

K-STATE ALUMNI ASSOCIATION: NEAT/MARKETING RECENT GRADUATE  
RETENTION ANALYSIS

by

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## **Abstract**

The K-State Alumni Association has the highest percentage of graduates in the Big 12 who are members of the association. As a result, there is a strong network of alumni spanning more than 150,000 living alumni internationally and throughout the United States. This project seeks to utilize the relationship management theory to review current marketing strategies and develop new strategies to increase retention rates of alumni to the association after their one free year of membership, a gift provided to undergraduate students by their perspective college. The focus of the relationship management theory is about building personal relationships, which is in line with the K-State Alumni Association's mission statement, "Enhancing our Kansas State University family through lifelong involvement." The recommendations were created to assist the efforts of the Alumni Association to continue to reach out to alumni to meet them where they are at by utilizing media and new programs.

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## **Dedication**

This report is dedicated to my family, Dad, Mom, Enjoli, and Brandon. Thank you for all of your love and unwavering support throughout my collegiate career. I love you and am very blessed to have God place you as apart of my life.

I would also like to dedicate this report to the K-State Alumni Association. Thank you for your support throughout this project and providing me with hands on experience. By working with the Alumni Association, I know that I am truly apart of the K-State family.

## **CHAPTER 1 - History of Alumni Associations**

Beals (1935) describes the birth of alumni associations as an effort to create programs and benefits to facilitate life long friendships and build loyalty and pride for the students' alma mater. One common denominator of alumni associations is the continual desire to provide alumni with tangible goods (e.g. programs, alumni magazines, and trips) providing a connection to the university. The act of balancing the needs of life members and other long standing members who have already developed their loyalty to the university through the use of the services of the alumni association and recent graduates who have not developed their loyalty and get distracted by other activities (Stuart, 2009), is a tough task to take on. Emphasis has been place on the importance to remain relevant (Beals, 1935; Stuart, 2009) and cultivate personal relationships (Levine 2008) with alumni. Few studies have explored the importance of making the connections with recent graduates to increase retention; rather the focus has been placed on developing the relationships during the students' undergraduate years (Sung & Yang, 2006).

The life lines of alumni associations are the payment of membership dues and donations from alumni and supporters. Alumni born in the 1970s to present day have not felt a sense of belonging to the alumni association and more importantly they have felt as though their small contribution has not made a difference (Levine, 2008). Yang and Sung (2006) emphasizes the need to develop programs for students, describing a college student's full experience and willingness to donate to their alma mater to encompass four variables "their satisfaction with their education, including relationships, reputation, communication and quality of educational experience." A student's perception of the value of the education (Sung & Yang, 2006; Levine, 2008) they received is a key factor to motivate alumni to give back to their alma mater. It is a collaborative effort of current students, staff, faculty and professors to create a welcoming environment for incoming students to ensure a positive college experience. The work to develop personal relationships should begin freshman year (Sung & Yang, 2006) and continue after graduation through continual efforts of the alumni association.

## **K-State Alumni Association**

The K-State Alumni Association was established by students in 1879, 16 years after the opening of Kansas State College of Agriculture and Applied Sciences (now Kansas State University) and 12 years after the first graduating class (Weigel, 1980; Royal Purple Yearbook, 1922, p. 350) in an effort to create programs for students and alumni to get connected to the university, much like the purpose of the Student Alumni Board (SAB) today. At the time of the birth of the alumni association President Anderson chose to give the alumni association an ultimatum to meet at the college without making any contradictory remarks or plans against administration or meet elsewhere (Weigel, 1980). The attitude of President Anderson did not give the Association a great start but the alumni were confident in their ability to create a successful organization. The Association, as we know it today, has more than 40,000 members and is considered to be number one of alumni associations in the Big 12 conference for the fourteenth year in a row (“K-State alumni membership highest in Big 12”, 2010, p. C10). With a rocky start and continuous support from alumni since 1879, the K-State Alumni Association is considered to one of the most successful organizations who place a strong focus on the strength of their relationship with their constituents, by providing alumni with their “Link to Life”.

