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## Marketing Savvy - Our Field's Blind Spot

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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What is it about volunteer leadership that makes us unwilling to take what we've got and flaunt it? I am so often struck by our lack of marketing savvy, particularly now that the Internet has opened so many new, *free* ways to spread the word about our work (free in terms of money, though time and effort are still needed).

First, it is my opinion that the volunteer world generates what ought to be headline-grabbing, real news on a daily basis – especially in contrast to the bleak and frightening world news blanketing newspapers, television and radio at the moment. Yet, if volunteer program managers contact the media at all, it is too often with boring stories that are anything but new.

Use what I call the “So-what? Factor” when you look for the newsworthy item. For example:

- Three volunteers get an award for serving 25 years each. So what?
- The summer orientation class is accepting applications. So what?
- Ten students pass their driving test with help from their volunteer reading tutors. So what?

The point is not that these facts are irrelevant to the people involved; it's that they are not important to anyone else. They are not *news*, in a public sense. News is made when certain criteria are met:

1. Anyone can immediately see the value of the activity, outcome, etc., without a great deal of background explanation.
2. The item is unusual (rarely occurs) or even unique.
3. The item is connected to other issues in the news – it's current.
4. The item is surprising or counter-intuitive in some way.
5. The item appeals to an emotion, whether people's reactions might be tears, laughter, anger, or pride. If there's no gut reaction, it doesn't matter to anyone.

What kinds of volunteer activities or accomplishments might meet such criteria? Of course it will depend on your setting, but let's look at #3 – some connection to national or local news stories.

Follow these steps:

*Step 1:* Read and watch the latest news reports and narrow in on those events that seem to have the greatest relevance to people in your community.

*Step 2:* Look within your agency and focus on what volunteers are doing that directly or indirectly impacts on or relates to this news.

*Step 3:* Take photographs of the volunteer activity and then write a press release to send to your contact list. Or, call one of the local news desks to invite them to send a reporter out. You can even write a simple letter explaining why you think this is “news” and offering to work with the paper or station to find the best way to bring it to public attention. (Be sure you answer “so what?” before anyone can think it!)

Here are just a few ideas to help you gain perspective:

- The news is filled with fear of war and terrorism. Can you show peaceful interaction among volunteers/clients (either side) who are Muslim or from the Middle East and those who are not? Do you work with children who express their feelings to volunteers who, in turn, help them see a wider world view? Can you provide the news media with comic relief of any kind?
- Unemployment and economic woes are in the news. Do you offer ways that unemployed people can volunteer, both to keep up their morale and to add something new to their resume? Are volunteers helping clients to job hunt successfully? To start home businesses?
- Teenagers and twenty-somethings are often perceived as alienated. Do you have proof they are not all that way? What do young volunteers do that might surprise the skeptics (pick out-of-the-ordinary things, not just walk-a-thons or visiting older people)? Similarly, confront conventional wisdom if you're in a nursing home in which residents do service for others instead of always being the recipients.

You'll get media attention for these types of things – and it doesn't have to be the biggest mass media. Community or neighborhood newspapers, often weeklies, are particularly interested in such stories. So, too, the university or high school newspaper. Local radio stations are also good targets for your press releases.

Note that this sort of publicity – great for new volunteer recruitment, for volunteer recognition, and for gaining the respect of the paid staff – doesn't take money. It takes a growing mailing list or, today, e-mailing list. It also means being alert to photo opps, since a picture is really worth a thousand words.

Even if you resist seeking media attention externally, are you doing effective marketing inside your organization? Do you make everyone aware of newsworthy actions by volunteers? Do you post photographs on a public bulletin board or on your Web site? Do you send special alert memos or at

least include the news item in your regular program report? If you are not the cheerleader for volunteers, who will be?

Finally, one of my pet peeves is the way that most volunteer-related conferences are kept secret. Of course, that isn't the intent of the organizers, but an observer might easily think the event is to be an exclusive gathering. Maybe a date saver is sent to an internal mailing list, followed by a more detailed brochure mailing. Some information may be put on a Web site. And then the registration committee waits for response.

Remember that advertisers tell us it takes seven mentions of a product before we even notice! Here are just a few marketing tips that can be applied by any conference or even local workshop sponsor:

- Look for every possible free calendar of events that will accept your notice: on the Web and elsewhere<sup>1</sup>; directed at volunteering folks but also of interest to a wider, yet related, audience (activity directors, fire chiefs, alumni officers). In fact, unless you start posting to general community calendars, you may never discover the full range of colleagues right in your own town. Get volunteers to help find sites and then keep the list to pass on to next year's chair!
- Cross-publicize events with volunteer colleagues in neighboring geographic areas. Usually people in New Jersey never hear about the Pennsylvania Association for Volunteerism's annual conference, and Pennsylvanians are in the dark about the New Jersey event. All it takes is an agreement to send each other press releases and ask for announcements in regular member communiques. Such missed opportunities abound all over the world, wherever artificial boundaries are placed on member territory!
- Print up inexpensive flyers or bookmarks with the basic information and share the job of distributing them as widely as possible: at conferences of related professionals; at community meetings; in public libraries; and other places where group leaders meet. If every member of the planning committee agrees to find three places to put a stack of materials, think of how many new venues you can reach with little effort.

What I want to know is:

- Do you have an example of "savvy" volunteer program marketing that others can emulate? (All suggestions for where and how to draw attention to volunteering are welcome.)
- Why do you think so few of our colleagues take marketing action?
- Can you brainstorm possible volunteer activities that might make "news" today?

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<sup>1</sup>As always, I invite all site visitors to use the [conference calendar](#) we offer on the Energize Web site. Do not think that your event is too limited or too local to qualify! You truly never know when someone within two miles of you may be out of your regular network, yet finds the information online and shows up.

