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Good Intentions Going Nowhere -- Again

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

October
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On September 27th, NBC News launched "[Education Nation](#)," a week-long examination of the state of American public schools and what concerned citizens can do to help. That morning, the television show *Today* gave American Express CMO John Hayes the opportunity to announce his company's "[Action for Education Challenge](#)." In a nutshell, if 100,000 people "pledge to do something – anything" for American schools by registering with this initiative by October 1st, American Express will give one million dollars to [DonorsChoose.org](#) (View the announcement [here](#)).

My first reactions? American public education can use all the help it can get, provided it is meaningful help. Having people promise to do "something" is like spinning a roulette wheel and hoping it lands on what's most needed. Further, a million dollars sounds like a lot of money to you and me, but it is a mere drop in the bucket to American Express and to public education. For comparison's sake, note that Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook, recently donated \$100 million to just one city's (Newark, NJ) public schools.

The official American Express press release says:

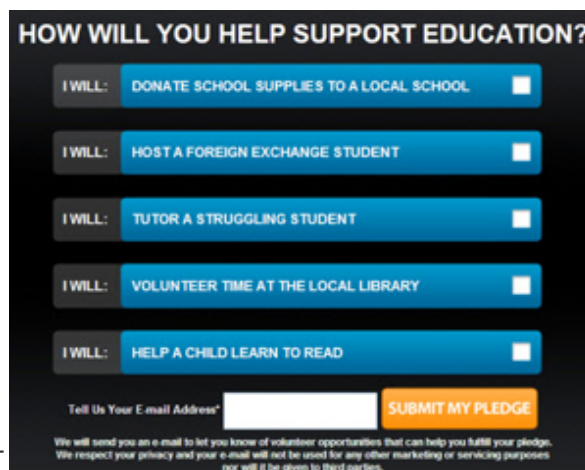
To further encourage involvement in the improvement of America's schools, American Express has partnered with HandsOn Network, the largest mobilizer of volunteers in the nation, to host volunteer events in New York, Los Angeles, Phoenix, Tampa and Cleveland. The projects will harness the efforts of close to 2,000 volunteers to help transform local schools and impact thousands of students.

Again, is 2,000 all that many volunteers, spread over five cities including NYC and LA? What's a "volunteer event"? What can this short burst of energy really do to "transform" schools? Why the hyperbole?

To the right is a screen shot of the "application" on the Action for Education Challenge [Facebook page](#) (whose "wall," by the way, was completely devoid of any posting at all on September 27, ten hours after the television launch – not even a welcome message). Look at the choices offered. Each is

excellent as a volunteer action to take, but all require first contacting an intermediary organization and 1) learning what the needs are and the qualifications for doing the role, and 2) undergoing some training and possibly even a background screening check. By the way, CMO Hayes did not tell listeners that they could only choose between his five options to help, with no way to write in any other idea.

I checked one of the boxes on the screen, submitted my e-mail address, and instantly received the following message:



HOW WILL YOU HELP SUPPORT EDUCATION?

I WILL: ☐ DONATE SCHOOL SUPPLIES TO A LOCAL SCHOOL

I WILL: ☐ HOST A FOREIGN EXCHANGE STUDENT

I WILL: ☐ TUTOR A STRUGGLING STUDENT

I WILL: ☐ VOLUNTEER TIME AT THE LOCAL LIBRARY

I WILL: ☐ HELP A CHILD LEARN TO READ

Tell Us Your E-mail Address:

We will send you an e-mail to let you know of volunteer opportunities that can help you fulfill your pledge. We respect your privacy and your e-mail will not be used for any other marketing or servicing purposes nor will it be given to third parties.

Members Project[®] from American Express thanks you for taking the pledge to help nurture growing minds. We'll let you know of opportunities to help enrich the quality of education in your area.

I suspect HandsOn Network is supposed to generate that list, since they are named as a partner, but buried or invisible in most of the publicity. The big unanswered question is whether any school or library or tutoring program has been told of this campaign and is ready (or willing) to accept an instant volunteer.

The only good thing to say is that now only 99,999 other people have to do the same thing to get that million dollars to DonorsChoose.org – which, I must stress, is a superb organization that I highly recommend to everyone as a form of micro-donating to specific projects in real, identified classrooms.

