

HOW DOES AN ON-LINE DIRECTORY FIT INTO THE WORLD OF FACEBOOK?

The growth of social networking, using tools like MySpace, Facebook, and Linked-In, has many schools wondering what to do.....

Facebook, etc. are very different services when compared to dedicated on-line alumni directories. Even if a vendor (such as Net Directories Inc.) duplicated the software provided by Facebook, it would never be the same. On-line directories and broad-based social networks each have their place. It is not a question of choosing one over the other, but understanding the strengths and weaknesses of each, and using them to maximize the effectiveness of your operation.

The following is a comparison between a "closed" system (e.g. as offered by NDI) and an "open" system (e.g. as offered by Facebook.)

	"Closed" Alumni Directory	"Open" Facebook
Population	Restricted to only alumni of an institution.	Open to anyone. These services are rather like the "wild west", which is partially why they are so appealing to younger graduates. The largest factor in their success is that they are open communities, so users are not limited to just their school peers (e.g. in the case of single-gender schools, Facebook has members of the opposite sex!)
Registration	Alumni can add themselves. Usually have ALL alumni pre-loaded into it, and each graduating class can be easily added by bulk file transfer.	Each person must register themselves.
Access to Content	Alumni can access any available content once logged in – no need to find or be confirmed as a "friend".	Each person must locate and ask to be a "friend" with each of their peers. Each friend must confirm all their friends.
Cost	Vendor charges a fee to institution, free to alumni.	No direct cost to an institution and its alumni.
Support	Vendor supplies full support to institution.	Minimal, or no technical support to institution.

Security	Institution must approve all new registrations, can easily suspend or delete those that do not abide by the rules.	There is no review of access, only if someone complains to Facebook.
Accuracy	Individuals cannot alter their names or year of graduation – they cannot misrepresent themselves	Anyone can easily misrepresent themselves, provide false or misleading information to others
Control	Institution sees all changes and updates, can remove or alter any information at any time.	Institution has no control.
Sync with Internal Database	Possible to download updates from institutional records to update the directory Possible to move information from directory to in-house database	Only possible to manually copy information from Facebook to in-house database Not possible to upload new information about individual alumni to Facebook
Advertising	None.	Yes. It is increasingly intrusive.
Privacy	Personal Data is protected, and can be completely controlled by each individual. Upon request, all personal information can be removed in short order. The information is not sold or distributed to third parties.	While Personal Data may be controlled by each individual, anything posted is NOT protected, and is being used for commercial purposes (e.g. targeted advertising.) Personal info may be distributed and sold to third parties.
Photos	Yes, in Bio profiles, Class Notes, Bulletin Boards, Photo Albums, HTML-mail and e-newsletters.	Yes, in Photo Albums, and various message postings.
Class Notes	Alumni and administrators can post updates about themselves or others. Each time a posting is created, a notification goes out to each person in that year of graduation informing them of the posting (individuals can elect not to receive them) encouraging them to login and respond, update profiles, etc.	No specific class notes function, but the posting of messages and having Facebook notify friends is the core of what the system is all about.

Mentoring	Mentoring is strength, where older alumnae volunteer to be "advisors" to younger alumnae. Mentoring profiles are searchable, making it easy for connections to be made. Some schools allow senior students access, and encourage recent graduates to act as mentors (e.g. university advice.) However, it does take some effort on part of the school to co-ordinate and promote mentoring. Because the participants have a common interest (the school) there is usually eager willingness to help other alumni.	No specific mentoring functions, but one can search on some criteria, locate individuals, and ask to be a "friend" of pretty much anyone. With no specific common bond, there does not seem to be strong willingness to assist unknown individuals.
Class Reps	Built in functions allow assigned class reps to broadcast e-mail to all the members of their graduating class. They don't have to worry about maintaining e-mail lists, or if they have everyone on their list.	Not available. However, individuals can post messages on-line and their friends will receive notifications. It is unlikely that an individual would be able to create a list of friends that would match just their class list.
E-Mail Broadcasts	With a complete database, your fancy looking e-mail broadcasts (news, information, invitations) can reach more people, and save you significant postage/printing costs. You can target the younger crowd who are more e-mail centric than perhaps the older graduates. (Many younger graduates say they "don't use" e-mail, but they must have e-mail to receive Facebook notifications.)	Structured e-mail broadcasts not possible, although you can post messages online and have your friends notified.
Source of Alumni Updates	Because a directory is "approved" by the school, it is perceived as a safe vehicle to use, and to keep updated. Alumni can update their own information and profiles, thus providing the school with an easy source of address changes and other information. Minimal time is required to administer the changes.	Facebook is perceived as less secure, so not as much information will be available. However, it is a great place to collect information. You can find current e-mail addresses, phone numbers, university status, job titles, etc. It can be used to manually populate your internal records, but it is time consuming to search and filter through individual listings. It is yours for the taking, being publicly available information.

SUMMARY:

Facebook is at its best doing peer-to-peer communication, or among groups of self-identified "friends". Alumni use Facebook to keep in active touch with their friends, for scheduling get-togethers and seeing "what's up" with their buddies. It is not very good at mass communication. Individuals have to put up with a fair bit of "noise" to use it, and sometimes the messages get drowned out. Facebook is a great source of information about alumni, including their e-mail addresses, which can be used to update an on-line directory.

An on-line directory is very good at "school to alumni" communication, where you want to get a message out to a larger group (either all alumni, or a subgroup segmented on some criteria) in a quick and cost effective manner. You get lots of control over the message (content and look) who gets it, and when it is delivered. Alumni like to use it as a reference tool, to find long-lost friends, and as a networking tool, where they can access trustful advisors.

For further information please contact Dale Carter at:

dcarter@netdirectories.com, or toll-free at 1-877-833-7178.