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Strategic Use of Social Media by Higher Education to Influence Alumni Engagement

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ABSTRACT

Social media is a low-cost platform to develop and maintain communications and relationships while overcoming the barrier of distance. Higher education is an expensive affair especially with financial needs growing day by day, creating the opportunity for fundraising and institutional development to reach out to alumni. Higher education institution's fundraising initiatives will need to adopt social media to establish and maintain ties with alumni. This literature review study investigates the strategic use of social media by higher education to influence alumni engagement. Articles from the Web of Science and Proquest are included in this review with a focus on how institutions employ social media to engage alumni and alumni engagement behaviors towards the alma mater. Our results suggest that age, program delivery method and academic program of study are significant factors to determine the donative behaviors of alumni.

Keywords

Alumni, student, institutional advancement, social media and literature review.

INTRODUCTION

History of Higher Education

Higher education is an expensive venture and higher education institutions develop networks of alumni for support. Changes made by the government regulations and deductions to funds paved the way for the development of alumni associations. Budget cuts from both federal and state funds impact the institution's influence on the students' affordability to pay tuition fees and merit scholarship aid. The economy of the state also impacts higher education institutions. It influences the likelihood of giving in donors as the standard donations of a person to higher education institutions fluctuates with any changes in the overall economy (Tsao & Coll, 2004). In addition, institutions face an increase in the overall cost of higher education. Higher Education Institutions now focus on alumni associations and fundraising efforts to supplement many areas of fund development.

Growing Online Alumni

Changes in technology accompanied the change in the delivery of higher education. In the late 1990s, learning transformed into internet-based e-learning (Kidd, 2010). Internet-based e-learning has enabled online/distance learning in higher education. Online learning provides greater accessibility of higher education to students who do not have access to traditional face-to-face classes and helps the institutions to increase their number of students, in turn, increasing the overall revenue. However, these learners often view their online education as 'transactional' and do not form affiliation or close engagement with their higher education institutions (Wastyn, 2009).

It is important that institutions develop and maintain ties with its alumni population. However, achieving this through conventional means of direct mailing, phone calls and face-to-face interactions is not always possible and cost-effective specifically with online alumni. The usage of social media can help higher education institutions to overcome these shortcomings.

Increasing alumni engagement and donation opportunities through social media is a promising avenue by which universities and colleges might enhance their donor base and foster a sense of community beyond a student's time on campus or online student experience. Communicating effectively with alumni is imperative to increasing their participation in philanthropic

efforts (Whitinger, 2015). To communicate with alumni in a way that is both easier and preferable to them, Institution of Higher Education (IHE) fundraising initiatives will need to adopt social media as a leading communication medium (Sessa, 2015).

On the other hand, higher education institutions need to analyze non-donors by deconstructing their social narratives that may inspire alumni giving. This can take many forms which can be supplemented by social media such as tailoring needs that resonate with their college experiences, engaging in requests that influence their emotional appeals, and increasing their awareness by communicating the importance of giving towards the needs of the university and the social needs of higher education (Wastyn, 2009). In this structured literature review, we analyze how social media can be leveraged by higher education institutions to engage its alumni community.

METHODOLOGY

A structured literature review helps to summarize the theoretical frameworks and key findings in a field of study. It guides the way to discover new research ideas, develop new theories to create new knowledge (Webster & Watson, 2002). It facilitates the “critical summary and assessment of the range of existing materials dealing with knowledge and understanding in a given field” (Rowe, 2014). Additionally, Ph.D. students are benefited through structured literature reviews as it helps them to publish the literature review as a stand-alone paper which is part of a larger research project (Pickering & Byrne, 2014).

We followed a structured approach (Webster & Watson, 2002) for selecting articles that study how higher education institutions engage alumni in giving back to their alma mater. We conducted the search of keywords in the title, abstract and keywords of articles indexed in Web of Science and Proquest. We used the following terms to carry out the search “alumni”, “student”, “institutional advancement”, “social media” and “literature review”. We limited the search of articles to only the last five years. We considered only English language articles for our review. Also, we excluded any news articles, executive summaries, general information, interviews and commentaries to focus only on scholarly work.

The initial keyword search retrieved 78 articles for the last five years. After limiting the articles only to scholarly work 19 articles were retrieved. In the next step, all the articles were reviewed based on the title and abstract. We excluded articles that did not focus on the relationship of alumni behavior to institutional advancement. As a result, a total of 17 articles were included in this step.

In the final step, we reviewed the full text of the 17 articles selected in the previous step. In this step, we ensured the articles selected had information about how institutions employ social media to engage alumni and alumni engagement behaviors towards the alma mater. After carefully reviewing, we found that five articles should be included. Therefore, the total number of articles included was five. We derived conclusions from these five articles and present them in the next section of this review.

RESULTS

A total of five papers met the criteria of having information about how institutions employ social media to engage alumni and alumni engagement behaviors towards their alma mater and were included in our analysis. We present the key findings from these five full text reviewed articles. Mainly, we analyze the relationship between alumni demographics and giving behavior of the alumni. We focused on the mostly used demographic variables and included a summary of less frequently used demographic variables.

