

## **The Role of Students and Alumni in Relationship Marketing: An Exploratory Study at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, South Africa**

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**ABSTRACT** Universities seek alumni associations for ongoing support and, therefore, should attract, maintain and enhance ongoing relationships with their alumni. This is usually done by the alumni association, which becomes a marketing instrument and mouth-piece for the university and its alumni. The objective of this study is to examine the perceptions of senior students (at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology) in respect to the university's efforts to attract, maintain and enhance ongoing relationships with students (and eventually alumni). This paper concluded that senior students at CPUT are not yet convinced that the university's efforts to attract, maintain and enhance ongoing relationships with students (and eventually alumni) are successful. This further means that a relationship between the alumni association and the alumni of the university will be difficult to start and develop. This is not an ideal situation for a university that is longing for strong lifelong relationships with its alumni. It further shows that more than half of the respondents are unaware that CPUT uses an alumni association as a marketing instrument to maintain good relations with its alumni. This again indicates that the alumni association and its functions are not well known to senior students who are future alumni.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Universities seek alumni for ongoing support and, therefore, should attract, maintain and enhance ongoing relationships with them. This is usually done by the alumni association, which becomes a marketing instrument and mouth-piece for the university and its alumni (McAlexander and Koenig 2001). A well-developed relationship depends largely on recognition. Humans feel that they belong when they are in a relationship where the parties understand the importance of acknowledging each other's roles.

The university will then make an effort to attract the attention of current students, alumni and the broader community for them to support the university in its activities. The alumni association is an effective instrument to advertise the efforts and also to organize and manage some of the efforts (Born 2014).

The Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) opened its doors in 2005 following a merger between the Cape Technikon and the Peninsula Technikon. Since then the university has tried to build an identity for its students and alumni with which to associate. This in itself demands building a positive image, reputation and brand (Sung and Yang 2009; Patouillet 2013).

In general, people want to be identified with successful identities or brands (Karra 2012; Wesels 2012). Therefore, the creation of successful identities or brands is important for any institution whose future depends on the attraction of clients (Andrews 2012; Gardels 2005). For universities, in particular, it is important to attract potential students who can build the identity and brand of the university (Stellenbosch University 2009). Also, the relationship between "success" and identity creation in the university is that potential students would rather want to be identified with successful universities than with unsuccessful ones (Born 2014; Polsky 2014).

An alumni association was gradually established at CPUT to further enhance and market the efforts of reputation and brand building (Anyangwe 2012; Yeager 2010). The success of these efforts is not easy to determine amongst alumni owing to the short history of the alumni association, but also owing to poor support of the association. The university quickly understands that identity building is a process of investing in the building of a strong brand (Patouillet 2013; Polsky 2014), which further depends on the university's image or reputation on a variety of terrains. This study focuses on whether these efforts were successful.

### Research Question

What are the perceptions of senior students (at CPUT) with regard to the university's efforts to attract, maintain and enhance ongoing relationships with students (and eventually alumni)?

### Objective of the Study

The objective of this study is to examine the perceptions of senior students (at CPUT) in respect of the university's efforts to attract, maintain and enhance ongoing relationships with students (and eventually alumni).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Rationale for Study

This paper examines data and information about the knowledge of students at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology regarding activities of the university to attract, maintain and enhance ongoing relationships with students (and eventually alumni).

### Instrument Design

A quantitative research approach was followed. Self-structured questionnaires, based on a 5 point Likert scale (with the variations Definitely agree, Agree, Uncertain, Do not agree, and Definitely do not agree), were distributed among students in classrooms under the guidance of a lecturer during a specific week in the third term. The questions in the questionnaire focused on the efforts of the university to build ongoing relationships with students who will eventually end up as alumni. In order to eliminate misunderstandings of questions, a pilot study was done with thirty students two months earlier. This helped to compile a clear set of questions. A covering letter also accompanied each questionnaire, which explained the need and research process.

The questions in the self-structured questionnaire originated from a thorough literature study and from discussions beforehand with alumni office personnel at other universities (Rust 2012).

