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Save a Life, Win a Car! When Do Incentives to Volunteer Cross the Line?

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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2005

Colleague and friend Loretta Bacon, who coordinates volunteers for the City of Phoenix, initiated this month's Hot Topic, with the following e-mail and attached link:

New donor prospecting seems to be climbing to a new level.....Look at this: [Blood Drive Flyer](#)

My contention is that sports teams and their "volunteer" charity projects (supposedly done by their foundations) have raised the bar and made it harder to recruit volunteers because of all the perks they offer. Now it seems to be spreading as "cause related marketing" is rewarding people with chances at cars, etc.

Perhaps a topic of discussion is how this will change the volunteer pool. Perhaps the diehard volunteers who want to give back to someone (an organization) that has helped them (direct connection) will continue without perks, but the casual or more transitory volunteer that we thought we had a chance to "hook" will be siphoned off in campaigns like this one.

Thanks for raising this issue, Loretta - it certainly forces us to consider what we really mean when we say a volunteer isn't "paid." Heaven knows I'm happy that we have advanced way past the days when we argued that getting academic credit or being reimbursed for out-of-pocket expenses meant someone was not a "pure" volunteer. (For anyone new to the field who didn't know about this debate, be glad you missed it!) But I agree that there's an invisible line out there somewhere that divides unpaid from paid that makes me very uncomfortable to cross.

This is truly a percolating hot topic popping up in various places. In an amazing coincidence, Andy Fryar on the other side of the globe in Australia has also written his July 2005 Hot Topic for OzVPM on almost the same theme, based on another American program, the "10,000 Hours Show" in Iowa where the only people who can get into a special concert are those who volunteered at least 10 hours in a community agency. It's well worth your while to read Andy's cogent remarks.

I don't have answers or even many hard-and-fast beliefs on this subject. But I do have a series of questions that deserve consideration. Let's see what we all think as I try to outline the issues involved here.

Thank You Gifts

It's probably safe to say that we all believe in thank you gifts for volunteers, at least of the "token" variety. We also believe in giving volunteers items that they need to do a project, such as an identifying tee-shirt. But how much do we have to spend before the small gift becomes a substantial reward with cash value? More to the point here:

- Do we ever see thank you gifts as "payment" of some sort or as an incentive to do more volunteering?
- Do we feel differently if the gift is a true surprise at the end of a period of service versus if everyone knows from the start that the big gift or costly perk is coming? (This is Lactetia's point about things like golf tournaments, in which at least some volunteers get everything from high-quality golf gear to expensive meals.)
- Does it matter if an organization buys the gifts from its own funds as opposed to all items being donated by others? The monetary value is the same to the volunteer, but does our comfortable level change based on who is paying the bill?
- What about "deferred gratification" types of recognition that can lead to future profit, such as advancing a career, writing a thesis based on the experience, or developing new client referrals?

Incentives

A growing number of organizations, particularly those who perceive there to be a critical shortage of volunteers, have been discussing whether tangible "incentives" will win a "yes, I'll do it" response from prospective volunteers. Lactetia found another piece of synchronistic evidence this week when she discovered a recruitment incentive advertised on volunteermatch.org by the Multiple Sclerosis Association of America that has the following pitch (no longer online, 2014):

One volunteer through their service on this assignment will earn a new MINI COOPER car, donated by EZFIND. Other volunteers may also earn a new LAPTOP or IPOD or one of a number of other incentives to volunteer as a MS EZFIND ENVOY.

This is the marketplace approach to recruitment and it presupposes a number of beliefs that I question:

1. Money (or a big prize) is an irresistible motivator.
2. Most volunteering is interchangeable, so it's necessary to use external incentives to convince people to work for this cause over that one.
3. Low-income people, students, seniors on a fixed income, etc. can't afford to volunteer and it's wrong or insensitive to ask them to do so.

