

# How Voluntary Sector Managers Might Use Consumer Research to Market Their Organizations to Volunteers\*

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## Introduction

The purpose of this article is to explore the ways in which insights from the field of buyer behavior might help non-profit organizations to market themselves more effectively to volunteers.

It is taken for granted that readers concur that marketing has profitable applications to non-profit organizations, since this thesis is now supported by significant scholarly literature, a number of academically respectable college courses, and a lengthening list of convincing applications.<sup>1</sup>

In summary, the thesis holds that it is the role of marketing to facilitate mutually advantageous exchanges between an organization and its clients, whether they are customers, patients, voters, members, patrons, recruits, adherents—or volunteers. It finds that organizations accomplish such exchanges by doing these things: scanning their environments with clarity and shrewdness; appraising their capabilities realistically; selecting target clienteles astutely; defining their offerings generically; building marketing mixes interactively; and positioning themselves in their “markets” differentially (see Appendix). It concludes that all organizations engage in marketing. They differ only in whether they do so explicitly, intelligently and professionally or unwittingly, witlessly and ineffectually.

This article accepts the thesis as proven, and therefore takes it as evident and acceptable that the world of volunteering is like a marketplace, that unfilled volunteer assignments are like unsold products, that alternative activities are like competitors, that volunteers are like buyers, and that volunteer administrators are like marketers.

This point of view is being pressed on volunteer administrators not only by academics but by events. One is the declining supply of volunteers. The women’s movement, the recession, the increase in the percentage of wives working outside the home, the increasing number of people who believe they are without “free time” and the alleged increase of narcissism are all factors which force recruiters of volunteers to perceive their task to be selling their organizations to hard-to-come-by customers.

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Another event affecting volunteer recruitment is the “professionalization” of fund raising. Some of the fund-raising efforts of non-profit enterprises could be challengers for the American Marketing Association’s Marketing Campaign of the Year award. Thus, the demonstrated value of marketing a non-profit organization to funders prepares managements to perceive the benefits which might arise from marketing their organizations to volunteers.

Because of developments in both academia and the marketplace, we find ourselves asking how insights into consumer behaviour might help volunteer administrators in others areas of their work.

### **Consumer Behaviour and Marketing Practice**

Scholarly interest in buyer behaviour grew out of larger developments in marketing. The social upheaval of the 1960’s produced an explicit articulation of the need for businessmen to avoid “marketing myopia” by being “consumer oriented”. An influential periodical of the time stated:

Selling focusses on the needs of the seller, marketing on the needs of the buyer. Selling is preoccupied with the seller’s need to convert his product into cash; marketing with the idea of satisfying the needs of the customer by means of the product and the whole cluster of things associated with creating, delivering and finally consuming it.<sup>2</sup>

This new emphasis on making the end user the beginning of marketing planning was accompanied by fresh efforts to understand consumer behaviour. Marketing scholars borrowed insights from sociology, anthropology and social psychology which could guide marketing efforts. By the middle 1960’s, texts and courses on consumer behaviour began to appear. By the late 1960’s several models of buyer behaviour had been advanced; by the end of the decade the Association for Consumer Research had been founded; and by the mid 1970’s the *Journal of Consumer Research* had been launched. As a result, a 1982 publication could state with assurance that: “Research in consumer behaviour is now making important contributions to knowledge of human behavior in general”.<sup>3</sup>

This could, of course, include the behaviour of volunteers. The following sections examine some of the findings from the field of consumer behavior which could become useful tools for recruiters and co-ordinators of volunteers.

### **Life Style**

While the roots of life-style research can be traced to some of the social-class studies of Lloyd Warner in the 1940’s and Pierre Martineau in the 1950’s, it became a subject of explicit study in the early 1970’s.

There are several features of this line of enquiry which recommend it to voluntary-sector managers. First, life style has to do with the patterns in which people live and spend time and money. Clearly, these patterns could include activities like volunteering. Second, life-style analysis recognizes that people make commitments to products<sup>4</sup>, services, media<sup>5</sup> and organizations within the context of a life setting learned through socialization and interaction with others. That, too, seems an appropriate basis for understanding volunteers. Thus, if life-style analysis can

help explain how people choose the stores in which they shop (as it does<sup>6</sup>) then it seems reasonable that it can throw light on how they choose the voluntary organizations in which they work.