### Target Population

The target population comprised senior students (BTech, 4<sup>th</sup> year, full time and part stu-

dents) of the Business Faculty at CPUT. The focus was on this group, because fourth year students are seen as senior students who have student life experience. Part-time and full-time students were targeted. Part-time students are also more exposed to networks outside of the university, and to different types of news. These senior students had enough exposure to the operations and efforts of the university for four years in order to decide on whether or not to be a loyal supporter of their alma mater.

### Data Collection

Students were asked to complete a questionnaire in which they recorded answers to a range of topics concerning aspects that add to the decision to support a university and its alumni association. The week that was chosen was 20-24 August 2012. It was in the middle of the third term, when all activities are usually at full operation (a normal week for any student). The respondents who were selected were all fourth year students in the Faculty of Business and in various BTech courses (Marketing, Human Resources, Public Management, Tourism and Public Relations). Lecturers were called together for an information session to inform them of the content of the questionnaire and to answer possible questions. A field test was conducted with 1004 students. Those surveys that were only partly completed upon return were excluded.

### Literature Review

#### *The Dynamics of an Alumni Association*

The main advantage of graduating from a university is that you become one of the thousands of alumnus that have attended the same institution. Having something in common with another person is a meaningful way to enter into a relationship. Each person has a "sense of belonging" and wants to be a member of a community (for example an alumni association) (Born 2014; Polsky 2014). A community has a common identity with unique webs of relationships, and it is this distinctiveness that offers a meaning and a sense of belonging for its members, as well as a bond with fellow members (Jacobsohn 2010). An alumni association is the instrument that drives a university community towards a sense of belonging to the university.

Alumni associations are old entities with a specific organizational structure and management practices. The first alumni association in the USA was established at Williams College in 1821, and was basically organized as it is done today all over the world (Dolbert 2002: 1). The models of governance are independent (managed and operations are funded by alumni), interdependent (managed and operations are funded by alumni and the university), and dependent (essentially a university department, the Alumni Office, that receives all or almost all of its funding from their institution and report exclusively to an institutional officer). The dependent model is by far the most popular one, because the university is in control of the operations, strategies, plans and aims that it wants to achieve with alumni or the office. The focus of this study is aimed at this last mentioned model.

#### ***Factorsthat Influence the Effectiveness of an Alumni Office***

The Alumni Office seeks to harness the needs, support and goodwill of the alumni community for the benefit of the university and alumni (Andrews 2012; Anyangwe 2012; Patouillet 2013). It seeks to engage alumni into an association and to provide them with a variety of services with the idea that the alumni become enthusiastic about the relationship and also support the university in the long-term. To build this relationship and make it sustainable one requires some action from the Alumni Office (McAlexander and Koenig 2001; Born 2014; Polsky 2014).

A number of basic principles are required for an Alumni Office to be effective, and these are outlined below:

*Embraced by the University*-to ensure that the university fully supports alumni initiatives with recognition (Dolbert 2002: 2-9; Nailos 2009: 2; Sung and Yang 2009: 805; Trustrum and Wee 2007: 9; Frank 2013).

*Manage Data*- to keep the contact list of alumni up-to-date. This function is closely related to relationship marketing. This entails gathering data about members (information about members, such as biological, demographical, geographical, and ideological information), store data in an easily accessible format, analysis, and using the data to effectively communicate with members. The emphasis is to create long-term,

mutually beneficial relationships with members (Patouillet 2013; Toker 2008:3; Beaulieu 2009; Harrell 2010).

