

Virtual dynamic academic-workplace community in advertising creativity

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Abstract

The project to create a DYNAMIC VIRTUAL COMMUNITY (DVC) aims to make it easier for students in Advertising and Public Relations to adapt to the working world as the culmination of their education by linking up these two audiences: students, and alumni who are already working. This initiative was prompted by the absence of a technological tool today that links academia and the professional world.

This project is currently under construction using freeware (*Joomla!*) that is specially designed to create virtual communities. The design of this community is enabling us to create professional and skill profiles that dovetail with the profiles that the degree programme aims to produce. At the same time, telemarketing actions have been conducted to generate and expand the database of alumni from up to 24 different graduating classes in able for them to later join the community.

The functionalities of the virtual environment of students and alumni encompasses the possibility of viewing the personal and professional profiles of the other members (such as their CVs), getting in touch with them, registering for and checking job offers in the sector, conveying personal news to your chosen contact and also finding out the latest news and activities related to the faculty.

General area of interest of this innovation

This project could be interesting for academic managers and educators who wish to create alumni networks that relate the university with the profession.

1. Objectives

The purposes of the project area:

1. To foster the integration between theory (the university, where students are in their last year) and professional practice (where the graduates are).

2. To get students in their last year of the Bachelor's Degree in Advertising and Public Relations in touch with alumni who are already working.
3. To enable us to create a website for the interaction of students in the Bachelor's Degree in Advertising and Public Relations – especially those falling within the profile of «Creativity, design and management of production». This website will enable students to manage their own virtual CV and serve as a network of contacts.
4. To get alumni to keep up their ties with the UAB after earning their degree so they can always remain linked to the university.

2. Description of the project

Currently, the Faculty of Communications Studies is implementing a pilot DURSI/EHEA project which leads to the UAB's own Social Sciences degree (Advertising and Public Relation). The first diploma class graduated in 2007, and the first students slated to earn their Bachelor's degree will do so in 2008. The DYNAMIC VIRTUAL COMMUNITY will become an essential tool to achieve the maximum workplace integration of these students.

The degree programme defines five different professional profiles:

1. Strategist. Consultant in commercial communication and public relations.
2. Creativity, design and management of production in advertising and public relations.
3. Account manager in advertising and public relations.
4. Media planner.
5. Consumer and market researcher.

The initial approach to this project aimed to centre on the profile of Creativity, design and management of production (profile 2). Here is where we saw the fewest job placements, and where the traditional way of creating jobs (job boards, newspaper ads, etc.) does not work to help new creatives join the business and social fabric. As this project has been developed, ultimately all the profiles have been included.

For this type of project, we needed an internal contributor from the department, an alumnus from the Bachelor's degree programme who provided the legal advice needed. This legal advice is required since all databases on Internet must comply with Spanish laws on the protection of personal information (LOPD) and the law on services in the information society (LSSI).

The project also included the signing of a sponsorship agreement with an external company, ADQA (www.adqa.com), which makes possible «the hosting of up to 100 megabytes, renewable each year».

3. Methodology

The project is divided into four main avenues of action or phases:

1. Preparation: drawing up the databases.
2. Technical development of the website of the virtual community.

3. Dissemination: spreading the word about the new community to alumni, companies and the media.
4. Consolidation: joining by alumni, researching other avenues of financing to ensure the continuity of the project, transfer of experience.

3.1. Preparation: drawing up the databases

First of all, all the files of the students in the course on Creativity in the Bachelor's Degree in Advertising and Public Relations were gathered together. As the data in the files was released to the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona with the consent of the students, we were free to use them. Once we had the entire list of names and telephone numbers digitalised, the telemarketing stage began in which the project technicians tried to get in touch with each of the alumni in the database. The initial database was implemented using Excel, and it was organised into the following contents: surname(s); name(s); email; telephone 1; telephone 2; comments on the contact (such as landline and wrong email; call after 7 pm; lives in New York, etc.); current company (such as Young&Rubicam, Vitrubio Leo Burnett, Barcelona County Council, Encofrado Made, Flaix FM, not working, etc); details (freelance, company-staff conciliation services, own design studio, etc.); and other comments.

As was predictable, much of this information was obsolete, and for this reason we had to try to trace the person and the methodology.

3.2. Technical development of the website of the virtual community

This was divided into two stages:

1. Research and analysis of experiences involving virtual communities.
2. Computer programming (technological aspects) and web design (graphic aspects).

After analysing a good number of virtual communities that are currently on the Internet, and after having participated in some of them as users, we were able to get a fairly broad idea of the services, structures and operation of this type of service, which is so in vogue these days.

The research was based on online communities in a variety of fields and of differing kinds which somehow could serve as a model for our project because of either their contents (advertising or communication, like publircidad.com), their nature (professional or student groups) or their way of operating and managing millions of users (general or personal contact communities, such as meetit.com, match.com and hi5.com).

