Corporate Compassion in a Time of Downsizing: The Role of Public Relations in Cultivating and Maintaining Corporate Alumni Social Networks

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Abstract

This paper contends that corporate alumni networks serve a public relations purpose more than they do a human resource purpose. Through interviews with two developers of corporate social networks and a former employee who started an alumni network, the paper shows that these networks represent an opportunity and a moral imperative for public relations. By institutionalizing an ethic of care, which emphasizes responsibility and compassion, public relations can enable these relationships to provide value to those inside and outside the organization.

Universities put a lot of time and money into cultivating alumni networks. They recognize that the relationship with one’s undergraduate and graduate institution inspires alumni to give back. Indeed, many alumni include in their wills large financial endowments for their alma maters. But corporations do not look to maintain their relationships with former employees and retirees. On the contrary, the norm for the corporate world is to sever relationships with downsized employees and discourage survivors from staying in contact with former colleagues.

This philosophy is reflected in two examples cited by Simon (2006). In the first example, the new brand manager for Ivory soap recalled the first day he joined Procter & Gamble Co. in 1977. He visited the personnel department and found the photo of the man he had replaced already deposited in the wastebasket. In another example, a former employee of Electronic Data Systems [EDS] Corp. noted that when he left he received no more formal communication from the company. He was not surprised; it was part of the company’s culture. "An old joke within the company went, 'When you leave EDS, they scrape your car off the parking permit" (p. 1).

Given examples like these, when a company actually cares about staying in touch with former employees it still qualifies as news. In 2007, Business Week reported that in December Dow Chemical Company would launch four corporate-sponsored social networks for women on maternity leave, retired workers, employees, and alumni (Green, 2007). Dow’s motivation came from the changing face of its company: 40% of its workforce retiring in the next five years. “We want to keep in touch with the brainpower of past employees, and frankly it’s also a great group to consider for new hires,” the corporate vice president for human resources and marketing told Business Week.

Alumni networks are not a new phenomenon. They have been loosely organized as long as there have been companies and employees who leave them. Prior to the age of social media, retirees and other former employees of corporate America continued their association through everything from barbecues to Christmas letter mailing lists to volunteer groups—gathering and communicating with one another to share memories, experiences and friendships.
The advent of social media has made this even easier to do. Today’s alumni networks utilize Email lists, wikis, listserves, blogs, and Yahoo, Google, LinkedIn, and Facebook groups. These alumni networks, driven primarily by the interested individuals themselves, are “not captive networks,” says Ross Mayfield, president of Socialtext, a Palo Alto firm that creates virtual workspaces for online collaboration. “They consist of people who can come and go as they wish. In a sense, they are like ethnic diasporas” (Mayfield, 2009, personal communication). Whatever their current situation, these former employees retain much of the identity that bound them to their fellow alumni.

From a human resource standpoint, alumni networks make sense because former employees are a resource that can be tapped for operational knowledge, corporate history, and veteran counsel. The company also has a pool of potential hires when the economy rebounds. In a time of massive layoffs, however, it remains to be seen whether a concern for engaging former employees remains high on a company’s priority list. Says Mayfield (Feb. 16, 2009, personal communication): “In today’s companies, so much of HR’s focus is on on-boarding new employees, as opposed to out-boarding former employees. They tend to [place] less value [on] those who are no longer at the company.”

Former employees use alumni networks to keep in touch with former colleagues, share knowledge and job leads, organize events, and keep abreast of what is going in inside the company. For example, when Oracle acquired PeopleSoft in 2004, PeopleSoft alumni self-organized a network, and one of the employees asked Socialtext to donate a hosted private wiki workspace for the group. The group subsequently obtained Socialtext’s consent to use the network for non-profit purposes, such as hosting events. The Peoplesoft network has grown to a success story, with over 3,000 members (Mayfield, Feb. 16, 2009).

