

[News and Hot Topics](#) » Three Things Volunteer Managers Can Learn from the Social Media Revolution

Three Things Volunteer Managers Can Learn from the Social Media Revolution

By [Rob Jackson](#)

May
2012

For the last year the most popular presentation I've delivered at conferences, seminars and training events has been one which looks at how our changing world is re-shaping volunteering and what organisations can do to respond. A key part of the presentation looks at social media and the growth of Internet use, the former more recently illustrated by the addition of the excellent video, "[The Social Media Revolution 2011](#)".

To me there are three main points made in the video that I think volunteer managers should consider:

#1: 50% of mobile internet traffic in the UK is for Facebook. Imagine what this means for bad customer experiences.

People are [much more likely](#) to tell others about bad customer service than good customer service. With social media, it gets a whole lot easier to tell people if you have a bad experience and, when you consider that [the average Facebook user has 190 friends](#), it gets a whole lot easier to tell a great many more people than before.

Think about this in terms of volunteering.

A volunteer named Jennifer offers her time to support your organisation. She turns up but you aren't ready for her – maybe there isn't a free desk and computer for Jennifer to do her work, or perhaps she's ignored by the paid staff. Jennifer leaves annoyed and frustrated.

In the past, Jennifer would have had to wait until the next time she saw or spoke to her friends to share her anger and frustration, by which time she would have calmed down a bit. Today Jennifer can get straight onto her smartphone and share that fresh, hot anger and frustration with everyone she is connected with via Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and any other social network to which she belongs. Not only have you lost Jennifer as a volunteer, but your reputation has been damaged amongst all her

online friends, people who can then re-post Jennifer's negative experience to their own networks with a simple click of a mouse or tap of a screen.

Even more concerning is that people could be doing this before they even start volunteering for you. Why? Because they never got a response to their enquiry about volunteering, or because it took so long to hear back that they already moved on. In the UK, 28 days used to be an acceptable period to wait for the delivery of goods bought on the phone or by mail order. In just a few short years that changed to the point where we expect delivery in less than 24 hours. Have the customer service standards of our volunteer programmes followed suit or are we still living in the past?

As Jayne Cravens once said, "With online tools, it's never been easier to disappoint large numbers of potential volunteers -- and with online tools, those disappointed people can let a lot of people know just how frustrated they are [with] your organisation". And remember, a happy customer tells a friend; an unhappy customer tells the world. Don't give them a reason to do so.



Quick Tip: Create automatic response messages for voicemail and e-mail that clearly state when you expect to respond more fully. People will be far more understanding if they know it might take you a couple of days to get back to them rather than it being left to guesswork if/when they'll get a reply.

#2: 90% of consumers trust peer recommendations; 14% trust advertisements.

Word-of-mouth has been and always will be the most popular form of volunteer recruitment. It comes out top of the list in all kinds of research into volunteering and volunteer recruitment. Similarly, the top reason people give for *not* volunteering is often that somebody didn't ask them to.

Yet I think volunteer managers tend to be quite down on word-of-mouth as a way of reaching out to potential new volunteers. Today we seem to be striving for new and exciting ways to recruit volunteers other than personal peer-to-peer recommendations even though most people would trust the latter (and act accordingly) rather than that jazzy new poster you've just had designed.

Many commercial organisations would kill for the kind of recommendations volunteers can provide. They know that for the millions of dollars spent on advertising, having users of their products enthuse about them to their friends is much more powerful than anything else.

As Australian colleague [DJ Cronin recently suggested](#), maybe it is time we re-discovered the power of word-of-mouth recruitment, especially in this social media age where it is quicker and easier than ever for friends to share with others.

Some wonder if the social media networks we all have now negate some of the lack of diversity that is often cited as a weakness in word-of-mouth recruitment. My own experience is that I have a much more diverse network of 'friends' online that I did in the real world 15 years ago. So, perhaps with the right approach, word-of-mouth recruitment done via social media can be a great way to diversify your volunteer team as well as gain the support of new people.

Quick Tip: Put together some simple resources to give to your existing volunteers so that they can share with others about your organisation and the ways volunteers can support it. For example, provide suggested text that volunteers can customise for e-mails or posts to social media. If appropriate, be specific in saying what kinds of donated skills or talents you seek. It is much easier for volunteers to recruit others if they know that's what you want them to do and you support them doing it.

#3: Generations [Y](#) and [Z](#) consider e-mail passé; some universities have stopped distributing e-mail accounts.

Just as many volunteer managers are getting comfortable with e-mail and the Internet, technology is evolving at an ever quicker rate. What was once done in print is now done online; where once an e-mail would do, now it's a tweet.

The expectations of volunteers are changing in many ways, including how we communicate with them. This is true of almost all volunteers, but especially of young people.

Someone told me last year about a volunteer programme working with young people that posts a thank-you message to the volunteer's Facebook timeline immediately after their shift finishes. No more waiting for Volunteers' Week and a certificate, there's a recognition message sent to you on your way home -- one that is public and can be re-posted out to your friends!

