those who do not is being undertaken in order to measure this effect further.

## **First Steps**

Given the early success of the e-newsletter, we began to look for a more comprehensive online community solution that would allow us to reach large numbers of alumni efficiently. With an alumni base of approximately 100,000 and an alumni staff of two, it was imperative to find ways to reach large numbers of alumni and parents, given limited resources. There were a number of other internal objectives, including re-engaging lost or disengaged alumni, consolidating existing online services (under previous systems, alumni had up to six usernames and passwords), and implementing an easy online fundraising component. We also felt pressure from a number of external factors, including a larger movement among academia and nonprofits toward an e-communications-based model. Alumni now expected e-communications and online communities. In many ways, we were not innovating but merely keeping up.

With that in mind, we initiated a search for a set of tools that would allow us to expand our newsletter into a full-scale online community capable of connecting with alumni in innovative ways. These tools had to be Web-based with strong e-mail and directory components, and they had to possess listserv, blog, and content management capability. They also had to be affordable.

As a first step toward an expanded online community, we outlined the tools we thought we would need for initial implementation. The system had to be sophisticated enough to engage more tech-savvy users but simple enough for everyone to use. We decided that the first effort should include an online alumni directory that constituents could update themselves, an e-mail and e-newsletter production tool, listserv management capabilities, a publishing mechanism that allowed users to submit their own content, photo galleries, an event calendar and online event registration, and pages that could be managed by regional alumni volunteers. We chose these tools for their potential to enhance existing services, to expand into areas in which alumni had expressed interest, and to exploit mechanisms that had worked for other organizations.

Technical specifications and mechanisms also had to be defined. We found that we had three main technical options:

1. Free or open source software/shareware, which is generally flexible but which requires expertise for customization and support;
2. A custom-built system, which would have enabled us to design just what we wanted but would have been expensive and required in-house or contracted expertise, not just to create the community but also to provide ongoing support; or
3. A prepackaged system purchased from a software vendor, which would have been affordable but would not have the nearly infinite flexibility of custom-built or modified freeware-based systems.

We did not have the in-house expertise or resources required by the first two options, so we looked for a software vendor whose product fit our needs. A number of vendors offer such packages, with wide variations in functionality and price. During the identification process, we created a functionality grid to determine how well each vendor met identified needs ([Exhibit 1](#)). The grid, which included a comparison of the services offered, level of support available, and price point, led us to the chosen vendor.

Between October 2003 and November 2004, World Learning personnel researched software, met with vendors, and implemented a new online community for alumni: [OurWorld](#). We encountered many challenges, discovered new opportunities in alumni engagement, and found ourselves asking even more questions about where these new tools would take us.

### **Implementing an Online Community**

We began by implementing some "easy wins"—features that alumni expected and on which they would form their judgment of any online tool. These included an [alumni directory](#), a [forum](#) for distributing news about the organization, and [photo galleries](#). The last was easy as we had thousands of student photos to incorporate into our site. The directory was much more challenging to design and implement, but it was among the top things alumni requested and used. Data architecture and syncing of data for this directory were big challenges and were likely to be a sticking point in any directory design. We had to think about these issues early on, and we contacted data experts in the firms of both the database of record (in which we hold information about alumni) and the online community vendor.

We took a number of steps to ensure that the site would be attractive and user friendly. Early on, we engaged a skilled visual designer to provide a coherent look for the site. The same firm that designed the organization's printed publications called on their Web design experience to design the look of the online community, allowing the site to be integrated with other current marketing initiatives. For example, the [donations](#) portion of the site was recently expanded to provide potential donors updated news on the accomplishments of alumni, information about initiatives that have resulted from gifts, and further guidance regarding the wide variety of ways in which they can contribute to our organization. Other pages were also recently expanded to provide a richer network of communication among alumni: a [conference page](#) with a calendar of upcoming events, an [advocacy section](#) with links to outside organizations and resources, an [opinions](#) page offering links to alumni blogs and blog entries, and an [archive](#) of e-newsletters. Testing the system with real alumni—those who were already connected to the organization in a volunteer capacity—was very helpful for ensuring user friendliness across a diverse alumni base. Finally, incentives drew users in and encouraged them to update information; we used e-cards and scholarship donations to accomplish this.