Current benefits offered by the K-State Alumni Association provide alumni with their “Link to Life”, lining up with Beal’s definition of what the alumni association should serve the prospective university – building personal relationships and loyalty to K-State. Building a successful relationship takes patience and understanding, to start the process the leaders of the Association must define what type of relationship they would like to build with their constituents. It is important for organizations to develop a mission statement that describes to essence of who they want to be (Drucker, 1990, p.4) perceived as. The mission statement of the K-State Alumni Association,” *Enhancing our Kansas State University family through lifelong involvement,*” and their core values, 1) accessibility 2) champion of tradition 3) excellence 4) integrity 5) sense of family 6) strong work ethic 7) teamwork should align with one another so the leadership and their constituents are on the same page for what the organization stands for.

With more than 150,000 alumni (K-State Alumni Association Annual Report 2007-2008, p. 2), the Association has to be sure to uphold their mission and core values, continue to provide

alumni with their “Link to Life” and remain relevant (Stuart, 2009) to their alumni and students to increase retention to the association. The Association must know how to effectively build a relationship with each individual alumnus for this process to be successful.

### ***Programs***

Retention and recruitment of alumni, current, and prospective students is important to the K-State Alumni Association. With emphasis placed on retention and recruitment, the Association has developed various programs for all age groups ranging from *Born to Be a Wildcat*, for newborn to one year old children to *Catbacker Clubs*, for alumni after graduation in various cities around the United States. In an effort to serve current students at K-State the Association has developed, *Wildcats Forever*, a program that provides current students with a taste of what it is like to be apart of the alumni association – partaking in benefits from local businesses and university sponsored events. The *Student Alumni Board* is a branch of the Alumni association that allows current student to serve in leadership positions in the alumni association. It [Student Alumni Board] provides a good stepping stone for students to be active members and leaders in the association and their local chapters.

In 2009, the K-State Alumni Association teamed up with the university’s Career and Employment Services office to create a database to post jobs for alumni to alumni networking. The program was developed in an effort to combat and assist the challenges alumni face when it comes to a finding a job in a struggling economy (Nightingale, 2009). Maintaining programs for all ages gives the Association a high position in the alumni market, allowing them [the Association] to establish, create and maintain loyalty and positive relationships with members, contributing to the enhancement of the K-State family and mission of the university .

### ***College Gift Program***

When an undergraduate student graduates they are presented with a gift, a one free year of membership to the alumni association, from their perspective college. In 1988, the College of Agriculture decided to team up with the Association to develop a program for recent graduates, Adopt a Graduate (Stichternath, 1989). The program was created to drive membership numbers up for the alumni association. The Adopt a Graduate program was the pilot program for the College Gift program, where soon after the start of the program other colleges decided to create a

graduation program of their [the college] own. Since 1999 the College Gift program has had the participation of all nine colleges –agriculture, arts and sciences, architecture, business administration, education, engineering, human ecology, veterinary medicine, and technology and aviation. The K-State Alumni Association has maintained a retention rate of approximately 20%, well above the average retention rate of other alumni associations.

In addition to the focus on the retention efforts for alumni, the goals and the strategic initiatives of the K-State Alumni Association help the Association to develop a well-rounded alumni association and understand how to communicate with all of their alumni on an individual yet equal level. Focusing on the goals of the Association will lead to fulfilling their [the Association] strategic initiatives: 1) increase use of electronic media 2) grow membership 3) grow participation in event opportunities 4) grow alumni fundraising efforts 5) partner with the university to increase enrollment. The goals of the K-State Alumni Association are 1) expand the reach of the Association 2) increase involvement by being relevant in the lives of our constituents 3) develop and enhance relationships with the university and broader community entities to strengthen and grow the Association 4) ensure long-term financial growth and stability (K-State Alumni Association Annual Report 2008-2009).

This report will utilize the relationship management theory (Bruning & Ledingham, 2000) to provide recommendations for new programs that will stress the importance of the K-State Alumni Association to build a mutually beneficial and strong relationship with recent graduates, to increase their retention rates from 20 percent to 30 percent by June 30, 2010 (K-State Alumni Association Annual Report 2008-2009). By fulfilling their [the Association] goals, implementing the strategic initiatives, understanding the core values and remaining true to their mission statement, the Association will be able manage their relationships and reach out to young alumni, remaining relevant (Stuart, 2009) and provide young alumni and recent graduates with their “Link for Life.”