These assumptions reflect a rather low opinion of human beings in general and of volunteers in particular. My biggest issue here is that the people who propose incentive plans are often those who don't know the first thing about how to create volunteer opportunities that people will actually be attracted to do, nor how to conduct an effective recruitment campaign. But I am not necessarily against all incentives. The questions I'd raise here are:

- Is part of the problem our fear that the wealthier organizations will therefore always get the volunteers because smaller, grassroots groups cannot afford to compete? Loretta raises this concern [and speaks to it more fully in her response (below) to this essay].
- Do incentives all have to be costly? For example, in a performing arts organization, giving volunteers the chance to spend time with the artists personally might be seen as a special perk, but doesn't need extra cash. Here the incentive is *exclusivity* – getting something no one else can. Does this trouble us as much as cash gifts?
- What about the “chance” to win the car? Since only one person can actually get the big prize, does this put all the volunteers' motives into question? Is everyone a “volunteer” until one of them wins the car and transmutes into...what?
- Again, what if the incentive doesn't cost the organization anything? I assume that car for the blood drive was donated, as a lovely dinner for two or a crystal vase might be. Does it matter? What if the donor of the item gave it specifically as leverage to get even greater help for the cause? What if it works?

In the real world, there is a continuum of rewards, moving from a heartfelt thank you through small token gifts through larger gifts, and ultimately into genuine compensation for time. At what point does something stop being simple recognition and become an incentive instead? When does an incentive become profit? When does a stipend become a lousy wage? When is a volunteer no longer a volunteer?

Or is all of this irrelevant to the biggest question of all: What will encourage the most people to participate in important community work? If incentives work (and we don't necessarily know they do), do the results justify the means?

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Posted on 18 August 2005 by Deborah Stroup, MO Secretary of State/Wolfner Library for the Blind Coordinator of Volunteers, Jefferson City, MO USA

The first thing that struck me when I saw the flyer for the blood drive was this: How many people will lie in order to give blood, hoping to win this car? When you donate blood, you have to fill out a questionnaire. I can't give blood anymore because I am taking a blood thinner, and my blood is unsuitable for use by other people. What if I lied on the questionnaire about my medications, because I wanted so badly to win this car? The blood bank could be severely compromised. So, in addition to all the other issues raised about volunteering, there are practical questions we need to be asking

about what people might be willing to do for large incentives. We might impact our programs in ways that have serious repercussions.

Posted on 22 July 2005 by Carol Dixon, Providence Health Care, Director, Volunteer Resources , Vancouver, Canada

I recently volunteered at the grand opening of a well financed research centre in my community. In exchange for my Saturday afternoon (just one) I received a high quality golf shirt with crest and an invitation to a wine and cheese thank you event the next week. So I went and had great wine and high quality cheese -- for my 3 hours. BUT do I realize that this is a wealthy company? Yes. Would I expect my local hospital to do the same? No. Longer term volunteers volunteer for different reasons, one time volunteer roles like the above and like the sporting events are different and appeal to different people. -- And my husband wears the golf shirt a lot.....

Posted on 19 July 2005 by Greg Scanlan, National MS Society, Minnesota Chapter (not the same as the MS Association mentioned), Volunteer Development Coordinator, Minneapolis, MN United States

There is a lot being said about motivations that volunteers have. I don't think enough is being said about the motivations that the "donor" of perks have.

While the Saturn promotion in Arizona might have come about out of Saturn's altruism and civic spirit, we'd be naive not to acknowledge that they also are doing it to enhance their public image, promote themselves, show off their product, etc. I imagine they also end up with a list of people they can mail, call, or e-mail future promotions. (Most contests or drawings are conceived simply as a way to generate lists of prospective customers. These lists can be quite expensive for a company to buy or create.)

So, I don't want to sound too cynical, but I think the incentivizing of volunteer opportunities is just part of the "free lunch" corporate promotions mentality. It's also just another example of the reality that non-profits (from public radio to health organizations to schools) either choose to or have to rely more and more on corporate sponsorship.

What we lose in so doing is not examined enough. Indeed, we use to call it selling out, and I'm not sure just calling it marketing makes it any better.

Posted 11 July 2005 by Pam Betz

Good going fellow colleague! However, as Vice Chair of the Community Leadership Council of United Blood Services in Phoenix, I beg to differ with the analogy of blood donors as 'volunteers' with special perks, in this instance the chance to win a car. They are giving not only of their time, but life source to others. The ultimate volunteer! In the summer when blood donations seriously decline, whatever means need to be taken to motivate donations, I support them 100%.