The difference in how human resource departments and former employees view social networks explains why layoffs have such a profound public relations impact on companies. Human resource departments care about staffing, while current and former employees care about each other. In other words, people view relationships as valuable, long-term ties that even workplace separation does not sever. Companies may view these relationships as temporary, expendable, and utilitarian, but survivors and victims of downsizing care about these relationships and act to maintain them.

Research on downsizing shows that organizations that do not value or care about existing and former relationships damage those who remain with the company as well as those laid off. Through alumni networks, the public relations function of an organization can institutionalize an ethic of care and can protect and promote the reputation of the company even in times of dramatic downsizing.

This paper argues that corporate alumni networks serve a public relations purpose more than they do a human resource purpose. Through interviews with two developers of corporate social networks and a former employee who started an alumni network, this paper will show that these networks represent an opportunity and a moral imperative for public relations in the new media age. By institutionalizing an ethic of care, which emphasizes responsibility and compassion, public relations can enable these relationships to provide value to those inside and outside the organization. Further, effective alumni social networks can maintain and enhance an organization’s reputation even in a time of downsizing and economic recession.

**Downsizing**
Grimshaw and Kleiner (2002) defined downsizing as “actions of management resulting in the involuntary displacement of a substantial portion of an organization’s workforce” (p. 128). In other words, the term downsizing is not applicable when one or two positions are cut from a company, unless that company only consists of a handful of positions in the first place. Grimshaw and Kleiner focused on the legal obligations in downsizing and found that legal responsibilities fall on top management, human resources, managers and supervisors, and employees. Legal counsel also plays an important role because there are a number of federal and state laws that apply to layoffs.

Although the public relations function is not mentioned specifically, Grimshaw and Kleiner noted that communication plays a critical role at all phases of a layoff. Indeed, August (1991) cited communication as one of the crucial steps in meeting legal requirements of downsizing. Communication also decreases wrongful termination lawsuits. August urged managers to meet face-to-face with employees on a regular basis to provide information and updates. Though communication does not negate the impact of job loss, it does ameliorate employee fears and reduce the impact and number of unfounded rumors. The final step of the downsizing process also carries public relations implications: Laid off employees should be give priority over other applicants if the firm has future openings. Thus, communication is critical not just at the beginning and middle of the layoff process but even at the end and six months after the separation has occurred.

Spellman (2008) contended that news about layoffs needed to be communicated to affected employees and the entire company. “Tell as much as you can, as quickly as you can,” Spellman wrote in PR Week. “Look for ways to regularly show how the company is staying afloat as a result of the difficult measures it has taken” (para. 7). Pfeil, Setterberg, and O’Rourke (2003) noted that this kind of approach helped a company facing layoffs. The company communicated its financial problems early to its employees and showed by its efforts that it had tried every other possible alternative before making layoffs. These efforts included salary cuts for top management, cost cutting, and the reduction of temporary and part-time personnel. Employees preferred to get the message from their front-line managers and were loathe to learn about downsizing through email, newsletters, and other impersonal methods.

Pfeil, Setterberg, and O’Rourke (2003) added that companies might want to hire the former employees back and thus should show concern when letting them go. The former employees want to be treated as people and not as managed human resources. In their conclusion, the authors noted the importance of keeping communication lines open so that laid-off and retained employees could ask questions of the company. But absent from the discussion was any counsel or information about using communication to maintain relationships with laid-off employees.

The absence of any need to maintain communication networks may be explained by the relative lack of discussion about an organization’s social responsibility to its former employees. In 2000, Buren noted that relatively little academic work had been done on corporate downsizing and social responsibility. In the years since that time, however, particularly in light of the bursting of the dotcom bubble and the economic woes following the terrorist attacks on 9/11, more research has been done on corporate downsizing. However, there seems to be a general lack of information dealing with the ethical and moral responsibilities associated with employee termination. Little is said about an organization’s moral responsibility to its laid off employees, except in regards to severance pay and other elements of a separation package. Despite this fact, re-employment of former employees was considered a pragmatic possibility as it negates the
need for retraining and would seem to indicate a need for continued interaction between the company and current and former employees.