## **CHAPTER 2 - Relationship Management Theory**

Relationship management is a public relations theory that was developed by John Ledingham and Stephen Bruning (2000) in an effort to assist organizations develop personal relationships with their constituents and increase business. Ledingham and Bruning (2000) believed that a successful and effective relationship is developed through clear communication between the organization and their public. Several variations of the definition of public relations were developed prior to creating the concept of relationship management, the chosen definition was created by Cutlip, Center, and Broom (as cited in Bruning & Ledingham, 2000), “the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and its publics on whom its success or failure depends.” This definition was found to be the most acceptable by Bruning and Ledingham (2000) in relation to relationship management. The definition created by Cutlip et al. (1994) will help the K-State Alumni Association to understand that their success in retaining alumni is measured by the quality of the relationship between the Association and its publics (Ledingham, 2005) as it relates to alumni (as cited in Coombs & Heath, 2006). Relevant programs, provided by the Association, will help maintain a positive reputation (Sung & Yang, 2006), encourage alumni to participate and maintain their membership, opening the door for success and a mutual beneficial relationship between the Association and recent graduates. To have a mutually beneficial relationship with recent graduates, trust, openness, involvement, investment and commitment have to be a part of the process. Bruning and Ledingham (2000, p. 162-263) found that if a recent graduate does not trust the organization to fulfill their needs and be open about the organization, the graduate is less likely to be involved, invest in and commit time and effort to the Association.

Knowing the importance of management creating and maintaining positive relationships with the customers, this study will attempt to connect and express the importance of adopting the relationship management theory, developing positive and long-term relationships with recent graduates.

Now that we have an understanding of the definition of public relations, as it relates to relationship management, that laid the ground work for the relationship management theory, we

have to understand what it means to adopt the relationship management concept. To begin we have to define what relationship and management means at the core of the words. A relationship, according to Coombs and Heath (2006) is “the state which exists between an organization and its key publics in which the actions of either can impact the economic, social, cultural or political well-being of the other (Ledingham, 2003, p. 184),” and management is defined as “the act or manner of managing; handling, direction, or control.” (Dictionary.com) If you combine the meanings of the two words you get the four main developments of relationship management, 1) relationships are the main concept of public relations 2) public relations should be used as a management function of communications 3) there are key factors that identifies the relationship between an organization and its publics and 4) the variations of model for the organization and public relationship (Coombs and Heath, 2006). Grasping the developments that contributed to the development of the relationship management theory will help the Association to create beneficial programs to increase membership to 30 percent and participation in event opportunities to 10 percent, as listed in their strategic initiatives.

In addition to understanding the developments of the relationship management theory, it will be important for the Association to know the ten principles behind creating an effective relationship, according to Coombs & Heath, 2006). First, building relationships is the core of public relations practice and will contribute to the success of the Association. The Alumni Association should study the generational needs and wants of Generation Next. Those who were born between 1981 and 1988 are considered to be apart of Generation Next and do not believe they are easily definable. In fact, 68% believe that they are unique from their parents and grandparents generations (Pew Research Center: For the People and the press, 2006). Secondly, a successful relationship will be mutually beneficial to the recent graduate and the Association. The relationship formed between recent graduates and the Association should satisfy the needs and wants of recent graduates as well as fulfilling the Association’s goals, values and strategic initiatives. Third, the relationship between the recent graduate and the Association must strong and powerful. After understanding the needs and wants of recent graduates, the Association will be able to focus, individually, on each need and strengthen the bond.

The fourth principle of relationship management is paying particular attention to the wants and the needs of the Association and recent graduates, which will drive the success or failure of the relationship. Early in the research we discussed the need of donations and membership dues to the Association in order to be financially successful. The basis of managing a dues-based organization is building successful relationships. Building a successful relationship will lead to additional monetary support for the Association and overall success for the Association. Fifth, the Association will continue to increase their understanding of recent graduates by learning how to effectively communicate with recent graduates. Sixth, the success of managing the relationship between recent graduates and the alumni association is measured by the quality of the programs provided. Alumni programs should fulfill the needs of recent graduates to be successful and have their “Link for Life”.

