



# ENGAGE ALUMNI ONLINE: 8 STRATEGIES TO BOOST YOUR EFFORTS AND ROI

A Campbell & Company strategy sheet

**How do I build relationships with alumni?** Every higher education institution is grappling with this question, from the largest public universities to the smallest liberal arts colleges.

Campbell & Company addressed this challenge in the 2018 study, [“Alumni Engagement: Best Practices for Building Long-Term Relationships,”](#) and our team continues to focus on creative solutions to the alumni engagement question. While there are no silver bullets, applying best practices from online fundraising to your alumni engagement efforts can help move the needle.

In this strategy sheet, our Online Fundraising and Higher Education teams detailed eight ways your institution can develop closer bonds with alumni, boosting your ROI and setting the stage for robust long-term fundraising.



## Develop five to seven alumni personas.

Your alumni audience is made up of thousands of graduates, each with their own story, likes, and dislikes. So how do you effectively communicate with such a vast group? Enter alumni personas. Alumni personas are archetypal representations of your alumni population. By grouping your alumni into five to seven different personas based on their demographics, identifiers, goals, and challenges, you can begin to segment your communications—online and off—delivering content that engages and inspires action.

**Note:** Five to seven personas is the sweet spot for many colleges and universities, but if your institution has an especially large and diverse alumni population, you may opt to create more personas. If your institution is small or relatively new to digital engagement, you may choose to create fewer personas. Whatever the number, ensure that it's manageable and useful for your team.

Unsurprisingly, the most accurate personas are created with input from the source: your alumni. You can gather this input through one-on-one conversations, focus groups, or surveys. Frontline fundraisers and alumni relations staff know this group well and can also provide useful information to strengthen the personas.

To [create a persona](#), couple your research with fictional information like a representative name, photo, and bio to humanize each character you create. **On the next page, we included a basic alumni persona from the fictional Anytown University.** Your personas can include additional details such as preferred social media channels, daily routine, and personality traits—whatever makes them most useful to your team.

## EXAMPLE ALUMNI PERSONA:



### EMERGING LEADER ELLEN

#### Bio

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Ellen graduated from Anytown U 10 years ago with a B.B.A. and works for a Fortune 500 company in finance, managing a small group of analysts. An overachiever, she stays busy outside of the office, volunteering for a grassroots nonprofit in her community. She credits Anytown with preparing her for the workforce but still feels the pressure of student loans.

#### Demographics

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- Age: 32
- Family: Married, no children
- Education: BBA from AU
- Income: Middle income
- Neighborhood: Large city

#### Identifiers

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- Often engages with Anytown online, both through social media and email
- Donates sporadically to Anytown, most recently on a giving day
- Liberal and passionate about social justice issues

#### Goals

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- Securing her next promotion
- Starting a family
- Making her community a good place to live for all residents

#### Challenges

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- Achieving financial security while paying off student loans
- Navigating numerous work and personal commitments
- Staying in touch with far-flung friends—including Anytown classmates



## Create highly consumable content customized by persona and platform.

Once you have your alumni personas mapped out, you can begin to segment communications. But you need content to share, whether it's a 20-page report or a 100-character tweet, a four-minute video or a Boomerang (mini video that plays forward and backward). Above all else, focus on highly consumable content—content that is easy for your personas to engage with, that captures their attention, and that keeps them coming back for more. What qualifies as “highly consumable” will vary from persona to persona and from communications platform to platform.

For example, Anytown U's Emerging Leader Ellen is active online but extremely busy. On Facebook, highly consumable for Ellen may mean an informal video post about the upcoming football season. She watches the 30-second video and posts a quick comment where she tags several college friends.

Via an email on Sunday, highly consumable content may be a blog featuring a story (complete with several images and pull quotes) about Anytown's business school and its work with B Corps in the community. This story hits Ellen's inbox when she has some down time and taps into her values and goals.

Engaging alumni online will never be accomplished with one-size-fits-all content, so customize your videos, social media posts, surveys, emails, and more wisely.