The alternative of not having a vital blood supply available is unfathomable....you don't realize the importance of those donor 'volunteers', until you need the priceless gift of life for you or a loved one. Without it, this discussion would be nonexistent.

Posted 9 July 2005 by Amy Lemon

I will admit that the suggestion that someone give blood so they may win a car makes me uncomfortable. However, ten years as a volunteer manager in 2 very different non-profit settings has taught me that all volunteers get something out of volunteering. If they didn't, they wouldn't volunteer. Whether it's motivation to get out bed, work experience for building up a resume, a belief that they are making the world a better place, companionship with other volunteers, the discounts at the non-profit's store, or a chance to win a car it's all motivation.

It helps to know what kind of volunteer you are looking for and understanding who is motivated by what benefit. The person who is motivated to win a car is very different from the person who volunteers for companionship, for example. If another agency in your area is offering a car raffle to its volunteers, you are only competing for the type of volunteer who would be motivated by a car raffle and that is by no means every possible volunteer in your area. There's nothing wrong with this type of volunteer, but I think most agencies need more substance and motivation from their corps of volunteers. More importantly, most volunteers need more from their volunteer experience than the superficiality of a car raffle.

Posted 9 July 2005 by Tiffani Hill, CVA, Foodbank of Santa Barbara County, Program Manager, Santa Barbara, CA USA

This topic hits home with food banks across the country. Volunteer opportunities with food banks tend to attract court-ordered community service volunteers and community members who are hungry. Many of our volunteer positions involve heavy labor and are not as "sexy" as docenting at a museum, teaching art at a children's camp, or assisting keepers at a zoo. So, many food banks attract and retain volunteers by giving them food.

Many food banks are accredited by America's Second Harvest- this accreditation is a sign that the agency meets high standards of conduct and cleanliness. We received one of our regular audits from this accreditation group this spring and were surprised to find that we were "out of compliance" by allowing volunteers to take a certain amount of food in exchange for a minimum number of hours worked. America's Second Harvest interprets this as paying the volunteers in food in exchange for their work. The auditor cited the IRS Tax Code of 1976, specifically 170(3).

We immediately complied and lost such a large number of volunteers that activity in our two warehouses came to a halt. We had to refuse truck loads of donations because we did not have enough staff to process it or room to store it. Paid staff had to re-direct their time to go out to off-site food distributions that were previously well supported by volunteers. In addition, we fielded many complaints by upset volunteers.

Many volunteers who previously took advantage of the opportunity to "earn" food did so because they felt they were giving back for the help that they received. This seemed to be a more dignified option than just becoming another statistic in a social service program and receiving "hand outs". They felt they were not taking advantage of the "system" and were not "charity cases". I applaud this motive and, when marketing our opportunities, highlight that our efforts provide food for 68,000 community members, 45% who are children. My hope is that these volunteers will see that, when they receive help, they are not receiving something for nothing because they gave back at another place in the continuum.

Posted 9 July 2005 by Sarah (Sam) Elliston, Trainer/Consultant, Cincinnati, Ohio USA

What an intriguing series of questions. I volunteered at a community race just yesterday (the 4th of July) and I witnessed the runners and walkers acting as if entitled to the rewards and incentives, not the volunteers. In fact, most of us didn't wear the identifying t-shirt because we didn't receive it until that morning (and for some of us it was too small).

But that begs the question.

I have always maintained that people volunteer because they want to, at some level; in some way it meets an internal need, whether they are aware of it or not.

So, the incentives like a car or a lap top will probably appeal to some but not all. I don't think I'd volunteer on the chance of winning a car or a lap top, unless I thought the cause important and the volunteer opportunity wasn't too taxing. If I was offered a lap top just for volunteering, no lottery, a done deal, then I'd be very interested but that's because I really want a lap top right now.

Is it still volunteering if I am doing it to receive a thing- for example, the car? I wonder - wouldn't it have to be reported to the IRS as some kind of a capitol gain? In which case, the IRS will have defined it as NOT a volunteer activity, n'est-ce pas?

