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Short Attention Spans versus Long-term Causes

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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Volunteers often engage in causes that require an exceptionally long-term perspective. We are unlikely to end hunger, cure disease, or achieve world peace in our lifetimes, yet some people are willing to work toward such goals one day at a time. Even more people commit to causes that might be solved sooner, but definitely not in a few weeks or months.

Yet, we live in a world of very short attention spans. Quick-and-easy is the goal of most products we buy. Instantaneous global communication is the expectation. And, in volunteering, single days of service and micro-volunteering attract much attention.

How can we reconcile the long-term demands of most causes with the “what's-new-today?” push of media attention? How do we continue to recruit the volunteers we need for the long haul?

The Attention Cycle

Earth Day 2011 (April 23), the 41st since its start in 1970, saw worldwide activities to urge people to conserve, recycle, and generally pay attention to the environment. It's remarkable that this cause has endured in popularity for so long and, in terms of volunteering, protecting nature remains the most popular focus of community service projects for those under age 25. But a number of research polls in the last year, in several countries, show that public interest in environmentalism is in decline, possibly as jobs and the economy take greater priority.

In my career, I have seen the rise and fall of a wide range of issues, marked by intensive media stories (news items and human interest features), large grants to fund projects, a flurry of subsequent activity, and then replacement in the public eye by a new issue. Eventually, the earlier cause disappears entirely from public view – the issue or need does not go away, just the attention paid to it. Some call this the “cause du jour” syndrome. Do you remember when these issues were at the top of the charts?

- “crack babies”

- school dropout rates
- adult illiteracy
- AIDS
- hurricane destruction in the Gulf and in Haiti

How do you get your community to give time and energy your organization if it isn't the current popular cause, is rarely noticed, or is so familiar it seems dated?

No Quick Fixes

Every natural disaster evokes spontaneous volunteering, fueled by media images. Yet the time that help is most needed is in the weeks and months *after* the crisis, when the long, slow process of rebuilding is no longer on the radar screen of most of the world.

The type of volunteering with the greatest potential for significant accomplishment requires long-term commitment – even dogged determination. Most change is incremental. There are no cameras around, no tee-shirts with corporate logos, and no catered lunches. How can you compete with sexier “days of service” or this month's visible cause?

Similarly, when so many are coping with economic crisis, how can you interest new volunteers in supporting the arts, youth sports, or anything not addressing human services?

Challenging People to Do Something Hard

First, we should celebrate the many volunteers already deeply involved in an incredible range of work that some see as old fashioned and others don't see at all. Then, we need to take pride in bucking the tide of quick-and-easy. I think it's important to be very clear in recruitment efforts that:

- You are *not* offering anything easy or quick. Instead, you are asking for hard work and stamina. (But you will make it enjoyable, help volunteers to learn new things, and make friends.)
- You can be flexible in many ways to find the right placement for a volunteer, but people who simply want a day of service every once in awhile should look elsewhere.
- You need a generous commitment of time and attention because that's what it will take to achieve the change wanted. (But you will do your level best not to waste any volunteer's time.)
- All volunteers who join you will see that their efforts matter, but in small steps or perhaps to only a few people at a time. (But like the proverbial starfish being tossed back into the ocean, it will make a difference to *that* one.)

However, you *are* competing with the causes du jour, so you also need to explain what makes your mission relevant today, even if it has been around for a long time. Make your cause come alive with:

- **Data:** how many and what types of people are affected right now, in this community? Think about what other statistics you have that might be useful. How many people have you already helped? How many volunteers are working on this cause already?
- **Personal stories:** Put a face on your cause (without violating confidentiality), just as the media focus a huge crisis on individuals touched by it. Help a prospective volunteer understand the human element of your work. Tell stories about the individuals affected and the volunteers who are having an impact.
- **History:** Acknowledge that your issue has been around for a while; not because nothing has changed, but because change takes time. Use a progress timeline to show what has changed over the years because of volunteer engagement. Point to benchmarks that show previous effort deserves continuity to keep making a difference. If you don't know the history of volunteers for your cause and live in the United States, my book, [By the People: A History of Americans as Volunteers](#), might provide some information you can use.
- **Surprises:** What are assumptions about your work that you can disprove? Counteract stereotypes by explaining the range of people already involved in volunteering with you and what they are doing.

Remember you either need to compete directly with the cause du jour or show your relation to it. Is your work connected even if it's not immediately obvious? For example, after Hurricane Katrina, local arts organizations and libraries made the case that they affected the *quality* of life, which was a part of rebuilding the community.

Use all such approaches in your recruitment efforts and materials. Also, make sure to keep your active volunteers abreast of the same information. You don't want them to begin wondering if the cause du jour is more worthy of their time than your cause.

If yours *is* the cause du jour, make the most of it! Don't miss the opportunities that come from being in the public eye. But if you are fighting to be seen, rise to the challenge – and expect the right volunteers to respond.

Have you been the subject of media attention that then moved on? How did you handle it?

Are you dealing with issues that seem hard to interest the public about? What are your recruitment secrets?

What's your opinion of the "cause du jour" syndrome?

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Submitted on 12 May 2011 by Kristen Hoplin, St. Paul, MN

These are great tips! I work for an organization that has been in operation for 26 years so many of these causes have come and gone, but our need to serve the elderly remains and will only increase. It's hard to maintain momentum and keep your issue in the spotlight. I think it's important to keep our expectations of volunteers high. I also try to show volunteers how much their help is appreciated by our clients, not just our staff--as the post mentions, if people know they are making even a small difference to a small group of people it can really motivate them.

Submitted on 04 May 2011 by Nedra Cutler, CVA, Director of Volunteers, Meals On Wheels, Inc., Fort Worth, USA

I work for an agency that utilizes volunteers one day a week on-going to deliver meals to the homebound. I have set up to recruit groups to volunteer and they rotate their delivery within their group. They only help one time a month which seems to be the desire but we can still get the meals delivered daily. You have to recreate your volunteer jobs and be creative.

Submitted on 02 May 2011 by Annie Heart, , Family Bridge Shelter, Hillsboro, Oregon, USA

We need volunteers who will commit to volunteer every week/month at the same time. This is a challenge - not many of us can do this. When things come up we hope that volunteers will find someone else to replace themhowever we require a training and that new volunteers shadow at least once. Open to suggestion.

Submitted on 02 May 2011 by Amber Smith, President, , Raleigh, NC, U.S.A.

This dilemma is one thing that has caused the organization I serve with to re-evaluate and revamp our volunteer management practices. As a volunteer connection agency/center, we aim to get people involved with nonprofits that need them, but those nonprofits often need longer term support more than they need short-term 'spurts' of volunteer energy. To this end we've devised a new program model that we hope will encourage longer term volunteering while capturing some of the appeal of the way short-term projects are framed. Hope to share more once our new program is up and running!

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