

Case Study: *University of Manitoba*

SMALL STAFF FINDS BIG SOLUTION FOR FAR-REACHING ALUMNI

CHALLENGE

How do you produce more personal and timely communications without blowing the budget? That was the question facing Russ Medvedev, when he joined staff at University of Manitoba's Alumni Association Inc. in 2001. Complicating the challenge for Medvedev was the fact that U of Manitoba's alumni are dispersed across 148 countries, with more than 5,000 in Hong Kong alone. At the same time, nearly half of the 146,000 living grads have remained in the university's base city of Winnipeg, where they have easy access to university news from local media outlets.

As manager of marketing and communications, Medvedev wanted an inexpensive and timely vehicle that would give alumni the feeling they were getting the inside scoop on university happenings. Online communications were an obvious solution, but where to begin?

The Alumni Association had recently redesigned its web site but needed another way to reach graduates to complement their online community. An electronic newsletter could provide more topical and up-to-date information than the existing print magazine, but would be too ambitious for U of Manitoba's small alumni staff. "I knew I wanted more than a text-based email offering. I wanted something attractive, with graphics, and equally as important, deployment had to be reliable," Medvedev said. "But what did I know about e-newsletters? I'm not an IT guy." And Medvedev did not want to have to deal with deployment and database issues. He had already sent one mass email and found his computer swamped with bounces.

SOLUTION

Medvedev turned first to a local email service provider, but wasn't happy with the customer service. "In a small organization, being able to rely on suppliers is so important." Then came a cold call from Inbox Marketer that was "pleasant, open, and helpful."

Working with email marketing specialists at Inbox, Medvedev developed a plan for a quarterly e-newsletter. *OnManitoba OnLine* would offer a mix of alumni event notices and university news in a clean, concise format, with plenty of links to more information. U of Manitoba chose Inbox's full-service option, where Inbox produces the html design and hosts the database, including unsubscribe and "forward to a friend" features. Medvedev was relieved to learn that Inbox tests the newsletter on all browsers before deployment. He says it's that kind of value-added service that ensures consistent quality and reinforces his decision to outsource the newsletter deployment.

RESULTS

OnManitoba OnLine is earning open and click-through rates that are consistently higher than industry standards. Unsubscribes are running at 0.2% or lower and bounce rates

below 4%. Medvedev says these numbers make it easy to justify working with an outside supplier come budget time. He also finds the click-through data provided by Inbox useful for determining what sorts of articles interest alumni most and thereby producing a product that people truly want.

Medvedev says the quick turnaround time on the e-newsletter makes it especially useful for promoting events, and event notices have proven popular with readers. U of Manitoba has recently increased the number of out-of-town activities it hosts to keep its far-reaching alumni involved. Now the e-newsletter is timed to coincide with major events, such as its semi-annual event in Toronto, to help connect with that area's 8,000 alumni.

Medvedev says Inbox's reliability and round-the-clock customer service are crucial to *OnManitoba OnLine's* success. "We want to do the things we do well. Our alumni are our donors. It's worth the few cents each email costs us to avoid losing a multi-thousand-dollar donor because we look incompetent."

The e-newsletter is also helping alumni association staff build relationships with other campus organizations that recognize it as an effective way to communicate with grads. The science faculty recently asked to publish a request for nominations for a graduate achievement award. The recreation facility is promoting an alumni discount. And of course *OnManitoba OnLine* is a useful vehicle for affinity partners. "All these things can truly benefit graduates and keep them connected with their alma mater," Medvedev says.