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Volunteer communication and media richness: Recruiting, communicating with, and retaining volunteers

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Volunteer Communication and Media Richness:

Recruiting, Communicating with, and Retaining Volunteers

by

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VOLUNTEER COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA RICHNESS:

RECRUITING, COMMUNICATING WITH, AND RETAINING VOLUNTEERS

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Abstract

With the advancement of online and Internet-based communication, including email and social

networking sites, the way in which organizations recruit, communicate with, and retain

volunteers is ever evolving. The not-for-profit sector relies heavily on volunteers to help with

daily functions, supplementing the need for additional paid staff with volunteers. With the

continued growth of Internet use across all generations, leaner media have become the preferred

means of communication among volunteers and Volunteer Coordinators. An email survey of

more than 100 current volunteers at the Seneca Park Zoo Society was conducted to determine

which media channels are used and preferred. Although volunteers are finding opportunities on

websites, Facebook does not prove to be an effective means of recruitment.

Keywords: volunteer, communication, media richness, Internet, Facebook

Volunteer Communication and Media Richness:

Recruiting, Communicating with, and Retaining Volunteers

Means of communication are constantly evolving and changing with the continued

advancement of the Internet and Internet-based communication. The ways in which people seek

out volunteer opportunities, communicate with Volunteer Coordinators, and learn of volunteer

programs continue to change as well. This study examined how these means of communication

are best used and how media richness theory influences volunteer communication. Seneca Park

Zoo Society volunteers serve as the sample.

Rationale

These matters warrant scholarly review for different reasons. First, an investigation will

provide guidance regarding how to increase the number of active volunteers at the Seneca Park

Zoo Society as well as how to improve communication between volunteers and the volunteer

coordinator. The intent of the study is to discover how best to recruit, communicate with, and

retain these volunteers for years to come and how to better tailor a program to what volunteers

and potential volunteers want. It is my feeling that in addition to my own purposes this study

may also be useful for other local not-for-profit organizations with regard to recruiting and

communicating with volunteers.

The best methods of communication can be determined by applying media richness

theory, which holds that forms of media that allow for social visual cues and gestures are more

effective for equivocal tasks such as communicating with volunteers. With the advancement of

Internet-based communication this study explored how, if at all, the theory should change. As

technology continues to evolve and change this study suggests ways in which media richness theory must adapt.

Literature Review

For not-for-profit organizations (NPOs) such as the Seneca Park Zoo Society (SPZS), volunteers are essential to the survival of the organization. Not only do volunteers help with fundraising efforts, activities, and daily functions of an organization, they also offer an organic way to spread the message or mission statement of a particular not-for-profit. According to Hager and Brudney (2004) in an experiment conducted for the Urban Institute, "Charities that use volunteers to recruit other volunteers have higher retention rates. Having volunteers represent the charity implies trust, evidence of a positive organizational culture, and confidence that the charity provides a worthwhile experience for volunteers" (p. 11). Anderson (2004) suggests the use of both mediated and interpersonal channels, "… (N)on-profit organizations seeking to improve fundraising efforts and volunteer recruitment should examine the socio-economic climate, and explore using both media relations and interpersonal communication techniques" (p. 188). Volunteers also help to keep an organization's operating costs down by replacing the need for additional full-time or part-time paid staff members. According to the SPZS Annual Report (2012), the number of volunteer hours spent at the Zoo in 2011 was equivalent to nine full-time employees.

According to Pope, Isely, and Asamoa-Tutu (2009) many NPOs fail to understand that volunteer management and recruitment is critical to the retention of good volunteers. They suggest viewing the recruitment and management of volunteers as a marketing tool. It is important that NPOs recognize that, in addition to appealing to potential customers, prospective

donors, and board members, marketing to possible volunteers is critical to the continued success of their organization. In fact, according to Farrow & Yuan (2011) it is valuable for not-for-profits to increase recruitment of volunteers because not only are those people critical to the day-to-day functions, but volunteers are also more likely to make charitable gifts on their own to a particular organization. The American Cancer Society, an organization that Anderson (2002) describes as the largest volunteer health organization in the world, has made this one of its practices. Between 1936 and 1945, "thousands of women volunteers used public relations-type initiatives to recruit volunteers, raise money, and promote early detection of cancer" (Anderson, 2002, p. 187). In order to spread the word about cancer and the need for early detection, the organization created a printed pamphlet that was distributed by its volunteers. Not only did the pamphlet encourage the volunteers themselves to be screened early for cancer but also to distribute the pamphlet to every woman in her club (Anderson, 2002). It stands to reason that any NPO should continue to seek out ways in which to increase the number of volunteers as well as to increase the number of potential financial donors.

