

# Development and Alumni Relations Report

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## Effective alumni e-communication is within your reach

Keeping up with the cutting edge in Web and e-mail communication is hard. Ten years ago, just having an e-mail newsletter was pretty advanced. And there weren't many alumni with addresses to receive it.

Now, e-mail communication is more sophisticated, and your audience is increasingly expecting you to keep up. Dynamic and effective e-mail communication can help you stay connected with your alumni, says **David Fish**, CEO of **iMakeNews Inc.**, an e-communications service provider.

If you don't already have a regular e-mail communication already, then you are missing a great opportunity.

At **Boston University**, 250,000 alumni receive a monthly newsletter by e-mail each month. One-half to two-thirds of the newsletters are opened, according to **Joel R. Seligman**, assistant vice president for strategic communications at BU. That's a quick, cost-effective connection with your institution's supporters.

Remember all the things you can use e-mail for – a general newsletter, event announcements, and last-minute reminders, Seligman says. Three-fourths of the e-mails sent to BU alumni are related to an event. To improve on the e-communications you have now, try these tips from Seligman and Fish:

- **Don't overwhelm your audience.** Don't send so many e-mails or send them so often that it annoys your recipients. Aside from a regular newsletter, save the universal e-mail to your entire alumni base for truly important events such as a change in the institution's president. If anyone complains, explain how overuse of e-mail communications can hurt their effectiveness.

- **Avoid being labeled a spammer.** Spam filters are programmed to delete e-mails with certain word combinations in them. Your IT department may be able to guide you away from certain trigger words or phrases, such as "free offer" or "mortgage rate."

You can also find Web sites that will tell you which words to avoid. Submit your e-mail content to [www.lyrics.com/contentchecker/](http://www.lyrics.com/contentchecker/) and it will give you a heads-up on potential spam-blocking problems.

- **Target your e-mail as much as possible.** You want something that people are interested in reading. Craft e-mail communication that is specific and that is sent to the most appropriate

recipients. For example, football news to sports fans and theater happenings to former drama majors.

And with the potential feedback available with e-communications, you can get a sense of what articles or topics are working. That can help you set an editorial plan for any of your publications, Fish says.

- **Keep technology in mind.** Not all your alumni will have the same level of technology, but don't design for the lowest common denominator, Fish says. Graphics and HTML give an e-newsletter impact.

Go with a service or software that gives the option of scaling back from HTML to text.

- **Prepare to get more cutting edge.** HTML is just the beginning. Now familiarize yourself with the idea of RSS: real simple syndication. With RSS, you'll be able to personalize e-newsletters further, and your readers will be able to personalize it for themselves as well. RSS allows the newsletter to pick up content from various Web sites or weblog (blog) communities, giving an e-mail-based publication the ability to be more dynamic and flexible. Other improvements in e-communication technology include near-DVD quality video.

"Imagine an alumni football newsletter that shows video highlights," Fish suggests. IMN has already developed a prototype with this feature.

This new technology makes brand and viral marketing easier. Great content can compel readers to forward it to their friends. With the RSS technology, readers can forward just one section or article of the e-mail rather than all of it.

- **Never forget to protect the trust of your readers.** Don't send unsolicited e-mail newsletters to alumni. Show respect for your readers, by allowing them to "opt in" for the e-communication.

For more about IMN, go to [www.imninc.com](http://www.imninc.com). ■

Want to learn more about hiring an e-mail communications consultant?

If so, see the upcoming August 2005 issue of *Development & Alumni Relations Report*.

### Don't forget e-mails to donors

E-mail communication is not just for alumni, says **David Fish**, CEO of **iMakeNews Inc.**

You can offer a high-end newsletter to donors, big and small. It is possible to fine-tune and personalize e-communications for different giving levels.

Capturing new graduates early with cutting-edge communication helps get them thinking about becoming donors, Fish suggests.

Because e-communication is so cost-effective, you can ask for less money from recent graduates and get them in the habit of giving. ■

### Did You Know?

## Measure your success with feedback, calls to action

How can you tell that an e-newsletter is reaching your audience successfully? Judge the effectiveness of your e-mail communications by examining the reactions to its content. For an event announcement, look at the participation rate, especially if it's a new event.

Study other responses such as online fund-raising levels and visits to the institution's Web site, suggests **Joel Seligman**, assistant vice president for strategic communications at **Boston University**.

In addition, immediate feedback is one of the most valuable tools that e-communication can give you over paper publications. At different stages, you can look at:

1. Delivery rates. How many e-mails successfully arrive.
2. Open rates. How many e-mails are opened.
3. Read rates. Which topics are being read.
4. Calls to action. How many click-throughs from the e-mail to your Web site or other sites.

With the feedback that most software and outside services offer, you can see what in your newsletter has the readers' interest, says **David Fish**, CEO of **iMakeNews Inc.** ■