I truly believe that AmEx wants to do something valuable. And \$1 million is not to be sneered at (even if I just did). But someone could have helped them to create a campaign that was more likely to produce *results*, not hype. Why is no company ever challenged to exceed expectations in philanthropic work? It would cost the same million dollars to do this right. And I know this is true in other countries around the world, as well.

What do I mean? Well, maybe offer would-be volunteers the choice of five reasonable, do-able acts, such as give three *new* books to the school library (something the *library* chooses, not just outgrown family junk), take a child you know to get a library card and pick a book to borrow, contact a local literacy program to learn what the requirements are to become a tutor. I suspect people might actually fulfill this sort of pledge. Asking them to promise to tutor a student when they don't know where or how to get the chance to do that is simply misleading them. Worse, when they ultimately discover they cannot quickly fulfill their promise, volunteering in general gets a bad name for being bureaucratic.

At a minimum, people should be able to click for more information on exactly what the five offered choices *mean* and what will be expected from them to do each as a volunteer.

The Issue Is Bigger than American Express and NBC

If the usual pattern is followed, some of the responses to this Hot Topic will defend this project as a way to motivate new volunteers, generate enthusiasm, and give visibility to a real need. Fine. But just because a corporation dangles money in front of us, do we have to jump?

I am writing this Hot Topic out of end-of-my-rope frustration. Remember that this year began with the “Give a Day, Get a Disney Day” campaign, in which people could get a free ticket (worth \$72-94) to a theme park for volunteering just for a day. Please read my November 2009 Hot Topic that goes into more details about this, [Media Blitz vs. Media Noise: What Are We Trying to Accomplish?](#) Everything I said eleven months ago applies fully again. And – to no one’s surprise except Disney’s (who was trying to do something good while getting publicity) – the one million tickets were snapped up in two months and the campaign ended ten months early. Ask the agencies who jumped through hoops to get listed as authorized placement sites whether their effort, suddenly cut off, was worth it.

And in between we’ve seen initiative after initiative all pushing to “get people to volunteer” as if *that* was the problem. It is not. In fact, the very first Hot Topic I wrote when Energize launched this Web site in April 1997 was, [Is the challenge recruiting citizens to volunteer or making sure agencies are ready for volunteers?](#) The issues today are exactly the same, except that the Web and social media tools like Facebook are making things worse. It is amazingly easy to launch a viral pledge campaign today.

I want to know what *you* all think, but if I could wave a magic wand, here’s what I would try to do:

1. Harness the good intentions and cold cash of corporations who want to get involved in volunteering by challenging them to approach their campaigns as they would any other business venture. Do some focus groups with end users – both volunteers and agencies, ideally on the front line and not just at a national headquarters. Have a plan for evaluating results and have an exit strategy that does not leave everyone in the lurch.
2. Shine a light on what *already-engaged* volunteers are accomplishing. Heaven knows, they could use some recognition – especially those who have rolled up their sleeves for the long haul. The Disney project, for example, specifically gifted only new enrollees and did not permit agencies to reward long-time volunteers. I submit that showing others what volunteers are already doing will be a more effective recruiting mechanism to find serious new volunteers than empty calls to “any” action.
3. Put less emphasis on giving *incentives* to new volunteers and instead provide support to the organizations that have to do better at welcoming more volunteers. Ben and Jerry’s® can give away loads of ice cream or Starbucks® can give cups of coffee and a lot of people will enjoy

them for sixty seconds. Give fifty agencies cash to hire a director of volunteer involvement and the ripple effect goes on for a long time.

4. Urge HandsOn Network to be our advocate, even if it means saying no to some corporate ideas. Branded initiative after branded initiative serves no one and eventually won't even help the sponsoring company since the public is already bored by endless campaigns to "give an hour." Point the way to great projects that provide publicity while doing real good. (And this holds true for any country's national peak volunteering body.)

This is not a rant against American Express, NBC, Disney, or HandsOn. They are simply the most visible recent players in the competition to outdo others in generating superficial activity and buzz in the name of mobilizing service. In the process, such campaigns are misdirecting well-meaning volunteers and only adding more work for agencies, diverting effort from what's genuinely important.