Research indicated that there are three groups directly affected by downsizing: victims (those laid off), survivors (fellow employees who remain), and downsizing agents (those who personally laid off the victims). Most companies have recognized the need for communication with the survivors and even downsizing agents, but few have realized the importance of maintaining relationships with the victims—the former employees. An examination of the research on each of these groups revealed that the one common denominator mediating the negative effects of the downsizing experience was whether the organizations cared about those involved in a layoff.

**Survivors**

After downsizing takes place in an organization, survivors may appreciate that they still have jobs, but they do not come away from the experience unscathed. Indeed, Doherty et al. (1995) found that survivors felt less loyal toward the organization but felt greater their loyalty to colleagues, including those no longer employed. Vinten and Lane (2002) interviewed employees at a company in which layoffs were handled poorly. One person referred to the company as a slaughterhouse, another witnessed what was done to “friends and colleagues” and stopped taking seriously management reassurance of the survivor’s importance. Survivors experienced a personal loss, not only in terms of lost work associations, but in terms of their faith in the organization’s commitment to its mission and values. Many of the survivors expressed that they had experienced a loss of loyalty to the organization and had quit working extra hours or taking an interest in the quality of their work and work environment.

Additional research also revealed that survivors respond negatively when they perceive that the layoffs were handled unfairly, when they had little trust in management, when they lost friends to layoffs, and when they feared further layoffs (Spreitzer & Mishra, 2002; Brockner et al., 1994; Brockner et al., 1993; and Brockner et al. 1987). Brockner et al., 2004 found that the negative effects on organizational commitment and performance were moderated by employees’ perceived control. In other words, if employees felt they could still have an influence on the company, they remained committed and willing to work as hard as they had before the layoffs.

Vinten and Lane (2002) noted that another moderating factor in alleviating survivor trauma was communication. Effective internal communication was important before, during, and after the experience. A senior person trusted by fellow employees should handle communication. They also emphasized the importance of open discussion. The authors urged organizations to allow for two-way communication in which employees, both those staying and those leaving could vent their concerns and feelings. Management must communicate that the pain is shared through voluntary pay cuts or other actions. One of their final recommendations was for the establishment of a mutual support network for those let go and a continuation of help from human resources.

Organizations moderate the negative effects of downsizing by making the process transparent and fair. But the research offers little guidance on how to handle the relationship issue between survivors and their former colleagues. The suggestion to establish a mutual support network reflects something different than being fair in a negative process such as downsizing. It represents a relationship component that doesn’t emerge as much in the literature. Human resources may be ill equipped to deal with the relationship question because it calls for something distinctly different from fairness and justice; it calls for care and concern.
Downsizing Agents

Those managers assigned to break bad news to colleagues, and sometimes even having to determine which colleagues to send packing, experience negative emotional baggage. Most of the research, according to Claire and Dufresne (2004), has focused on the victims of layoffs, but they chose to look at the survivors, and in particular, the downsizing agents. Claire and Dufresne examined the experiences of forty surviving members of a company that incurred major layoffs and found that downsizing agents faced intense, negative circumstances during and after the downsizing process. Indeed, the authors compared the emotional experience to that of doctors telling patients about a death in the family. The emotional impact of the experience was heightened by the closeness of the relationship that existed between downsizing agent and victim. Those who dealt with the experience in a peripheral way, writing up departure documents or working out severance and insurance issues, tended to experience less emotional distress. Thus, one’s role and proximity to the actual downsizing experience affected how one responded as a downsizing agent.

Claire and Dufresne (2004) discovered that managerial anxiety was increased by the fact that they had to keep the identities of those being downsized confidential until official announcements. This meant that they often had to deceive fellow employees who wanted to know whether they were to receive the axe. They experienced dissonance because their commitment to confidentiality conflicted with their personal and community loyalties. Further complicating the problem was the task of deciding whom to lay-off. Finally, the downsizing agents were stigmatized as grim reapers, executioners. As a result of these experiences, Claire and Dufresne found that downsizing agents coped by emotionally distancing themselves from the situation in three ways: emotionally, cognitively, and physically. It helped that some found that those downsized were satisfied with company compensation and the opportunity to move on to other jobs. In other words, the amount of care and concern expressed by the company, through compensation and re-employment support, moderated the negative effects of the experience for downsizing agents as well as victims of layoffs.