Traditionally, as in the case of the American Cancer Society, volunteer recruitment consisted of word of mouth and printed materials. Prior to the expansion of the Internet, a majority of volunteer opportunities, including those at the SPZS, were disseminated through word of mouth and traditional mailings. With the implementation and continued advancement and understanding of social network sites such as Facebook, communication with current and potential volunteers is ever evolving at both the Zoo and among other NPOs. One way to facilitate this is to employ Internet-based forms of communication including social media and networking sites such as Facebook.

According to Conhaim (2003), those organizations using the web to list opportunities and recruit volunteers save money on postage as well as tap into a "contingent of non-traditional volunteers" (p. 2). This holds true if the notion of a traditional volunteer is similar to what was detailed in the American Cancer Society study, someone who learns of volunteer opportunities through printed collateral material and by word of mouth. However, by using the web as a recruitment tool for potential volunteers, people are able to view the opportunities within an organization and determine what best fits with what they enjoy doing. This allows people to seek out volunteer opportunities within their community without having to have face-to-face interaction with current volunteers or employees. This type of non-traditional volunteering is what Choudhury (2010) refers to as "virtual volunteering" (p. 592). The concept explores the notion of using websites to match volunteer interests with what particular agencies or organizations need. Yeon, Choi, and Kiousis (2005) claim that the Internet's feature of interactivity allows volunteers and organizations to communicate effectively. They report that websites are a very effective and efficient communication tool for NPOs to attract potential volunteers.

While the SPZS does not actively recruit volunteers through a designated web site, it does use a volunteer blog that is updated as needed, depending on the season (more events and activities occur during the spring and summer, which results in a greater need for volunteer help). This blog allows the volunteer coordinator to communicate with volunteers or potential volunteers, as the link is accessible on the home page of the Seneca Park Zoo web site (www.senecaparkzoo.org). The blog is where the volunteer coordinator can update readers on upcoming events at the Zoo, existing volunteer needs, and scheduled meetings. The blog is

uploaded to the Zoo's Facebook page which, to date, has more than 10,000 followers. This allows for two groups of current or potential volunteers to view the information: those who go to the Volunteer Blog on the Zoo's web site to seek out information and those who are followers of the Zoo's Facebook page or are connected to someone who is another follower.

According to boyd and Ellison (2008) social network sites are web-based services that allow users to create a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, show a list of users who share connections with them, and view and explore their list of connections and those made by others within the system. According to Farrow & Yuan (2011), individuals are more likely to actively engage in volunteering for or donating to a specific organization if that organization is part of their social network. It seems as though NPOs can only benefit by implementing sites such as Facebook for volunteer recruitment. Once users join a social network site, they are asked to identify others in their system who they have a relationship with, including other individuals as well as organizations (boyd & Ellison, 2007). This allows users to connect with other people with common interests as well as to connect with organizations that are of interest to them. What makes social network sites so unique is that they allow people to connect with others who are within their own network; it is not that it encourages users to meet new people, although that can be another use.

According to Xu, Schmierbach, Bellur, Ash, Oeldorf-Hirsch and Kegerise (2012), individuals use cues about the popularity of a cause to make judgments. This is something they refer to as the "bandwagon phenomenon," which has been found to be particularly true in online communities. The phenomenon, or theory, "suggests that individuals will be influenced by others' opinions. If we extend the bandwagon effect into the context of online social

movements, we should find that individuals will support something if many other people support

it" (Xu et al., 2012, p. 436). I would propose that the same holds true for people who are active

volunteers within particular organizations. If social network sites, or online communities, are a

means of connecting individuals with organizations as well as secondary individuals with the

same organization, the bandwagon theory should increase the number of connections to a

particular organization, thereby increasing the number of potential volunteers. At the Zoo, this

can be seen through the use of the Volunteer blog to recruit volunteers for specific events. Since

this blog links to Facebook, it can be seen by all who are followers of the Facebook page as well

as the people who are within their networks.

