

Using Facebook to Engage Young Alumni

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Overview

The current popularity of Facebook is remarkable. With over 100 million users worldwide and 31 million in the U.S., more institutions are using Facebook to reach out to young alumni. Of course, the general interest social network market is a fast-changing landscape. A few short years ago Friendster was the “hot” network, followed by MySpace and now Facebook. The capabilities, best practices, and integration techniques and tools of these networks will evolve as well. iModules has an active and ongoing research and development effort to continuously improve our product and integrate Encompass with other social networks.

iModules recommends the following strategy to engage members of Facebook in collaboration with Encompass:

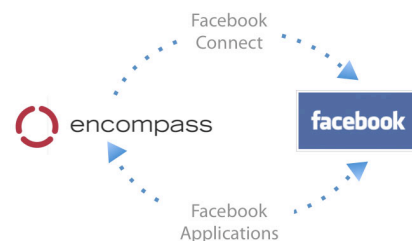
- 1) Publish member activity on users’ news feeds with Facebook Connect
- 2) Share member information with Facebook Applications
- 3) Using Encompass, share content with Facebook Pages

In May we published our “Leveraging the Facebook phenomenon in education communities,” and the response has been overwhelmingly positive. In it we presented a balanced look at using Facebook as part of your overall engagement strategy. Hundreds of iModules customers already leverage Facebook today to reach and regularly communicate with alumni. Some great examples are Oklahoma State University, Humboldt State, and Ithaca College. All three are easily reusing content from their existing iModules-hosted site along with providing handy links to their alumni community, events, and giving campaigns.

Facebook Connect & Applications

Facebook Applications. The Facebook Application for Encompass allows Facebook users to automatically update their Encompass alumni community profile directly from Facebook; without sacrificing data integrity. An administration system is included that provides realtime management of profile updates from Facebook. Also, the Facebook Application for Encompass dynamically receives customized content from Encompass, keeping alumni on Facebook informed of what’s happening on campus.

- Profile updates directly from Facebook to Encompass
- Administrative interface to improve data integrity
- Dynamically receives custom content from Encompass



Facebook Connect. Recently Facebook announced its new Facebook Connect platform for social network developers. The platform provides members of the Facebook Developers Program, like iModules, more engaging ways to link Facebook to sites like those hosted for our alumni communities. Our recently completed proof of concept demonstrates the usefulness of Facebook Connect to build viral campaigns in Facebook.

Single Sign-on. Once an alumni associates their alumni community login identity with Facebook, alumni will no longer need to remember as many passwords to quickly and easily login to alumni sites. Sites displaying the "Facebook Connect" login graphic will allow users to login to a site using their Facebook identity and password.

Populate the News Feed. Certainly the most exciting feature of Facebook Connect is the ability for linked sites to populate information into a user's Facebook News Feed based on activity outside of Facebook. At the center of Facebook's redesign, the News Feed is the one place friends can see what others are doing online – and particularly on Facebook. Using Facebook Connect, iModules is able to display recent event registrations and donations directly into a member's News Feed and Facebook. For instance, when a member of an alumni community registers for Homecoming, his or her News Feed in Facebook would include something like "Julie registered for Homecoming Dinner 2008 at State University." And now, all of Julie's friends would only need to click on the news item to be redirected to the event registration form on State University's alumni community.

Integrating Encompass with Facebook

Create a Page on Facebook. Facebook Pages offer a free, viral, interactive, and engaging way to target and market to Facebook users. In fact, it is Facebook's recommended practice that institutions use Pages to reach out to Facebook users. A page for your institution can serve as a home base on Facebook for your students, alumni and constituents. As Facebook members opt to become "fans" of your page, you can communicate with them and they can receive instant notification of many of the updates you provide on your page.

Syndicate news from Encompass. Because News, Events, Blogs, and other content in Encompass can be published on other websites and on Facebook Pages using Really Simple Syndication (RSS), iModules recommends you install an RSS Reader on your Facebook Page to automatically pull content directly from your alumni site. Once configured, the process is entirely automated, allowing you to easily re-publish your content in Facebook without any additional effort by you or your staff.

Simplify event registration and online giving with links. Be sure to publish links to Events and Campaigns on your Facebook Page as well. Also, post unique content on your Facebook Page that you believe will appeal to young alumni who might be looking to reconnect with your institution. Finally, encourage interaction between fans of your Page to increase the viral reach of this effort. By having links for events and giving on your Page, you can have a presence on Facebook that drives alumni to your Encompass site. This way, event registration and giving information can be stored in one, secure place, making your job easier.

Introduce your Page with e-mail marketing. Use e-mail marketing to introduce your Facebook Page to young alumni. Don't think of Facebook and your internal marketing efforts as separate; integrate them to reach audiences that are difficult to engage. One iModules client passively set up a Facebook Page with limited success, but after a single targeted e-mail from Encompass, they had over 2,300 fans on their Facebook Page within one week.

Create a Group on Facebook. While not as feature-rich as Pages, Facebook Groups offer another way to engage with alumni on Facebook. Since anyone can create a Group, you might find eager alumni have already done this work for you. A best practice is to reach out to the group owners and compliment them for their enthusiasm while encouraging them to turn over ownership of the group to your team. The long-term future of Groups for institutional use appears to be in question as Facebook now formally encourages the use of Pages for these purposes.

More ideas to engage young alumni

Experiment with Facebook Social Ads. In conjunction with several universities, iModules tested Social Ads to promote alumni communities. For a small investment the trial yielded very positive results. The annualized results from that test suggest institutions may benefit from using this targeted advertising tool available on Facebook to reach alumni.

Create an Encompass Form. While not tightly integrated with your alumni database stored in Encompass, you can create a simple "Interest" form on a hidden page of your alumni community and provide a link to it from your Facebook Page. The form can be as simple as a "Contact Us" form or a simple survey; the key is to be sure to collect an e-mail address.

Join related Groups on Facebook. Becoming a member of Facebook Groups related to your institution allows you to familiarize yourself with how relationships are managed and communication is digested from a users point of view, which helps you leverage your marketing messages. It also gives you the opportunity to monitor activity and content within these groups and gather additional information about your target audience. Being a member of institution-related groups also gives you further opportunity to drive traffic back to your own Facebook page and take full advantage of viral marketing.

Direct Outreach and Social Graphs. Public social networks offer new ways to understand the connections among your alumni. This is sometimes referred to as someone's "social graph." Facebook allows you research who are the most interconnected alumni. Depending on an individual's privacy settings, you can find it difficult to locate alumni using tools like Facebook and LinkedIn. Institutions will often create unique programs that target the "connectors" in a social graph – those persons who interconnect larger disconnected groups of alumni as a way to increase the results of other viral marketing efforts.

Leverage other social networks. Don't ignore other and upcoming social networks. You can apply some of these same marketing tactics to them as well. While over 50% of Facebook users are 18-25 years olds, nearly the same percentage of LinkedIn users are 26-35. Also, over 60% of LinkedIn users are men. Your young alumni engagement strategy should include MySpace as well. If your alumni live overseas, remember the adoption of Facebook internationally lags compared to here in the States.

Make the right ask. Too often institutions don't segment their "ask." Young alumni can contribute to your institution in more ways than financially. One strategy some have taken is to first ask alumni to serve as career transition mentors for undergraduates, and be organizers of local young alumni online and off-line events. Young alumni are more likely to have more free time to contribute than money to donate. Recent research shows only 6% of Americans under the age of 30 are charitable givers compared to over 60% for those over 65. Customize your ask, and begin a lifelong connection of giving to your institution.

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