Gandolfi (2008) replicated Claire and Dufresne’s findings in a study on the effects of downsizing at an Australian bank. Gandolfi explained that executioners represented the second category of victims in a downsizing event. The first victims, of course, were those let go from the organization, but the second victims are the executioners who coped with the experience by distancing themselves emotionally, cognitively, and physically. He also found that the severity of the distancing depends on the closeness of the relationship, the proximity of the person affected, and previous experience with the person. Veteran executioners also tended to become emotionally numb to the experience. Like Claire and Dufresne (2004), Gandolfi found that executioners generally showed empathy and compassion for those who were downsized but after the event had to distance themselves in order to deal with the emotional stress caused by handing out a pink slip.

Again, the downsizing agents may have considered the process fair, but it did not lessen the effect of layoffs, especially if people leaving were close to the agent. Handling the process with fairness, justice, and compassion moderated the negative effects but still did not prevent agents from distancing themselves emotionally, cognitively, and physically. Somehow there needed to be an element of emotional support that would allow for downsizing agents to reconnect with their feelings and their relationships severed through layoffs.
Victims

The effect of layoffs on victims depended on how well their organization lived up to the psychological contract existing as a part of their employment. Pugh, Skarlicki, and Passell (2003) defined the psychological contract as “a mental model or schema comprising beliefs about the exchange relationship between employee and employer” (p. 202). Every employee and employer establishes ground rules for their work relationships. Traditionally, employers felt little obligation to employees, viewing the exchange of pay for work rendered sufficient for demanding employee loyalty and commitment. However, this perspective fails to take into consideration the emotional aspects of the contract. Employees develop a sense of belonging and self-worth, common mission and values, friendships, and self-identity through their employment. More recently, organizations have come to realize that the psychological contracts include emotional and moral components.

Bies, Martin, and Brockner (1993) found that the effect of a layoff on those losing their jobs depended upon how fairly they felt they were treated by the organization. Brockner et al. (1994) noted that those who felt they were treated fairly were less negative about the layoffs than those who felt the action unfair (see also Naumann et al., 1998). Laid off employees considered management actions fair if the leaders provided an adequate explanation for the layoffs and expressed sincere concern (Bies et al., 1993). Naumann et al. (1998) reinforced these findings by showing that organizational support of laid-off employees, even those expected to stay and work for a time before separation, mediated the relationship between interactional justice and organizational commitment. In other words, if downsizing agents treated laid-off employees with care, concern, and fairness, employees remained committed to the organization despite the fact that they knew that they were to be laid off. This research indicates that organizations that care for their employees, even those laid off, reap benefits in loyalty, commitment, and understanding.

The opposite is true as well. Pugh, Skarlicki, and Passell (2003) found that laid-off employees who felt that the organization had violated the psychological contract carried “attitudinal baggage” to their subsequent jobs. If they experienced a violation of the psychological contract, they became more cynical about their work experience and less likely to express as much trust in their new company and management. Little research has been done on how laid-off employees cope with the trauma of losing their jobs. But recent research has shown that how laid-off employees react to the job loss influences their success in dealing with the stress and finding a new job (Leana, Feldman, and Tan, 1998).

The experience of having been laid off also affects how one perceives future layoffs. Sronce and McKinley (2006) discovered that former victims viewed downsizing in a more negative light than those who had never been laid off. The former victims saw downsizing as not as financially effective and a breach in the psychological contract. In the same study, those who strongly believed in the ideology of employee worth also viewed downsizing as a violation of the psychological contract and less inevitable than those with weak beliefs in employee worth.

