

'Our college campuses are with us forever'

How universities are engaging with alumni to create powerful networks and growth opportunities

THE CURIOUS MARKETER



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Last week, I was back at my college campus — Birla Institute of Technology and Science (BITS), Pilani. I graduated over four decades ago, and the four years spent on this campus had transformed my thinking and shaped my life.

CALLING ON ALUMNI

I was impressed to see many new developments on campus, including new classrooms and laboratories, a lovely library, a new-age centre for incubating start-ups and a sharp focus on research. But what fascinated me most was how well BITS Pilani has begun engaging with tens of thousands of alumni.

Universities are unique in having to cater to multiple customer segments — including students, faculty, industry and alumni. The best Indian universities have focused on their students, faculty and industry recruiters quite well over the years, but have typically lagged in their engagement with alumni. At BITS Pilani, I saw a concerted effort being made to change this pattern, and a sharp focus on

building a strong alumni connect. I know a similar effort is underway at many other top-ranked universities.

A WIN-WIN

For so many of us, our colleges hold a deep emotional bond — these are the institutions that gave us the education that shaped our careers and lives. This is also where we made friends for life, had great fun and grew up. Hence, for alumni, there is a latent desire to connect back to their beloved colleges. For those in the later stages of their career, giving back to the college also provides a new purpose in life and proves to be very fulfilling too.

For universities, on the other hand, alumni are among their best brand ambassadors, and an invaluable source for fundraising and building long-term endowments to power the university's growth. Alumni also provide a smooth pathway to connect with industry and research ecosystems, which are very important for the development of the university's intellectual and placement platforms.

HOW TO ENGAGE

Given that engagement with alumni is such a powerful proposition, how do universities go about doing this? Here are some of my learnings.



BACK TO COLLEGE. BITS Pilani is fostering a strong alumni connect

- Creating a dedicated department of alumni affairs at the university is critical. This team becomes a focal point for connect with alumni. They also address essential tasks such as building a database of alumni and keeping this data constantly updated, and conceptualising unique and appealing frameworks for alumni engagement.
- Universities need to encourage and catalyse the growth of strong alumni associations, which serve as ongoing platforms for networking, as well as thought leadership on how alumni can help each other and give back to the institution.
- Frequent and relevant communication with alumni becomes key

to building and sustaining connect and interest. Alumni are keen to know how their colleges are progressing, and they take great pride in their university's achievements and milestones.

● Universities can add value to alumni in many ways throughout their lives, including providing career counselling, helping them in job searches or creating mid-career learning pathways.

● Creating platforms and recurring opportunities for networking and engagement, as well as communities of interest in various fields, is very important. For instance, BITS Pilani has put in place an annual BITSian Day, which is celebrated worldwide during the

first week of August. There is also a very popular bi-annual global meet organised by the BITS Alumni Association, where many topical issues are discussed. These platforms can be further segmented — for instance, BITS has, in recent years, begun organising a unique literary festival featuring its alumni authors (which was the reason for my recent visit to Pilani.)

● Setting an aspirational target for raising funds or endowment building, with clear objectives for the end-use of the funds, provides a sharp rallying cry that often galvanises alumni engagement.

● Continuous engagement of the university leadership with alumni matters hugely. Alumni are keen to interact directly with the vice chancellor or director, deans of the institute, and hear from them on the way forward.

If our country's universities are to compete effectively with their global counterparts in the future, alumni engagement will necessarily have to be one of the key levers. To ensure this, universities will have to develop a marketers' mindset of viewing alumni as a key customer segment.

Some good work has begun, but there is a long road ahead.

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