

CyberVPM, or Networking at the Speed of Light

By Nan Hawthorne

All reluctance from the “people” people of our profession aside, the Internet has increasingly held two major benefits for practitioners of the management of volunteer resources: the speed and ease of communications, and the ability of a single individual to initiate group effort on a global scale. The potential for beneficial connections between people are virtually without boundary. Thus has been the story of the CyberVPM online discussion group, the first continuing network of its kind and arguably one of the most far reaching tools this profession has ever had. On its latest evolution into a resource offered by the international Association for Volunteer Administration, I offer this short history of the groundbreaking email discussion forum.

In February 1996, as the Internet, although in actuality over 40 years old, was just beginning to make inroads into volunteer programs, a group of leaders met in the Pacific Northwest to discuss and plan ways to take the profession of volunteer resources management to new levels of outreach. The occasion was the DOVIA of King County annual conference near Seattle. Chief in advocating for using the Internet to advance the profession in Washington State were internationally known trainer and writer Nancy Macduff, DOVIA president and local social entrepreneur Patti Mullen, the energetic and cheerful state capital area leader and influencer of governors Chuck Hennigan, and me, among

many other luminaries of Northwest volunteer management. What started as a plan to connect volunteer leaders in Washington State became two important entities: DOVIA Washington and CyberVPM.

If truth be told, CyberVPM took a long time — and a radically different path — before it took the shape it needed to begin connecting people. In fact in my typically volatile manner, after several months I took the whole project entirely into my own hands, and started the infant CyberVPM as my own property, in the nebulous way discussion groups online are “owned” by individuals. I did have others’ support, but never felt I had the official sanction of DOVIA of King County or the fledgling DOVIA Washington. It became apparent soon after the birth of CyberVPM in August 1996 that to be useful CyberVPM had to grow beyond Washington and even beyond the northwest.

The CyberVPM that saw the light of day for the first time that August was a “manually” distributed list. That is, emails intended for the entire discussion group came directly to me. I then forwarded each message to everyone who had requested to be on CyberVPM by putting every individual’s email address in the “blind copy” field of the address block of the outgoing email. The group started with about two dozen people but others began to hear of it and asked to join. The CyberVPM map grew first to the

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Pacific Northwest then to the Western U.S. and Canada, and then the world. Subscriber-ship jumped to 50, then 100. At 200 it became time to look for an automated distribution method.

In December 1996 I contacted America Online's "Give Back to the Net" program, with which I was familiar from an earlier discussion group I had helped run. The program provided certain qualified groups with access to the top of the line distribution software, Lsoft's(tm) listserv. CyberVPM was readily accepted and moved to the listserv, allowing it to grow more rapidly. With 200 subscribers it was clear we had reached "critical mass" as discussion built and snowballed. Since that time there has never been any debate that CyberVPM is one of the most active, energetic and intelligent online discussion groups anyone who has participated has known. At its most active, CyberVPM could boast about a dozen posts a day.

In May of 1997 I set up the website also known as CyberVPM to enhance the discussion group's effectiveness as a resource. CyberVPM became CyberVPM.com, a for-profit company with Internet resources and me as a trainer. Nevertheless the rich vitality of CyberVPM is, and has always been, its members and in particular those who have participated so willingly and well.

Over the years CyberVPM has exemplified the natural inclination to help and support others in the profession so characteristic of VPMs. Many messages on CyberVPM are from new professionals seeking advice, guidance and tools, and few if any have ever been disappointed by a meager response. When a subscriber asked for information on outcome evaluations, she got it in full. When another asked about legal questions surrounding applicant interviews, it was supplied in abundance. The mentoring role of a professional network has been well fulfilled in the electronic signals that make up communication via the Internet.

CyberVPM has been a place for discussion of the profession and its standards and — yes — controversies. We have discussed and debated standard setting, national volunteerism initiatives, recruiting for diversity, the value and nature of recognizing volunteers, and many other topics including the lack of awareness of the nature of volunteer resource management in our organizations and our communities. About once or twice a year our two most consistently and hotly debated topics would surface: mandatory service requirements and the recruitment and management of disabled volunteers. (As I am severely visually impaired I have always lent to the fuel on the latter fire.) Much to my surprise it was my own CyberVPM that took up a hot debate over whether the holiday I founded, International Volunteer Manager Appreciation Day, was a worthy means to the end of recognition of our profession.

