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Why Social Media Is Not the Cure-All for Building Volunteer Engagement

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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Each month I try to identify some emerging trend in volunteerism to discuss here, but sometimes, as the song says, “everything old is new again.” That is very true when it comes to volunteer recruitment. Everyone is buzzing about social media and climbing the learning curve of sites from Facebook to Google+ Hangouts, hoping to “go viral” and grab the attention of prospective new volunteers. That’s great (and sometimes successful), but the medium is not the message.

Let’s review the fundamentals. No matter what kind of organization you represent, volunteer role you need to fill, or type of volunteer you seek, you will vastly increase your chances of finding the best candidates if you do the following when you recruit:

1. Be as specific as possible in defining what the new volunteer will do—and honest about your expectations (such as how long a commitment you want).
2. Design the volunteer work in such a way that will appeal to the type of person you most want to attract (for example, skilled people want to be challenged, not do the most low-level assignment).
3. Make sure you get your message to places where the people you most want are most likely to see it.
4. Don’t confuse publicity (a *notice* that you need help) with issuing an invitation to get involved (*asking*) that each person will recognize as meant for them.

In all honesty, you should not even try to recruit until you have fully completed 1 and 2 above, since a vague “please help us” sort of appeal rarely produces great volunteers. So let’s take a closer look at 3 and 4.

Where to Put Your Message

In case you haven't noticed, we live in a world that bombards us continually with messages vying for our attention, always designed to get us to *do* something, especially to buy something. Most of us have become expert at ignoring these commercials, beyond irritation that yet another ad is blinking or flashing at us in the corner of the TV or computer screen. Volunteer recruitment notices simply add to the noise.



This is equally true on most social networking sites, with millions of this-minute messages (and now paid promotions) pushing down messages from five minutes ago. Unless it's a direct message to one of your followers, you can't guarantee all of your followers will ever see a particular post and it may be long gone if they do not stay online continually. It's best to think of social media as an old-fashioned bulletin board: give specific directions on how to take action; use colorful images and flashy statements to attract attention to your post above all the other messages; and avoid text-heavy messages as people tend to glaze over and move on to something else...fast!

This is why online volunteer recruitment sites such as VolunteerMatch (and its counterparts around the world) are so useful: someone browsing the site is actually *seeking* information about volunteering. But even an intentional prospective volunteer must sift through many postings to find the few of true interest or "fit." We'll come back to this critical point in a moment.

You can become very successful at recruitment if you are able to brainstorm *where* you are most likely to find the *right* people – not just *people* – and where your message will not compete with thousands of others. In many cases this will result in a series of what I call focused "mini-campaigns," rather than a cattle call for anyone and everyone within a hundred miles.

This is easy to understand if you need one to three volunteers with a specific skill, such as coaching basketball. Why tell the world you need basketball coaches when you can instead find ways to get your request to people who really play or love the game? *Where?* Sites where basketball is already being played, sporting goods stores, athletic clothing stores, the local radio station that broadcasts the high school meets, etc.

But what if you need people with great personalities and dedication, rather than a specific skill set? Then you need to consider different ways of connecting. For example:

- If you match volunteers to older or younger clients as visitors or mentors, start with *each* client and figure out what that person's special interest might be. A hobby or favorite television show might do the trick – anything that would help start a conversation with an interested stranger. Then you can recruit specifically, such as a notice in a local antiques store: "Do you watch *Antiques Roadshow* every week without fail? Why watch it alone when you can watch it with someone who loves it too and would appreciate the company?" Or maybe a message on the Web site of a local car dealership or automobile supply store: "Can you identify every car on the

road in 10 seconds? So can one of our boys who would love to challenge you (and get help with homework).” And so on.

- Proximity can be a huge plus. If you are located in a city or town, when was the last time you intentionally aimed a recruitment campaign at the people who live or work across the street or around the corner? Just because they know your organization or facility exists, does not mean they know you are looking for volunteers or that you have something they might enjoy doing. The pitch begins with “Hi, Neighbor!”
- If you need volunteers to help serve breakfast, why not go to people who are wide awake at that time? Such as the nightshift workers of any nearby 24-hour employer who finish work at 7:00 a.m. (And in terms of competition, how many other messages about volunteering do you think they see near their time card clock?)

Grab the Right Audience Like Uncle Sam Did

The reason the World War I army recruiting poster of Uncle Sam saying “I Want You” was so successful was the fact that his eyes followed the viewer no matter where the person turned. Are your recruitment targets aware that your invitation to volunteer means *them*?

If you send out a recruitment notice in a newsletter, or even in a tweet, everyone knows that the same message will be read by all the other recipients on your list, not just them. So being specific really helps: “Avid reader and writer? Always meet deadlines? Wish this newsletter had more news-you-can-use? Apply to become our new Reporter-at-Large and contribute a 350-word column every 2 months.”

On social media sites such as Facebook, the impact of your invitation changes depending on its origin. You can send the “ask” from your organization’s page, which is not so personal and easier for individuals to ignore. Or, you can ask anyone with an existing user profile – such as current volunteers – to post the recruitment information to their pages, which increases the chance that their friends will feel a connection to the “ask.”

In general, for most organizations, shot-in-the-dark calls to anyone who is the friend of anyone else may not necessarily find the right volunteers to match your vacancies. But on the other hand, the far reach of social media may help you fill a unique position or generate an inquiry from someone totally unexpected and wonderful. And such interactive sites are also great places for current volunteers to share their experiences at your organization publicly and help others imagine what they might do, too.