Operationally, too, life-style analysis has some attractive features for the voluntary sector. One is that psychographics, the main methodology employed in measuring life style, is one of the simpler techniques in consumer research. While fairly large samples are required, the surveys involved are usually self-administered by mail through standing, nationwide panels. Further encouragement comes from the fact that quite elaborate illustrations are available to show how managers of manufacturing and retailing organizations can translate the findings of life-style analysis into customer-attraction strategies.<sup>7</sup>

These examples should assist volunteer administrators to make the intellectual leap which will enable them to apply this knowledge to their own institutions.

Moreover, enough is known about life style to suggest in what voluntary settings it might be most significant. It seems not to be relevant in choice situations which have low involvement for the consumer. Thus it would not be a suitable frame within which to design appeals for casual volunteers. On the other hand, life style has been found relevant to purchases which are expensive, symbolic, highly involving, hard to evaluate objectively and heavy with psychological gratification. This suggests that life-style concepts would be most fitting in appeals to potential volunteers who are being asked to make a substantial investment in the enterprise—board members, those who will represent the organization in the media, campaign chairmen, and providers of key services, for example.

An example of a life-style cluster noted by marketers which is potentially interesting to volunteer administrators is the “societally conscious” group. Such people value simple living, smallness of scale and inner growth. Marketers seeking to identify them find that they vary in age and locality but that they are usually white and highly educated and that they have bimodally high and low incomes. Because of their life styles, they may be unusually good volunteer prospects.

Less obviously relevant, but much larger in number, are the achievers: those who value accomplishment, success, fame and material things. They tend to be upscale city dwellers who are leaders in business, politics and other areas of endeavour.

Others deserving market research by the managers of nonprofits could be described as “the experientials”, “the emulators”, and “the belongers”.<sup>8</sup>

### **Interpersonal Influence Networks**

Another consumer behaviour concept which could be a particular tool for marketers in the voluntary sector is the interpersonal influence network.

The potential value of this concept arises from the infrastructure of the voluntary field. In mass consumer markets, the advertising media used by companies tend to be national, impersonal and electronic. In the market for volunteers, the promotional tools used by non-profit organizations are often local, interpersonal and informal. This difference of instruments reflects the fact that, compared to those employed by their commercial counterparts, the networks used to win over

volunteers are quite primitive. However, it is precisely because they do represent the norm in the non-profit field that interpersonal influences should be analyzed, understood and managed.

The “web of word-of-mouth” is seldom powerful enough or accessible enough to accomplish all the promotional tasks associated with a marketing campaign in the private sector. Nevertheless, interpersonal information networks are very attractive to companies. This is because in a commercial marketplace which can be clamorous, confusing, and unconvincing, the interpersonal adjuncts to main-line advertising channels may carry unusually credible selling messages at comparatively low cost.

Following this reasoning, the Ford Motor Company helped make the Mustang “the most talked about” car during its introductory year by loaning cars to opinion leaders such as college newspaper editors, disc jockeys, and airline attendants.<sup>9</sup> In a similar effort, a record company sought out student social leaders among class presidents, sports captains and cheerleaders and invited them to serve on a panel to help evaluate new singers and records—with impressive success.<sup>10</sup> The fashion industry provides perhaps the most elaborate example of the use of opinion leaders to set the pattern for desired popular behavior.<sup>11</sup>

Managers of voluntary organizations are even more heavily reliant on webs of interpersonal influence to sell their organizations to potential volunteers. Manuals on the recruitment of volunteers argue correctly that the most compelling advertisement is an existing volunteer and that the most effective promotion is person-to-person. It follows that voluntary organizations have at least as much incentive as their commercial counterparts to learn what consumer research can reveal about interpersonal communications.