*Create and Maintain Identity*-to develop and maintain identities, and to create loyal alumni. Individuals have a “sense of belonging” and want to be a member, and be associated with a community (alumni) with a specific identity that the members define as central, distinctive and enduring about the community (Frank 2013; Patouillet 2013; Toker 2008: 3; Arnett et al. 2003: 94). The community’s distinctiveness offers a meaning and a sense of belonging for its members, as well as a bond with fellow members (Toker 2008: 3; Jacobsohn 2010). There should be some kind of personal connection (Beaulieu 2009). This includes the creation of a unique culture, for example symbols, traditions, rituals, behaviors and values (Polsky 2014; Nailos 2009: 2). These cultural aspects influence the engagement of an individual, and thus shape the alumni relationship. University prestige (for example, recognized academic programs; newsworthy cultural or sport performance) also affects alumni supportive behavior in two ways: promoting (a person will promote the university to others) and donating (White 2014; Sung and Yang 2009: 791).

*Experiences While a Student*- students who feel valued by the university and who are satisfied with their university experiences are more likely to place a university identity higher in their hierarchy of identities (Sung and Yang 2009: 805). Research on culture and symbols, alumni development and environment measurement finds that the student does not have an isolated experience, but is exposed to numerous stimuli during their years of study. All of them impact the student’s future support of and relationship with the university as an alumnus (Nailos 2009: 9).

*Create Sound Communication*-to focus on effective two-way communication is one of the most important goals, which is recognized throughout alumni relations. With electronic capabilities and the social media, opportunities for effective communication with alumni are increasing by the day (Born 2014; Husted 2014; Beaulieu 2009; Dolbert 2002:1; Sung and Yang 2009: 805).

*Give Stewardship and Recognition*- to give credit to beneficiaries in university newsletters or newspapers; to ensure that donations by alumni are well publicized; and to list names in various publications or on plaques and even build-

ings, is a status symbol and helpful to build a strong relationship between the university its alumni (Polsky 2014; Sych 2014; Harrell 2010; Karpova 2006: 22; Singer and Hughey 2002: 53).

*Initiate Action in Special Events*-to organize activities (get-togethers; reunions) that alumni will respond to, find appealing, and participate in. Special events help to get publicity, to have greater visibility in the community, to reward donors, to involve volunteers, to bring prospects to campus and to raise money (Brant and Regan 2014; Nailos 2009: 2; Beaulieu 2009; Karpova 2006: 24; Taylor and Joseph 1995). These events will create long-term memories and will strengthen relations.

*Maintenance of Old Classmate Friendships*-to offer an opportunity for old classmates to stay connected (Andrews 2012; Bedigian 2006; Beaulieu 2009). To keep contact and to stay connected is the beginning of a sound relationship between the student, alumni body and the university.

*Provide Further Education*- to offer alumni a variety of educational and enrichment events (Bedigian 2006).

*Provide Networking Opportunities*- to create network facilities for alumni to connect, for example, with employers. Alumni associations can provide online career service opportunities. Students and alumni can then talk with others within their field, identify employment opportunities, apply and even be offered positions—all as a result of online activities (Polsky 2014; Dolbert 2002: 1; Bedigian 2006; Arnett et al. 2003: 100).

*Advertisement for the University*- to create an opportunity for the university to advertise its rituals and traditions (for example, open days). Most universities actively use their institutional rituals and traditions to recruit prospective students. In any event, the key to any recruitment strategy that involves alumni seems to be the identification of factors that tend to influence the formation of a close relationship between the institution, its current students, and its alumni (Polsky 2014; Singer and Hughey 2002: 54).

### ***Relationship Marketing and the Link with the Alumni Concept***

#### *Meaning of Relationship Marketing*

The practice of relationship marketing has been facilitated for years by customer relation-

ship management (customers' preferences, activities, tastes, likes, dislikes, and complaints). Bedigian (2006) defines customer relationship management as, "a systematic approach using information and an ongoing dialogue to build long lasting and mutually beneficial customer relationships". In contrast, relationship marketing is cross-functional marketing. It is organized around processes that involve all aspects of the organization. Grönroos (1994: 4) refers to relationship marketing as, "attracting, maintaining, and enhancing customer relationships", and later (1996: 7, 1999: 328) emphasizing the process of, "maintaining and enhancing ongoing relationships with customers, as well as identifying and establishing new ones".