Email is another form of nontraditional communication that can be beneficial to volunteer

recruitment. As the volunteer coordinator, I have found that communicating with volunteers

through email has proved to be an effective and efficient use of time and resources. In addition

to the money saved by eliminating the need for mass mailings through standard mail, this form

of communication allows me to reach a large group of volunteers in a short period of time. As

stated previously, not-for-profits such as the SPZS supplement additional paid staff by recruiting

volunteers, and sometimes requests for help come up at the last minute. Having a database of

email contacts or a distribution list makes finding volunteers to assist with those tasks more

efficient and a better use of time. Trembath, Balandin, Stancliffe and Togher (2010) report that a

major barrier for volunteers was the inability to communicate with staff effectively. The use of

email allows volunteer coordinators and other staff members to communicate efficiently and

effectively with volunteers in a timely manner. The SPZS, much like other not-for-profit

organizations, "are realizing that volunteers represent a different type of worker, one which

requires strategies and techniques to guide, motivate and coordinate their behavior" (Adams,

Schlueter, & Barge, p. 70) and email enables that to happen.

Daft and Lengel created the media richness theory (MRT), considered to be "one of the

most famous and widely cited theories in media selection studies" (Gu, Higa & Moodie, 2011, p.

291). MRT suggests that effective communication can reduce the level of uncertainty by

achieving a good match between the media and the message (Gu, et. al, p. 292).

> Media Richness Theory says that the criteria for ranking a medium's ability to carry
>
> information can be based on the ability of the media, to relay immediate feedback,
>
> provide feedback cues such as body language, allow the message to be created or altered
>
> specifically for an intended recipient and transmit the feelings or emotions of the
>
> communicators. (Bidin, Tamam, & Ahmad, 2011, p. 82)

Face-to-face communication has long been argued to be the richest form of media because it

"enabled users to communicate more quickly and to better understand ambiguous or equivocal

messages" (Dennis & Kinney, 1998, p. 258) and the use of leaner media such as written

materials including email and Internet-based communication "lead to better performance for less

equivocal tasks" (p. 258). With the advancement of online communication how does media

richness play a role in communication today? Considering that volunteer recruitment is an

equivocal form of communication, how does this theory apply to recruiting volunteers?

Currently, who is the typical volunteer? According to the United States Bureau of Labor

Statistics (http://www.bls.gov/), in 2011 the highest percentage of volunteers was Caucasian

women age 35 to 54-years old with a bachelor's degree or higher. The least likely group to

volunteer was those in their twenties. The data on volunteering were collected through a

supplement to the September 2011 Current Population Survey (CPS). According to the statistics,

between September 2010 and September 2011 about 64.3 million people volunteered at least one

time. According to the SPZS's 2012 annual report, in 2011 a total of 178 general volunteers gave

3,525.5 hours. In addition to general volunteers, the Zoo relies on the help of docents (volunteer

educators) and ZooTeens, which are both part of the volunteer program. For the purposes of this

study I will be referring to general volunteers only.

Method

Because communicating with volunteers would be considered equivocal communication,

media richness theory suggests that a richer form of communication such as face-to-face

interaction would be a more effective means of communication. However, with the popularity of

Internet-based media, leaner forms of media may be substituting for richer media, particularly

with volunteers. This study can be considered a test of the theory's ability to explain or predict

media preferences of volunteers. Given the wide range of demographics related to media use,

differences such as age, gender, and education level might affect preferences for methods of

communication. The present study investigated the following research questions:

RQ1 What is the relationship between age and media preference?

RQ2 Are younger volunteers more likely to have learned of volunteer opportunities

through leaner media?

RQ3 What are the media preferences of volunteers with regard to communicating with

the volunteer coordinator?

RQ 4 How effective is the use of social media, specifically the Zoo's Facebook page, as

an effective marketing tool to recruit new volunteers?

