

Hip Technologies Make for Hip Fundraising

Karli A. Grant, Product Manager
Institutional Advancement Solutions
Datatel, Inc.

It's 2008 and by now you've probably heard of alumni portals, social networking sites and You Tube. But what about other online tools like blogs, Flickr and Twitter? Have you thought about how these technologies could impact your fundraising goals and visibility for your institution?

This article serves to familiarize you with the technologies and how your development, foundation and alumni staff can potentially 'harness the power' to benefit your advancement and alumni relations efforts.

Alumni Portals

An online or Web portal is a site that serves as a point of access to multiple pieces of information on the World Wide Web. An example of a portal is your Yahoo! or AOL homepage, where you can access your email, see your local weather, read local, national or international news, view stocks and sport team standings, and much more.

Likewise, an alumni portal provides an environment for your graduates and former students to access multiple types of information and activities in the context of your institution's homepage or alumni Website. Some alumni portals are very narrow but meet the needs of sharing information outward from your institution. Others are very robust and provide many bells and whistles such as lifetime email, online giving, chat rooms, bookstore shopping, photo galleries, and much more.

Alumni portals serve to keep your constituents engaged with your institution and connected to their friends and classmates. The benefit to your institution is that you can build alumni affinity and even leverage a captive audience to which you can make announcements and conduct various types of solicitations and appeals.

Social Networking Sites

Social networking is literally 'all the rage' and growing exponentially on a daily basis. A social networking site hosts communities of individuals who share common [and uncommon] interests or activities. This literally creates the ability to make friends and connections all over the world based upon very broad, or very specific, information. Popular social networking sites include Facebook and MySpace, whose focus really is on the social aspect of life, while others, such as LinkedIn, focus more on professional networking.

Chances are your students have already created a college, class year or program-related group on one or more of these sites, so it's good to keep tabs on what they are saying and take the opportunity to create your own positive publicity for the institution. Consider creating an alumni association member site, forming groups for promoting special programs or initiatives you have, and even providing links on your pages for institution information, online giving and more.

You Tube

Who knew ten years ago that you would be able to view TV commercials, music videos, world-wide broadcast bloopers and even course lectures online? YouTube is the premier video sharing Website where people can post and share nearly any type of video clip so others may access and view it. While

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viewing a particular clip, analytic tags show you other videos similar in nature that you may wish to watch as well. Viewers also have the ability to post comments regarding the video they are watching.

While the majority of content is provided by individuals for entertainment purposes, several institutions and businesses are posting content as well. This strategy can be used in an effort to create your own publicity, provide information, or use the tool to further learning efforts. For example, you could post a 30 second 'commercial' to advertise an upcoming alumni event for your institution, or you could post a three minute appeal for your annual fund, with directions for how to make a gift online or where to send the donation. Likewise, a faculty member could create a seven minute video introduction to the brand new dental hygiene program and facilities your campus now offers. The opportunities are limitless!

Blogs

A blog [short for Web log] is an online diary or journal of sorts, where entries are written, cataloged, and displayed in a chronological order. Typically, blogs are written in a very informal or casual style, to help the viewer 'hear' the voice of the person writing the blog (known as a blogger).

Blogs are often used to present commentary on news, politics, and current events. Other blogs focus on sharing information and creating communities on specialty subjects, such as mountain biking or folk music. Blogging software can be very basic (mostly text in nature) to very sophisticated, where design elements plus content such as photographs, videos, podcasts, music, real time RSS feeds, text messaging and audio functionality are utilized.

Literally over one million blogs exist, so how can you tap into this functionality? Your director of development may create a blog to discuss and update the public on the results of a current campaign; your alumni program director may reach out to all of your alumni, friends and current/former students to share information on programs, services, events, and results from recent surveys. Or your president may blog as a modern way to keep the campus community informed of important news and information.

Flickr

Flickr is a virtual space for the sharing of photographs within the context of an online Yahoo! community. Individuals use Flickr to post personal photographs, but bloggers also use it to store photos that support their blog topic.

How can Flickr be used in higher education? Think about your current alumni Website or online community...do you have the ability to store and display photos of your various functions and events? If not, consider using Flickr to get you going. Photographs of your events bring to life the programs and services you offer your alumni, friends, and former students. Likewise, this tool can be used to showcase your facilities to recruit new students, new donors and other community supporters.

Twitter

Twitter is a combination technology of sorts, which provides free social networking plus a 'micro' blogging service, all updated through either short message service (SMS), instant messaging, or email to Twitter's Website. These brief, text-based posts can also be updated to other applications such as Twittrific.

A poster's updates are displayed on that individual's profile page but can also be sent instantly to other users who have signed up to receive these short messages. This is where the social networking aspect comes in... like a social networking site, people can opt-in to be friends of an individual, and opt-in to receive his/her updates as well either online or via a mobile device (such as a cell phone or personal digital assistant [PDA]).

Do you think this technology sounds like a fad? As of late spring 2007, over 100 other sites started offering "Twitter-like" features! Because this is a tool that combines social networking with very brief blogs, your institution could utilize it to communicate very brief updates, like emergency messages or class location changes. Specifically in the realm of fundraising, Twitter could be used to keep your board members and volunteers abreast of campaign results, or even send a very quick 'thank you' to a donor for their gift. It could also be used to keep everyone involved in a scholarship dinner, golf outing or ice cream social in-the-loop with the planning and details of the upcoming event.

Communication technologies are evolving at a rapid pace. While fundraising will always be directly related to friendraising, it's important to be familiar with—and utilize—some of these online tools. Doing so will help you reach out to the masses, further promote your message, share critical information, shape your institution's image, and benefit your advancement and alumni relations goals.