Building and nurturing ongoing relationships (Gummeson 1999; Worthington and Home 1996: 190) is at the heart of relationship marketing (Arnett et al. 2003: 1), and mainly the success factor of an alumni association (Beaulieu 2009). Shaik (2005) says that emphasis is on relationships based on mutual trust and commitment. Building and managing relationships are the underlying facets. It is about transforming students into loyal alumni. Universities seek alumni for ongoing support. This comes with an understanding, where the university has to embrace the customer (alumnus) to recognize the value of the customer; and understand that the better they treat their customers, the higher their customer loyalty will be (Bedigian 2006; Voss and Voss 1997: 298). The result is a long-term and mutually beneficial arrangement wherein both the buyer (alumnus) and seller (alumni association) focus on value enhancement in the relationship with the goal of providing a more satisfying exchange. Toker (2008) supports it by saying that "adding value" by both sides to the core product (the relationship) is a means of increasing customer satisfaction, which in turn results in improved customer relationships and customer loyalty. Worthington and Home (1996: 193) emphasize a long-term interactive relationship between the supplier and the customer, and a long-term profitability with each partner in a win-win situation. Thus, the relationship must be beneficial for both parties.

However, an important condition for the implementation of the relationship marketing concept with an alumni association and its relationship with the alumni is the motivation of parties to enter into the relationship (Voss and Voss 1997: 298).

### ***Relationship Marketing in Education***

Grönroos (2000) argues that relationship marketing refers to all activities, which are directed towards establishing, developing, and maintaining successful long-term relationships. In universities these long-term relationships are with the students and other stakeholders. Emphasis is on relationships that are based on mutual trust and commitment. Building and managing relationships are the underlying facets. It is about transforming students into loyal alumni. It is a “*marketing attitude of mind*” (Grönroos 2000) throughout the institution. For example, when students feel that the staff is interested in addressing their concerns spontaneously in a friendly and professional manner. Relationship marketing offers an alternative strategy to build competitive advantage based on collaborative involvement with the students and other departments.

Even though there are similarities between marketing of products and services, because of the special characteristics of educational services, it is not recommended to blindly apply marketing strategies that are developed for manufacturing products (Born 2014). Marketing of educational services is about interactions between the institution and the students that form the basis of a process of relationship building. Management of educational services is the management of this relationship process (Brant 2014). It is more complex than managing products because products can be standardized, whereas it is difficult to standardize services owing to a large number of staff who are involved with a host of services. Conceptually, the complete chain of activities is coordinated and managed as one large process (White 2014). The goal is to create a non-imitable bundle of services for the student (Pauillet 2013; Sych 2014).

Higher education, in general, as well as distance education is undergoing a number of changes as a result of advancements in computer technology, growing competition from dot.com companies, and changes in student profiles. Students are demanding quality services and are less willing to make compromises in the quality of educational services (Rust 2012; Polsky 2014). To survive in this competitive environment, educational institutions should consider implementing relationship marketing strat-

egies to promote student retention, encourage recruitment and enrollment of new students, and build long-term relationships with students.

Having internationally renowned faculty teaching courses is not sufficient to gain competitive advantage (Andrews 2012; Anyangwe 2012). Quality teaching should be supplemented by quality support services by staff, with a marketing attitude to maintain long-term relationships with the students.

Relationship marketing offers an efficient way to keep track of a student’s expectations and to offer student services that are meaningful and relevant. Such a strategy will have a balanced focus on student recruitment and retention initiatives. Implementation of relationship marketing requires a dedicated staff with a service attitude of mind, a good physical or virtual environment, and well-managed service processes (Frank 2013; Harrell 2010; Husted 2014).