It would appear that social informational networks are most likely to influence choices when the individual lacks sufficient information; confronts an ambiguous situation; perceives a high degree of risk; is aware of information in the possession of others who are thought to possess greater knowledge or expertise; and when that information can be obtained at low cost.<sup>12</sup> In the conventional marketplace these conditions apparently apply quite widely, since interpersonal communications have been found to be influential for the buyers of many products and services. These include food, soap, motion pictures<sup>13</sup>, dental care<sup>14</sup> and medical services<sup>15</sup>, farming practices<sup>16</sup> and man-made fabrics<sup>17</sup>. Since many agencies in the third sector deal in health-related social services, it is worth noting that interpersonal influences have been found to be important agents of choice in the markets for health care.<sup>18</sup>

From these findings, it would be expected that in the market for volunteers, interpersonal networks would often be found to operate but that they would be especially important in the strategic circumstances just described. If that were the case, the volunteer administrator should expect to see many opportunities to invoke interpersonal influence systems but should give special attention to shaping those networks where the voluntary assignment is seen as unfamiliar, ambiguous and risky, e.g., where volunteers are being asked to serve in a hospice, to train for a suicide-prevention service, or to screen children for a diabetic camp,

rather than to canvass door-to-door for the United Way, handle a switchboard for the Humane Society or staff the gift shop at the art gallery.

An important determinant of information-seeking behavior is the perceived credibility or expertise of the person giving information. Watching the vicissitudes of their market share, commercial product managers are constantly reminded of the ignorance, indifference, and skepticism of their publics. The magnitude of the problem is seen in the size of the fees paid for testimonials in the commercial world. Lacking a commercial window on the world and deeply committed to their own programs, voluntary sector managers may underestimate their own publics' indifference. For example, even though my university has for years delivered highly successful business school seminars to the voluntary community, our credibility as a reliable source of information requires continual reinforcement. Accordingly, we must continue to assure prospective participants that each offering has been designed with the advice of a panel of respected, identified, executive directors from the sector. Charitable organizations invoke the same source credibility when they name honorary patrons or advisory boards but these devices seem to be addressed to potential funders, patrons or clients rather than to prospective volunteers.

### **Opinion Leaders**

A decision to manage opinion networks means a commitment to understanding opinion leaders. Here too, the available body of consumer research can be of help. For example, it is known that opinion leaders tend to resemble those they influence. This is because of the principle of homophily, which demonstrates that sources of communications and receivers of communications tend to have similar attributes. Usually, then, but not always, opinion leaders influence their peers.

Naturally enough, consumer researchers have looked for generalized characteristics which would describe opinion leaders. These enquiries seem to show that those who form the hubs in networks of personal interaction are unusually gregarious, innovative, interested in the area in question, and active in giving and getting information on the subject. It seems plausible that these characteristics are also descriptive of opinion leaders in the voluntary field. Since these traits are readily observable, volunteer administrators might want to test the generalization against their own experience.

Despite the discovery of these generic characteristics, the more general marketing finding is that opinion leadership is related to product category. For example, women fashion leaders have been found to be more emotionally stable, assertive, likeable and self-confident and less depressive and self-deprecating than women in the general population.<sup>19</sup>

If the characteristics of opinion leaders vary with product category then we would expect to find that in the voluntary sector they vary by type of voluntary organization and recruiters would need to know how volunteer opinion leaders classify, cluster and arrange non-profit organizations in their minds. That may seem to call for formidable research but a relatively simple start can be made by looking for surface evidences of the underlying interactions, e.g., plotting the cross memberships of the boards of directors and/or volunteer work forces of all organizations

which serve a specific market. Moreover, techniques are now quite well developed for deriving buyers' portrayals of the alternative offerings they perceive, whether those offerings are products, political candidates or liberal arts colleges.<sup>20</sup>

### **The Family**

The voluntary sector's reliance on interpersonal influences should encourage attention to the family.

Consumer research underlines the fact that an important agent of interpersonal communication is the family unit. This conclusion is reinforced by numerous marketing studies of the roles played by the various family members in the family's commitment to major household investments. Indeed, leading consumer researchers have concluded that, "It is difficult to overstate the importance of the family in understanding how people buy and use products".<sup>21</sup> Therefore, in using word-of-mouth as an advertising medium, volunteer recruiters should consider that they are probably marketing to families rather than to individuals.

