



# Strategies

## for Sustainable Small Town and Rural Development

It is necessary for citizens and their leaders to be actively engaged in shaping the destiny of their communities. Often, simple, yet powerful actions are all that are necessary to start the momentum in a community toward a new and more promising future. Consumers Energy asked leading experts from around the country the strategies they recommend for individual communities.

*"We want our future to be our choice and not something that happens to us."*

– A small-town resident

**Consumers Energy**



**Oscar Rodriguez** has an extensive career in city management as an administrator and consultant. More recently, he has worked in large metropolitan areas, but he has a passion for small towns because he grew up in one. This passion and his interest in networks led to his development of practices for connecting with "community alumni."

**Q. What's the concept of community alumni and why is it important?**

The concept recognizes the attraction people feel to their hometown even though they moved away. It says that your community is not just a town in a fixed time and place, and everybody who has ties to your community counts, not just those who live there today. Your hometown's footprint in the world grows if you see it as the hub of the network of the "life paths" of its citizens, past and present, as they grow up and as they stay, move away and maybe return. Those who are away are an extension of your community, friends and relatives who are emotionally tied to you like alumni to their alma mater.

It is important to recognize our alumni as an asset, and if we count them, they may often outnumber current residents! If part of your community's strategy is to attract creative workers and entrepreneurs, what better audience than alumni who are already emotionally attached to your town and receptive to your message to return home. And, even if they remain away, yet stay connected, they still can significantly benefit their hometowns.

**Q: So what are the characteristics of these alumni?**

- **Who are they?** Your alumni include the graduates from your local high schools, but also those who have attended summer camps in the area or a local college. Other alumni are retirees now living elsewhere and second home owners or regular vacationers who have come to your area often. Also, consider those who grew up in your town but left to pursue a career or for employment reasons. They, and even their children who visit their grandparents back home, have roots in your community.
- **Where are your alumni?** Considering the mobility of our population, they could be anywhere, but you're likely to find concentrations of them right here in Michigan and specifically in nearby metropolitan areas. Others may be in retirement locations, and some of these may be in specific places where people from your community tend to cluster.

- ***What ties do alumni have to the community?*** There are many things that tug at your alumni's hearts and motivate them to visit your community. Certainly family remaining in the area is one of the biggest draws, and an influx of alumni can be expected around major holidays. Other draws include school and church reunions, annual festivals and any unique local events that might cause these alumni to visit home.
- ***What image do alumni have of the community?*** Hopefully your alumni see your town as "a perfect place to raise a family," "a vacationland," "a refuge from the city," "an ideal spot to retire" and "the only place I call home." The sentiments associated with one's hometown are often difficult to put into words, so helping your alumni understand and express their attachment can help them feel more connected.
- ***Which alumni should be targeted and when might they "return home"?*** Those who are entrepreneurially inclined or creative workers are worth special consideration for their potential to create and contribute to enterprises that can grow in your town. They may be more motivated to resettle in their hometown if they own their own businesses; have young families to raise and educate; have elderly parents in the community; are retiring or preparing to retire; or when life or career circumstances allow them the opportunity to return to a place that has special meaning in their lives.
- ***How do alumni stay in touch, and how are they connected to their hometown?*** Alumni stay abreast of hometown developments via e-mail, newsletters (of schools, churches, summer camps, etc.), blogs and various Web sites including those of the local newspapers. More formal networks include alumni associations, class reunion committees and other special organizations perhaps associated with vacation areas, retired employee groups, church members, etc. Find the linkages to these networks in your community and encourage them to participate in a communitywide effort to engage their alumni.

***Q. How does a community engage its alumni?***

You will be more effective managing the engagement of your alumni if you approach it as addressing the "life cycle" of your town's residents. You want to see what can be done before they leave and, once they are away, how to stay connected so they might return.

**Before they leave** – Start by accepting that people will leave your community and work proactively to reinforce their connectedness to their hometown before they depart.