Related Topics: [Employee Volunteering](#) | [Ethics](#) | [Motivation](#) | [Recruitment](#) | [Workplace Volunteering](#) | [Image of Volunteering](#) | [Trends and Issues](#)

Submitted 23 October by Gerald (Jerry) Pannozzo, CVA, Program/Grant Coordinator and Consultant, Kingsbrook Jewish Medical Center, New York, NY

Thanks for posting this topic. I noticed some key points: getting one's foot in the door of corporations before big projects are launched; respect for the work of volunteer resource managers and volunteers; incentives/material rewards for volunteering; what our professional associations and individual responses might be; etc. I will also respond to "October 12 from Anonymous."

When I co-taught a class at a NYC college (School of Public Affairs), I was surprised with the reactions from the grad students looking to be executive directors of nonprofits regarding corporate involvement with volunteering and non-profits. This small sample was "suspicious and cynical" regarding the motivation and involvement of corporations. The students were in their 20's, 30's, 40's and 50's.

I agree the partnerships need to begin before the launch of projects. I've experienced some differences in organizational cultures. For-profits often fix it with money and that is usually not an option for nonprofits. Some nonprofits have a consensus decision-making process (might involve the recipients of service) and this takes longer. The business community often moves at a different pace and is focused on their goals. We are currently faced with the concept that those with business experience can "fix it" and the nonprofits are lacking staff with such skills (another myth). An effectively managed nonprofit shouldn't feel inferior to the corporations.

Within the last ten years I've seen a greater interest in careers in nonprofits. I'm optimistic about those with new skill sets entering the field. In order to attract the most qualified volunteer administrators the salaries will need to increase. Where the department/the volunteer resource manager is within the organization chart is also important. He/She needs to be part of the nonprofit's general decision making process and discussions regarding corporate partnerships. Here in NYC

some of my colleagues have the respect of their leadership and boards. Sadly in many nonprofits it still remains a low level position. This leads to the revolving door of yet another new and inexperienced individual being given the responsibility of volunteer programs (and sometimes additional responsibilities). Fortunately my local professional associations (NYAVA and GNYADVS) have served those new to the field by providing professional development, networking, and mentoring opportunities.

My response to "October 12, from Anonymous": I want to share what many of us learned here in NYC (and beyond) from an amazing trainer, author, and practitioner. We do not "use volunteers" -- rather we engage them; empower them; incorporate them in the process; mobilize, authorize, (won't list all 40 terms). This is a shout-out to Jarene Frances Lee who taught me (and others) this standard "best practice" of volunteer resource management.

Submitted 12 October, Anonymously

I have read all the responses and must say that I am troubled. While it is true that many people volunteer to feel good about themselves that is not necessarily a bad thing. Several years ago I attended a week long volunteer training at which Susan presented. She said at that time volunteer management is similar to fund raising, it is people raising. She also said to take publicity where you can find it.

If a corporation is willing to put in the amount of money needed to bring awareness to the need for volunteers, why is it that volunteer managers are NOT willing to put in the work to make it streamlined and time efficient.

Stop complaining about those who volunteer for their own reasons and to get something from it. Each of the managers here is using the volunteers too. The difference is that your reasons are not for the good of the persons being served, it is for a paycheck. I challenge each of you Susan included to donate your salary to a local agency for six months and then say that a million dollars isn't good enough.

Get out there and find quick start opportunities and new methods. Stop buying certificates and pens and buttons and say thank you every day -don't skip one - to the volunteers who work with you. I for one am happy that corporations and celebrities use their voice since so few of us do.

Submitted 8 October 2010 by Glenna Obie, Manager of Presidents (volunteer) Council, Intermountain Children's Home, Helena, Montana US

National "volunteer initiatives" are non-starters. They suck up a lot of mis-directed energy and leave disappointment and confusion in their wake. Volunteerism is, by nature, LOCAL in scope, need and execution. American Express and others need to encourage people to seek to volunteer at local non-profits and agencies where they can be quickly be trained, organized and mobilized for local needs.

Submitted 8 October 2010 by Jayne Hench, Volunteer Services Coordinator, Montgomery Parks Dept, Montgomery County, MD USA

Another AMEN from me. I saw the Disney promotion coming a mile away but jumped in anyway so as not to seem like a buzz kill (and to peek in at the current goings on in the "volunteerism movement").