Seventh, communication avenues the Association chooses to utilize will be a key component to developing and establishing a relationship. The Pew Research Center (2006) found Generation Next to be the “Look at Me” generation and have high usage rates of technology. Over 80% of Generation Nexters occasionally use the internet and over three-fourths know a lot of people who participate in social networking to connect with families and friends. This information infers the younger generation to value relationships and seek various ways to make connection. The Association will want to join the relationship process and become a friend of recent graduates through social networking.

The willingness of the recent graduate to become friends with the K-State Alumni Association will be based on the history, frequency, interactions and reciprocity between the Association and recent graduate, leading to the eighth principle of relationship management. The experience of the student at K-State and with the Alumni Association will have an affect on the perceived value of the relationship and the urge to remain with the Association. Ninth, the Association can categorize their relationships with alumni and their importance. Lastly, building relationships will be the basis for the Associations public relations strategies in further research of retention with the Alumni Association. A fourth of Generation Nexters have indicated they admire those who they have a personal relationship with (Pew Research Center: For the People

and the press, 2006). The Association will be successful in managing a professional relationship with recent graduates if the ten principle of creating effective relationships are implemented.

## **Methodology**

Prior to focusing on efforts to increase retention to the Association, the K-State Alumni Association has to understand their positioning amongst other colleges and universities in the Big 12 conference. To determine their position in the alumni market the Association has to define the benefits it offers their alumni compared to the benefits offered by other Big 12 schools. After collecting data on benefits offered by Big 12 alumni associations, three categories of benefits have been developed; national, local and university, and additional benefits. We will define the groupings in subsequent parts of the report. Membership fees were divided into three grouping as well, recent graduate, annual, and lifetime. The recent graduate category under student fees were important because of the goal of this report, to provide programs that will assist in increasing the retention rate of recent graduates to the K-State Alumni Association.

After understanding the position of the K-State Alumni Association in the alumni market, it was important to understand our audience. How are our alumni distributed? Who is considered to be a recent graduate? How does a young adult communicate? We turned to the Pew Research Center: For the People and the Press (2006) to define Generation Next, who use technology to connect with people, use social networking to have a “Look at Me” attitude, they are fully aware of the advantages and disadvantages of technology, maintain close contact with family members and parents, is interested in keeping up with politics and national affairs, people close and familiar to them are their heroes, and goal in life is fortune and fame.

## ***Benefits***

National benefits are generally offered by national companies such as hotels or moving companies and include discounts offered by national companies, discounts accessible by association members anywhere in the United States – does not include online discounts from online stores, however, it does include programs such as the *Savings Connection* that is an online service that represents various national companies, centralizing benefits for the user. Benefits included in the national category are, moving companies, insurance plans, national golf courses,

car rentals (i.e. Enterprise and Hertz), hotels (i.e. Holiday Inn), identity theft program, realty/mortgage, travel, association credit card, and discounts with *Savings Connection*.

Local and university benefits are defined as a benefit that is only accessible if the alumni are in the area of the school. Local and university benefits are provided by companies local to the university (i.e. local hotels, restaurants and gift shops) and benefits provided by the university (i.e. sporting events, access to alumni center/building). Benefits in the local and university category include discounts at the student union/bookstore, local golf courses, university library, university recreation center, use of alumni center/student union, local hotels, local restaurants, university credit union, theme parks, automotive discounts continuing education courses, discounts to alumni events, and tailgating or football opportunities.

Additional benefits are those that can be accessed no matter the location of the alumni, national or international, but may be offered online or in print. Items in print, mailed to members nationally and internationally (i.e. association magazines, local magazines, and newspapers) and online services for members only (i.e. Savings Connections, online directory, and e-newsletter). With the purpose of this report in mind, additional benefits include alumni magazines, wall calendar, access to online career center, discount subscription to local magazines/newspapers, online stores (i.e. apparel), e-newsletter, online alumni directory, lifetime e-mail address, car window decal, enrollment in legacy program, survey software, university press books, Kaplan or Princeton testing resources.