Yet time and again I come across organisations whose IT policies prevent staff from accessing social media and/or have draconian rules about who is allowed to post online and what they are allowed to say. If the expectation of our volunteers is for communication and interaction via social media, such locked-down policies will make it increasingly hard to effectively run a volunteer programme in the 21st century.

How is your organisation and/or volunteer programme online? Do you have a Facebook or Twitter or Google+ account? Do you know which would be best for you? Do you collect from volunteers details of their social media profiles or is it still just phone/mobile, snail mail and e-mail?

Quick Tip: Recruit what Susan Ellis calls ‘cyber deputies.’ These are volunteers who perhaps have more knowledge or comfort with social media than you. Give them a clear brief about what you want them to achieve – online recruitment, setting up an online peer-support group for volunteers, etc. – and then let them do their thing.

So, over to you.

- *What are your thoughts on social media and volunteer management?*
- *Have you embraced social media to engage with current and prospective volunteers? How? What success have you had and what lessons have you learnt?*
- *What's stopping you from doing so?*

Let's hear your thoughts.

Related Topics: [Children and Teens](#) | [Recruitment](#) | [Social Media and Internet Technology](#) | [Volunteer Resources Manager, Role of](#) | [Trends and Issues](#)

Submitted on 09 May 2012 by Elizabeth Tyrwhitt, Volunteer Coordinator, Centre 454, Ottawa ON, Canada

This is a great article. I have forwarded to our Communications lead on our Management Board, members of our communications committee, our Executive Director and my manager.

Submitted on 08 May 2012 by Colin Thacker, Owner, Thacker Volunteer Management Services, North Bay, Ontario, Canada

There is all kinds of possibilities connected with social media. However, social media needs to be part of a package – balance to getting the “word” out, it shouldn't be a stand alone technique.

Let me give you an example; the Rotary Club I belong to holding a Mayor's Gala dinner and auction to raise monies for a children's water park. Social media outlets such Facebook, Twitter and Linkin play a key role in the marketing of this project, so does posters, PSAs, word-of-mouth and other promotional activities. Social media outlets has an enormous capacity to reaching out to people however it needs to be part of a marketing package.

Submitted on 08 May 2012 by Donna Lockhart, Consultant – Volunteer Engagement, The RETHINK Group, Ontario, Canada

Thanks, Rob for sharing your thoughts and ideas. I have been sharing with managers for years the power of testimonials from existing/happy volunteers but have yet to see any evidence of use. Your article sparked for me another thought about this “asking feature” to recruit volunteers. Fundraisers for many years were challenged with the ‘ask” for money...I wonder what they might share with

managers of volunteers about making both the 'case and the ask' easier since this is the preferred method of recruiting. We can learn from others I think this is an example. The other challenge with social media and the changing nature of volunteers is that the work of managers has significantly increased since they now may have to deal with different age groups differently etc., but have not been given support/resources to do so. Instead of engaging a generic group of people, where one method of communication worked most of the time, managers have to have and use different tools for many different people.

Submitted on 04 May 2012 by DJ Cronin, Blogger, <http://djcronin.blogspot.com>, Australia

Thanks Energize for continuing to promote great authors on emerging trends and thanks Rob for an insightful piece that I plan to share widely!

Submitted on 05 May 2012 by Wendy Moore, Volunteer Coordinator, Brisbane, Australia

I agree with you Rob that Social Media can spread bad customer experiences exponentially.

As you suggest Rob and DJ, Word of Mouth has always been a great way to recruit volunteers.

I am not yet convinced that a thank you post to a Facebook timeline will ever replace a genuine, heartfelt, personal, face to face, thank you at the end of a shift.

A more detailed response to this hot topic can be found on my blog on the following link.

<http://wendy-moore.blogspot.com.au/2012/05/social-media-to-tweet-or-not-to-tweet.html>

Submitted on 03 May 2012 by Georgean Johnson-Coffey, Coordinator of Volunteer Services, Eckhart Public Library, Auburn, IN, USA

Point #3 on email being passe for young people is especially significant.

Submitted on 03 May 2012 by Tom McKee, President, Volunteer Power, California, USA

Great article, Rob. Loved the way you gave very specific expamples for each point. Very helpful.

Submitted on 02 May 2012 by Esis, National Coordinator Volunteer Program, Vision Australia, Victoria, Australia

I work for a national NFP in Australia and it is nearly impossible to obtain buy-in from the people that make the decisions regarding volunteer management and social media – it is last on their list. Thank you for this article though – it is very thought provoking and I will certainly use it to add weight to my discussion.

Submitted on 02 May 2012 by Lisa Coble, Director, Newport Hospital, Newport, RI, USA

Thank you for shining a light on the new way to communicate, recruit and recognize volunteers. Good insight and detail on what is happening in our world today and how to stay current in our messaging.

Submitted on 02 May 2012 by Rosemary Byrne, Director of Volunteer Resources, St. Mary's Hospital Center, Montreal, Canada

Working in an institutional setting, it is so difficult to adapt. Planning for a Facebook page for my department ground to a halt, because of PR preoccupations with reputation control.

PRIVACY STATEMENT

Energize, a program of Adisa <https://adisagroup.com/>

Follow us   

Copyright © 1997-2025