Participants

      Current general volunteers at the Seneca Park Zoo Society were surveyed using an email questionnaire. Demographics gathered on the current volunteers included but was not limited to age, gender, education level, level of volunteer commitment, and preferred method of communicating with the volunteer coordinator. The email distribution list contained the addresses of those general volunteers recorded on their volunteer application form. In order to come without a parent, a general volunteer must be at least 13 years old. The ZooTeen program is only for teens ranging in age from 13 to 18 years; to be a docent one must be at least 21 years old. The volunteers receiving the email survey were informed about why they were receiving it. Their responses were anonymous, thus ensuring confidentiality. The data derived from the survey will help to determine what existing volunteers at the Seneca Park Zoo Society report to be the best medium in which to communicate.

Method and Procedure

      Survey Monkey was used to host the survey questionnaire. A link to it was supplied from the Zoo's Facebook page. This allowed anyone who was a follower of the Zoo on Facebook the opportunity to participate in the survey. By employing web-based social media as a marketing tool to attract potential new volunteers, the effectiveness of Facebook was tested. Additional benefits may include additional inquiries into becoming a volunteer at the Zoo and that the findings will be useful in engaging potential and current volunteers not only for the Zoo, but for all NPOs. The review of literature supports the conclusion that implementing the use of social media can only help the recruitment of volunteers to any NPO, and this study tested that

assertion. This also informs the way in which SPZS uses Facebook as a recruitment tool and allows the organization to gain a better understanding of its typical volunteer.

Results

The first research question asked, "What is the relationship between age and media preference?" There was no statistically significant relationship between age and media preference ($\chi^2 = 22.00$, $p = .23$), nor was there a statistically significant relationship between age and the medium through which respondents learned about the volunteer program. However, 44% of the respondents learned about the program through the Zoo's website.

The second research question asked, "Are younger volunteers more likely to have learned of volunteer opportunities through leaner media?" There was no statistically significant relationship ($\chi^2 = 33.34$, $p = 45$), but overall 15 of 34 (44%) learned about the program through the Zoo's website.

The third research question asked, "What are the media preferences of volunteers with regard to communicating with the Volunteer Coordinator?" Email was the preferred medium for communicating with the Volunteer Coordinator by 29 out of 35 respondents (83%).

The fourth research question was "How effective is the use of social media, specifically the Zoo's Facebook page, as an effective marketing tool to recruit new volunteers?" Although 31 out of 40 respondents (77.5%) reported having a personal Facebook page, and 23 out of 40 (57%) reported being a fan of the Zoo on Facebook, only 6 out of 40 (15%) relied on the Zoo's Facebook page to learn of volunteer opportunities. A majority, 21 of 40 (51%), reported wanting to see more printed material for volunteers such as pamphlets to keep volunteers informed of Zoo events. A slightly larger majority wanted a Facebook page to keep volunteers informed of

Zoo events and happenings. However, an even larger majority, 23 out of 40 (57.5%), did not

know about the volunteer blog.

Findings

The results of the survey revealed that demographically, the typical volunteer at the SPZS

is similar to those reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics in a few ways and dissimilar in

others. As reported previously, the traditional volunteer is female, age 35 to 54-years old with a

bachelor's degree or higher. Of the respondents to the survey for this study, 67.5% are female

and 40% responded to having a college education, followed by 32.5% who responded to having

graduated high school or had a GED. The major difference in the typical volunteer as recorded

in the labor statistics and those who volunteer at the Zoo is the age bracket. The traditional

volunteer in the United States is reportedly between the ages of 35 and 54-years old; however,

the majority of respondents, or 30% of zoo volunteers, are between the ages of 22 and 30, 20%

are age 13 to 18, and 17.5% are age 61 and over. An overwhelming majority, 75% of volunteers

currently volunteer at the Zoo because they are passionate about its mission. A much smaller

number (18.8%) participate for the social aspect, and 6.3% are there because they need

community service hours for school. None of the respondents is there because community

service hours were required for court; however, it should be noted that eight survey participants

chose to skip this question. See Appendix for the complete survey.

Limitations

Limitations to this study include the small sample size and method of survey distribution.