So, fascinating question. I think people will continue to volunteer; I don't think we will run out of volunteers; and I think the people who know nothing about it who are developing the incentives and "cause marketing" approach will both teach us something about marketing and learn themselves that people will always help each other, all the time, incentives or not.

Posted 9 July 2005 by David Westervelt, N Street Village, Manager of Volunteer and In-kind Services, DC USA

I agree that the presented arguments against these incentives suggest a very low opinion of human generosity. Because people naturally want to give of their time to programs in which they find meaning and fulfillment, incentives will never be more than a nice reward or, at worst, noise.

Posted 9 July 2005 anonymously, USA

We have a responsibility to effectively market our organization's volunteer program to the public. Successful marketing campaigns and communications reach the hearts of potential volunteers, while inviting them to join in a worthwhile effort. We design each volunteer position so that it is meaningful to the volunteer, while also tied to our Mission and meeting our business goals.

On this issue, I have been concerned that there seems to be a lack of attention given to the "compensation" issue. This must be considered when gifts are given to volunteers. By law, volunteers must claim "gifts" (a.k.a. "incentives") they receive as "payment for services rendered" (compensation/income) if the gift(s) exceed a "reasonable amount." For our purposes, we put an annual "cap" of \$25 per volunteer. Connecting hours volunteered to receipt of specific item(s), can equate to compensation, thereby, in essence, making the volunteer an employee. My advice: seek legal counsel prior to making decisions about the "goodies" you give volunteers for their services.

Bottom line: Our communities benefit when we get the best volunteers in the best positions. Rather than "compete," many of us (local volunteer coordinators) recommend each other's organizations to

volunteers who are clearly not a "good fit" for our needs, but may be a "perfect fit" for another's.

Posted 9 July 2005 by Caroline at Inland in Maine, USA

I have serious concerns about the title volunteer when a person receives values in money, valuable products like cars, etc. Why would they wear that title?

A volunteer should be a person who is giving, and gives from their heart. The experiences that they receive is their reward for a job well done.

Small gifts, such as meals, a remembrance at Christmas, a card on birthday's, etc. should be all that is necessary.

But the world is changing. It is hard to find good people as so many organizations require their help. Budgets have a short fall. Wish we could clone some of the good ones.

Posted 9 July 2005 by Gilda Kaplan, Vail Police Department, Volunteer Coordinator, Vail, Colorado USA

As a "Volunteer" Volunteer Coordinator for a Government agency (Police Department) we are greatly impacted by non profit organizations that either have sponsors or are using donated funds to provide incentives for volunteering. I have been asked what do we give and when I explain that as Government organization we cannot provide gifts, they're no longer interested in working with us.

We are a small resort community and I believe that a one on one personal relationship is what keeps our volunteers involved. Yes, the guys with the big incentives are competition, but if that's what they're looking for, they are not what we are looking for.

A token of thanks is nice to provide for service rendered, but when it gets to the proportion of giving away a car or other high ticket items it cheapens the word "volunteer". One "reward" we gave our volunteers who put in the required number of hours was to present them with The President's Volunteer Service Award at a session of the Town Council and invited the Media to cover the event. Each Award package cost \$2. An inexpensive way to say thank you and a public recognition for their work.

Posted 9 July 2005 by Proscovia Wagaba, Refugee Housing Association, Volunteer Coordinator, London UK

We all agree that the days of Florence Nightingale and Eglantyne Jebb, of dedicating to a cause for 30 years, with no expenses paid, no perks expected, are well and truly gone. People will still volunteer for the cause, but in the process they expect to improve their CV, improve their standing in society, travel, make useful contacts, have fun and yes maybe get the odd perk here and there.

Governments around the world now recognise the value of volunteering to their economies.

In an increasingly competitive environment, the business and marketing strategists of voluntary organizations have to look for new and more innovative ways of attracting resources, including volunteers.

This favours larger more well established charities at the expense of smaller voluntary organisations and community groups. As Volunteer managers, we can continue to be aware of volunteers' motivations, design good volunteer placements and support our volunteers effectively. We also need to keep our eye on the bigger picture and think strategically in an increasingly competitive sector.