Relationship between Alumni Demographics and Institutional Advancement

All the reviewed papers examine the various predictors, including alumni demographics that are related to engagement behaviors. The main demographic variables analyzed are age, gender, academic program of study, and program delivery method. Less frequently analyzed demographics are the distance from campus, membership in national fraternity or sorority, participation in athletics, undergraduate or graduate alumni, and multiple degree holders.

Age

Age is found to be a significant determinant of alumni donative behaviors. Older alumni had higher participation in overall engagement and giving behavior (Berger, 2016; Clarke, 2016). This behavior is due to the fact that older alumni have likely cleared their student loans, are well established in their careers and are more likely financially secure. Whereas younger alumni have just started their careers and are likely to have student debt (Berger, 2016). These factors indicate older age groups have the flexibility of income required for philanthropic work.

Gender

The results were mixed regarding the relationship between gender and giving behavior of alumni. A high participation rate among males when compared to females is found in some studies (Clarke, 2016). In other studies, it is a different story where gender is not a significant factor to determine the giving behavior of the alumni (Berger, 2016). Institutions should treat both the genders equally by actively engaging them to become a donor to their alma mater.

Program Delivery Method

Program delivery method variable was found to have an impact on being a potential donor. Traditional alumni are more likely to be donors when compared to online alumni. Although a relation exists between these two, it is not strong enough and could be neglected (Berger, 2016). Another study examined the relationship between distance alumni and organizational identity. The results of the study depict distance alumni have a positive organizational identity towards the institution. Distance alumni with higher positive organizational identity tend to make more financial gifts to the alma mater (Watson, 2018). This trend in distance alumni is like that of traditional alumni.

Academic Program of Study

This variable was found to be a significant factor in understanding the giving patterns of the alumni (Watson, 2018). In (Berger, 2016) no relation could be established between academic programs of study and giving in traditional alumni while there was a significant relationship between giving and online alumni. However, the strength of this relationship was weak. In one another study, no correlation was found in predicting the giving patterns of the alumni. The reason stated by the authors is that the particular institution nourishes all the disciplines (Clarke, 2016). In the study (Berger, 2016) both traditional and online alumni had a low positive correlation between social media and academic programs of study. Therefore, this variable can help institutions to target solicitations towards alumni from programs that are most likely to donate. Also, institutions should plan to tackle the online alumni through different approaches for example via social media.

Other Variables

The distance from campus is a significant predictor to understand the giving behavior of alumni. This is true for traditional alumni whereas for online alumni this relation does not hold true. Alumni living closer to their alma mater tend to be more informed about their institution, have greater occasions of interactions with other alumni and increased chances of being reminded of their alma mater through various methods such as local news and institutional marketing (Berger, 2016). In (Watson, 2018), distance from campus was found not to be a significant variable to predict the giving nature of alumni.

Membership in a nationally recognized fraternity or sorority does not have any relation to the giving behavior of alumni, institutions should not segment based on this variable rather engage all alumni regardless of alumnus's affiliation with a nationally recognized fraternity or sorority (Clarke, 2016).

Athletics was found to be not a significant predictor of donating behavior (Clarke, 2016). Undergraduate alumni had a higher tendency to give back to the alma mater when compared to the graduate alumni. Also, multiple degree holder alumni are found to be a significant variable to predict giving behavior (Watson, 2018).

The key findings in (Harriman, 2017) states that lasting student and alumni friendships and the impact of alma mater in the professional life of alumni are direct factors that influence alumni giving behavior. The paper also states that affinity towards the institution alone does not result in higher giving rates in alumni.

DISCUSSIONS

The purpose of this systematic review was to analyze the role of social media to influence alumni donating behavior by higher education institutions. The review of literature provides an understanding on how institutions inform fundraising efforts to their alumni community. It is observed that the institutions under-utilize social media as a platform to create a sense of community with both online and on campus students. A few higher education institutions employ social media to request for funds from alumni while majority of them still utilize conventional methods such as direct mail. The findings from this study create opportunities to conduct extensive research on social media as an opportunity to influence alumni engagement and fundraising success.

Social media has several characteristics to leverage in this area. Social media may provide a platform for alumni to form a community of connections while examining content made available by the online community. The intent is for alumni association community to share information from the alumni thus improving or increasing awareness of contextual information of the alma mater.

In addition, online ambassadorship can be featured. Influencers who are prolific users of social media may provide connected links with their networks of networks with content generated from the alumni association. In this sense, the alumni associations may further identify and monitor social influencers and build online ambassadors.

Social Media based fundraising opportunities may provide a quick and alternative way of fundraising for projects that resonate with alumni and that are significant to the alumni association or university.

CONCLUSION

The social media platform is the solution that can be utilized by higher education institutions to increase donations from alumni as financial needs grow. From this review, alumni demographics play a significant role in the donating behaviors to the alma mater. It also depicts the lack of research in leveraging social media to shape alumni engagement. We analyze how social media can be leveraged by higher education institutions to engage its alumni community.

This structured literature review analyzed how social media can be leveraged by higher education institutions to engage its alumni community. The contribution of knowledge in this area generates research projects in the area of social media, student engagement, and alumni engagement. Further studies in these areas will benefit higher education by providing opportunities to develop best practices for implementing social media technologies. These advances may lead to additional contributions related to strengthening alumni relationships, improving higher education organizations' ability to build a donor base and develop stronger institution advancement based on strong alumni networks.

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