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## The Hot Topic Is the Hot Topic

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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Happy new year! As proof of how-time-flies, 2003 marks the seventh year of monthly Hot Topics on this Web site. For me, scrolling through the [Archive](#) is like watching my life flash before my eyes (at least, my professional life).

Last week, our Webmaster Kristin suggested that, given the controversy last month's Hot Topic evoked, it might be time to say a few things about the Hot Topic itself. Kristin sees all site responses first and therefore learns directly what our visitors say. Based on her sense of all remarks, pro and con, she posed some great questions as a framework for my essay. I liked these so much that I decided to use a Q&A format. (Thank you, Kristin!)

### ***Kristin:* What is your goal with the Hot Topic?**

*Susan:* There are very few places that provide a forum for discussion of issues in volunteerism. "Issues" are different from information, best practices, and other skills-training topics. According to the dictionary, among the various definitions of "issue" are:

- A point, matter, or question to be disputed or decided.
- A sending or giving out; putting forth.

We all know that volunteerism is far more complex than the average person suspects. How can we expect others to be knowledgeable about the philosophy, ethics, and fundamental principles of our field if we do not know them or agree about them ourselves?

So one purpose of the Hot Topic is to identify and surface issues. As a consultant and trainer with the privilege of serving international clients, I feel an obligation to share what I witness. Often I use the "percolation" theory: if the same topic is bubbling to the surface in, say, three to five or more different places, something is definitely brewing.

I am lucky enough to have many opportunities to publish my thoughts, whether in articles, books, or columns such as the one I've written for *The NonProfit Times* for twelve years. But the World Wide

Web provides an outlet that is substantially different than the printed word: the chance for readers to respond immediately and publicly to what I say. This is a remarkable power and I have been thrilled to share it.

Why? Because I want to give volunteerism practitioners a dependable place in which to learn and debate. So the full statement of the “goal” of the Hot Topic is:

*To identify and surface issues affecting volunteerism and to elicit the opinions of as many people as possible about them.*

Ultimately, of course, I hope that the public record of the discussion influences decision makers (this is one reason we maintain the Archive of all past Hot Topics and all the responses received). So I'd like to have an impact on strengthening our field

**Kristin: Why do you state a strong opinion rather than try to give a pro/con presentation on an issue?**

*Susan:* Marilyn Mackenzie, a Canadian colleague, is fond of saying that our field is “terminally nice.” While some people love my willingness to state an opinion honestly, others see it as aggressive. Because I want to stimulate discussion, I provide my perspective as clearly as I can. No apologies. Actually, I think I do try to acknowledge gray areas or to give credit where credit is due. But, yes, I say what I feel.

The most important thing to remember is that the Hot Topic is designed to start discussion – right away, in public, on the Web site. I never take a stand just to stimulate controversy, but I do not shy away from controversy either. If people are irritated (or thrilled) by my opinion, but do not post their own in exchange, they are missing an opportunity to have an influence on everyone’s thinking.

In some ways, only an independent consulting firm could offer the Hot Topic feature. We are not political and have no one to protect or impress. I can’t tell you how often newspaper reporters say to me: “Thank you so much for being willing to be quoted. Everyone else refused to go public, although they felt strongly on the subject.”

**Kristin: Do you like being challenged?**

*Susan:* Yes, if the response is thoughtful and based in experience. I was very happy with the wide range of responses we generated last month about the relationship of Volunteer Centers to the United Way. I think that reading everything – both my essay and all the responses – would give someone a balanced range of viewpoints. More than anything, the debate demonstrated that the subject deserved to be discussed!

While I relish learning other perspectives, I’ll admit to not liking it when someone questions my motives or knowledge, responding with a broad personal attack. As I said online last month: Having a

difference of opinion does not make either party ignorant. It is possible to have the same facts and draw different conclusions.

For the record, I take all the responses seriously and often adjust my opinion based on the cogent arguments someone makes to my original opinion. Or, I'll at least mention the "other side" when I speak in public about that subject later.

***Kristin:* Is there something about the volunteer field that avoids conflict? Why do you try to stimulate it?**

*Susan:* Contrary to common belief, I prefer being popular to unpopular! It's just that I hate back-room whispering. We are actually a field with lots of disagreement, but we resist fighting openly. Internal to each organization we are battling administrator and paid staff attitudes about volunteers. In our communities we struggle for media attention, plead for consideration from school service-learning or court-ordered programs, and face colleague apathy about collaborative efforts, whether forming a DOVIA or jointly celebrating National Volunteer Week. On the national level, we complain about the services our professional associations do and don't provide, and about how these associations relate (or don't) to one another.