Neurona.com and Xing.com are the best-organised, most interesting communities that offer a very comprehensive service; they are extremely popular among professionals. They were therefore taken as the model for creating the UAB community. Neurona.com is already the leader in Spain, with more than 700,000 users today, and Xing works Europe-wide. Econozco, Eacademy, Joined-in and Publircidad are other examples, yet they have certain weak points (poor design, high prices, not very popular, etc.).

However, it should be borne in mind that the alumni community from Advertising and Public Relation at the UAB is designed to be a more restricted site, in theory, and that there will be added emotional content: everyone will be graduates of the same university. In this vein, we have also analysed some of the numerous communities and websites devoted to both universities (universia.es) and those specialising in finding former classmates (quefuede.com). The overall assessment of these websites is quite negative, as often they are solely based on this goal, they are poorly organised, they lack complementary services and end up being «failures» in terms of participation. We should bear in mind that in a more informal, interactive sense, there is already a general website where UAB alumni can interact, patatabrava.com, although the idea behind our virtual community is different.

The technical development of the community was done through different sub-stages:

- a) First of all we had to join all the parts and packages in the freeware programme *Joomla!* This programme is made up of different packages developed separately over a common base, which when joined together offer the functionalities needed for the UAB community. This part of the project was developed with the help of a UAB computer science student.
- b) The second phase in this stage was to make all the adjustments. We had to construct the sections of contents, how the user profiles would appear, how users would communicate with each other, which menus would be visible, and even how a user would register for the community. This part was quite lengthy since new adjustments to make kept arising. Even today, we are aware in the launch phase that fine-tuning is still needed.
- c) Finally, the last phase in the production process was based on giving the community design and colour. For this job, a design expert adjusted the templates that came with the freeware to the corporate image. Within the limitations give by the programme, we had to do our utmost to make it as attractive as possible.

3.3. Dissemination: spreading the word about the new community to alumni, companies and the media

As this article was being written, preparations were underway to disseminate the community to alumni. This dissemination will consist of sending an email to inform alumni that the community is now up and running and that they may join it. Once there are enough alumni in the community, we will then advertise in companies and the specialised media.

3.4. Consolidation: joining by alumni, researching other avenues of financing to ensure the continuity of the project, transfer of experience

This stage will be conducted as of summer 2008. We should mention the support of the Office of the Vice Rector of Students and Culture of the UAB to implement the philosophy of this project in other degree programmes on campus.

4. Results

4.1. The database

The efforts to generate the database were one of the most difficult in this project. Despite the fact that it is toilsome, we have managed to reach almost 700 alumni who graduated between 1977 and 2007.

The table below summarises the results of almost one year of data gathering:

Figure 1. Effective contact with alumni in the virtual community (www.uabcom.net) as of the 3rd of March 2007. PN indicates the new academic curriculum started in 1992.

Graduating class	Contacts	%	Graduating class	Contacts	%	Graduating class	Contacts	%
1977-82	12	27.9	1985-90	13	7.9	1996-00 PN	47	40.5
1979-84	3	5.8	1986-91	27	14.1	1997-01 PN	50	51.0
1980-85	8	10.3	1987-92	6	3.8	1998-02 PN	64	64.6
1981-86	9	9.0	1988-93	17	11.9	1999-03 PN	90	84.9
1982-87	14	10.0	1989-94	1	0.8	2000-04 PN	96	93.2
1983-88	19	14.9	1990-95	0	0	2001-05 PN	56	52.3
1984-89	21	16.1	1992-96 PN	3	3.1	2002-06 PN	42	44.6
			1993-97 PN	15	14.1	Total 1997-2006	674	25.4
			1994-98 PN	53	50.4			
			1995-99 PN	8	6.8			

Of the approximately 2,635 students who have graduated from the Bachelor's Degree in Advertising and Public Relations at the UAB, a total of 663 students were located, representing around 25% of the total.

4.2. The website: The virtual community

Bearing in the mind purpose this community should have for students in their last year and for alumni, an environment was created with different areas. The areas were arranged into two groups: the user's personal menu and the common menu among all the community members. Below is an outline of the features of each of these parts (personal menu and general menu).

PERSONAL MENU: «El teu menu» (Your menu)

- *Start* (Figure 2).
- *Profile*. This is the section that allows users to edit their personal information, that is, the information through which the other members of the community can get to know them. With this purpose in mind, this is one of the most highly personalised sections, and it allows users to upload a photograph, enter personal data and attach their own CV and professional data.