### **Evaluation**

With the site now in operation, some features have proved to be more useful than others. The photo galleries, which allow alumni to post pictures from their study abroad experiences, are by far the most used part of the site; the directory was difficult to design, but it has been well worth the effort. Other features have not been used as expected, mainly because they could not be implemented in a way that alumni found accessible. The classnotes section is not well used, and while the career postings listserv proved popular, the blogs and other listservs are not as heavily trafficked as we would like.

Two years in, however, the user base is steadily increasing. On average, OurWorld has at least 9,000 unique visitors per month, the equivalent of nearly 10% of the alumni base. Most interesting is the number of updates to personal information in the alumni directory. The old system generated roughly 40-50 updates per month. With the new online community, the organization receives approximately 500 updates per month. Averaged out at this rate over the next 20 years, the online community will have generated approximately 110,000 more updates (12,000 vs. 120,000), ensuring much better alumni contact information. Considering that World Learning's primary objectives for this effort are predicated on the ability to stay in contact with alumni, the organization will be much more successful in the long run even if the only benefit of the system is an increase in updated contact information.

## **Lessons Learned**

Both the challenges and the unexpected opportunities yielded important lessons for implementing an online community. Even with a clear vision, a cooperative vendor, and a robust software package, we encountered difficulties in design and deployment. We discovered that very specific communication with the vendor regarding customization and training needs was vital, as was coordination across management levels and departments within the institution.

More careful communication with the vendor regarding World Learning's needs on two fronts might have eased some of these difficulties. First, we would have benefited immensely from a clearer understanding of what components of the system did and did not simply work "out of the box." The organization's data organization principles were different from most institutions of higher education; that unique data structure required a level of customization that added months to the implementation process. We found, for instance, that we could move information from the database of record to the online database easily but that data from the online community had to be manually entered into the backend database. On a similar note, the training provided by the vendor did not address the desired level for use of the system. As fairly adept technology users, World Learning personnel wanted to learn how to push the system. Instead, training was designed for users who had less familiarity with online communities and technology.

Coordination within the organization was a key element in the design and deployment of the online community. It is imperative that all stakeholders understand the goals and possibilities for such an undertaking and that everyone is on board. Management must be prepared to provide adequate resources, not only during design and deployment but also for the ongoing support of the system. Without that ongoing support, the community will languish; it could be worse to launch and then fail to follow through than never to launch at all.

On a similar note, everyone involved must have a clear understanding of what the online community can do for the organization. While the community will not save time, it can increase efficiency and effectiveness, allowing a small alumni development staff to accomplish more. To ensure that the organization benefits from the community, its integration with the organization's other marketing efforts must be considered early on. The online community can function as its own brand, or it can become a part of the organization's existing Web site. This decision will have ramifications throughout design and implementation; it must be made early and in concert with all stakeholders.

The implementation process raised another set of coordination issues, specifically regarding who controlled the process: the alumni office or the IT department. While cultivation and design decisions needed to be made by the alumni office, IT was frequently best positioned to evaluate technology options. A multidepartmental team helped to ensure that key issues were considered from both perspectives.

## **Conclusion**

As future upgrades and expansion of the online community are considered, World Learning personnel will need to continue to be alert to how the technology will continue to change not only how the organization reaches its goals but also the goals themselves. Institutions of higher education cannot just keep up; to

effectively engage constituents, whether students or alumni, they must continually explore the edge of new technology. I hope to have answered some practical questions about how World Learning used technology to reach its Net Generation alumni, but even more importantly, I hope to spark debate about how technology is used, both to reach students and alumni of the Net Generation and by these same students and alumni in an increasingly complex and borderless world.

[Editor's note: This article was adapted from Holly Peterson and Tristan Roberts' [presentation](#) and preconference [podcast](#) at the April 2006 HigherEd BlogCon ([HEBC](#)) sponsored by [Thomson Peterson's, PR Newswire](#), [ProfNet](#), and The Council for the Advancement and Support of Education ([CASE](#)).]

## References

Peterson, H., and T. Roberts. 2006. Alumni e-networks: Using technology to engage alumni and constituents. Presentation at the HigherEd BlogCon virtual conference, April.

<http://www.higheredblogcon.com/index.php/alumni-e-networks-using-technology-to-engage-alumni-and-constituents/> (accessed March 30, 2007).

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