## Coordinate online and print campaigns.

Take your highly consumable online content a step further by integrating it with your print communications. All alumni (even those who are digital natives) interact with your institution in multiple ways. If you design an online campaign to raise money for scholarships, you'll likely coordinate the effort across multiple channels: email, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, for instance. You want to meet people where they are, ideally through several touchpoints.

Try bolstering your online campaign with a mailing that reinforces the same messages. This mailing should encourage recipients to give in the way they feel most comfortable, whether that's on your website, via text, in a check sent through the mail, or over the phone. Additionally, a multichannel strategy is a great way to convert annual donors into monthly donors, providing a sustainable revenue stream and building a deeper relationship with alumni who opt into recurring gifts. Identify an alumni persona or other audience segment—such as young alumni or online giving day donors—who might be interested in establishing a recurring gift. Send them a mailing with step-by-step instructions on how to set up a monthly gift online, or call and offer to set it up for them.

Your team can also experiment with multi-step fundraising campaigns that start with one channel and move on to others if the alum doesn't respond. This strategy appeals to your audience's preferences and delivers multiple messages reminding them to give. We recommend starting with the most inexpensive communication method and working up from there to ensure the best use of your resources. For example, you can start with an email ask. If there's no answer, you move on to a mail piece. If you're still waiting on a response, you follow up with a phone call. This tactic may work better with some personas than others, so be sure to review by segment when you're analyzing the results.



## Plan online programming and virtual events.

Communicating with alumni in customized ways and on their terms will help keep the relationship going. But it's still difficult to recreate the magic of the educational experience—taking a class, socializing with friends, attending a big campus gathering. By hosting online experiences for digitally savvy alumni, you can entertain and educate graduates while reminding them what they love about your institution.

Online programming can range from in-depth career development to lighthearted fun. Consider these ideas:

- Recruit top-rated professors to teach online enrichment courses on popular subjects
- Offer virtual career service sessions for recent grads
- Give alumni the opportunity to give back through online Q&As with current students
- Organize a virtual mentoring program between alumni and current students
- Broadcast a virtual thank-a-thon for alumni donors live on social media

**Pro tip:** Take your alumni personas into account when planning virtual events. (We bet Emerging Leader Ellen would jump at the chance to do an online Q&A with Anytown U business students!)



## **Involve your alumni board in efforts to reach grads online.**

So far, we haven't touched on the alumni board—but volunteer leadership should play an important role in your online engagement efforts. First and foremost, ensure alumni board members understand that this is a top priority for the institution. They should know that digital isn't a peripheral concern but a key aspect of your engagement strategy.

Next, bring them in to help you build that strategy. Ask them to take part in focus groups and connect you with classmates to help you create alumni personas. Develop a list of ways they can further online engagement, and request that they take one of these actions at least once a month. These actions can be small—sharing a post from the institution's Facebook page—or large—doing an Instagram takeover during reunion weekend. The key is to leverage these highly engaged volunteer leaders in multiple ways to get other alumni excited and involved.

## **Collect and share user-generated content from alums.**

The Instagram takeover we mentioned in the previous strategy is an example of user-generated content (UGC), a powerful tool in your online engagement toolbox. UGC is just what it sounds like—content created by your audience. It derives power from its authenticity and trustworthiness. Alumni are showing their peers the value of a relationship with your institution.



Start collecting UGC from alumni who are the most engaged: your alumni board and ambassadors. Ask them to post on social media when they're on campus or taking part in any institution-related activities. UGC can be high level, but don't shy away from more in-depth forms of content. If there's enough interest, consider recruiting a group of alumni ambassadors to write a blog series hosted on your website.

Your team can also source user-generated content from a broader base of alumni. Hashtags are a great way to collect UGC, especially at times when school pride and nostalgia run high, such as homecoming. Be sure to promote one or more hashtags during these key moments. You can also request UGC more actively in emails and social media. For instance, ask alumni couples who met at your institution and recently got married to share wedding photos. Direct them to a landing page where they can easily submit content.

