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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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KEYWORDS Relationship marketing, Alumni, Alumni association, University management

ABSTRACT Universities seek alumni for ongoing support, and therefore, should attract, maintain and enhance on-going relationships with 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 show the perception of the senior students (of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology) of the university's efforts to attract, maintain and enhance ongoing relationships with students (and eventually alumni). This study concluded that the senior students of 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 alumni of the university will be difficult to start and to grow. This is not an ideal situation for a university that is longing for strong lifelong relationships with the alumni. It further shows that more than half of the respondents are unaware that CPUT uses the alumni association as a marketing instrument to maintain a good relationship with alumni. This, again, indicates that the alumni association and its functions are not well known to the senior students who are alumni to be within months.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Universities seek alumni for ongoing support, and therefore, should attract, maintain and enhance on-going relationships with alumni. 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. Therefore, 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 wider community for them to support the university in its activities. The alumni association is an effective instrument to advertise the efforts and also to organise and manage some of the efforts.

The Cape Peninsula University (CPUT) opened its doors in 2005 after a merger between the Cape Technikon and the Peninsula Technikon. Since then the university tried to build an identity for students and alumni to be associated with. This in itself demands the building of a positive image, reputation and brand (Sung and Yang 2009). In general, people want to be identified with successful identities or brands (Karra 2012; Wessels 2012). Therefore, the creation of successful identities or brands is important for any institution whose future depends on the attraction of clients (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 <http://www.sun.ac.za/english/corporate-identity/about/what-is-corporate-identity>).

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.

Gradually an alumni association was established at CPUT to further enhance and market the efforts of reputation and brand building. The success of these efforts is not easy to determine amongst alumni due to the short history of the alumni association, but also due 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, which further depends on the image or reputation laid by the university on a variety of terrains. This study will focus on whether these efforts were successful.

Research Question

What is the perception of the senior students (of CPUT) of 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 show the perception of the senior students (of CPUT) 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 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 variations Definitely agree, Agree, Uncertain, Do not agree, 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 around 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 that 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 of other universities (Rust 2012).

Target Population

The target population was the senior students (BTech, 4th year, full time and part students) of the business faculty of CPUT. The focus fell on this group, because 4th year students are seen as senior students with student life experience. Part time and full time students were targeted. Part time students are also more exposed to networks outside the university and to different types of news. These senior students had enough exposure to the operations and efforts of the university for 4 years in order to decide on to be a loyal supporter of their alma mater or not.

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 chosen was 20-24 August 2012. It was in the middle of the third term where all activities were at full operation (a normal week for any student). The respondents selected were all 4th year students in the Faculty of Business in the BTechprogrammes (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 on return, were excluded.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The dynamics of an alumni association

The main advantage of graduating from university is that you become one of 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 (e.g. an alumni association). 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 the fellow members (Jacobsohn 2010). An alumni association is the instrument that drives the community of belongingness for a university.

Alumni associations are old entities with a specific organisational structure and management practice. The first alumni association of the USA was established at Williams College in 1821, and was basically organised as it is done today all over the world (Dolbert2002:1). 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 it wants to achieve with alumni or the office. The focus of this study is aimed at this last model.

Factors influencing 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. It seeks to engage alumni into an association and to provide them with a variety of services with the idea that alumni get enthusiastic 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.

The basic principles for an Alumni Office to be effective are:

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).

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 on members, such as biological, demographical, geographical, and ideological), 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 (Beaulieu 2009; Harrell 2010).

Create and maintain identity -to develop and maintain identities, and to create a loyal alumnus. Individuals have a “sense of belonging” and wants to be a member of and associated with a community (alumni) with a specific identity that the members define as central, distinctive and enduring about the community (Arnett, German and Hunt 2003:94). The community’s distinctiveness offers a meaning and a sense of belonging for its members as well as a bond with the fellow members (Toker 2008:3; Jacobsohn 2010). There needs to be some kind of personal connection (Beaulieu 2009). This includes the creation of a unique culture, for example symbols, traditions, rituals, behaviours and values (Nailos 2009:2). These cultural aspects influence the engagement of an individual, and thus shape the alumni relationship. University prestige (e.g. recognised academic programmes; newsworthy cultural or sport performance) also affects alumni supportive behaviour in two ways: promoting (a person will promote the university to others) and donating (Sung and Yang 2009:791).