There are many proven practices for this:

- ***Know who they are*** – Tracking your potential alumni (and securing their contact information) before they leave will help you stay connected with them later. Look for those events or situations where people may be preparing to leave the community: high school (college) graduations, or the closing and/or relocation of a business.
- ***Brand your community*** – Branding creates an image of your community in the minds of your citizens. Create customer loyalty by reinforcing this brand while your citizens are still "home" and a captive audience. This will help motivate them to stay in touch and perhaps instill the desire to support their hometown and to ultimately return home.
- ***Include them in your lexicon*** – Establishing the value of your alumni to the community is fundamental in a successful program to include them, and this starts with a term(s) that reflects what they mean to your town. Whether it be "alumni," "expatriates" or

“extended community,” giving them a name and identity helps the alumni themselves and your community know that these people, although absent, are an important part of the town’s past, present and future.

- ***Accept and even celebrate their departure*** – For many, leaving your community is a normal step in their life, and it may be just a temporary absence for some. The last impression they have before they leave may very well be the most lasting one, so make this a positive experience. It helps your alumni to know their hometown cares enough about them and is helping them to achieve their dreams. If you engage them, then they’re not really gone, and even if they don’t return, they are out there to help their hometown. Look for ways to recognize those who leave with ceremonies and tokens they will fondly remember.
- ***Link them to your network of alumni*** – As they depart, modern technology makes it easy to connect with new alumni either directly from the hometown or, better yet, from a node of your hometown’s network already located at the university or town where they are heading. Encourage them to join that network at their new destination, and announce their arrival to fellow alumni. A warm welcome extended to a newly arriving son/daughter from the hometown makes a lasting impression on those who have recently relocated.

**While they are away** – Your most robust efforts in managing your alumni probably need to be made while they are away. This largely determines their likelihood to return or to at least participate in activities and initiatives of their hometown. Some practices to employ while your alumni are away include:

- ***Maintain updated information*** – Periodic surveys keep your database current and provide insights on your alumni. You’ll have a better understanding of their status and how they are connecting with their hometown. Share the information you glean with the pertinent nodes in the network that may have contacts with these alumni.
- ***Use various means of communication*** – A variety of communication channels including e-mails and e-newsletters, a special alumni section in the local newspaper, Web sites, etc. can reach alumni and help minimize their estrangement from their hometown. One novel approach is “call away radio” using a local radio talk show format to contact alumni and interact with them on what they’re doing, updating them on news of the community and getting them to express their impressions and memories of their hometown. Another strategy is to deploy webcams as an inexpensive means for including the alumni in special events and refreshing the image of their hometown in their mind.



- **Stage alumni events** – Visit and gather your alumni. Hold events where you have clusters of alumni (perhaps at universities, retirement locales or nearby metropolitan areas). Host a reception or a tailgate party to allow your alumni to gather around their hometown.
- **Appoint goodwill ambassadors** – Name volunteer ambassadors of your hometown for every node in your network, whether it be based on geography or some other affiliation such as “retirees.” They function as conduits back to your community, maintain the database of fellow alumni and are in place to initiate events and programs associated with your hometown.
- **Confer honorary appointments** – Designate “alumni representation” on boards, councils and committees, even if these appointments are honorary and in absentia. These make a statement that alumni are important to their hometown.
- **Encourage an export market** – Your alumni represent a potential market for your local economy and will appreciate the opportunity to buy local while away. Some products and services to offer include hometown memorabilia, “return home” tour packages, Mother’s Day gifts, local municipal bonds, reunion services, and local foods and brands.
- **Create a Department of Extended Community Affairs** – Even if unofficial or part-time, an organized effort to engage your alumni suggests a commitment and sustained effort that can pay dividends. Smaller cities and/or chambers of commerce can help support this effort on a regional basis or by collaborating with a local college.
- **Offer opportunities** – As opportunities emerge, pass the word to alumni. Is a business ready for succession, is an orthodontist needed, has a historic building in downtown become available for restoration? Opportunities might be all an alumnus needs to return home.

**Q. What’s the goal of your community alumni initiative?**

Certainly you’d want all of those who moved away to return home with the experiences and wealth they had gained elsewhere, but this isn’t realistic. Some will return, and your efforts in managing and engaging your alumni before they leave and while they are away should contribute to your success. However, even if alumni don’t return, consider the value they can otherwise provide. They are potential contributors to your community fund-raising campaigns, they are nodes of your network who can contact other alumni, and they, themselves, are in other networks which may have individuals or enterprises that could find your community attractive for ventures or be markets for your hometown’s goods and services.

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**Additional Resources:**  
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