

ALUMNI PARTNERSHIP CASE STUDY

Boosting Engagement and Revenue for the Penn State Alumni Association

The Penn State Alumni Association transitioned the operations of its alumni-focused ecommerce site to Barnes & Noble College in 2016. Already running the university bookstore website, Barnes & Noble College had the infrastructure and retail expertise in place to help the Alumni Association reduce its logistical workload and collaborate on an expanded selection of merchandise and fresh marketing campaigns. As a result of these efforts, Penn State alumni have driven more than half of the total web revenue across both websites, up 214%.

CHALLENGE

The Pennsylvania State University (Penn State) has a tremendous alumni base – the largest and one of the most spirited in the U.S. – served by the Penn State Alumni Association. Founded in 1870, the Alumni Association helps alumni stay connected with Penn State and each other; provides career, volunteer and other valued services; and supports the university’s mission of teaching, research and service.

In 2016, the Alumni Association decided to revisit one aspect of its operations: the alumni shop, which sold school spirit merchandise and gifts to members. These efforts were separate from the Penn State campus bookstore and focused primarily on an ecommerce website managed internally by the Alumni Association.

While the alumni shop offered a valuable service and means of connecting with alumni, operating the website was a significant undertaking for the Alumni Association. It had to navigate a number of logistical challenges, from inventory management to payroll.

The Alumni Association saw an opportunity to work with a partner on the ecommerce site, allowing the organization to focus on the core elements of its mission. It decided to transition operations for the alumni ecommerce site to Barnes & Noble College.

SOLUTION

The Alumni Association already was collaborating with Barnes & Noble College, which had operated the Penn State campus bookstore since 1993. The two organizations had been working together to offer merchandise such as class rings and regalia to alumni, and the campus bookstore also gave alumni a 10% discount. The expanded partnership served as a natural and mutually beneficial extension of the relationship. The Alumni Association brought a deep understanding of its members and insights from running the alumni shop. Barnes & Noble College had decades of experience serving the Penn State community; all the necessary systems and infrastructure in place to run a website; and extensive retail expertise and vendor relationships.

Barnes & Noble College developed the new ecommerce site as a True Spirit website, an online, branded store experience tailored directly to the needs of specific communities within a university. It also expanded the selection of general merchandise, working with vendors and the university licensing department to offer lines of merchandise that would translate specifically to alumni.

Year-round, the two partners work together to select the right merchandise mix; keep the look and feel of the site fresh; and execute the monthly promotions, communications and marketing campaigns that keep members engaged.

“We meet virtually on a monthly basis – the Alumni Association marketing team and management, the Barnes & Noble College home office and the store team – to review performance and results from the previous month and what’s ahead in the coming month,” said Cathy Pacheco, regional manager, Barnes & Noble College.

“It’s vital that we meet every month, because what’s true in July is not true in November. So we really plan everything out month to month in real time, looking at real trends and real performance. It allows us to respond to what’s actually happening instead of what we think is going to happen.”

The strong collaboration between the Alumni Association and Barnes & Noble College ensures that all communications are coordinated and complementary – and prevents over-messaging the audience.

“The Alumni Association wanted to be sure that even when we are marketing a specific promotion, we are telling a story, not just pushing product,” said Pacheco. “We work very closely together, cross-merchandising our emails and creating the right look and feel to tell the right stories. They appreciate our flexibility and attention to their wants and needs.”



RESULTS

The partnership between Barnes & Noble College and the Alumni Association has proven to be fruitful.

The marketing campaign emails garner an impressive 7.7% conversion rate. And, support from Penn State alumni drove more than half of the total web revenue across both websites, up 214%.

“Our conversations and the feedback we receive from the Alumni Association help us tailor our marketing campaigns, and it’s reflected in our sales,” said Jennifer Guyer, bookstore manager, Penn State. “It truly takes the village to be successful.”

ALUMNI ONLINE SHOP

- 7.7% email conversion rate
- 214% increase in alumni-driven web revenue



Our forward-thinking solutions are designed to help colleges and universities navigate the fast-paced changes occurring in higher education, solve pressing challenges on campus and drive much-needed revenue. Let Barnes & Noble College help your institution achieve success today!

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