



World Wide Volunteer

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Online Power for Volunteer Action

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One of the unique characteristics of volunteers has always been that they are private citizens and, as such, can cross official jurisdiction boundaries and even national borders in ways that paid representatives of organizations and governments cannot. On a local level, this may mean a volunteer is able to transport an ill person to better medical care outside a district even if the public health officer cannot. At the international level, this freedom allows activists to work together regardless of formal diplomatic ties, on every conceivable cause, whether environmental issues, AIDS, or the digital divide.

The Internet or, more specifically, the World Wide Web has provided citizen activists with a powerful- and relatively inexpensive-tool beyond anyone's expectations as little as a decade ago. Here are some of the ways the Web supports and extends volunteer action.

The Power to Find Each Other

Anyone with a point of view is free to post a Web site and those that are of value will be found by individuals with similar interests, with the ripple effect of generating more and more like-minded visitors. So a strong Web site is not only a way to educate others but is also a recruitment tool. Through search engines and hyperlinks, every type of cause or campaign can be found by anyone with the patience to look. More important, once someone comes to a Web site or joins an online discussion group, s/he is self-identifying as a potential supporter. This unique ability to "discover" new people willing to align with a cause often surprises organizers by turning up previously-unknown volunteers across the street as well as across the globe.

The very term "online community" speaks to the powerful sense of connection that people feel when they find others who share their concerns. Some may resist cyberspace as impersonal, others recognize that it can also be intimate. Observe how often people who "meet" online desire face-to-face contact-and find ways to get it. From the volunteer perspective, virtual networking ultimately evolves into true collaborative action, particularly fostering personal exchange across those boundaries already mentioned.

On the other hand, fictitious screen names offer a degree of privacy that helps those concerned that their support of a cause might hurt their reputation, jeopardize their job, or target them in even more serious ways. Anonymity has value when it permits participation. The beauty of e-mail is that even someone protecting her or his identity can have public and private communication with others.

The Power of Public Information

As with previous forms of publishing, smart people recognize that the information on a Web site is only as good as its source. Just as a high percentage of printed books, journals, and newspapers must be read with skepticism, it takes a discerning eye to separate wheat from chaff on the Web. But if the content is solid, a Web site has extraordinary potential to communicate:

- Space is not a problem-neither for very short or very long items. Without the constraints of the printed page (length and costs), materials can be presented in complete form, with whatever supplemental material is necessary.
- A well-designed Web site will break long or complex material into manageable chunks, allowing the casual reader to glean the basics quickly while the more interested reader can continue to delve more and more deeply into the subject.
- Hyperlinks allow a site to "document" its sources, offer additional information, and support others working in the same field.

It has already been documented that a large percentage of existing Web sites are created and managed by private individuals, without commercial interest. Whether or not such Web developers consider themselves "volunteer," if they are driven by a sense of mission to educate others, it is legitimate to see their work as service to the larger community. Newer tools such as Weblogs have further expanded the ability of anyone to go public online. Ideally, such access to mass communication can:

- Allow dissident/minority views to be expressed.
- Allow expression of views from those otherwise not in power, including the young and the old and those commonly perceived as "recipients" rather than providers of service.
- Bring new ideas to the table, enabling them to be judged on their own merits.

- Provide the press and established media with alternative position statements and information.
- Give recognition to overlooked issues, problems, and also successes.

The Power of Exchange

Closely connected to the sharing of useful information is the ability to invite others to participate in data gathering and viewpoint discussion. Good Web sites provide mechanisms for visitors to submit their own opinions-pro or con, or simply from a different perspective. Over time, such public exchange adds to the credibility of a Web site, reduces the isolation of people with minority views, generates a sense of common cause, and adds to everyone's understanding of an issue. The more people looking for relevant information, finding it all over the world, and freely sharing it online, the more educated everyone becomes.

A fascinating aspect of Web response posting is how often for-profit sites encourage customers or users to share their opinions, product reviews, and information with each other. Often this provides technical assistance for other customers at little cost to the company, but since most of these postings are freely offered, this type of consumer-to-consumer networking has to be seen as part of the volunteer world.

Web sites can also avoid duplication of efforts. If site visitors are willing to share sample materials, templates, project methodologies, evaluations, etc., everyone's work gets easier. Why reinvent the square wheel when it's possible to build on the experience (good and bad) of others? Message boards permitting open posting of questions and answers also develop a database-one that can be maintained as an accessible and searchable archive for as long as necessary. This is of huge assistance to newcomers as well as to veterans in a cause.