Finally, let’s get back to that online volunteer opportunity registry posting. Are you competitive with all the other notices in your geographic area or under the keyword a prospective volunteer might search? Do you know? Go do a search as if you were looking for a placement and see what you think. Have you created a posting that is generic, bland, one-size-fits-all? Why, when you can post several notices at no extra charge, each focused in a different way? So write one for the odd time slot (we

really need someone on Sunday afternoons) or with an unexpected twist (lots of our residents speak Southeast Asian languages, do you?) – anything to stand out from the crowd and help someone connect to your invitation.

- *What do you think has or hasn't changed in the last decade or so about volunteer recruitment?*
- *How do you find the right people – where and with what tools?*

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Submitted on 11 March 2013 by Rose Duncan, Volunteer Coordinator, United Communities Southeast Philadelphia, Philadelphia, PA, USA

This has been very helpful. I must admit I have been using the "One size Fits All Model"

Submitted on 10 March 2013 by Colin Thacker, CEO, Thacker Volunteer Management Services, North Bay, Ontario, Canada

Social media was never meant to be a stand alone recruitment tool. From a best practice point of view, social media ought to compliment one's offline recruitment strategy.

At a recent workshop I delivered in Barrie Ontario on the impact of social media on volunteer program, I emphatically pointed out to participants not to abandon offline recruitment practices.

If one is using social media as a recruitment tool, the best practice that comes to my mind is to be a good story teller. The ability to tell appealing stories about your volunteer program paired with great pictures illustrating the story enables one to reach volunteers who you may not be seeing your offline messages.

Thank you Susan, I like the way you took a balanced approach to the entire concept of social media.

Submitted on 07 March 2013 by Jane Scripps, Manager of Volunteer Services, North Haven Hospice, Whangarei, New Zealand

Thank you Susan. Yes, let's bring a balanced view into volunteer recruitment. Social media definitely has its place and has been superb at spreading key messages to people who use texting to communicate. Here in NZ this is well documented by the actions of the Student Army who had such a positive impact on the clean up of Christchurch after the 2nd earthquake. However, volunteers are spread throughout age groups and we need to use a range of methods to communicate our message as appropriate to what we need. When the organisation has a strong and positive community profile with regular new users, such as the one I work for, it has opportunity constantly presenting itself.

The two most recent groups of volunteers have come from tertiary students specific to our area of work and migrants needing to a] improve their English and b] socialise into their new community.

Where we do need to become more innovative is how we consider our volunteer, their breadth of ability and experience and how our organisation and their contribution can be best partnered.

Submitted on 04 March 2013 by Volunteer Co-ordinator, Paisley, Scotland

Thank You - there is a voice of reason.

Social Media - instant in your face - sometimes superficial.

Volunteer recruitment and selection should be based on building solid relationships and reputation - not on flashing jingoism - facebook - social media - shallow blah.

Submitted on 01 March 2013 by Hillary Roberts, President, Blankie Depot/PLNJ Inc., Keyport/NJ, USA

[Also see Hillary's response to Rob's post](#)

How incredibly refreshing to hear social media is not the answer for everything. Sometimes it seems even a tech-savvy gal like me can feel like she's talking to a viral-brick wall when so many organizations and corporations have jumped in. I believe that too much of a good thing, dilutes the message and places your recruitment needs up against dozens of others anyway. Similar to headhunting, you cast a line and see what bites. We interview every candidate that contacts us before we throw a good catch back.

For fourteen years, we've recruited through VolunteerMatch, our own website application and word of mouth. Enhancements to those three include what comes immediately after a well written newspaper article appears, a press releases we send to a local magazine, placement in online newsletters, with professionals working in our field (quilting, knit & crochet), service learning projects coordinated by libraries and museums), events we plan and our financial reports. Every form of publicity we have used results in our telephone ringing and our email box filling.

We do not have a FB or Twitter account. We leave the social media buzz to our energized volunteers. Happy, well placed volunteers are all the social media your organization ever needs.

Today, we have a state network of 12,000 crafting for charity volunteers and collaborations with 20 US states, France and Canada. We proudly support more than 300 recipient facilities and have engaged 45,000 students in service projects since 1999.

All accomplished through the tried and true methods of recruitment: solid program development, welcoming communication and outstanding follow through.

Submitted on 01 March 2013 by Rob Jackson, Director, Rob Jackson Consulting Ltd, Grantham, UK

Thanks for another great Hot Topic, Susan. You are right, social media isn't going to change recruitment any more than the Web did - word of mouth is still the most popular way to get new volunteers, despite the Web being many years old. However, social media does have the potential to turn word of mouth into world of mouth, or maybe WOM2.0! As you suggest towards the end of your article, I think the real potential of social media in volunteer recruitment comes not from having another way of announcing our needs - just adding to the noise as you say - but from maximising the potential of two-way communication: of conversation, of peer recommendation and interaction. At a party, talking at someone all the time is not very social. Talking with them is. So, when we incorporate social media into our recruitment toolbox, we have to remember that it isn't there to give us another way to talk at people but to talk with them, building engagement and hopefully securing the support of their time.

Submitted on 01 March 2013 by Hillary Roberts, President, Blankie Depot/PLNJ Inc., Keyport/NJ, USA

Rob, social media may be a tool in our toolbox we need to rethink and reposition, but the world wide web (websites, blogs, email, webinars,e-groups-just to name a few) places a much bigger toolbox before all of us.

I am grateful that the Internet cuts down on the cost of communication and offers light-fast speed to address a letter or announcement, event or project. If I had to place a stamp on 12,000 thank you notes a year or 45,000 newsletters annually I wouldn't have a programs budget! So, let's be careful not to throw all forms of 21st century communication under the same banner.

From where I sit, the Web has made a 110% difference in our ability to reach our target audience, our recipient clientele and our funders (e-grants.

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