The research indicates that treating downsized employees with fairness, care, and concern ameliorated much of the negative weight associated with downsizing. However, people who have experienced layoffs always retain a view that downsizing is a breach of the psychological contract between employee and employer.

The ethic of care
Corporate alumni networks have the capability of maintaining an informal psychological contract with former employees even though the formal relationship has ended. Social networking offers organizations a chance to show they still care about former employees, survivors, and downsizing agents. A morality founded on justice and fairness fails to address the needs of people wanting to maintain relationships. The ethics theory that best describes the need for organizations to maintain relationships with former employees is the ethic of care developed by Carol Gilligan (1993). Gilligan argued that, “the logic underlying the ethic of care is a psychological logic of relationships, which contrasts with the formal logic of fairness that informs the justice approach” (p. 73).

In interviews with women, Gilligan found that they “saw morality as a matter of preserving valued ties to others, of preserving the conditions for the care and mutual care without which human life becomes bleak, lonely, … not self-affirming, …” even if the women (and the men interviewed as well) were successful in achieving their self-interests (Baier, 2003, p. 106). In other words, human relations have meaning beyond a contractual, exchange, or reciprocal relationship. To simply cut off these relationships ignores the importance of human interactions in the workplace but not of the workplace.

The ethic of care revolves around the understanding that self and others are interdependent. Gilligan offers the example of a woman who does not see a future in her relationship with her boyfriend and realizes she must do what is in her best interest. At the same time, she does not want to hurt her boyfriend’s feelings. She feels a commitment to self along with a responsibility to the relationship. While the morality of rights emphasizes equality and fairness, the ethic of responsibility recognizes equity and differences in need (Gilligan, 1993, p. 164-165). Conflicts and disagreements are resolved through compassion and nurturing (Christians et al, 2005).

Thus, an organization focused on the ethic of rights would consider its work done if it handled layoffs fairly and with respect. But a commitment to the ethic of responsibility would recognize that victims still have a need and a claim for care and compassion. The psychological contract established through employment would require organizations to continue to show care and compassion even after a morality of rights justified separation. Stated another way, even though the organization has a need to look out for its own survival, it still has a responsibility to the other, the result of organizational action that creates relationships between people and an institution. The ethics of care would place the creation and maintenance of alumni networks under the auspices of public relations.

Methodology

To test the assumptions of this paper, the authors conducted three initial interviews with a social networking company executive, a public relations professional, and a public relations practitioner who began an alumni network following his layoff. These initial interviews were analyzed to determine the public relations implications of alumni networks. In addition, the relationship aspects of these networks were examined to determine the applicability of the ethic of care as a theoretical justification for organization involvement in them. The role of public relations—the professionals speak

Public relations research has long contended that the development of long-term, mutually beneficial relationships is critical to organizational success. The establishment and maintenance of alumni networks can be an opportunity—as well as a responsibility—of the corporate PR department and PR practitioners. The HR department is busy with the mechanics of redesigning
the downsized organization. The PR department has the unique capability to build stakeholder relationships by encouraging companies to become involved in corporate alumni networks. They can also articulate to management the “PR” case for doing so.

In all three interviews conducted with public relations professionals on this subject, professionals strongly supported the notion of fulfilling public relations imperatives—not just cost or operational imperatives—when establishing and maintaining corporate alumni networks.

Public Relations Imperative #1—Maintain Stakeholder Relationships

One of the most basic definitions of PR is that it seeks to establish mutually beneficial relationships. This includes relationships with all key stakeholders—including, in this case, former employees. This is, however, not the mission of any other function peripherally involved in corporate alumni networks. Management’s role is to ensure long-term profitability. HR’s role is to ensure staffing levels (hiring and firing) in support of management’s goals. (The HR function, particularly, is usually already significantly overworked in the midst of downsizings, and has little to no time and energy to devote to the well-being of former employees.) The sales and marketing function is charged with looking out for the well-being of customers—not people who used to work at the company.

Public relations professionals can help their companies become committed to helping form and participate in alumni networks. Companies should feel this obligation not only out of a desire to promote good business, but also to “tend to” important ongoing relationships with and among former employees.