But apart from whining, despairing, or heated coffee shop discussions during conference breaks, when do we try to do something about our feelings? It is my hope that by bringing privately-shared opinions out into the open, we can strengthen our field.

***Kristin:* What "clout" do you and Energize have?**

*Susan:* We are not in control of anything outside our own client services. But we have the power of influence, exactly because we are willing to voice our opinions to the world. This is a power that I freely share: Anyone who takes the risk to respond to a Hot Topic is given the opportunity to use that same clout.

***Kristin:* Can anyone suggest a Hot Topic? Write one as a guest author?**

*Susan:* I warmly welcome ideas for Hot Topics from anyone. Keep in mind the criteria:

A challenging issue about some aspect of volunteer involvement that has various elements for discussion (not a standard volunteer management topic like "recruiting volunteers").

So far we have had three guest authors and the door is open to others with the interest and ability to share their perspectives on an issue. E-mail us at [info@energizeinc.com](mailto:info@energizeinc.com) to explore the possibilities.

**The discussion questions in response to this Hot Topic are:**

- Why have you or have you not responded to a Hot Topic in the past? If you took the risk, were there any results (good or bad)?
- What are some "hot topics" you'd like addressed here? (For now, please limit your response to suggesting the issue. We'll save the "debate" for later.)
- What other forums are available for airing issues in our field and do you use them?
- How might professional associations stimulate more issue-based discussion and, ultimately, action?

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***Submitted on 22Jan03 by Ivan Scheier, volunteerism consultant, New Mexico USA***

Throughout my time in the field, I felt our most grievous failure was disinclination to deal seriously and beneath the surface with the real problems organized volunteerism does have. So, hurrah for the hot topic! If it steps on some toes now and then, maybe that just makes us even more real in a world where there is indeed a lack of unanimity and a foggy presence of superficiality.

***Submitted on 15Jan03 by Sheila S. Pastore, Volunteer Coordinator, California***

I loved the article about United Way ([December 2002 Hot Topic](#)) and its impact on volunteer centers under its umbrella. It made me think about an issue I had not thought about before. I did not reply for the simple and common reason many of us volunteer coordinators have: too busy, and happily so.

***Submitted on 9Jan03 anonymously, Florida USA***

I also appreciate Hot Topics but sometimes it is hard to know how to respond to a hot topic when you live in a "small pond". Unless the response is pretty generic it could be hard to even give a response anonymously. I guess the good thing is that many of the people I have told about Energizeinc.com must be visiting the web site!

***Submitted on 9Jan03 by Jayne Cravens, UN Volunteers program, Germany***

I get weary of the same topics over and over again at conferences and online discussion groups for volunteer managers -- how to recruit, and to retain, and how to thank. There are controversial issues that need to be discussed! There are disagreements that need to be aired! And, for me, that's what the Hot Topic is for sometimes. There seems to be no other forum, online for face-to-face, for provocative topics, other than e-volunteerism.com. I'd rather have a tough question from Susan Ellis than, say, a funder, or someone who is hostile to volunteerism -- Susan confronts 'cause she cares. Sometimes the Hot Topic changes my mind, sometimes it pushes me to be even more of a believer in my alternative stand, but it always makes me think. And often, even makes me inspired.

***Submitted on 8Jan03 by Anne Hislop, Volunteer Development Scotland, Scotland***

I, like many others already posted, look forward to the Hot Topic each month. Last month's was of particular interest and was highlighted in training to stimulate discussion and thinking.

***Submitted on 7Jan03 by Rob Jackson, RNIB, London, England***

First off, as a man working in this field I love Miriam Leslie's suggestion that by being a volunteering

manager I may be reputed to be a "queen of nice". I don't think anyone has ever called me that, directly or by implication, before :-).

Like others, I look forward to the Hot Topic as a thought provoking and challenging start to each month. The professional exchange they encourage is vital to our continued development as a field and enables spin off discussions on other forums such as listservs and eGroups.

I would very much encourage people to step out of their comfort zones and post responses and, if they feel strongly enough about an issue, maybe even offer to write the Hot Topic themselves.

***Submitted on 7Jan03 by Kristin Floyd, Webmaster, Energize, Inc. Website***

As Webmaster of the Energize site (and the interviewer in this Hot Topic!), I thought I'd take a minute to respond to [Hilary Robert's](#) concern that we might screen the answers to the Hot Topic. Generally, I am the one who reviews all the Hot Topic responses and I post them before Susan has even had a chance to see them. There are three instances in which I don't immediately post the response:

*1. The response needs some editing to make it easier to understand.*

If I think the response needs clarification, I forward the response to Susan and see if she agrees. If she does, I send the response back to the individual for some editing.