Experiences while a student - students that 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 to and relationship with the university as an alumnus (Nailos2009:9).

Create sound communication – to focus on effective two-way communication, is one of the most important goals recognised throughout alumni relations. With the electronic capabilities and the social media, opportunities for effective communication with alumni are increasing by the day (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 publicised; and to list names in various publications or on plaques and even buildings is a status symbol and helpful to build a strong relationship between the university and alumni (Harrell 2010; Karpova 2006:22, Singer and Hughey 20002:53).

Initiate action in special events – to organise activities (get togethers; reunions) the 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 (Beaulieu 2009; Karpova 2006:24; Taylor and Joseph 1995). These events will create long-term memories and strengthen relations.

Maintenance of old classmate friendships – to offer the opportunity for old classmates to stay connected (Bedigian 2006; Beaulieu 2009). To keep contact and to stay connected is the beginning of a sound relationship between the student, the 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 on-line career services opportunities. Students and alumni can then talk with others in their field, identify employment opportunities, apply and even be offered positions - all as a result of on-line activities (Dolbert2002:1; (Bedigian 2006; Arnett, German and Hunt 2003:100).

Advertisement for the university – to create an opportunity for the university to advertise its rituals and traditions (e.g. 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 (Singer and Hughey2002:54).

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 relationship management (customer's preferences, activities, tastes, likes, dislikes, and complaints). Bedigian (2006) defines customer relations 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 organised around processes that involve all aspects of the organisation. 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 on-going relationships with customers as well as identifying and establishing new ones”.

The building and nurturing ongoing relationships (Gummesson 1999; Worthington and Home 1996:190) is the heart of relationship marketing (Arnett, German and Hunt 2003:1), and mainly the success factor of an alumni association (Beaulieu 2009). Shaik (2005) says the 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 recognise the value of the customer; to understand that the better they treat their customers, the higher their customer loyalty will be (Bedigian 2006; Voss and Voss1997:298). 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) emphasizes 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 the parties to enter into the relationship (Voss and Voss 1997:298).

Relationship marketing in education

Grönroos (2000) says relationship marketing refers to all activities directed to establishing, developing, and maintaining successful long-term relationships. In universities these long-term relationships are with the students and other stakeholders. The 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. It is a “marketing attitude of mind”(Grönroos2000)throughout the institution – e.g. 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, yet because of the special characteristics of educational services it is not recommended to blindly apply marketing strategies 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 standardised whereas it is difficult to standardise services due to a large number of staff involved with a host of services. Conceptually the complete chain of activities is co-ordinated and managed as one large process (White 2014). The goal is to create a non-imitable bundle of services to the student (Patouillet 2013; Sych 2014).

Higher education in general and 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 the student profile. 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 need to consider implementing relationship marketing strategies 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 for gaining competitive advantage (Andrews 2012; Anyangwe 2012). Quality teaching has to be supplemented by quality supporting services by staff with a marketing attitude to maintain long-term relationship with the students.

Relationship marketing offers an efficient way of keeping track of students' expectations and offering services to students 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 has to embrace the customer, to recognise the value of the customer, to understand that the better they treat their customers, the higher their customer loyalty will be (Bedigian2006). In the competition for students, universities implement mass marketing strategies, at considerable expense, to maintain or increase their market share (Shaik2005). Marketing budgets are steadily rising with institutions spending large amounts on an integrated marketing mix that targets would-be students. But what is difficult to determine is 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 to the public and new potential students to encourage recruitment and the enrollment of new students; can participate in alumni functions; can purchase university-branded products; can 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 current and anticipated needs. Therefore, the alumni association takes on a customer orientation approach in order to identify, analyse, understand, and respond to customer needs and expectations (Toker2008). This also has financial value with the extra costs involved in recruiting new customers, as opposed to keeping existing ones.