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**Submitted on 25Oct03 by Naidoo Co-anchor / Insert Director SPIRIT SUNDAE, SABC 1 CEO: Volunteers VIA Africa (volunteer position)**

Volunteers VIA Africa, the media and mobilisation campaign highlighting volunteers and volunteer opportunities across Africa, has launched a volunteer feature "Spirit in Action", on SPIRIT SUNDAE, South Africa's first multi-faith Live breakfast show, on SABC 1, Sunday 9-10 am. Within the hour-long menu of in-studio experts and celebrities, "Spirit in Action" features inspiring volunteers, and volunteer opportunities where people serve humanity as their service of God.

Media plays a huge role in people's lives and I came into media as a social activist, disturbed by the moral degeneration amongst youth who live out what they see on TV. Producing programming that reflects the true spirit and potential of human beings to be Divine, is my agenda for being in the industry. The real stars are the Volunteers - Visionaries in Action across Africa! So proposing to direct the volunteer feature was natural it shows people putting their spirituality into practice. This spirit of compassion, non-judgment, universal love, truth and all pervading Self shines through when we serve God in each Other. We want to inspire viewers to volunteer, and experience their innate divinity. [visit [www.viaafrica.org](http://www.viaafrica.org) ]

**Submitted on 20Mar03 by Susan Lebovitz, SAFEHOME Volunteer & Special Events Coordinator, Overland Park, KS USA**

I think the word "passion" is the key to marketing for volunteers. If a volunteer is passionate about an agency's mission, then our responsibility as volunteer managers is to find a place where this person will best benefit the agency and feel gratified. We need to recognize unconventional areas where people can volunteer. This involves interests as diverse as computer skills and manual labor to involvement with clients and fundraising. I've always thought that the majority of people work to make a living, and volunteer to follow their passion. When I talk to groups or socialize with friends who don't know where to go to volunteer, I always ask where their passion lies. Their answer, along with some creative brainstorming, will lead them to the right volunteer opportunity.

**Submitted on 18Mar03 by Stephanie Coleman, Manager ActNow, Inspire Foundation, NSW Australia**

I agree the volunteering community needs to think more about how they market themselves. At The Inspire Foundation, we developed the ActNow website ([www.actnow.com.au](http://www.actnow.com.au)) as a pilot project to try to encourage more young people to get involved volunteering. The pilot was a huge success, and we believe this was because we chose to "market" the volunteering positions to young people.

Before posting our opportunities we looked at them as a potential volunteer might, and asked the question "What's in it for me?" So we chose to answer that question in all our advertisements by accentuating the positive side of all our volunteer opportunities.

For example, instead of starting a posting with something like "we are looking for people to help us restore old boats in Sydney" we wrote " Do you have a passion for boats, and want to spend time on

sparkling Sydney Harbour, then this is the position for you!” This proved to be a successful tactic, pointing out the benefits to the volunteer, and many organizations reported huge responses to positions they had previously had little interest in. These positions had been previously advertised offline, and even on other websites and had little response. Exactly the same positions had markedly different response rates from volunteers, just because they were marketed differently!

We believe the key is to look at what you can offer the potential volunteer and market that. Is your organisation a fun place to work with a supportive team? Are you flexible about the hours they can contribute? Do you offer a certificate of appreciation for their contribution? If so, then make sure all of that is in the ad, written in a friendly tone this is the best way to market volunteering opportunities and doesn't cost your organization a thing!

The ActNow website is currently in a transitional phase. We hope to roll the project out around Australia in the next year.

***Submitted on 6Mar03 by Vicki Henrichs, Houston Association of Volunteer Administrators, Houston, Texas, Harris County, USA***

As an active member of the Houston, TX volunteer community and professional member of the Houston Association of Volunteer Administrators (HAVA), we compete with an enormous population of many, diverse interests to reach local media. Public Service Announcements (PSA's) flood local news sources. However, there is usually some unique element about a conference, volunteer group or special project. With our multitude of ethnic minorities and vibrant social service community, we repeat the emails and faxes until we obtain responses. Bottom line is: seek new sources and maintain old ones; repeat and refuse to give up.

***Submitted on 5Mar03 by Cara Blank, Director of Online Publications, Energize, Inc., Pennsylvania USA***

On a lazy, snow-covered Sunday in Philadelphia, I was delighted to find a prime example of “headline-grabbing, real news” in the volunteer world and immediately wanted to share it with all who would read Susan's hot topic of this month.

Amid headlines of imminent war and a plunging economy, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* covered a group of activists who uniquely knit for peace and social justice. Yes, knit! Sweaters, scarves, pot holders... I was able to apply each of Susan's 4 criteria for what really makes news. And to boot, I wanted to run out and become a member of this group of volunteer activists, even though I've only finished half of a cockeyed pot holder in the last 2 years. Marketing at its best!

Although I don't know if the founder of “Sew What?! Radical Knitters” intended to market her organization or the news reporter found her, the article still proves that volunteer organizations can make headlines. With the right press release and unique blend of news criteria, even the *New York Times* might bend its ear your way!

**Submitted on 5March03 by Sam (Sarah) Elliston, Sr Vol Associate, Volunteer Connections Services, Cincinnati, OH**

I think everything you say is true, Susan, in terms of our not being savvy enough to find the real news in our programs. I appreciate your criteria list, it will help me in the future.

I have found a challenge recently in the marketing area when I am posting volunteer opportunities on websites as recruitment tools. I am told by our marketing department that these posts are NOT like press releases and so shouldn't include the kinds of hearts and flowers compelling language that a press release might use.

Is this correct? Or am I again missing an opportunity?

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