CyberVPM has received plenty of recognition in its six years and counting. The first was an Award of Excellence from Victim-Assistance Online. Readers of the popular *Nonprofit Nuts and Bolts* chose CyberVPM as their favorite volunteer management resource. *The Los Angeles Times* chose it as the "Pick of the Day" for its web-based volunteer resources. I was honored with the Dufort Award of Excellence in Volunteer Management and became a biographee in *Who's Who in America*, largely as a result of the esteem in which my creation itself is held. Perhaps the highest honors came, however, through the recognition the high level of authority and authenticity its members displayed when its posts were quoted in a *Journal of Volunteer Administration* article on mandatory service requirements and throughout the Jarene Frances Lee and Julia M. Catagnus book, *What We Learned (The Hard Way) About Supervising Volunteers*. The purchase of CyberVPM by AVA caps the honors as CyberVPM is drawn into the bosom of our officially recognized association.

CyberVPM owes everything to its many influential supporters. Nancy Macduff was there at the beginning and remains a staunch friend. Energize's Susan J. Ellis has lent her globally respected voice to the broad recommendations of CyberVPM as a professional tool. Other respected trainers and writers have participated generously, such as Steve McCurley, Mary V. Merrill and Lance Hood, and of course the resource extraordinaire, Jayne Cravens of UN Volunteers. Lane Codrington of VolSoft helped win the costs of what has never been a "successful business" from a fiscal standpoint. The names of all who made up CyberVPM and its success are far too many to list here. But I cannot forget to mention those who've put their support to work as volunteer moderators, doing all the actual work for many months.

CyberVPM has had its ups and downs, primarily due to transitions from one distribution service to another. In an effort to free CyberVPM from certain inherent constraints, I have moved it several times over the years. Each time the normal confusion and discomfort with change has ruffled member feathers. And the glitches have taken their toll. In spite of all this, we have held at about 700-900 subscribers for several years. Miraculous in the world of Internet discussion is the consistently pacific nature of discussion. I have never kicked a member out, although I came close once with a subscriber whose posts were less than polite. Unlike the vast majority of email lists, CyberVPM has never stooped to angry recriminations and insults, obscenity, threats, spam, offlist mutiny or other common ills.

How do I account for CyberVPM success? I give much of the credit to the naturally cooperative nature of volunteer resources managers. The day-to-day character of CyberVPM has always been positive, constructive and notably intelligent. Not being afflicted with inordinate modesty, I am prepared to take some of the credit. The fact that in "iffier" times I stuck with it day after

day has a lot to do with its longevity. I also applied my personal values to how CyberVPM was run. My motto is "Censor the reading, not the writing," stressing individual choice and responsibility in a medium so easy to control the output. The emphasis has always been on the quality of the "product" rather than controlling the content.

CyberVPM is the second community I have built and let go. The first lasted over twelve years before it was time for me to go on to other things. And that is half of the story for my stepping away from CyberVPM after six years — an eon in Internet terms. I am, in a nutshell, retiring from volunteer resources management to pursue the career I've dreamed of since I was a child, writing for a living. Ironically I found the new and rewarding work I do now for eSight Careers Network www.eSightCareers.net through someone on CyberVPM.

The other half of the story holds the future for CyberVPM. For years I believed CyberVPM should be a project of AVA, adding global Internet networking to its other efforts to build the profession of volunteer resources management. AVA is THE proper home for networking on this scale. AVA believes so strongly in CyberVPM that it is devoting staff time to manage it. AVA is committed to keeping CyberVPM open, and recognizes in past policies the benefit to keeping CyberVPM well regulated and free. I could not have hoped for a better outcome when I sat in the conference room in Shoreline in February 1996. To CyberVPM I say, "May the wind be always at your back."