Consumer research indicates that family decision making will be most active where the "purchase price" is high. It seems more than plausible, then, that when an agency signs up a Big Brother, a member of a co-operative, or a museum tour guide, it has somehow sold not one person, but a family. Understanding group information-processing activities will become more challenging as the traditional family unit is augmented by a variety of other household living arrangements. A further problem is that, "... Although most purchase decisions are *family decisions*, most research about consumer behavior has been conducted with *individuals*."<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless marketers of industrial equipment, household durables, and many other products and services know that to survive they must understand not only the purchasing agent or the housewife but that cluster of initiators, influences, decision makers, buyers and users that is the total "customer".<sup>23</sup> Ambitious recruiters of volunteers cannot afford to do less.

### **Brand Loyalty and Learning**

Two other concepts deserving of the attention of volunteer co-ordinators are "brand loyalty" and "learning".

In non-profit organizations, volunteer turnover is destructive of budgets, service and morale. In private sector enterprises, customer turnover has a similar effect. Thus volunteer recruiters and product managers share a similar concern for "brand loyalty".

In some respects, the research on commercial brand loyalty is less readily usable than non-profit managers might wish. First, much of it concerns low-involvement products. Volunteer co-ordinators care most about high-involvement assignments. Second, brand loyalty, like opinion leadership, appears to be product-specific rather than a general attribute. This makes it harder for non-profit managers to take advantage of available commercial findings. Third, brand-loyal customers are not generally distinguishable by socioeconomic, demographic and psychological variables. This makes their identification more difficult. Other researchers identify other discouragements.<sup>24</sup> For the present we must conclude that the basic concept is applicable but the body of knowledge is slender.

For the longer term, a more promising remedy for volunteer turnover may lie in the application of learning theory. Again, it must be acknowledged that in this area we know much less than we might wish. “. . . Conscientiously trying to understand learning phenomena and the laws regulating them, [one] is likely to despair . . . He may fall into a vapid eclecticism with the general formula, ‘There is much to be said on all sides.’ ”<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless, it does seem clear that continued commitment to a volunteer assignment, like continued patronage of some products, involves elements of learning. Marketers of capital equipment for the factory or home recognize that the purchaser’s need for installation and instruction in the use of the equipment calls for learning by the user and teaching by the seller. It is also clear that the buyer who has learned (or been taught) well is more likely to graduate to repeat purchases. That is why IBM has marshalled more impressive teaching skills than most universities. Volunteer recruiters recognize a similar situation when they promote volunteer jobs as opportunities for the volunteer to learn commercial skills.

If marketers and recruiters can profit by recognizing that product use involves personal learning, they might also find it an advantage to understand how people learn to decide whether and how to make the purchase in the first place. Learning theory stresses that the acquisition of social behaviour is a process of socialization that begins very early. Companies whose target markets are children are very alive to this fact.<sup>26</sup>

Recently, a leading recruiter of volunteers stated that her attitude to any person volunteering was, “I don’t care how you came to my door”. An alternative view held, for example, by those in a voluntary action centre, might be that the road was probably a long one, that the journey might well have begun in the formative years, and that the voluntary sector might use learning theory to smooth the way and speed the arrival.

### **Some Actions Available to the Voluntary Sector**

Several useful courses of action are open to voluntary sector managers who are convinced that consumer behavior concepts can help to build stronger volunteer work forces.

First, leaders should ensure that the voluntary sector, like the corporate community, is continuously in touch with those who are doing major research and analyses of our changing social and cultural environments. More specifically, a consortium of organizations such as VOLUNTEER, the Association For Volunteer Administration and the Association of Voluntary Action Scholars should negotiate access to the logitudinal surveys conducted by the Gallup Poll, the Harris Poll, the Yankelovich “Monitor” and Stanford Research Institute’s VALS. Such umbrella organizations should also ensure that the findings from these investigations are interpreted so as to identify threats and opportunities for the third sector; that these interpretations are translated into suggested actions for voluntary organizations; and that these recommendations are then put into the hands of those managers who can act on them.

