

CASE STUDY

How Columbia University Facilitates Career Opportunities for Its Diverse Alumni Community

Staff at the university's alumni association reassessed the traditional business networking model, looking for ways to provide alumni with more meaningful opportunities. Here's what worked for them.

The Community: Columbia University

You don't get to be the oldest institution of higher learning in New York by sitting on your success. No, New York City's Columbia University offers its elite group of students the best tools to achieve their potential, helping its 300,000 alums become astronauts — a 2013 grad is headed to the International Space Station! — physicians, engineers, artists and more.

Undergraduate students make up the minority of the student body at Columbia. But because this university offers robust graduate school programs as well, students tend to spend much more than their formative years on campus, building an even deeper connection to the historical institution. Staff at the Columbia Alumni Association (CAA) are devoted to keeping those connections strong, making the right alumni resources more important than ever.

The Problem: Large Group of Alumni, Few Quality Options for Connections

Outside of traditional, in-person career networking events, there didn't seem to be many appealing networking options that the staff of the CAA Career Services could provide its alumni. Inherently, in-person networking events to be costly and generally not well-attended. Marketing for those events can also be expensive and ineffective, so any solution had to be easy to promote to the alumni audience.

At the end of the day, the need was simple: CAA staff wanted another way to connect the alumni body across time and space. "As our alumni continue to engage online and through social media channels, we were looking to bring a professional solution to our online presence," said CAA Career Services Coordinator Lindsay Macala. At the center of its online presence was the CAA LinkedIn alumni group with more than 39,000 members... but Macala and her staff wanted more.

The Solution: How the Brazen Platform Works for Columbia

Although CAA's LinkedIn group was popular, it didn't offer alumni the opportunity to truly engage with connections and collect information on what alums really want in terms of their career networking, so CAA chose Brazen's online networking platform to further bring their support efforts to life.

“Though in-person events are valuable, it’s becoming an increasingly globalized world, and people need more opportunities to connect to one another virtually,” said Macala. “I’ve found that [Brazen] is a great forum to build and sustain connections worldwide,” she added.

The Result: Columbia Alumni Make More Meaningful Connections

Macala has since developed, marketed, and run more than 15 events through the Brazen platform. She smartly promotes new events on LinkedIn, taking advantage of the alumni there, but social media is now just the start of alumni interaction. “The whole concept of cross-marketing has proven to be most effective,” she said.

She began hosting one event every few months and then moved to monthly events once word spread. With her marketing experience, Macala develops events with different themes or hooks, featuring up to five different industries each time. Predictably, some events are more popular than others. “We did one event called ‘Networking in the New Year,’ which was very well attended,” she said. “During that time of year, making changes to all aspects of life are top of mind, and career is certainly a top priority.”

““ IF YOU HAVE A GLOBAL COMMUNITY THAT’S
VERY LARGE, IT MAKES SENSE TO HAVE AN ONLINE
NETWORKING TOOL [LIKE THIS]””

Alumni have responded positively, taking time to write to Macala and share feedback and success stories, with some saying, “I’ve met two people in my area, which has never happened before.” The fact that participants reached out unsolicited surprised Macala. “For someone to take time out of their day to write a message, to share that they had a good experience, is a big deal,” she said.

That goodwill no doubt translates to other components of the alumni community and university in general. When alumni feel like they’re truly benefiting from university connections, they’re more likely to participate in both online and in-person events, as well as help move the needle in other areas as well, like alumni giving. “If you have a global community that’s very large, it makes sense to have an online networking tool [like this],” Macala said. “It allows us to reach a large number of people that we may not otherwise be able to.”