### ***Reasons for Relationship Marketing with Alumni Management***

Universities seek alumni for ongoing support. This comes with an understanding where the university should embrace the customer, recognize the value of the customer, and understand that the better they treat their customers, the higher their customer loyalty will be (Bedigian 2006). In the competition for students, universities implement mass marketing strategies, at considerable expense, to maintain or increase their market share (Shaik 2005). Marketing budgets are steadily rising with institutions spending large amounts on an integrated marketing mix that targets would-be students. However, it is difficult to determine the potential benefit of employing relationship management principles in marketing to the alumni. Bedigian (2006), Shaik (2005) and McAlexander and Koenig (2001: 1) agree that alumni is a marketing instrument and mouth-piece for the public and for new and potential students to encourage recruitment and the enrollment of new students, while students can participate in alumni functions, purchase university-branded products, do repeated enrollments when deciding to study further and thus add to the revenue of the university, and can make donations to the university (probably the most important advantage to the university).

By viewing the student as a lifelong customer, universities respond to alumni’s current and anticipated needs. Therefore, the alumni association takes on a customer orientation approach

in order to identify, analyze, understand, and respond to customer needs and expectations (Toker 2008). This also has financial value with the extra costs involved in recruiting new customers, as opposed to keeping existing ones.

The alumni, as well as the university have a role to play in the relationship marketing process (Shaik 2005). Effective faculties; quality teaching; and quality supporting services by staff with a marketing attitude, are all important to maintain long-term relationships with the students. This will add to the university's external image and its reputation with respect to numerous stakeholders. Specifically, universities with a good image might have a competitive leverage in attracting and keeping investors and customers (Mignonac 2006: 1). Implementation of relationship marketing requires, though, a dedicated staff with a service attitude of mind, a good physical or virtual environment, and well managed service processes (Grönroos 2000; Trustrum and Wee 2007: 6).

## DISCUSSION

Considering the results of this paper, it was clear that respondents can be categorised into three groups: those that experienced the efforts of CPUT to attract, maintain and enhance ongoing relationships with students; those that did not experience it; and those that are uncertain. The "uncertain" group makes up a significant group that swings the results either way. Therefore, the question is how to treat this group in order to be truthful to the information. The decision to rather combine the "uncertain" group with the "do not agree" group was taken, because the former did not experience efforts from CPUT to attract, maintain and enhance ongoing relationships with students (and eventually alumni).

For instance, to name a few, between a half and two-thirds of the current senior students are not aware of the symbols, traditions, rituals, behaviours and values of CPUT, and that they are well known among students and, in general, are supported by the student body. They are unaware that CPUT goes out of its way to build a reputable image and brand so that a student becomes a lifelong customer and loyal alumnus. They also do not know that CPUT seeks alumni for ongoing support and, therefore, makes an effort to attract, maintain and enhance ongoing relationships with alumni and relies on the alumni association to build a strong relationship with

them, and that CPUT uses the alumni association as a marketing instrument to maintain good relations with alumni.

In light of this background, two sets of information were compared: "Agree" versus "Uncertain and Do Not Agree (combination)". In these two sets of information the focus was on how significantly more respondents fall into one of the categories. Since the responses were now categorized into two categories, the One Sample Binomial Test (p-value) was done to show the significant difference for each example. Analysis of the data was conducted by using the SPSS statistical software, version 18.

Information from the following questions from the questionnaire focused on relationship marketing was compared.

**Question 9:** The symbols, traditions, rituals, behaviors and values at my university are well known among students and, in general, are supported by the student body:

35.9 percent (Agree) versus 64.1 percent (Uncertain and Do Not Agree combination)

It is clear that a significantly large group of respondents (64.1%) did not agree that all or some of the symbols, traditions, rituals, behaviors and values that are associated with the CPUT and its students are well known to the students (p-value < 0.001).

**Question 10:** My university goes out of its way to build a reputable image and brand so that a student becomes a lifelong customer and loyal alumnus:

37.4 percent (Agree) versus 62.6 percent (Uncertain and Do Not Agree combination)

It is evident that a significant group of students (62.6%) did not experience CPUT's efforts to build a reputable image and brand for a student to become a lifelong customer and loyal alumnus (p-value < 0.001).

