

IMN E-NEWSLETTERS KEEP PENN STATE UNIVERSITY LOYALTY RUNNING HIGH

Once a month, chapter leaders of the Penn State Alumni Association open their email to find the latest issue of *Alumni Volunteer Update* – a highly professional, well-organized e-newsletter branded with the Association's mark in emblematic blue. It looks simple and straightforward, but its goals are anything but.

The Penn State Alumni Association is the largest dues-paying alumni association in the world with more than 150,000 members. More than 500,000 diehard graduates participate in programs and activities hosted by the Alumni Association's nearly 300 affiliate groups. Each group is led by a volunteer leader responsible for organizing social and networking events, sharing Penn State related news and supporting the University's recruiting initiatives.

The affiliate group leaders are connected by their love for their alma mater but until recently, they had no collective forum. The Penn State Alumni Association knew an e-newsletter could become the ideal communications tool for galvanizing affiliate group leaders and giving them an efficient, low-cost vehicle for showcasing the affiliate groups' achievements and sharing their creativity and experiences.



On the other hand, the Penn State Alumni Association's online team shared a host of responsibilities including online strategies, the Association Website, email marketing campaigns and online alumni services. They didn't have a lot of time to devote to publishing and subscription list management. They also knew the expectations of the affiliate group leaders would be high: any e-newsletter had to be professional, it had to be consistently presented, and it needed to be reliably distributed and hosted if it were going to be useful. This was a tall order that became even taller. Ideally, the e-newsletter would also feature archiving capabilities and a content tool that required no HTML knowledge. Finally, it had to be scalable. Penn State currently graduates approximately 15,000 students a year. The alumni databases have a habit of growing exponentially.

And the Winner is...

The Alumni Association did its homework. After carefully reviewing five different providers they chose the e-newsletter service IMN created specifically for alumni associations. In addition to meeting the punch list of must-haves – customizable, low-cost, easy-to-implement, scalable – IMN's Alumni Connect e-newsletter included bundled-in reporting services.

Surveys embedded in the initial issues encouraged recipients to recommend content ideas, delivery frequency and other preferences. Using IMN's proprietary content-tracking analytics, the Alumni Association can find out what articles the affiliate group leaders read the most. This straight-from-the-subscriber feedback identifies the topics and articles of highest importance to the affiliate group leaders, as well as which events draw widespread interest. The learning helps the Alumni Association determine the editorial calendar for the next e-newsletter, while providing valuable research that is shared back with the affiliate group leaders as they plan their events.

After just four short months the e-newsletter has more than doubled its subscription base through its embedded "tell-a-friend" functionality - going from an initial distribution list of 1,000 to over 1,800. As of October 2004, the Alumni Association Website had a 64% increase in user sessions, an increase of 81% in unique users, and a 132% up-tick in repeat visitors. There has also been a spike in new visitor traffic (compared to October 2003) attributed to a push link from a new, online *Football Letter* (see below). While it began as a communications tool for affiliate group leaders, executive board and council members, and volunteer staff, more and more alumni themselves are asking to receive the Alumni Association's Alumni Volunteer Update in order to keep abreast of the activities in their areas.

Online Football Letter Gets Results to Fans a Week Faster

Having firmly established its affiliate group leader e-newsletter, the Alumni Association then proposed to create not one, but two more membership driven e-newsletters to serve two key alumni constituencies: 1) Penn State's loyal football fans and 2) fresh crops of graduates.

The oldest publication of its kind, the Penn State *Football Letter* dates back to 1938. Every week, thousands of eager Nittany Lions devotees await its arrival to read coverage of last weekend's game along with post-game analysis by John Black '62, Penn State Alumni Association's Executive Director Emeritus. Unfortunately, the paper nature of a traditional newsletter delays the joys of Monday morning quarterbacking a whole week since it has to be written, composed, printed and mailed.

The Alumni Association online team's first step was to create a password protected, Web version of Penn State's famous *Football Letter*. To build interest and subscription in the Web version, the Alumni Association included a return postcard with the paper version that introduced the online e-newsletter and stated that unless recipients sent the postcard back they would no longer receive the printed version. This move saved the Alumni Association \$250,000 a year in printing costs.

However, the members quickly requested that they receive an email version of their Nittany Lions recap the Monday directly after the game, which necessitated a change in delivery strategy and a new e-service in the form of Alumni Connect.

The first issue went to 60,000 recipient email addresses already in the Alumni Association's database. That will undoubtedly grow as news of the already popular online version of the *Football Letter* begins to spread. Page views for the new football newsletter sent in October 2004 were up 814% over the static version emailed in October 2003.

Keeping New Grads Connected

Graduates scatter immediately after tossing their mortarboards into the air. Therefore, the best time to introduce them to the benefits of joining the Alumni Association is before they leave. The Alumni Association created yet another IMN-based Alumni Connect e-newsletter directed at new graduates that reminds them of the free membership for one year. Professionally presented and easy to navigate, *Life After Penn State* recipients can click and find out about the Alumni Association's alumni services, events, publications and networking. *Life After Penn State* also features loyalty items for sale such as Penn State license plates and an MBNA affinity credit card. A portion of the proceeds from these items is given back to the University.

Launched in September 2004, *Life After Penn State* has already become a fundamental communications tool for introducing new Penn State graduates to the Alumni Association and keeping them connected to their alma mater and each other.

A Post-Launch Service Summary

Now that the Penn State Alumni Association has three IMN Alumni Connect e-newsletters up and running, they can comment knowledgeably about their experience with IMN's dedicated support staff. A quote from a recent email sent by Giovanna Genard, Associate Director of Online Communications, to IMN says it all:

"We work with many vendors and overall, you offer one of the top, easy-to-use, and affordable online business solutions we've encountered. Your customer service staff is also superb. They answer questions almost immediately and are very knowledgeable. We've even received requests from other vendors to take over our e-newsletters but we are so happy with IMN we don't want to let go. Great job!"

This is particularly high praise in the e-communications world – an industry that is known for providing customers with all kinds of attention during the sales process and then becoming somewhat less attentive when it comes time to implement and maintain initiatives.

Given the success of its first Alumni Connect e-newsletters, the Penn State Alumni Association is already planning on creating more versions tailored to the specific interests and needs of its 152,721 members. Big believers in research, the Alumni Association also intends to take further advantage of IMN's tracking analytics and to start using them to "get closer" to alumni as the e-newsletters continue to keep them closely connected to their beloved University.