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Happy anniversary?

What's the point of a business school anniversary? 'Re-membering' and re-energising for the next one according to **Julie Davies** and **David Buisson**



Although universities represent some of the world's oldest continually operating organisations (the University of Karueein was founded in 859 in Fez, Morocco), business schools are relative newcomers with more recent birthdays. (ESCP Europe claims to be the world's first business school, established in 1819). Nevertheless, we see anniversaries as significant milestones to highlight the value of business schools.

While being sceptical about how to measure the tangible benefits of a business school anniversary, we suggest they are timely reminders of the sector's resilience, durability, legitimacy and adaptability. Business school anniversaries provide unique opportunities to (re)unite past, present and prospective members, to reflect and celebrate, and to renew shared missions to sustain business school life for future jubilees.

As members of the international advisory board of IAE Lyon School of Management in France, we celebrated the school's 60th anniversary last year. The 12 months witnessed a series of events as well as the publication of a commemorative history of the school and history of management in Lyon.

The actual anniversary day included over 60 workshops with academic conferences, sports, a huge picnic, a quiz in the city, singing, gardening, wine tasting, blood donations and it culminated in a gala with a 1950s fashion show.

The year came and went very quickly. But we are interested in capturing any lessons we can share from Lyon by highlighting how the business school sector can benefit from anniversaries by establishing legacies well after fireworks and light shows have been extinguished.

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So, what makes for a successful anniversary year campaign? Drawing on illustrations globally, we propose seven guiding principles:

- 1.** Plan at least two years ahead with dedicated and professional resources
- 2.** Be future-focused and bold about your ambitions to realise changes
- 3.** Ensure long-lasting anniversary legacies and synergies among diverse voices
- 4.** Determine clear strategic intent and explicit ROI measures (especially budgets)
- 5.** Craft your narrative carefully for a shared and inspiring sense of purpose about continuity and change
- 6.** Ensure inclusive stakeholder engagement, including the central university and civic involvement
- 7.** Implement a professional (social) media strategy to strengthen key communities and messages to generate future opportunities with a robust database and student-led projects – while having fun!

Recently in the UK there has been a spate of 50th anniversary celebrations, including this year at Warwick (which has gone from a green field site to offering spectacular facilities in the iconic Shard, the UK's tallest building), Emerald Publishing and at the Association of MBAs.

As for centenaries, in the US, Harvard Business School celebrated its in 2008. AACSB International marked its 100th anniversary last year.

In Asia, the National University of Singapore Business School's 50th anniversary charity concert in 2015 raised over €300,000 for bursaries. The Asian Institute of Management in the Philippines has launched a new logo ahead of its 50th anniversary in 2018 to reflect dynamic changes in its identity. Meanwhile, Lee Kong Chian School of Business at Singapore Management University, a rapidly rising business school, is only a teenager at 17.

Anniversaries of programmes, such as 50 years of women on the Harvard MBA or the 10th birthday of Imperial College's MSc in Management are similarly press worthy.

Anniversaries of international campuses are also recognised, such as INSEAD in Singapore, whose 10th anniversary included testimonials from the Prime Minister of Singapore, announcements about expansion plans, a leadership summit, and an alumni networking day with panel discussions and faculty lectures.

If you employ a business school historian and look closely enough at the different types of business school anniversaries, you might find there's an excuse to organise an anniversary every year. There are plenty of examples around the globe from which to draw inspiration. In the business school world we even commemorate accreditation anniversaries, with EQUIS currently celebrating its 20th anniversary.

Clearly, the scale, prestige and age of the institution need to be taken into account – we cannot all emulate the special milestone of the 2009 University of Cambridge 800th anniversary campaign, which raised over £1bn. That anniversary year attracted 10,000 visitors to a central Cambridge light show with university banners throughout the city and included initiatives such as a lightshow in China and on the Empire State Building in New York, a science festival for children, BBC Proms concert, competitions for ideas to help major challenges, garden parties and a newly commissioned play watched by HM Queen Elizabeth II.