*2. The response is off topic.*

If I think the response is off the topic, I forward the response to Susan and see if she agrees. If she does, I send an explanation to the individual who posted the response and see if they want to revise their answer to better respond to the Hot Topic.

*3. The response is sent anonymously.*

In general, our preference is not to accept anonymous posts. However, we realize that some subjects are indeed "hot" and being publicly identified may pose personal or political problems for the writer. So, we handle anonymous listings the same way as newspapers handle Letters to the Editor: We must know who is submitting the post, but we will honor a request for anonymity if the individual asks for it and if s/he explains the reason for it in the response. Even then, we reserve the right to limit the number of anonymous responses.

***Submitted on 7Jan03 by Karen Patton, Coordinator of Volunteer Services OSF St. Joseph Medical Center, Illinois/USA***

I agree with [Robin Albert's](#) suggestion regarding the topic of court ordered "community service." It would truly be a worthwhile issue to debate. Please consider it as a future Hot Topic!

***Submitted on 6Jan03 by Miriam Leslie, Volunteer Coordinator, Kids Kottage Foundation, Alberta, Canada***

I look forward to the Hot Topic. It stimulates my thinking and is a helpful tool to me professionally. I replied once and my response was posted. I look forward to this year's topics and lively responses!

I also agree about managers of volunteers having the "queen of nice" reputation. Not a totally bad thing but it's wonderful to have a forum to address valid concerns and issues and to be helped to creative and practical solutions. Happy New Year!

***Submitted on 6Jan03 by Robin Albert, Director, United Way of the Greater Seacoast Volunteer Action Center, NH***

I think a discussion around court ordered "community service" would generate interesting debate. Even calling this type of community restitution "community service" is an issue! Please excuse me if it's been a hot topic before, and I'm just not remembering.

***Submitted on 6Jan03 by Sue DeGolier, Past President of Minnesota Association for Volunteer Administration, Director of Volunteer Services at Ridgeview Medical Center, Waconia, MN***

I did not see the responses to the hot topic last month, but I did appreciate the Q & A format in response to what, apparently, was quite a discussion. One of my favorite sayings is, "There is wisdom in the council of many." Sometimes our thinking can get very narrow minded -- especially if we surround ourselves with people who think just like we do! It is good to expose ourselves to new ways of thinking about issues. I appreciate Susan because she is direct -- You do not have to guess where she stands. I prefer that to people who are two faced, seeming to agree with something, but using various methods to attack. Thank you Susan for providing an arena for discussion. I agree -- there is almost always more than one way to look at any issue. Sometimes we will not agree -- we can choose to respectfully disagree -- but hopefully that can be done after airing the issues. Then all sides can at least understand why the others think the way they do.

***Submitted on 2Jan03 by Hillary Roberts, Director, Project Linus, NJ,***

Happy New Year, Susan and staff at Energize Inc.,  
Last month's hot topic renewed my interest in returning to your website.

I found that particular hot topic timely and "spicy." A rare thing when we agree, however, it was immediately clear that the topic hit a nerve and will continue to be challenging for every Volunteer Center. As a result, I shared your website with several colleagues. It was the first time my post appeared on Hot Topics.

Frankly, I have found that the nonprofit community is so closely woven that even on an international exchange like Hot Topics, professionals are careful. Volunteer administrators wear many hats and clearly the postings emphasized how much "stepping on toes" plays a role in responses. I found your choice to make Hot Topics the "topic" indicative of how careful and professionally smart we all try to be.

In the past, I have sent posts, and they did not appear within the hot topic. In 2001 when I didn't agree with your perspective on IYV I was sent an email by your office privately. My post did not appear within the topic listing.

I was left then with the feeling that only "in agreement" arguments were considered for publication. Today, I was left hopeful.

***Susan replies:***

Hillary and I exchanged e-mails after we received this. My message to her was: "I am very concerned at your note that you have sent posts which did not appear online. I assure you that we have never edited anything for disagreement. Sometimes a posting is truly unclear to us and we will then ask the person to please clarify before we post. At any rate, I apologize if you felt censored in any way and assure you that was never our intent. In fact, I'd like to use your e-mail as a response this time."

The negative reaction from my staff to which Hillary referred occurred in 2001 and there is no way to track it down now. But she was willing to allow me to share this with everyone and said further: "As I said, today's hot topic post reminded me of my IYV experience and also gave me hope that criteria for replies have matured. Keep those hot topics comin'! Knowledge is power....and more often a source of pride."

Thanks for giving us another try, Hillary!

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