I guess the issue for me becomes - can I continue to steer my ship in the right direction with all the Sirens singing on the sea? (Too obscure a reference?) IE - are these corporate promotions simply a distraction or are they negatively affecting agencies that seek to provide mission critical services through the effective engagement of volunteers? Are we clever enough to help maneuver these promotions into opportunities?

I am going to try - while I keep sailing ever forward!

Submitted 7 October 2010 by Robin, Director, Volunteer Center, NH, US

One detail-oriented beef with AmEx Members project campaign - when you do go to the site to check out volunteering, you can enter your zip code. BUT - the search engine being used is VolunteerMatch.org which is limiting. If AmEx is spending all this money on the campaign, why don't they know about the All for Good search engine (used at www.serve.gov) that pulls volunteer ops by zip from a variety of reputable sources. Volunteer Solutions, 1800Volunteer, Corporation for National & Community Service, etc. Why not give potential volunteers the choices they need.

Submitted 6 October 2010 by Crystal, Los Angeles, CA USA

Can I just say amen! to Susan? And DJ, I love your passion but yes, it's that hard or it would've been done already.

The tutor a child or teach a child to read are the ones that drive me to drink, as if it's such a lovely idea I can just pop by and start doing that tomorrow (and yes, I've had people that think that - the Obama mentoring one from a few years ago comes to mind).

The reading program process is very time consuming (background, tb test, school/child matching) for the 3 different reading programs I work with and I rarely have someone who follows all the way through even when I make it as simple as I can (which is not very, it's still a lot of bureaucratic paperwork).

I guess the question is, for the 1 out of 100 that respond to a campaign like this and actually end up being a tutor, it is worth it? Would "we" have found that volunteer if the campaign hadn't been done? Food for thought.

Submitted 6 Oct 2010 by Don Rhodes, Don Rhodes & Associates Limited , Advocate, Omakau, New Zealand

I am currently directing the after-effects of my 'Angry Pills' against the PR- industry.....and I suspect much of what you are saying points right in their direction. I would be amazed if they did not have their 'professional' fingers in this pie. In New Zealand we are having a flood of PR where

organisations simply refuse to accept any wrong-doing. Did they not learn that a genuine apology works wonders amongst the great unwashed. Cheers. Keep up your thoughtful contributions.

Susan replies to two postings, 6 Oct 2010

Glad that we're generating some discussion here, both with me and among the responders. Thanks to Casey, who posted on Oct. 4th, for taking me to task for blithely suggesting someone "take a child to get a library card" when, in fact, some libraries may not permit "any" adult to do so. I fell into the same trap I criticized AmEx for: suggesting something without research. I apologize. My real point, of course, was to narrow the recommended actions to things that are do-able, *after* checking them out.

Thanks to DJ for his long post below. I agree with everything you say. FYI, at the moment, we in the United States do not have a viable national professional association that is doing any public advocacy and I mentioned HandsOn Network in the essay because they are supposed to be our "peak body." What I wanted to pick up from your comments, however, is the urging to *individual* volunteer program managers to write letters, make phone calls, talk to their local media, etc. whenever they want to express professional concern. I'm lucky enough to have this public forum. But anyone can take action as you did with the Australian bank. Right on!

Submitted 5 Oct 2010 by [DJ Cronin](#), Volunteer Manager Advocate, Brisbane Australia

I take your point Susan. As with so many of your Hot Topics you get to the heart of the matter and tell it as it is. You question, you hold initiatives up for inspection and you shine a light on areas that need to be examined more closely.

Personally I thought the Disney Day was a great idea. To me in far off Australia it seemed to generate an awful lot of interest and I thought that couldn't be a bad thing for volunteering. However you have pointed out some valid concerns as you have with this initiative.

But I have to call a spade a spade here as I am want to do. Who really is at fault for the good intentions going nowhere? Rather than apportion blame to the corporate world for utilising their cash in this way maybe we should look at why and how we as a sector have failed to educate corporates and engage them in more meaningful ways! Who can help AmEx to create a campaign that was more likely to produce results, not hype? Who can challenge companies to exceed expectations in philanthropic work?

