

Relationships last a lifetime, so they are worth looking after!

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Chris Marshall of Graduway has spoken very eloquently about the importance of knowing your school's history and understanding its ethos, being true to its culture but continuously adapting.

This is about the story of your school and stories are really powerful. Just think about how influential school has been in your life – how you still remember the people you were at school with, some of whom you might still be in touch with many years later - and how the narrative of your life begins with many of these formative experiences.

These school stories stay with us for life and help define us. And so, to a large extent does the school which helped form them. Of course, some people just move on from their school years and are happy to put them behind them but for many former pupils and even former parents, the relationship with an independent school is a big part of their life. In the case of parents, not least financially!

Parents educated at independent schools are disproportionately likely to send their own children to independent schools, which tells us a couple of things. Firstly, the experience for the majority of pupils is positive, but secondly, as a school, if you want to see your future, look back. These relationships last a lifetime, so they are worth looking after!

But the relationship with alumni and prospective parents is only one of the relationships which define a school. Public-benefit relationships with state school partners, relationships with advocates, trustees, financial benefactors and external fundraisers all play a part and add layers of complexity for development professionals to manage. Then, just for fun, lets add the requirements placed on schools by the GDPR!

So, we're all doomed aren't we? Well, maybe not. The way in which all organisations, not just schools, manage relationships with their supporters, customers, advocates, partners and anyone else they collaborate with, has changed drastically over the last few years.

With today's database systems, we're not just maintaining records of names, addresses and emails - we're starting to build a picture of the relationships that define the school. Who we talk to, why, what motivates them to give, what they are interested in, how they want us to communicate with them, if at all.

There's nothing sinister or big brother-ish about this. It's about understanding the relationships outside the school which continue to define it and project it into the wider community. It's about being able to

manage those relationships positively and maintain the links which will allow the school to grow and prosper. We're making decisions based on information, not hunches, and these systems can help us manage relationships in a way which creates positive experiences for all involved.

Effective engagement with your alumni, prospects and other supporters can give resource-constrained development teams freedom to do more. There's an old saying that those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it. There's a flip side to this, though.

To understand what's really possible for your school in the future, look back!