Academic entrepreneurship: The HBS Library takes a lesson from the school it serves

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In 1998, Tom Michalak, executive director of the Baker Library at the Harvard Business School (HBS), received a call from an HBS alumni inquiring as to whether online access to the school’s very extensive resources was available to help him on a management project he needed to research. Typically, online contracts that universities have with the online database suppliers do not allow alumni remote access to any databases. Universities typically are contractually required to limit access to current faculty, staff, students, and those who may walk into the library. Remote database users usually must authenticate themselves through some sort of proxy server as valid and current members of the university community for academic institutions to abide by their contractual license obligations.

Harvard’s Business School library was no different. But to Tom Michalak, “In an age when information should be more immediate and accessible then ever before, that didn’t make any sense.”

To determine if other alumni of the school would also appreciate remote access to the school’s databases, the Baker Library surveyed alumni and did focus groups. The results showed an overwhelming interest in having access to a Web site with timely business material, alumni information, and access to those proprietary databases familiar to increasing numbers of alumni from their tenure as students. Alumni missed having access to the research once they left the Business School.

Survey results also showed that alumni had very different needs from the MBA students. Alumni expressed a need for filtered and distilled information, delivered in brief, timely, and concise capsules. This insight led to the development of a beta site named The Management Center, which was offered to a test group of 250 graduates. After reviewing the beta site and feedback from alumni users, the Harvard Business School dean, Kim B. Clark, suggested broadening the prototype and developing a more extensive Web site, which became the HBS Working Knowledge Web site [http://hbsworkingknowledge.hbs.edu/]. As the site developed in the summer of 1999, the objective expanded to building a resource useful to the entire HBS community and the general public by reflecting the full breadth and depth of the school’s intellectual output.

HBS Working Knowledge launched in October 1999 by sending more than 24,000 e-mail announcements to alumni, encouraging them to register for the Web site and to subscribe to the Baker Library Research Center. In early December 1999, the site was made accessible to the Harvard community, the general public, and the business information community. The February 2000 Harvard University Library Notes had a page-one story detailing the site’s history and development and was further useful in announcing the site’s availability [http://hul.harvard.edu/publications/library_notes/pdfs/HULN1292.pdf]. In addition, the staff of Baker Library talked it up at lots of places, such as alumni gatherings, and to summer graduates, as another benefit of being a Harvard Business School alumni. The Alumni Services offices continues to market the service to alumni.

The Harvard Business School had long offered fee-based services for alumni, in which librarians provided searches priced as the cost of the search plus a fee covering librarian services. The new site allowed alumni to do their own searching directly for the first time for an annual subscription fee. Although the fee-based, intermediated search service, usage numbers have certainly dropped, the services have not been eliminated. If an alumnus wants to have the library do extensive searching, they are referred to the Association of Independent Information Professionals (AIIP) to help them find an information broker who can do the extensive research they might need done. Even the Baker Library, like most academic libraries, does not have sufficient staff to handle a large volume of in-depth information requests, especially from those not currently attending the school.
To open up access to their content, Tom Michalak negotiated add-on licensing agreements with some — though certainly not all — of the vendors who sell business databases to Harvard. Additional licensing agreements were reached with OneSource [http://www.onesource.com/], CareerSearch [http://www.careerssearch.net/], ProQuest [http://www.il.proquest.com/], and some others. Vendors most likely to sign these additional agreements were vendors who clearly saw these alumni as additional markets they would not otherwise have and would therefore not substitute revenue from their corporate markets. Vendors who believed that the alumni effort might steal business away from their corporate marketing were unlikely to sign an agreement with Baker Library.

Many of the HBS alumni are entrepreneurs or work in small businesses that are otherwise unlikely to have a library or access to such services. The Baker Library tracks who subscribes to these services, but are very careful that vendors do not gain access to the names, addresses, or even e-mail identities of their subscribers in order to protect alumni from unwanted solicitations or finding their addresses sold to others.

As of February 2000, the Harvard Working Knowledge Web site had 2,700 registered users, including over 1,900 alumni. Registered users may receive a weekly e-mail with headline summaries of new features, book recommendations, and Web site reviews. A total of 424 alumni had subscribed to the Baker Library Research Center and its business databases. Reaction to the services from alumni has been very positive, and both the Harvard Working Knowledge site and alumni subscriptions continue to grow.

Elizabeth Bibby, director of Business Information Services at Baker Library, said, “From a public services perspective, it’s really nice to describe and be able to offer these services. They [alumni] are not cut off just because they are no longer at the Harvard Business School.” Harvard believes that while the Wharton School has developed a similar type of Web site for its alumni and others, the Baker Library was the first academic library to have licenses for alumni to access some of their business databases. Whether or not HBS is first, this is an innovation we have not often seen in academic libraries, and it has some interesting implications for the future of both vendors and libraries. For vendors, this could be a way to reach entrepreneurs and people who work in companies without libraries. As more and more corporations cut their libraries, this seems a way for vendors to reach and serve a growing and largely underserved population, increasing new customer awareness and, hopefully, dependence on the products they sell.

For academic libraries and the institutions they serve, there are other potential benefits to consider. Private universities and, now more than ever, even public universities are increasing their hunt for additional revenues. Libraries that offer and expend resources to bring information products to their alumni can potentially generate revenue for the library from their alumni/customers. It is also a way to reach out and offer continuing benefits and services to alumni.

Keeping alumni attached to and involved with the university community is viewed as a good way to ensure a continuing and mutually beneficial relationship between the university and alumni, including alumni who might become donors to their alma mater. Perhaps an alumni who got useful information from one of the library-supplied databases — information that generated large sums of money — might be thankful and appreciative enough to make a contribution to the university. Even if no donation ever follows, generating goodwill and providing alumni with information, especially through resources that require little or no ongoing work for library staff past setup, is worth a great deal as well to the universities.

My own university and I am sure most, if not all institutes of higher learning, place a high value in providing help and support to their community. This type of service offers a new and important way to further that goal while helping the university continue to enhance alumni membership benefits and to build an active alumni organization. For alumni who graduate having used these services in school knowing how important they are in helping make smarter business decisions, such service can be of great benefit. Even if they could or knew how to get access as an individual, start-up costs in many cases might be prohibitive. Using the clout of the library and the union of all alumni, they can get access for a much better price than they would have on their own.

In the words of Baker Library executive director Tom Michalak, “Information is more immediate and accessible than ever before, and we are constantly thinking of new ways to package and deliver it. The speed of change in our work lives is altering the way learning takes place and increasing the importance of continued learning.” As academic libraries are called on increasingly to bring in more revenue to help, even if only in a small way, offset the large cost of building a library collection, my guess is that you will see other libraries using increasing creativity to generate revenues and goodwill with the alumni in mutually beneficial ways. I think Harvard University’s Baker Library may have initiated this entrepreneurial academic approach, but they will not be the last to use it. Vendors should learn that while the academic market may not be able to pay some of the high premiums companies have paid, they are a steady, reliable, and growing market that can be relied on to always be there for vendors.