The K-State Alumni Association was found to provide the highest number of benefits to their alumni. The variety of benefits provided to alumni help to support the Association and retain alumni. The next step for the Association is to review their benefits, concentrating on what they offer and if it is relevant to the needs of young alumni.

### ***Recommendations***

The national, local and university, additional benefits, communication efforts, and current marketing practices were reviewed to understand what benefits and communication, if any, were offered to alumni that would spark their interest to remain with the alumni association. We found

that the alumni association does take part in various communication efforts, such as Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn, to communicate with alumni and reach out to Generation Next – keeping them connected. However, I did find that the alumni association does not provide a specific program for young alumni, especially recent graduates, to connect with one another, provide a personal story or face to the services and benefits provided by the alumni association, or an avenue to feel as though their goals and successes matter to the Association.

### ***Wildcat Young Alumni Program***

While a small amount of alumni associations are making improvements to their current communication pieces, a select amount of schools have strived to increase their efforts to connect with recent graduates and young alumni by creating young alumni programs (Carlisle, 2004). In an effort to respond to the need of connection, alumni associations have developed young alumni programs – providing a service to recent graduates to connect with one another to network, attend special events, receive professional development on life after graduation, how to land the first job, and how to climb to corporate ladder. Various schools, such as Arizona State University, have experienced an increase in membership numbers (Ryman, 2009).

White (2008) found that young alumni face feeling a disconnect from the association when they attend alumni events where the median age is in their 40s, with the creation of a young alumni program for alumni that have graduated within the last ten years, it can serve as a stepping stone and everyone is on the same page. This is important because there are recent graduates that feel as though the alumni association is after their money, after the student has paid tuition to attend the college or university (The America's Intelligence Wire, 2009; Ryman, 2009).

The K-State Alumni Association young alumni program will be for young alumni who have graduated from Kansas State University within the past 10 years. The program will serve as a sub-program under the direction of the K-State Alumni Association to help them [the Association] manage relationships with recent graduates and serve as a stepping stone and resource for a graduates transition into life after graduation – providing tools to be successful in connections in their career field, the university and other alumni. Recent graduates who are apart

of this program will quickly learn the importance of being apart of the Association during their first free year of membership.

The goals of the program will include providing recent graduates with their “Link for Life”, educate current students and recent graduates on the purpose of the young alumni group and the Alumni Association, increase membership and retention of recent graduates after their one free year of membership, show students how much the Association and university cares about their success, provide professional development, social, networking and community service opportunities, and assist young alumni to communicate and build a strong network and relationship with one another.

The students who serve or have served on the Student Alumni Board (SAB) within the past two years will be influential in starting the young alumni program. Students on SAB are taught the importance of the K-State Alumni Association and therefore, will be able to effectively communicate with other young alumni the importance of joining the young alumni group. The students from SAB will also serve as the first executive board of the young alumni program to solicit additional members and give the program a running start. The Association will not only want to target young alumni who have served on SAB but also young alumni in areas where there is a large amount of alumni, Dallas, Kansas City, Omaha, Chicago, Tulsa, San Francisco, and Naples/Fort Meyers. Young alumni that are highly involved in their local chapter or on SAB will most likely support the program, spark excitement in those around them, and be willing to serve on the young alumni council – that will serve as the board of directors you for the young alumni group.

As we learned earlier in the study, Generation Next spends a lot of time with technology and therefore build and strengthen relationships through the use of media. The young alumni program will want to be sure to communicate through traditional and nontraditional media and utilize the @KState e-newsletter and alumni magazine with a section for young alumni. It would be in the best interest of the Association to create a young alumni guide that can be distributed in one of two ways, paper form distributed at the grad fair or through email to all emails on file.

The topics of discussion in the guide will include topics on jobs, graduate school, housing, finances, insurance and the K-State Alumni Association.

### ***Testimonials***

The second recommendation for the alumni association would be to add testimonials to their website and other communication materials. Braverman (2008) defined a testimonial to be a short story of a personal experience, story of opinion told from a character, apart of the group in question, who has had a successful experience with a product or service. The main character of the testimonial makes it easier for an audience to identify with, even if no personal relationship exists between the narrator and listener. Identification is defined as, “one of the most powerful functions of narrative is to generate in the reader/viewer/listener the understanding that I’m like [a character in a narrative],” as found by Rowland (2005). Testimonials are a popular public relations strategy to establishing relationships with your audience, who will identify with the narrator in the testimonial, and providing the organization with a positive face to their public. Feinglass (2005) found testimonials to be an important puzzle piece for non-profit organizations to place in their puzzle and allow others to sing their praises.

