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Charity Burnout? How to Cope with the Impact of Mother Nature in 2005

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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As another year draws to a close, we can look back with mixed feelings. I hope that there were many wonderful things in your life this year but, in terms of natural disasters, this may go down in history as one of the worst times for destruction of lives and property. Whether it was tsunamis, hurricanes, or earthquakes, the demand for rescue and relief efforts in 2005 was unparalleled. And, for the most part, nations and individuals responded quickly – if not always effectively.

The huge commitment of time and money to so many areas needing disaster relief has a ripple effect on volunteer recruitment and fundraising for “everyday,” local organization needs. Here are some suggestions to cope during tight times.

The Well Is Dry – Wait for the Next Rain

Observers are noting signs of “charity burnout” – the sense that volunteers and donors have been giving to the maximum and can’t summon up the resources or the energy to respond to new appeals. Given the scope of the disasters, this is certainly understandable...at least for those who truly worked night and day to make a contribution.

For some, the multiple campaigns for help are mainly an excuse to avoid more commitment. But for those who responded generously several times, it may really be a hardship to give to more traditional year-end appeals. Requests from local organizations might get a reaction such as:

You don't have half the problems those poor people in _____ have this year! I've given so much to you over the years that you should understand I want to divert my time and money to this more pressing cause right now.

It seems to me that the key is not to conduct recruitment or fundraising campaigns in a business-as-usual manner. We need to acknowledge the overwhelming emergency causes (in number and

degree) this year – and express appreciation for people’s charitable response to those. The challenge, then, is to position these emergencies as *extra* giving, not as a substitution for addressing important issues at home.

End-of-year campaigns may indeed fall short. Try again in a few months, without evoking any guilt in volunteers and donors.

The Real Work Starts Now – Sustain Newly Found Help

Everyone understands that, as important as it is to provide immediate help to disaster victims, the real need is for *sustained* work, over months and years, to rebuild entire communities. Can the press and the public maintain their attention span? Not without a conscious publicity campaign that continues to focus awareness on the continuing situation.

The Web can be an important tool for the long haul. Any organization engaged in rebuilding ought to keep posting photographs, at least once a week, showing progress over time. This provides recognition to those engaged in the physical work and visibly shows donors and prospective volunteers that their contributions matter. Moving from general appeals to specific projects can also be successful. Few people can visualize how their support matters to a whole city, but show them how one school, one hospital, or one housing block is made whole again and you’ll keep them motivated. This approach has been demonstrated for a long time by organizations recruiting families in developed countries to “sponsor” one child in the developing world.

Don’t Compete, but Maintain Your Significance in Everyday Life

Life, death, destruction, and separated families are powerful, primal matters. They deserve an emotional response. In light of the immediacy of a tsunami or hurricane, how can a youth center, community theater, or literacy program measure up?

They can’t.

But this isn’t a question of competition; it’s the reality of life. No matter how hard things get, life goes on. The baby has to be fed, the car filled with gas, the work or school deadline met. So focus on how your organization is part of the ongoing fabric of life – the things that make a community your home – and that neglecting these has its own peril. Why not ask current volunteers to help you make this case to others?

Make Local as Sexy as Far Away

At the risk of dating myself, a song in the 60s musical *Hair* has the lyric: “Do you only care about the bleeding crowd? How about a needy friend?” The singer was lamenting the tendency of liberal activists to care about the big picture issues across the country or world, often at the expense of doing something small for a person in need right in front of them.

A good example of this is how many people in a city at some distance from the Gulf coast are providing hospitality and care to displaced victims of Katrina forcibly relocated to their area, while homeless local folks are largely ignored. The shelters, food banks, and meal programs operating all across the US and other countries constantly require money and volunteers, but struggle to get (or keep) the community's attention. It's somehow more appealing to help the visible outsider than to confront want in one's own backyard.