Perhaps the primary reason that companies are—or should become—involved in forming alumni networks is that relationships—including those with and among former employees—are intrinsic to its business. Noted Kate Lukach, director of public relations at SelectMinds, a global provider of corporate social networking solutions:

Organizations are viewing the employee lifecycle, which once used to be seen as “hire to fire,” as a “lifelong” employee lifecycle—one that needs to be nurtured, even after someone leaves the organization. Generating a sense of goodwill among former employees, showing a genuine sense of wanting to remain connected, and sharing knowledge, resources and information is becoming the new way of thinking. Forward thinking organizations realize that their business relies on and is run by relationships. Maintaining them once someone has left, and enabling former employees to maintain these relationships, is just good business. (Lukach, K., Feb. 24, 2009, personal communication)

Bruce Lidl, a former marketing specialist for digital media company DivX, who started his own alumni network, noted, “From a PR perspective, former employees can be incredibly important for creating and affecting a company's reputation—particularly today, as social networking makes it trivially easy to disseminate information online” (Lidl, March 2, 2009, personal communication).

However, Lidl went on to note, a company’s sense of commitment to alumni networks should extend beyond simply a desire to countermand negative information by joining the conversation directly. Lidl believed that some of that sense of corporate obligation lies in recognizing the importance of workplace relationships. “The relationships that people form with
and within a company have real value, and should be tended to in my opinion” (Lidl, March 2, 2009, personal communication).

The idea of tending to important workplace relationships takes on added significance when we stop to consider just exactly how pervasive workplace relationships are. A report from the American Sociological Association noted that, according to U.S. Census figures, in the year 2000 the average American male worked 43.5 hours per week, and the average female worked 37 hours per week (Anonymous, 2004). This averages over five hours per day for both genders, which is at least equivalent to, if not more than, the remaining hours available to those workers for personal and family time. So, in other words, many Americans spend more hours of the days with their colleagues than with any other group of people, including their own families. Consequently, it is logical to expect that these relationships will take on great significance, particularly over a long period of time. Co-workers share successes, failures, milestones, crises, and events. And, they do not forget or cease to honor those relationships just because they move on to other jobs or circumstances.

Public Relations Imperative #2—Identify and Speak to Audience Self-Interests

As they engage in corporate alumni networks, PR departments and practitioners can strive to discern the self-interests of a critically important public (former employees) and serve in a counseling role to remind management of its responsibilities and obligations to all key publics, including current employees. This is the high ground that can be claimed by corporate PR.

The benefits of corporate alumni networks to both current and former employees are clear. Corporate alumni networks provide former employees with a unique and highly specialized networking environment they simply can’t obtain in any other way. Explained SelectMinds’ Lukach:

These alumni networks are highly vetted and highly useful for former employees as a resource of trusted knowledge and information – the keyword here being trusted (*italics added*). Unlike public social networks (Facebook, LinkedIn, etc), corporate alumni networks are open only to those people who are invited to the network – making them highly vetted and valuable. (Lukach, K., Feb. 24, 2009, personal communication)

Recent research conducted by SelectMinds showed that 42% of employees turn to a current or former colleague for information if they have a work-related question (Lukach, K., Feb. 24, 2009, personal communication). Alumni networks help accomplish this by enabling current employees to easily access knowledgeable, trusted people. This need for trust and knowledge is a critical self-interest for remaining employees, particularly in a post-downsizing work environment where they may be taking on new and less familiar work tasks with fewer experienced co-workers who can provide guidance.

Corporate alumni networks also enable companies and recruiters to provide job opportunity information—either on behalf of the alumni’s former company or on behalf of other hiring companies. An October 1, 2007 BusinessWeek article noted that KPMG (a SelectMinds client) credits its network with helping it hire 137 former employees, or around 14% of the company’s total hires, since its network started, up from 72 people in the 3 months prior (Green, 2007).
Other companies and prospective employees can also utilize alumni networks for recruiting, re-recruiting, and reputation-building. The Oracle site is tapped into by 80 recruiters (Mayfield, Feb. 16, 2009, personal communication).