The placement of the testimonials will play an important role in the effectiveness of the testimonials to develop a relationship between the organization and its public. In relation to the Alumni Association, there are various options to establish testimonial sites on the website. The first option would be to have testimonials appear in different areas, membership – on the join or renew page, benefits and services, and life membership page, career services – have a member speak about their experiences with the Association in finding a job or helped them advance in their current careers, traveling wildcats page – talking about their experiences abroad supported by the Alumni Association, and on the club pages.

The second option to adding testimonials to the website would be to create a “Wildcat Success Stories” page. Establishing this page will allow testimonials to be in one central location, allowing the reader to read the testimonials at their own pace. The page should have a photo of the alumni that provided the testimonial next to their personal story. Providing the photo and centralizing all of the testimonials to one page will allow the recent graduates to place a face to the story and create their own image of the K-State Alumni Association. The last option for

testimonials is to post audio testimonials to the website. Audio contains more heuristic components and are generally more persuasive than textual.

### ***Token of Thanks***

The last recommendation for the alumni association to connect with recent graduates would be to adopt a program to show their appreciation of the recent graduates' membership to the association. A letter will be sent to those who chose to renew their membership with the Association thanking them for their continued support of the Association, signed by the alumni association president. A token of thanks program will allow the association to establish successful relationships, leaving recent graduates with the feeling of being valued in the organization and using word-of-mouth about the customer services and care the K-State Alumni Association provide for their alumni. Bucklin (2009) found word of mouth to be an effective marketing tool/strategy to sell a product or service.

The letter, in addition to a token of thanks such as an umbrella or tote, will be sent to those who chose to renew their membership with the Association after the term of the college gift membership program. If the Association focuses its' efforts to retaining those who chose to renew their membership, the Association will be able to count on word of mouth to distribute the message of the care and attention they give to alumni therefore increasing retention of recent graduates.

## **Summary**

Through the application of the relationship management theory, the importance of the K-State Alumni Association to establish relationships with recent graduates is shown. Successful and mutually beneficial relationships are the key to the success of the alumni association as an organization (Beals, 1939; Sung & Yang, 2006). The Association can develop mutually beneficial relationships with their alumni by understanding the core values, strategic initiatives, goals, and mission statement of the Association. The framework of the relationship management theory and the strategic initiatives will help the association to implement the basic public relations strategy, build a relationship with young alumni to provide programs that are relevant to their wants and needs.

The creation of the young alumni program, addition of testimonials on the K-State Alumni Association website, and providing recent graduates with a token of thanks for renewing with the Association will assist in building relationship. The most important factors in having a successful relationship between an organization and its public is: trust, openness, involvement, investment, commitment. If the Association does not understand how to effectively communicate with Generation Next, they run the risk of the amount of members diminishing in the future. This is not something the Association can afford to risk because they are a dues-paying organization, needing the donations and dues of alumni to sustain and position them in the alumni market. The relationship management theory will take the managers of the Association back to the basics of public relations strategies – putting the relationship back into public relations and provide a pathway of creating successful alumni programs in the future. If the Association remains open with their public, recent graduates will in turn trust them, become involved and invest in the organization, and commit to becoming a member.

## **Supplemental File – NEAT Internship Recent Graduate Retention Analysis**

In the supplemental file you will find an analysis of the current benefits offered to alumni by K-State and other universities apart of the Big 12 conference, membership fees, distribution of K-State alumni, portrait of our target audience, and three recommendations for new programs . Included in the analysis are operational definitions of the national, local and university benefits, and other benefits. To understand the financial positioning of the K-State Alumni Association, the chart of membership fees has been divided into three categories, recent graduate, annual, and life. Lastly, you will find detailed descriptions for the three recommendations of programs the K-State Alumni Association can adopt to assist the retention efforts for recent graduates.

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