Perhaps even more important than the Web itself is e-mail as a form of exchange between individuals. Once people have found one another, there is no limit to what they might share in terms of information, contacts, models, and options for collaboration. And, as has already been noted, e-mail relationships frequently evolve into real-world contact.

The Power of Instant Communication

Although effective language translation is a genuine limitation right now, never in the history of humankind could one form of communication be instantly accessible by potentially everyone in the world, at exactly the same time. This allows organizations and individual activists to broadcast messages with immediacy and (hopefully) accuracy. Such on-the-spot communication, augmented increasingly by wireless connections and video reporting, allows everyone to learn of new developments of all kinds, legislative votes, erupting violence, and other true news. This can augment, bypass, or contradict what the mass media is reporting.

It's also important that mistakes on a Web site can be immediately corrected, too.

The Power to Mobilize Action

Often, the result of instant communication is a call to action. Timely notification about events and activities results in larger numbers of participants. Further, once someone has decided to participate in a planned activity, it's easy to offer links to online instructions and more detailed background information.

The Web is not simply a tool for immediate response. A well-constructed site can offer individuals a range of self-selected ways to support a cause. Some examples, in ascending order of intensity of involvement, are:

- Posting a response to the site to contribute to the cumulative discussion.
- Cutting and pasting information from the site into e-mails to friends and acquaintances to educate them and influence their voting or donating.
- Referring key leaders to the site or its content, such as school teachers, clergy, and legislators, with a personal request to widen the circle of support.
- Selecting publicized events to attend, registering on the site to document participation and/or sharing post-event reports.
- Offering to volunteer at an event in a support capacity. If not able to attend physically, offering virtual support such as helping with online publicity and other tasks.
- Offering to lead an event, activity, or project in one's own community, following the model shared online.
- Providing one-to-one mentoring, technical assistance, or instruction to other volunteers, clients, or consumers.

The Power to Raise Money and Other Resources

Of course, one of the ways a Web site can channel support is to ask for money. Still in its infancy, online fundraising is definitely here to stay and is being refined constantly. The value of accepting donations online goes beyond reduced costs to raise such money. Even more critical is the Web's ability to ferret out supporters, as discussed at the start of this essay. In the United States right now, Presidential-hopeful Howard Dean has discovered that the Web brings him to donors in ways that no "mailing list" ever could. How do you know who is on your side if they haven't been identified yet? The Web lets supporters self-identify.

Beyond money, the Web also permits volunteers to post "wish lists" of donated items and services needed to further the work to be done. This is especially useful for needle-in-the-haystack searches for very specialized items or skills. How can you find the one person who can communicate in Lithuanian sign language for a client in Oshkosh? Where do you look for spare parts for that 1977 truck donated years ago? The Web provides unlimited outreach potential.

Is It All Good?

The Web is human-made and therefore has as much potential for destruction as for construction. Hate sites, calls to violence and terrorism, purposeful misinformation, and exploitation of the vulnerable

are all in abundance online. Ironically, volunteers are supporters of some of these, too, since volunteering is a methodology to get something done and therefore is adopted by all sides of a cause.

Rather than looking at the worst cases of Web abuse, it is more useful to examine the obstacles to the more positive results outlined in this essay. These can be overcome with conscious and collective effort:

- The cash costs of computer equipment, Internet service connections, and technical expertise.
- The really high level of literacy required to maneuver in cyberspace, in a world with so much illiteracy
- Limited translation tools and minority languages overlooked.
- Plagiarism, unattributed re-posting of material, and intentional misrepresentation of facts.
- Flaming, hacking and other poor or illegal online behavior that interrupts civil discourse.
- Lack of updating that allows sites to become "cobwebs."
- Poor volunteer management skills-off-line and on.

But these are issues for another article....

Historically, volunteers find the cutting edge, recognizing and acting on needs before any institution, government, or business assumes responsibility. So it is no surprise at all that the Web owes so much of its development to devoted individuals-from the free sharing of the Linux program and other software to the creation of all sorts of online communities. Volunteers have been building the Web while other volunteers have used it as a tool to further their causes. Commercial interests, especially pornography and shopping for bargains, exist side-by-side with civic involvement. It's a fascinating mix-and who knows what will come next?

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