While the majority of active volunteers at the Seneca Park Zoo Society have an active email

account, it should be noted that the survey was only sent by leaner media including both email

and Facebook. Considering that part of the intention was to determine whether leaner media

were preferred means of communication, additional data could have been gathered by

conducting the survey by standard mail and face-to-face interviews. Additional limitations

include the response rate. While there are more than 100 active General Volunteers, only 49 took

the survey for a response rate of 49%.

Discussion

There is evidence to support the contention that in equivocal communication leaner

media, such as the use of email, is the preferred method of communication between the general

volunteers and the Volunteer Coordinator regardless of age. Social media do not appear to be as

effective a tool for volunteer communication as originally believed; however, the Zoo's website

was the most popular way in which volunteers learned of the program, followed by Facebook

indicating that it may prove to be an effective recruitment tool. It would seem that although

there is still a need for richer media, volunteer communication has come a long way in

recruitment from the pamphlets handed out in years past. Further research should be conducted

using a variety of survey methods, incorporating a lean medium such as email as well as a richer

medium such as face-to-face interviews. This might possibly result in a larger number of

respondents and an increased response rate. Additional research should be conducted on other

not-for-profit organizations, including other zoos of similar size to the Seneca Park Zoo. By

surveying another Zoo as well as other NPOs researchers could determine whether findings are

consistent. There may also be organizational and regional differences. These additions to the

research would allow future studies to determine whether media richness theory should be

modified to address the continued development of Internet-based communication.

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Appendix

Survey Questionnaire:

1) Gender:
　　　　A) Male
　　　　B) Female

2) Age:
　　　　A) 13 to 18 years
　　　　B) 19 to 21
　　　　C) 22 to 30
　　　　D) 31 to 40
　　　　E) 41 to 50
　　　　F) 51 to 60
　　　　G) 61 and

3) Education level:
　　　　A) Middle School
　　　　B) High School or GED
　　　　C) College
　　　　D) Post – College

4) I am currently:
　　　　A) In school
　　　　B) Working part-time
　　　　C) Working full-time
　　　　D) Retired
　　　　E) Unemployed

5) I learned about the volunteer program at the Seneca Park Zoo through:
　　　　A) A friend who is a volunteer
　　　　B) The career board at my school
　　　　C) The Volunteer Blog on the Zoo's website
　　　　D) Facebook
　　　　E) Printed material
　　　　F) Other _____

6) I am currently volunteering at the Zoo because:
　　　　A) I am passionate about its mission
　　　　B) I enjoy socializing with other volunteers
　　　　C) I need community service hours for school
　　　　D) I need community service hours for court
　　　　E) Other _____

7) I prefer to communicate with the Volunteer Coordinator:
      A) By phone
      B) Through standard mail
      C) Through email
      D) Facebook
      E) Other _____

8) I read the Volunteer Blog:
      A) Yes
      B) No
      C) I didn't know there was one

9) I have a personal Facebook account
      A) Yes
      B) No

10) I am a fan of the Seneca Park Zoo on Facebook
      A) Yes
      B) No
      C) Not applicable

11) I rely on the Zoo's Facebook page to learn about volunteer opportunities:
      A) Yes
      B) No
      C) Not applicable

12) I encourage my friends to join the volunteer program
      A) Often
      B) Sometimes
      C) Never

13) I would like to see more printed materials for volunteers such as pamphlets to keep us informed of events and Zoo happenings:
      A) Yes
      B) No

14) I would like to see a dedicated Facebook page for volunteers to keep us informed of Zoo happenings:
      A) Yes
      B) No

15) I would like to see printed material for volunteers similar to the quarterly member publication, ZooNooz:
      A) Yes
      B) No

16) I would like to see that publication:
      A) Printed and sent through standard mail
      B) As a PDF available on the website
      C) Both
      D) I don't see the need for a publication for volunteers

17) I have referred a friend, relative or coworker to the volunteer page on the Zoo's website:
      A) Yes
      B) No

18) I have referred someone, interested in volunteering to call the Volunteer Coordinator:
      A) Yes
      B)

19) I have referred someone, interested in volunteering to email the Volunteer Coordinator:
      A) Yes
      B) No