Sharing UGC shouldn't be a one-and-done effort. Continue engaging alumni—both by sourcing content from them and by sharing that content with them—by building UGC into your online content calendars year-round. Give it a strong and consistent presence on social media, in emails, and on your website.

**Pro tip:** If you collect content from a wide audience, be sure you use almost all of it and don't request UGC that requires heavy vetting or editing. People who participate will want to see their content posted! Photo galleries work great for this purpose.



## Maximize your giving day results.

Any college or university that holds a [giving day](#) wants each year to be bigger and better than the last—but how can you move that needle? Below, we share three specific ways you can use online engagement to maximize your results this year.

### Give ambassadors multiple ways to contribute to your giving day.

Alumni ambassadors are crucial for giving day success, but serving as one can be a heavy lift for alumni who are high on passion but short on time. By creating a tiered ambassador program, you can mobilize a wider swath of alumni by allowing them to choose the level of involvement that fits their lifestyle. We recommend starting with three tiers and adjusting as necessary. Below we share examples of how this could work:

- [Tier 3](#): The lowest commitment level, your Tier 3 ambassadors receive monthly content with a simple request to repost on their accounts.
- [Tier 2](#): In addition to reposting monthly content, these ambassadors are periodically invited to record short, personal video messages during flash campaigns and share with their networks.
- [Tier 1](#): These are your “giving day” captains. Beyond the Tier 2 and 3 responsibilities, Tier 1 ambassadors also share save-the-dates, receive early access to new content, and encourage other volunteers to customize and reshare posts.

Work with your team to map out this tiered approach and create a toolkit and timeline for each tier, complete with goals, expectations, and shareable materials. Any incentive or giveaway structures should also be appropriately scaled for each tier.



## **Use your alumni personas to segment email communications.**

Remember to lean on your alumni personas for your giving day. One of the most important ways you can do that is by customizing your giving day emails according to each persona's values and interests. As always, your alumni are more likely to tune in if you're personalizing communications, rather than sending a mass email. So what does this look like in practice?

On your giving day, one of the easiest ways to segment emails is to intentionally select a signer/sender for the message that will appeal to each persona. For Emerging Leader Ellen, that could be a peer who graduated around the same time (your Tier 1 ambassadors are a good sourcing ground for this). You can also customize the projects highlighted based on each persona's interests: Ellen would be more likely to support the business school than the athletics department.

## **Design a day-long series of contests on social media**

Tap into the competitive nature of your alumni to break through the noise and drive awareness and gifts on social media. We recommend a steady stream of contests—aim for once an hour or every other hour. Ideas include:

- User-generated contests, such as a search for the cutest pet or baby in school clothing
- Time-limited challenges, like getting to 1,000 likes on a photo of an iconic campus scene within an hour or reaching 100 donations to a specific department

As you plan the contest series, think about how you want to reward winners. Individual winners may get school swag, while department winners could receive an allocation from a dedicated pot of funds.



## Monitor advances in technology and regularly adjust your online strategy.

Engaging alumni online is anything but a static endeavor. Rapid advances in technology offer new ways to streamline online giving and better connect with your audience. Be sure to keep your finger on the pulse of these advances and strive to understand how they will impact the way your alumni engage with the institution.

At Campbell & Company, we're keeping a close eye on Venmo, Instagram, and Facebook, focusing on how these platforms continue to shape the online giving landscape. What advances in online engagement are you most interested in monitoring? Drop us a line at [online.fundraising@campbellcompany.com](mailto:online.fundraising@campbellcompany.com) and let us know what's top of mind for you.

We hope these strategies help you build closer relationships with your alumni! For more online fundraising content, check out all our articles and resources at [bit.ly/CC-online-fundraising](https://bit.ly/CC-online-fundraising).

And don't forget, our Online Fundraising team is always here to answer questions. We can address all your online fundraising needs, including:

- Online giving experience
- Email strategy
- Social media strategy
- Search engine optimization
- Persona development
- Integration of online fundraising into your annual strategy and plan