Consider how many stories you read over Thanksgiving week that mentioned meals served to Katrina survivors – often displacing the usual (and, from the media's perspective, possibly boring) photo ops of other, annual, communal holiday meals. Similarly, watch for news stories of volunteers traveling around the world to build houses on an island in the Indian Ocean. Then think of the last time you saw publicity for a *local* Habitat for Humanity project. Don't you think any newspaper would use some "in progress" or "before and after" photos of good work right in town? Ask some current volunteers to use those digital cameras they get as holiday gifts for your cause!

Volunteer recruiters might make something positive out of possible financial donor burnout. During a disaster crisis, there isn't much the average person can do as a volunteer beyond raising money and supplies. So a recruitment campaign along these lines might resonate with prospective volunteers:

Were you frustrated by not being able to help directly in the disaster areas in Sri Lanka, New Orleans, or Kashmir? Well, there are plenty of opportunities to give support to people dealing with crisis right here in our own town....

Talk About Impact, Not Just Needs

Being mentioned in the news isn't enough. Think about the messages the public hears from us – we always seem to be asking for something. My guess is that the average ratio of new recruitment pitches to reports of what volunteers actually accomplished once they responded to the last recruitment campaign runs 50 to 1. Even if you do a lot to publicly celebrate the impact of volunteers, most people think of us as a bottomless pit of needs.

Volunteers respond to success stories. They want to be part of a winning team. Our world has many causes worthy of support, so don't evoke guilt over helping one over the other. Instead, allow people to join something that truly makes a difference. Again, use your Web site to recognize accomplishments. Find ways to express the voices of those who receive your services as well as the staff who want help in delivering them. Report back before you ask for more.

- Have you seen other volunteer trends/issues resulting from this year's overwhelming response to natural disasters?
- Do you have any ideas for disaster response organizations who need to sustain the level of volunteer involvement into the next couple of years to continue the rebuilding process?
- Are there ways that local "everyday" organizations and disaster response organizations can collaborate or assist each other?

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Submitted 12 December 2005, Hillary Roberts, Project Linus NJ, Inc., President, Keyport/NJ USA

Do you have any ideas for disaster response organizations who need to sustain the level of volunteer involvement into the next couple of years to continue the rebuilding process?

Last time I checked my cable service included 150 channels...perhaps ONE brave media outlet could lend an hour or two of programming time to disaster relief personnel who need to keep the volunteering public informed and plugged in to the long term recovery efforts. I'm not referring to the sensational news, I'm talking protocols, local contacts, where to register for training, donation requests, positive outcome coverage. If disaster relief organizations keep the general public under-informed they are missing out on rebuilding opportunities. Build a communication guidepost!

Submitted on 6 December 2005 by Erin, Women In Community Service, Volunteer Coordinator, Boston, MA USA




I am new to this position and this website is a gold mine! First, thank you for creating a space where people in this world can come together. The world is in a general state of dismay (coming from a recovering pessimist), but the volunteers I meet daily have a way of cheering me up and restoring my faith in people.

There are so many motivated people out there - perhaps some of them were inspired to volunteer due to these large-scale tragedies. Maybe they had an invaluable experience helping with the tsunami, earthquake, hurricanes, etc. This is definitely the time to say "thank you" and invite them to continue volunteering right here at home. For example, "did you enjoy handing food out to victims of Katrina, helping them in some way? Amazing! Please come check out the food bank in downtown Boston. You can do that once a week - helping out your own community." Etcetera. Good luck in 2006, fellow volunteer managers. Keep up the good work!

Submitted on 4 December 2005 by Regina Pistilli, Tuckerton Seaport, Admin Asst/Volunteer Coordinator, Tuckerton, New Jersey USA

What a great perspective. You have turned a negative into a wonderful positive opportunity for volunteer recruiters and not-for-profits. The concept of CELEBRATING VOLUNTEERISM rather than utilizing the "poor me" method is phenomenal. Positive energy receives positive results. I will utilize your suggestions in recruitment efforts here at Tuckerton Seaport. Thank you so much for your inspiration and enlightenment.

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