**Question 14:** My University seeks alumni for ongoing support and, therefore, makes an effort to attract, maintain and enhance ongoing relationships with alumni:

35.9 percent (Agree) versus 64.1 percent (Uncertain and Do Not Agree combination)

For a significant group of respondents (64.1%) it was unclear whether or not CPUT seeks alumni for ongoing support and, therefore, makes an effort to attract, maintain and enhance ongoing relationships with alumni (p-value = 0.1797).

**Question 15:** My university relies on the alumni association to build a strong relationship with alumni:

40.1 percent (Agree) versus 59.9 percent (Uncertain and Do Not Agree combination)

Of the respondents, 59.9 percent did not experience that CPUT relies on the alumni association to build a strong relationship with alumni (p-value = 0.0007).

**Question 16:** My university uses the alumni association as a marketing instrument to maintain good relations with alumni:

43.6 percent (Agree) versus 56.4 percent (Uncertain and Do Not Agree combination)

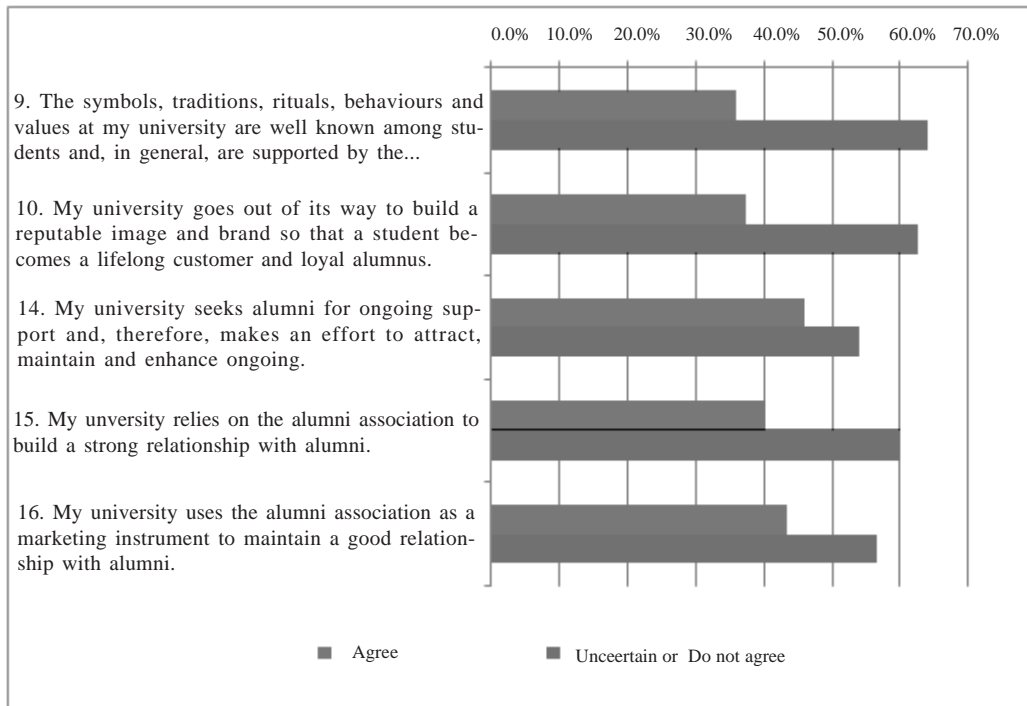
A total of 56.4 percent of respondents indicated that they are not aware of CPUT's efforts to use the alumni association as a marketing instrument to maintain good relations with alumni. This group constitutes more than fifty percent, but is not significantly more than the group that agreed (p-value = 0.0313). The bar chart represents these results (Fig. 1).

**CONCLUSION**

A university must make every effort to create a specific identity that is distinctive and

unique with symbols, traditions, rituals, behaviors and values. However, efforts by CPUT to ensure that its symbols, traditions, rituals, behaviors and values are well known among students and, in general, are supported by the student body, are not experienced by almost two-thirds of the senior students. Therefore, students have not seen or experienced typical traditions or rituals that are well known to the university in order to support it.