Second, leaders from voluntary organizations should join the American Marketing

Association, the Association for Consumer Research and the Professional Marketing Research Society. People from the sector which made “network” a verb should find this a congenial recommendation.

Third, volunteer administrators should challenge their marketing colleagues to lend their professional skills to the development of more effective programs for winning over volunteers. Most non-profit organizations are not reticent about asking for donations in many forms and from many sources. Marketing people are not noticeably less public-spirited than other citizens. It is surprising and regrettable then, that talented and willing people in advertising agencies, market research firms, corporate marketing departments and university business schools are seldom asked to attack the marketing problems of non-profit organizations. When charitable organizations are now so financially hard-pressed, this neglect comes close to being irresponsible. Let us hope this profligacy will now end and that a new working partnership will begin.

Fourth, volunteer administrators should enrol in marketing courses. No one can deny the value of seminars and workshops which permit recruiters of volunteers to share experiences and exchange information about successful programs. Nevertheless this kind of learning is essentially anecdotal and therefore limited. There is, therefore, a need for volunteer administrators to equip themselves with broader frameworks within which they can assemble, synthesize and extrapolate their accumulating experiences. The marketing literature now includes several broadly-based texts, casebooks and collections of readings on marketing for non-profit organizations. It is to be hoped that as their knowledge increases, voluntary sector executives will want to continue their professional development through formal marketing courses.

If volunteer administrators were to move in these new directions they would also be attacking a larger problem—the fact that there is virtually no exchange of ideas, experiences, or expertise between leaders in the voluntary sector and marketing professionals in the universities or industry. To test the validity of this observation, consider these questions: How many members of the faculties of business schools serve on the boards of umbrella organizations for voluntary agencies? How many marketing professors have published in voluntary sector journals? How many marketing executives have addressed conferences on philanthropy? Clearly the outreach from the marketing community to the third sector has been minimal. Conversely, there have been few approaches from the third sector to the marketing community. To demonstrate the truth of this observation you need only ask: How many managers from the voluntary sector are members of the American Marketing Association? How many voluntary-action scholars have published in the *Journal of Marketing*? How many managers of non-profits have earned an M.B.A.? The answer once again is: not very many. The effect of this separation is to keep marketers innocent of voluntary sector problems and volunteer administrators ignorant of marketing solutions.

Perhaps this article will help to accomplish a larger good—the bringing together of two professions that need each other. The ultimate beneficiaries will be their volunteers, clients, and causes.



## FOOTNOTES

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  21. Footnote 3 *supra*, p.174.
  22. *Ibid.*
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**APPENDIX**  
**Toward More Effective Marketing**

Some Key Features Of An Effective Marketing Organization	My Organization		
	Yes	No	Don't Know
A voluntary organization which is marketing effectively usually has:			
1. An Environmental Scan:			
- which monitors hard trends	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
- and soft trends	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
- in the market and beyond	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
- and translates these trends into potential threats and opportunities for the organization.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. A Marketing Audit:			
- which is regular, systematic, and objective and	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
- which is aimed at providing all key members of the organization with a continuing shared appraisal	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
- of the major liabilities, assets, capabilities and aspirations of the organization.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. A Consumer Orientation:			
- which is reflected in an integrated program of research on the motivations, attitudes and behaviour of consumers (clients or volunteers)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
- as systems managers and problem solvers.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. A Generic Definition of the Organization's Offer:			
- which emphasizes the kinds of problems solved and functions performed for the customer (client, volunteer) rather than physical products (services) developed by the seller (agency).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. A Defined Target Clientele:			
- which identifies those particular market segments which the organization seeks to serve (recruit)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
- as a matter of conscious choice.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. An Integrated Marketing Mix:			
- which employs multiple marketing tools	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
- that are planned and co-ordinated in character, weight, timing and deployment.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. A Differentiated Posture:			
- which seeks organizational health by focussing on differential advantage and avoiding "metooism".	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>