In our web research on business school anniversaries, however, we have noted some sub-optimal practices. For example, several anniversary logos omit the name of the business school and an interesting tag line; some institutions have had to cancel alumni balls, failing to keep in touch with alumni because of poor CRM (customer relationship management) systems. In a few business schools we have noticed expensive merchandise such as commemorative books left unread and unavailable digitally for others to access. In other cases, business school deans appear to have been exhausted by world tours of alumni chapters and stepped down soon after an anniversary, leaving us wondering about their pledges.

Curiously, the Management History division of the Academy of Management has the lowest membership – 384 – compared with 5,122 for the Business Policy and Strategy division. Perhaps we should frame business school anniversaries with Abraham Lincoln's adage that "the best way to predict the future is to create it".

By looking back and forwards and interacting with a range of stakeholders during an anniversary, these occasions can be viewed as dynamic living historical events rather than repositories of past artefacts and outdated narratives.

Anniversaries are occasions for thinking about why our work matters. They are opportunities for us to interact and think strategically by recognising historical trends and future challenges. Business school anniversaries represent important moments to reflect deeply, celebrate milestones, re-state and reframe timeless values, and progress a shared sense of purpose.

As business school advisory board members, we are interested to see evidence of the lasting impact of major anniversaries beyond cake cutting and having a good time. Goodwill generated can be valuably channelled into anniversary scholarships and the appointment of anniversary chairs in business schools. At IAE Lyon, the anniversary celebrations kick-started an intense focus on alumni relations that continues apace in person and on Twitter.

The downsides of anniversary celebrations are usually a failure to plan and a lack of a clear sense of returns on the time and energy invested. Business school anniversary years should not merely be a series of the usual bragging and begging events and not everything needs to be new either.

In some respects, we think that less might mean more. It is better to organise several high-impact activities than to fritter away time and money in myriad inconsequential activities.

But who has the energy to co-ordinate these anniversaries? No one person has time to be in charge of a major business school anniversary on top of their day job. It needs to be integrated as a key priority with activities outsourced to volunteers and agencies as appropriate such as professional caterers and advertising specialists.

It is interesting that administrators at the University of Maryland in the USA invited proposals from individuals to organise anniversary events and Birmingham University in the UK offers advice on how to organise reunions. At IAE Lyon, the Director of Communications used her Master's thesis to focus on the anniversary and Master's in Communications students produced YouTube clips as part of their course.

Although "pale, stale and male" figures will probably be honoured in many anniversaries as founding fathers, in terms of diversity we feel it is



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than the last”. Similarly, business school deans need to re-commit to core values and communicate higher ambitions in both traditional and social media, as well as in person.

Overall, party poopers might contend that business school anniversaries are just about nostalgia and tiresome small talk. Other doubters might repeat common motivational quotes: “Don’t look back, you’re not going that way, look ahead”.

In response, we argue that management history matters. Anniversaries are timely opportunities to communicate our accomplishments, reflect on lessons learned and to discuss the future sustainability of business and management education and research.

In summary, plan, look to the future, be strategic, inclusive, measure ROI, craft your narrative for continuity and change, ensure robust CRM systems, and communicate coherent and compelling media messages – while enjoying your business school anniversary!

Rather than viewing business school anniversaries as time-consuming distractions that appear all too regularly or ignoring them altogether, we recommend framing them as unique opportunities to get a business school’s house in order, to reach out and show case its accomplishments, to express gratitude and to strengthen ties.

Business school anniversaries are much more than marketing events. They are valuable moments of organisational “re-remembering” to bring lost or wavering members back into the community with renewed commitment and passion.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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important during and between business school anniversaries to engage in civic activities with local school children, to sponsor charities, to present diverse voices and images, to honour young entrepreneurs, contingent workers and students’ families.

Anniversaries enable business schools to open up to genuine opportunities for public and corporate engagement (social and intellectual) not merely entertainment.

As well as ensuring an accurate Wikipedia entry and issuing formal press releases, a dedicated Twitter hashtag (or Weibo) can keep track of anniversary activities in one place and allow the business school to gauge alumni discussions in real time.

A dedicated anniversary web site is a useful one-stop shop to capture events and to archive legacy material. On its 10th anniversary in 2014, Mark Zuckerberg used Facebook (his company) to articulate links between the past and raise the bar to continue this legacy for the future, saying: “I’m even more excited about the next 10 years