The image and brand of a university influence the engagement of an individual, and thus shape the alumni relationship. University prestige (for example, recognized academic programs, newsworthy cultural or sport performance) affects alumni support directly. Nevertheless, close to two-thirds of the senior students could not say that CPUT goes out of its way to build a reputable image and brand so that a student becomes a lifelong customer and loyal alumnus. This indicates that owing to a lack of brand or image, students will be reluctant to become lifelong customers and loyal alumni in future.



**Fig. 1. Percentage agreement on statements by senior students**

A university is dependent on the support of alumni and should attract, maintain and enhance ongoing relationships. Largely, the Alumni Association is trusted with these functions: managing alumni data, ensuring ongoing and effective communication with alumni, giving stewardship and recognition to newsworthy actions of alumni, initiating action in special events for alumni, connecting and maintaining old classmate friendships, providing networking opportunities, and acting as an advertisement instrument for the university. Despite what the literature says, about two-thirds of the respondents are unaware of CPUT's efforts to seek alumni for ongoing support and, therefore, to make an effort to attract, maintain and enhance ongoing relationships with alumni. If this is not well known to the respondents, alumni will not be willing to enter into a long-term relationship with the university.

An alumni association is the instrument that drives a sense of belonging for university communities. The university should rely on the alumni association to build and nurture ongoing relationships and to transform students into loyal alumni. Despite these views, it was further found in this study that almost sixty percent of the respondents are not aware of CPUT's efforts to rely on the alumni association to build a strong relationship with alumni. This indicates that the alumni association and its functions are not well known to the respondents. A long-term relationship with the university cannot be guaranteed in future if then approached by the alumni association to do this.

The Alumni Office seeks to harness the needs, support and goodwill of the alumni community for the benefit of the university and alumni. It seeks to engage alumni into an association and to provide them with a variety of services so that alumni can become eager about the relationship, and also support the university in the long-term. To build this relationship into a sustainable one requires some action from the Alumni Office. Hence, this paper shows that more than half of the respondents (56%) are unaware that CPUT uses the alumni association as a marketing instrument to maintain good relations with alumni. Again, this indicates that the alumni association and its functions are not well known to senior students who are future alumni.

This paper concludes that the senior students of the Cape Peninsula University of Tech-

nology are not yet convinced that the university's efforts to attract, maintain and enhance ongoing relationships with students (and eventually alumni) are successful. This further means that a relationship between the alumni association and alumni of the university will be difficult to start and develop. This is not an ideal situation for a university that is longing for strong lifelong relationships with the alumni. Strong efforts should be made by CPUT to start relationships, and to market the roles and functions of the alumni association to senior students, in order to secure a lifelong relationship with alumni.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

As this study concluded that the senior students of the CPUT are not convinced that the university's efforts to attract, maintain and enhance ongoing relationships with students (and eventually alumni, are successful, it is recommended that the university should implement the following: strong efforts should be made by CPUT to build good relations with current students. In particular, the roles and functions of the alumni association should be marketed to senior students so that when they become alumni, they are aware of the association. CPUT should create a specific university identity that is distinctive and unique and, which comprises symbols, traditions, rituals, behaviors and values, which are well known among students and, in general, are supported by the student body. CPUT should increase its efforts to build its profile by giving recognition to outstanding academic, cultural, sport and other outstanding performances. Hence, the image and brand of the university will influence the engagement of the student as a lifelong customer and loyal alumnus. CPUT should ensure that the alumni association is effective and functional with its duties of: managing alumni data, ensuring ongoing and effective communication with alumni, giving stewardship and recognition to newsworthy actions of alumni, initiating action in special events for alumni, connecting and maintaining of old classmate friendships, providing networking opportunities, and acting as a marketing instrument for the university. CPUT should make sure that the alumni association and its functions are well known to current students in order to guarantee their long-term relationship with the alumni association in future, and CPUT



should ensure that the alumni association acts as an effective marketing instrument for the university. Its efforts should harness the needs, support and goodwill of the alumni community in order to maintain a good relationship with the alumni and the university.

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