Bruce Lidl noted that the DivX network has enabled one group of former employees to form a freelance consulting group (Lidl, March 2, 2009, personal communication). Clearly, the establishment of alumni networks helps meet former employees’ self-interests of securing future employment—and this self-interest extends to the prospective employee audience as well. Simon (2006) noted that the law firm Latham & Watkins LLP gives lawyers it is interviewing access to the alumni directory before they’ve been hired, so they can start networking with former employees before they even start work. Former employees have a high level of corporate knowledge and often remain stockholders in publicly traded companies. These former employees’ opinions of the organization can be powerful persuaders in a prospective employee’s decision as to whether to accept a job offer.

Public Relations Imperative #3—Articulate the Value of What You are Doing

Maintaining alumni relationships through social networks can be of direct value to companies in recruiting and staffing efforts. For example, one SelectMinds client (an accounting firm) says its alumni network helped it pull in $180 million in new business from former employees. Another SelectMinds client saved $1.6 million in headhunter fees in one year alone, thanks to 31 recruits it found through its alumni network (Lukach, K., Feb. 24, 2009, personal communication). Even in a down economy, Lukach said, companies should look to the future when contemplating alumni networks:

The reality is, these same organizations are going to be faced with hiring thousands of people in a few years – which can cost millions. By maintaining these relationships through alumni networks, these organizations will have a huge advantage once the market turns – and will be able to easily and cost effectively re-recruit talent back into the organization. (Lukach, K., Feb. 24, 2009, personal communication)

An organization’s public relations department can and should take a lead role in communicating the value proposition for alumni networks, both to the company’s management and to the users (former employees).

Public Relations Imperative #4—Maintain Ongoing Communication

One of the corporate PR department’s most important tasks is to regularly and consistently develop alumni network content that is helpful, meaningful and relevant. Lukach explained,

All networks should have a dedicated person to run and manage the network, ensure that new content is posted, that members are active and engaging, and that information is relevant, newsworthy and interesting to the members. These networks need a dedicated person to mine these relationships and information for business value. These networks cannot be launched and then not nurtured and maintained – it is not technology for technology’s sake. (Lukach, K., Feb. 24, 2009, personal communication)
Indeed, companies who refuse to engage in conversation with their alumni do so at their peril—because the conversation will take place with or without them. Mayfield noted that speaking up is a far preferable alternative to simply standing by while a “rant” against the organization is perpetuated:

Companies who do not engage in alumni networks to share information and engage alumni in their brand themselves stand a far greater chance of seeing someone else do it for them. The cost of writing and publishing via social media is minimal, and virtually anyone can participate in this space as a citizen journalist. PR professionals can remind management that articulating messages and telling the company’s story is no longer the sole province of the company, its management, or its PR department—anyone can initiate the conversation. If the company is going to have any voice in that conversation, it must speak up clearly and frequently to all its key publics—including former employees. (Mayfield, Feb. 16, 2009, personal communication)

These public relations imperatives reflect good PR theory and sound principles of practice, but they also reflect something more—an ethic of care. The ethic of care moves beyond thinking about the relationship in terms of organizational or personal rights and places an emphasis on relationships and an organization’s responsibility to relationships created under its care. While the need for the organization to survive and succeed is understood as an ethical goal, the organization also has a responsibility to reduce and alleviate harm. This means that relationships do not end with the severing of employment. Former employees still have a claim on the organization for compassion and care. Through alumni networks, the organization can communicate its compassion and continue a relationship that pays off in long-term public relations benefits.

Thus, the need for corporate alumni networks is not only good business but a moral imperative. By institutionalizing an ethic of care within an organization, public relations can enable these relationships to provide value to those inside and outside the organization. By so doing, public relations can help to ameliorate the breach of the psychological contract between former employee and employer and protect and promote the organization’s reputation—even in a time of downsizing and economic recession.

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