You state that the issue is bigger than American Express and NBC. I say that the issue isn't them at all. The issue is us! Whether we are volunteer managers, peak bodies for volunteering, individuals interested in volunteerism - the entire volunteerism sector. We simply don't have a strong enough voice. Our voice is simply not there when these initiatives are being muted. What is the process of such matters and who is involved in the consultation on such matters. Who is the voice for volunteerism in the US? Who is your peak body? Who represents the voice of volunteer management in the US? Do both bodies work together for the common good of both groups they represent?

How strong is the consultative process between community organisations, The Volunteerism sector, Corporatism, the Volunteer Management sector and indeed Government. When one comes up with a bright idea do they consult with the others? Judging by various hot topics and debates and forums worldwide this process doesn't seem to be strong. Who's not talking to who and why? Is there certain politics keeping us apart? People may say I have the wrong end of the stick but if so why these debates? Why these Hot topics?

Recently a Major bank in Australia ran a great series of TV ads on volunteering. This bank sponsors volunteering in different ways. I wrote to them commending them and encouraged them to look at investing in volunteer management either by being a corporate sponsor of International Volunteer Managers Day, providing cash for scholarships for volunteer management training, providing finance for our professional body in Volunteer management to assist in various ways.

My point? I did this as an individual volunteer manager. They replied they would look into some suggestions. Imagine us unifying! Imagine having a strong voice. Imagine if we could seriously lobby? Who is doing this?

We don't need a magic wand Susan. We need a stronger more unified voice. I agree with Kristen McHenry who stated in a response to your Hot Topic "This is a great discussion, but we are preaching to choir talking about it here." Exactly Kristin! Voices within our echo chambers will just bounce off each other and go nowhere! Let's talk about who should be representing who and who should be the voice. Let's make our representative bodies accountable whether they be purporting to represent volunteer management or volunteering. And then let's speak with a unified voice that actually makes people hang on a minute when we say "Now, hang on a minute there!" It can't be that hard surely.

Submitted 5 Oct 2010, Anonymously

As a volunteer program coordinator for a large state agency that will report more than 90,000 volunteer hours this year it is a relief to see that others in similar positions share my frustration with these types of promotions. That is what they are... promotions. I felt horrible apologizing to volunteers for the fiasco created by Disney's Give/Get promotion. I regret the time I spent learning about, and signing up for, a program that we ultimately weren't able to participate in due to the flawed program structure and limited number of available tickets.

I do respectfully disagree with the previous comment about volunteer motivation. In my experience, no one volunteers for purely altruistic reasons. That expectation of your program participants can be very limiting to your program. Many folks DO volunteer to help fill a program need. They do so because it makes them feel good. The good feeling is the reward that motivates them. Volunteer opportunities should be mutually rewarding. Volunteers who aren't internally motivated tend to burn out quicker and at much higher rates.

I prefer to remain anonymous as I do not want my personal comments and opinions to in any way reflect the opinions of the agency for which I work.

Submitted 5 Oct 2010 by Cindy, Volunteer Coordinator, Boise, ID USA

I'd really like to see more focus on building nonprofit organization capacity for volunteers. So many like ours struggle with scheduling large numbers of volunteers, with expectation that they are being tracked, thanked and tended automatically - the technology is available, but the reality is that many volunteer coordinators work with very basic, manual tools. Perhaps a computer, with Excel & Outlook. When is the last time you heard of a grant specifically for scheduling software? With limited staffing and scheduling capacity, the sudden influx of well-meaning individuals can be overwhelming and frustrating to a small-staffed volunteer program.

Submitted 4 Oct 2010 by Casey

I just want to re-emphasize the importance of contacting the organization you wish to help BEFORE showing up and expecting something. I am fortunate to be the VC for a science museum and work at my local county library. I work very hard to match volunteers with the best "fit" possible for the person and the museum. I hate having to turn people away who want to start right then and there. For example, parents who drop their kids off during the summer to volunteer because they need something to do. That situation never ends well for anyone and causes me to lose a potential volunteer, as well as lead to bad word-of-mouth. Nobody wins. Additionally, I caution against this "just do something" policy without prior contact with the organization. Your suggestion to bring a child you know to get a library card is an excellent example. At our library, only the parent or legal guardian can obtain a library card for children under age 14. If the library has to refuse, you get frustrated, the child gets disappointed and learns that it may not be worth it to try. Again, nobody wins.