Posted 9 July 2005 by H. Roberts, Project Linus NJ, Inc., President, Keyport/NJ USA

Timely and interesting topic. I fear the ole "what's in it for you" marketing compass at work here.

Couple that with non-profit fundraising activities that confuse volunteers contributing to an agencies day to day operation with volunteers supporting a charity event and what have you got? If you dangle a carrot, most bunnies will bite--but sometimes the mission is all we should dangle. It's up to us, the professionals, to keep the focus on the mission.

Popular and growing cause marketing methods have generated new ideas and created the need for a host of new definitions but outcomes are often subjective. For a charity of any size to lead with perks in exchange for volunteer service and/or support in my mind confuses the very definition of non profit. This industry has enough challenges when it comes to defining the profession without creating new more confusing ones!

My question to fellow professionals is: Do you believe in volunteerism or do you believe that incentives are the only way to secure volunteers? What does your agency promise in return for solidarity? Do you regard recruitment as a live auction or a professional opportunity?

8 July 2005 by Richard Katona, Volunteering Development Manager, Depaul Trust, UK (originally posted to the listserv UKVPMs and shared here with permission)

As we all know, volunteering gets very fuzzy around the edges and, to be honest, I think that is always going to be the case. Andy Fryar is right, volunteering is a dynamic phenomenon, not easily straitjacketed into rigid definitions and Susan J Ellis is right too, there does have to be a line between volunteering and not-volunteering somewhere.

I tend to think that we should be guided by what's happening in real life rather than what the definition says.

A couple of old war-stories come to my mind, regarding two people who were treated fully in accordance with volunteer management good practice. But the trouble was that although they were both referred to as 'volunteers', neither of them really were. One was on a work experience placement and the other was on secondment from a religious community. In the first instance there were supposed to be academic placement outcomes that were not being managed at all and in the second instance the person was effectively being deprived of her statutory employment rights.

Volunteering 'good practice' does not necessarily remain 'good practice' when used to manage not-volunteering situations, when you may need to adopt a different 'good practice' set.

That, I think, rather than snappy definitions, is the real point.

Posted 6 July 2005

A representative of the "10,000 Hours Show" in Iowa has posed a lengthy and interesting response to Andy's Hot Topic on OzVPM

Posted 1 July 2005 by Loretta Bacon, Phoenix AZ USA

I've been concerned for a while that high profile organizations - like sports team foundations - offer volunteers an incredible mix of incentives: meals, free parking, tickets, "meet the player" opportunities, behind the scenes exclusivity (our local sports team is now selling opportunities to

shadow employees during a game to boost revenue), memorabilia created for a specific event to make it "exclusive," and the like.

And although I've seen this happen since we at the city were asked to help staff Super Bowl XXX events about 10 years ago, I've now seen it creep into other areas. And I think cause-related marketing has hastened its spread.

What this means to me in the volunteer world is that the "perks" that we used to be able to offer - or had and not even realized it - have now been diluted. If not diluted, then we need to realize what we have and market it better ourselves! (-:

It is competition - mostly for people's spare time, but also for their interest as lots of these are also marketed as a way to "help." They also fit nicely into our (mostly American issue here) increasingly fragmented, busy life.

So, to me, it raises questions that seem to supplement or complement what you have listed: In all our studies and talk about how much people "give" - do we segment out these other factors simply because we're navel-gazing at our own industry?

Is this another way to engage people that "whets their appetite" for more service or furthers the idea that 2 hours "helping" at an event while getting a lot of perks will solve a complex community issue? (I haven't witnessed the application of tenets of service learning during any that I've participated in, but it could be happening in other spheres.)




Do these marketing campaigns siphon off a large section of the potential volunteer pool - that "casual" volunteer that we hope we can connect to our organization? Or, does it offer a new chance for people to engage that we wouldn't get anyway? Does anyone study how people connect?

What will happen to small programs that can't compete with these high-profile campaigns? Will we be forced to create collaborations and coalitions? Is this a bad thing?

Does this mean (to borrow business terms here) that we have a mature market that is increasingly segmented? If so, will our programs become more specialized also? How does that translate to our generic recruitment term of "help?"

Is this essay a tempest in a tea pot and the whole thing will peak and deflate so that we return to the way things were?

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