Not only the alumni, but also the university has a role to play in the relationship marketing process (Shaik2005). Effective faculties; quality teaching; and quality supporting services by

staff with a marketing attitude, are all involved 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 OF RESULTS

Looking at the results of this study, it was clear that respondents can be categorised in 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 is taken, because the “uncertain”-group did not experience efforts from CPUT to attract, maintain and enhance ongoing relationships with students (and eventually alumni).

For instance, to name a few examples, 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; 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; that CPUT seeks alumni for ongoing support and, therefore, makes an effort to attract, maintain and enhance on-going relationships with alumni; that CPUT relies on the alumni association to build a strong relationship with alumni; and that CPUT uses the alumni association as a marketing instrument to maintain a good relationship with alumni.

In the light of this background two sets of information are compared: “Agree” vs “Uncertain and Do Not Agree (combination)”. In these two sets of information the focus is on how significantly more respondents fall into one of the categories. Since the responses are now categorised into two categories, the One Sample Binomial Test (p-value) is done to show the significant

difference for each example. The analysis of the data was done, using the SPSS statistical software, version 18.

The information in the following questions in the questionnaire that focus on relationship marketing, are compared:

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

35,9% (Agree) vs 64,1% (Uncertain and Do Not Agree combination) –

It is clear that a significantly large group of respondents (64,1%) does not agree that the all or some of the symbols, traditions, rituals, behaviours 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% (Agree) vs 62,6% (Uncertain and Do Not Agree combination) –

It is evident that a significant group of students (62,6%) did not experience efforts of CPUT 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 on-going relationships with alumni.

35,9% (Agree) vs 64,1% (Uncertain and Do Not Agree combination) –

For a significant group of respondents (64,1%) it is unclear if CPUT seeks alumni for ongoing support and, therefore, makes an effort to attract, maintain and enhance on-going 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% (Agree) vs 59.9% (Uncertain and Do Not Agree combination) –

Of the respondents 59,9% have significantly not experienced that CPUT university 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 a good relationship with alumni.

43.6% (Agree) vs 56.4% (Uncertain and Do Not Agree combination) –

56,4% of respondents indicated that they are not aware of efforts where CPUT uses the alumni association as a marketing instrument to maintain a good relationship with alumni. This group constitutes more than 50% but is not significantly more than the group that agreed (p-value = 0.0313).

The bar chart below represents these results.