Figure 2. Homepage of the virtual community (www.uabcom.net)



- *Post your news.* As if it were a personal blog, the community offers this section for posting news. This is the easiest way to share the latest professional news with everyone who visits your personal profile. When you post a news item, an editing box appears where you can write whatever you want. However, whatever users write is related solely to their personal profile, so it can only be seen when another member of the community visits that profile.
- *Members.* This is the tool for getting to know the rest of the community. In this section of the personal menu, there is a list of all the members in the community today. These members can be sorted by alphabetical order, by graduating class, by user name... This is how users can easily find the new members from their graduating class or other alumni by sharing and knowing their user names. Once found on the list, users can go to the personal profile page of the members selected from the community list.
- *Forum.* This section is the meeting point and debate forum for all the members of the community. Instead of being aimed at getting in touch with specific members, this forum for public debate in the community is used to comment on and discuss issues with a broader scope than more direct conversations among acquaintances in the community. Plus, it is one of the tools that should bring the community closer and foster the feel of a community as it deals with issues that might affect all the members.
- *ComCom* record.* The latest events and news about the degree in advertising and public relations at the UAB will be the content of this section. With its archive of news items that are, for example, related to the faculty or other more general events,

it is suitable for serving as a point of re-encounter between the university and its alumni who come back to be informed about what's happening there.

- *Contact us.* This is the section where users can get in touch with the organisers of the community, to propose improvements or recommendations, lodge complaints or report on technical glitches that arise. It is also a way for users to feel helped by the community's experience.

The goal of the merger between the theoretical world of the university and the practical world of advertising and public relations becomes a reality in the:

GENERAL MENU: «El troba-feina» (The Job-Finder)

- *Job vacancies.* As if it were a news section, the section contains all the notifications so that alumni and companies participating in the project may post the different job offers they have. The offers are classified by profiles, so that users can find the offers that are more closely related to their personal and professional profile. This section is fed by direct links with the job offers from the part of the menu called «Post an 'available to work'».
- *Available to work.* Following the lines of the previous section, in this section students can offer themselves for jobs. In this way, companies looking for students and alumni can go directly to this section to find work. This section is also classified by professional profiles to make it easier to search, and it also requires students to define what type of position they are seeking.

Figure 3. Internal page of the virtual community (www.uabcom.net)



- *Post an 'available to work' and post an offer.* These menus are for publishing the news that goes in the previous sections, «Job Vacancies» and «Available to work». Here, in addition to classifying the jobs by professional categories – as mentioned above – users may also enter a title and a text. The ability to attach images to the news item is still under development, as beforehand we must study the capacity and limitations of the server.

5. Conclusions

After one year of work we can state the following:

1. We have achieved the initial level of the first version of the community (CVD 1.0) with the following basic sections.
 - a) Your Menu
 - b) The Job-Finder
2. We are trying to «flush out» certain IT limitations related to:
 - a) Authenticating members. We finally decided to authenticate them via their national ID number (DNI).
 - b) Minor errors in certain processes when posting a job offer.
3. We have designed an interface that is user-friendly.
4. Of the approximately 2,635 alumni that have graduated from the Bachelor's Degree in Advertising and Public Relations at the UAB, we have located approximately 663, accounting for around 25 % of the total.

The future holds four main challenges:

- Keeping up our efforts to locate alumni by either telephone or post.
- Correcting the technical errors that might arise in the community.
- Making the community more dynamic.
- Finding a stable method to finance the project via membership fees or other avenues.

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Interesting links

- Innovation website: <http://www.uabcom.net> [2008]

The webgrafia proposed for the pilot study on the communities analysed includes an analysis of model virtual communities (consultations carried out in 2007)

<http://www.neurona.com>; <http://www.econozco.com>; <http://www.universia.net>; <http://www.meetic.com>; <http://www.xing.com>; <http://www.ecademy.com>; <http://www.publir-cidad.com>; <http://www.hi5.com>.

Keywords

Virtual community, alumni network, advertising and public relations.

Financing

Agency to Manage University and Research Aid (AGAUR) convocation: aid to improve teaching quality at Catalan universities for 2006 (MDQ). Identification number: 2006 MQD 00136.

Aid from the Rector's Office of the UAB-2007 to optimise the web platform and its dissemination.

Supplementary materials on the CD-ROM

Demonstration of the VIRTUAL COMMUNITY OF ADVERTISING AND PUBLIC RELATIONS ALUMNI website and example of a new user registration.

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Presentation of the working group

Using the abbreviation GRP, a group of advertising and public relations professors from the UAB gathers together to offer research and training services in addition to their teaching duties within the university.

The core group is made up of professors from the Advertising and Public Relations Unit who teach in the Bachelor's Degree in Advertising and Public Relations and in the

doctoral programme on «Advertising and Public Relations: Branding and audience strategies». Unlike other groups, GRP is open and its membership changes depending on the type of research or assignment. This enables doctoral students to join the group. Thanks to this dynamic, the young researchers receive backing and advice in developing projects.

To date, research has been conducted that is financed by a variety of companies and private institutions: Bayer S.A., Lloreda S.A. (KH7), El Gremi de Publicitat, and a variety of MQD-AGAUR teaching innovation projects and teaching innovation projects with the support of the UAB's IDES.

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