Submitted 1 Oct 2010 by Kristen McHenry, Outreach & Volunteer Services Manager, Bellevue, WA USA

"Give fifty agencies cash to hire a director of volunteer involvement and the ripple effect goes on for a long time." Yes!

Volunteerism is an easy go-to for big corporations to latch onto when they want to look socially responsible - it's non-controversial, it's feel-good, and it's easy to conjure impressive-sounding numbers out of thin air without any actual evaluation for effectiveness or impact - and without ever having to think beyond the PR campaign itself. It seems to be "good enough" to simply to toss up a pledge form or shoot a few celebrity-driven TV spots, then sit back and wait for the positive publicity to pour in. I totally share your concerns that a first-time volunteer signing up for this campaign could be discouraged from ever volunteering again when they come up against a slow response, confusion, and bureaucracy because of total lack of communication and coordination with the same agencies this campaign is supposedly "helping."

I'm not sure what the solution to this sort of thing is, but I think all of Susan's ideas are spot-on. I also think that it's fair to fight back by making our thoughts known directly to these corporations when they start these campaigns up. This is a great discussion, but we are preaching to choir talking about it here. I think we need to get Susan's missives and our points of view as director of volunteers out

there to each one of these corporations, and start educating them about how they can use their time and money more effectively. If they are going to co-opt volunteerism for their own PR agendas, then we have every right to ask them to maximize their impact.

Submitted 1 Oct 2010 by N. Rusin, Youth Volunteer Coordinator, PLNJ - Blankie Depot, Keyport/NJ USA

Since 2001, our organization has been championing service in the classroom. 45,000 NJ students have come through our service learning model and today, in my email box I received this charity campaign:

Kick that mid-morning or early afternoon slump to the curb with a gooey, chewy chocolate chip cookie break. Today, Oct. 1, from 10 am through 2 pm, Great American Cookies stores across the country will be giving away FREE Original Chocolate Chip cookies to help kick off their Reading is SWEET: 2010 National Book Drive program. But if you can't make it, they have another sweet surprise. Throughout the month of October, you can snag a free cookie of your choice (you MUST try the Peanut Butter Supreme!) by donating a new or gently read book at your local Great American Cookies store. The books will be collected and donated to public libraries and charities in your area.

What immediately grabs my attention is a campaign specifically geared to young people. What concerns me is youth volunteers being cultured to associate giving with getting. Young people who receive their information online through social networking sites, teen magazines, Twitter and corporate advertising. Or product ads aimed to sell to through incentives under the guise of volunteerism. Young people have neither the experience or point of reference to understand the structure of volunteerism.

I've been in enough schools to note that far too many treat volunteering like a contact sport with trophies expected and press releases submitted before the recipient charity even returns to their office. Volunteerism served as pop culture worries me. No one is knocking the philanthropic generosity of corporate America but the marriage of corporate giving and the mission of charities is turning into a cereal commercial. Sadly, as a result of "sound bite" announcements focused more on incentives, the public is missing out on the culture and longevity needed to operate a non profit organization.

Submitted 1 Oct 2010, Anonymously

As a person managing over 1000 volunteers each year, this article hits so close to home. And it certainly makes me feel like I am not in this frustration alone. While I know that volunteering can and usually does make the volunteer feel good, that is NOT THE GOAL! Fulfilling the missions of our agencies, serving those who need help, meeting the community's needs- these things are the goals!

I have seen a huge shift in the last 6 years from most people volunteering to meet the needs to most people volunteering to feel good, get service hours and get valuable experience that might translate into a job opportunity. While we still have quite a few altruistic, motivated, passionate, dedicated volunteers, the time it takes for me to manage those who are in it for themselves (and thus will not be

long-term volunteers) takes away from the time I have to nurture and grow the other volunteers who are willing to stick around and meet the needs.

I believe that the intention behind these high-profile marketing-driven calls for volunteerism is good. I value volunteers and volunteerism. But the results will be short-lived or negative at the agency level without first making sure that agencies are equipped to handle additional volunteers and finding out what the true needs are before signing people up!

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