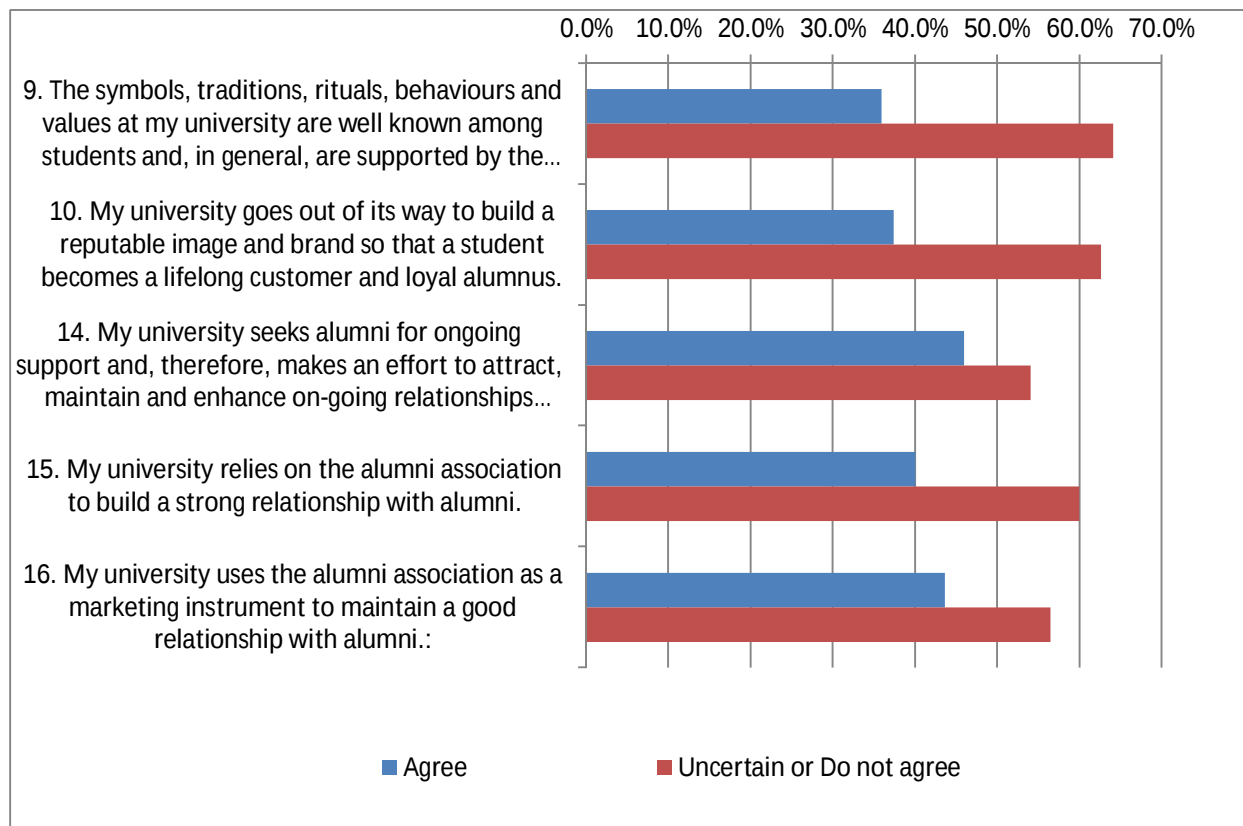


Figure 1: Percentage Agreement on statements by senior students

CONCLUSIONS AND SUMMARY

A university must go out of his way to create a specific identity that is distinctive and unique with symbols, traditions, rituals, behaviors and values (Jacobsohn 2010; Beaulieu 2009; Nailos 2009:2). However, efforts by CPUT to ensure that symbols, traditions, rituals, behaviours and

values of the university 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 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 (e.g. recognised academic programmes; newsworthy cultural or sport performance) affects alumni support directly (Sung and Yang 2009:791). 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 due to a lack of brand or image, students will be reluctant to become lifelong customers and loyal alumni in the future.

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 of old classmate friendships; providing networking opportunities; and acting as an advertisement instrument for the university (Nailos 2009:2; Sung and Yang 2009:805; Trustrum and Wee 2007:9; Beaulieu 2009; Harrell 2010; Bedigian 2006; Karpova 2006:24). Despite what the literature says, about two thirds of the respondents are unaware of efforts of CPUT to seek alumni for ongoing support and, therefore, makes 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 engage into a long term relationship with the university.

An alumni association is the instrument that drives the community of belongingness for a university (Jacobsohn 2010). The university should rely on the alumni association to build and nurture ongoing relationships and to transform students into loyal alumni (Worthington and Home 1996:190; Arnett et al. 2003:1; Shaik 2005; Beaulieu 2009). Despite these views, it was further found in this study that almost 60% of the respondents are not aware of the effort of CPUT 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 the 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 with the idea that alumni get 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 (Shaik 2005; Bedigian 2006; Beaulieu 2009; Jacobsohn 2010; White 2014). Hence, this study shows that more than half of the respondents (56%) are unaware that CPUT uses the alumni association as a marketing instrument to maintain a good relationship with alumni. This, again, indicates that the alumni association and its functions are not well known to the senior students who are alumni to be within months.

This study concluded that the senior students of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology 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 to grow. This is not an ideal situation for a university that is longing for strong lifelong relationships with the alumni. Strong efforts by CPUT to start relationships, and to market the roles and functions of the alumni association to senior students, are some ideas to secure a lifelong relationship with alumni.

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