

'Lever'-aging the old boys' network online

Hindustan Unilever becomes the first company in the Lever global system to create a portal for its alumni network

SAPNA AGARWAL
Mumbai

Hindustan Unilever (HUL) has many firsts to its credit. Now, it adds one more. India's largest fast-moving consumer goods company has found a new way of keeping in touch with its employees — present and former. And it has nothing to do with Facebook and LinkedIn, which have already made social networking sites and community building popular.

HUL has built its own community site for networking with its alumni. "The website gives a formal structure to do things that we were already doing — networking with other Leverites," said Gurdeep Singh, an independent director at Blue Star, who had joined the company as a management trainee in 1966 and retired in 2006 as the director for human resources.

Overseas most large companies have alumni associations, either informal or through an officially-sponsored effort. In India, HR departments of several companies have started eyeing alumni associations as a useful means of networking.

HUL is no exception, but the portal takes the effort one step further. The alumni portal, a first for fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) company in India and also a first for Unilever, was created around Diwali last year. The company realised that even though people had moved on, their interest in the company remained, Ankush Punj, a manager with HUL, said.

So far, of the 1,500 people that the company contacted, 600 have already registered. Some 270 of them are management board representatives from diverse sectors like telecom, IT and ITeS service, retail, banking and, of course, FMCG.

The database for the 1,500 members was available from company's database like pensioners' data for the last 10 years and from current employees who were informed of the initiative and asked to forward the alumni portal link to ex-colleagues with whom they were in con-



nect is still strong and we want to touch base with our ex-colleagues and want to know what's going on at the organisation and be a part of it," he said.

Harish Bijoor, chief executive officer of Harish Bijoor Consults, confirmed that he had signed up. "It's the University of Levers. Everyone who has been at HUL has learned from the organisation because it has added a great deal to our lives," he said.

Like other community network platforms, the HUL alumni portal has common features like profile view, blogging and conference facility. The plans include adding chat and message post-service, making it a complete community website with interactive features. The website also has a desktop alert service wherein if a member posts a message on the site, all the members will be alerted of the development and can log on to the website to view the post.

The community site is not only in the interests of the alumni. As Leena Nair, HUL's HR director, said, the company also benefitted from the rich and varied experience that each alumni brought to the table. "Most of them are in leadership positions across industries and the richness of their experience is invaluable to us," Nair said.

tact. "Once we have exhausted our contacts database, we will also look at So far, of the 1,500 people that the company contacted, 600 have registered

data mining and crawling techniques for which we will tie up with sites like LinkedIn and job portals to get in touch with ex-employees," said Punj.

Building a database doesn't seem like a huge problem. Sanjay Sehgal, an ex-Leverite and now managing director and chief operating officer of Sandoz, registered on the website the minute he got the invitation. "We have gained so much from the organisation. The con-

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