

ABSTRACT

Not-for-profit service firms depend upon volunteer employees for the success of their programs. This article offers a change in perspective—volunteer as customer instead of employee—to stimulate insights and provide recommendations about attracting and retaining volunteers. The volunteer is viewed as a customer, the service purchased is the volunteer experience, paid for in the currency of donated time and energy, and the not-for-profit service firm is seen as being in the business of designing, managing, communicating, and delivering a quality volunteer experience.

Volunteers as Customers: A Service Quality Perspective

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Countless nonprofit service providers in religious, educational, health, recreational, civic, social, political, and cultural pursuits depend upon the hard work and enthusiasm of volunteer employees for much of their success. Volunteers serve in various capacities and meet a wide variety of needs for nonprofit service agencies. The American Red Cross (1990, p. 1) notes,

[Volunteers] are considered central to the organization—not mere extensions of paid staff. Their jobs range from service and middle management to the highest echelons of leadership. They bring with them experience, skill, dedication, clout, passion, and an unparalleled ability to reach out to the American public.

Fortunately for nonprofit volunteer organizations, most Americans agree that volunteerism is a worthwhile and necessary pursuit. Of all adult Americans, 98.4

million (54%) log over 20.5 billion service hours annually (Gallup, 1990). President George Bush's "Points of Light" initiative has provided "official" visibility, encouragement, and recognition to the concept of volunteerism. Yet, the profile of the volunteer—traditionally white, middle-class, middle-aged, and female—is changing. Women who fit the "volunteer profile" are now part of the paid workforce, forcing nonprofits to learn to attract and retain a different kind of volunteer. The volunteer force of the 1990s will include employed men and women, retired persons, and teenagers, from diverse ethnic and economic backgrounds (Schindler-Rainman, 1990).

This article argues that to attract and retain these new volunteers, volunteer organizations must stop thinking about volunteers as employees and start thinking about them as *customers*. In the same way that for-profit firms provide goods

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and services that satisfy the wants and needs of their customers, so must non-profit volunteer organizations determine 1) what constitutes a quality volunteer experience and 2) how to effectively deliver a quality volunteer experience.

VOLUNTEER AS CUSTOMER

What do we mean by the "volunteer as customer"? Specifically, volunteer organizations must recognize that they provide services not only to their constituents, but to another group of customers, their volunteers. Hospitals provide not only medical services to patients, but provide volunteer experiences for volunteer candy-strippers, gift shop employees, and cafeteria workers. The Y.W.C.A. provides more than services to women in the local community in the form of day care, classes, and job assistance; it provides a volunteer experience for volunteer secretaries, teachers, and day care workers. In marketing terms, the service received, the *intangible product*, is the volunteer experience. The *price* paid for the volunteer experience is donated time and energy. *Customer benefits* include feeling good about oneself, a feeling of giving something back to the community, feeling charitable, feeling needed, feeling helpful, an opportunity to work with other people with similar interests, a chance to meet new people—the list is as long and diverse as the number of volunteers.

Like any other customer, volunteers "shop" for high quality volunteer experiences. Contrary to beliefs commonly held by dedicated managers and paid staff, the benefits of volunteering are *not* supplied only by one "vendor" (i.e., non-profit organization). A satisfying volunteer experience may be "purchased" from the local hospital, library, school, or charitable organization. Thus "competition" for volunteers exists between non-profits, regardless of whether the organizations themselves recognize that fact. For-profit organizations have long since

learned that providing a high quality service is one of the most effective means for service firms to successfully compete for customers. This article argues that providing a high quality volunteer experience will be equally effective in helping volunteer organizations compete for the best volunteers.

IMPORTANCE OF SERVICE QUALITY

Service quality (generally defined as excellence or overall superiority of the service) has been cited not only as a prerequisite for success, but also as a requirement for survival of service firms in the increasingly competitive environments of the 1990s and beyond (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry, 1988). Studies have shown that when for-profit firms deliver consistently high quality service, they enjoy greater repeat business than competitors, command higher prices, can reduce marketing expenditures yet increase market share, and earn increased returns on investment (Phillips, Chang, and Buzzell, 1983). If lessons can be learned from the experiences of these for-profit service businesses, similar benefits might be expected to accrue to nonprofit service providers that provide high quality service ("volunteer experiences") to their customers ("volunteers").

For example, companies that deliver high quality services generate increased referral business and positive word-of-mouth. Given that most new volunteers are recruited through word-of-mouth by current volunteers, providing a high quality volunteer experience should be a critically important element in attracting and retaining volunteers. The reverse is also true: providing a high quality service can *prevent* the potentially far-reaching effects of negative word-of-mouth—research shows that a satisfied customer tells three people about a good experience but a dissatisfied one gripes to eleven.

Providing high quality services to "internal customers" (like volunteers) can also provide benefits to paid man-

agement and staff. Merrill Lynch, for example, found that good "internal service"—such as providing high quality management, operations, and sales support to its people—was vital in improving retention among account executives (Rudie and Wansley, 1985). Furthermore, improving service quality to customers can directly improve the working conditions of employees. The rationale is straightforward: employees *know* when their firm does (or does not) provide good service to customers. In day-to-day contact with customers, employees continually feel the stress of dealing with customers unhappy with poor quality service. Indeed, improvement in the quality of *customer* service has an indirect effect on *employee* retention: studies have shown that *employees* are less likely to express an intention to leave their jobs when *customers* perceive that the firm is delivering high quality service (Schneider and Bowen, 1985). Applied to volunteer organizations, improvement in the quality of volunteer experiences will be felt immediately by paid staff who are in day-to-day contact with volunteers.

In summary, if the experiences of for-profit organizations can be applied to nonprofit organizations, improving the quality of volunteer experiences may stimulate widespread positive effects throughout the nonprofit organization. Directly, providing high quality volunteer experience should improve the nonprofit organization's ability to attract and retain volunteers. In addition, providing quality volunteer experiences can be expected to generate favorable word-of-mouth communications about the organization. Finally, a commitment to high quality volunteer experiences may improve the ability of the organization to retain management and paid staff. The questions become: 1) how does a volunteer define a quality volunteer experience and 2) how then does the organization deliver that quality volunteer experience? To that end, this article next introduces a model of ser-

vice quality that may assist volunteer organizations to address each of these issues.

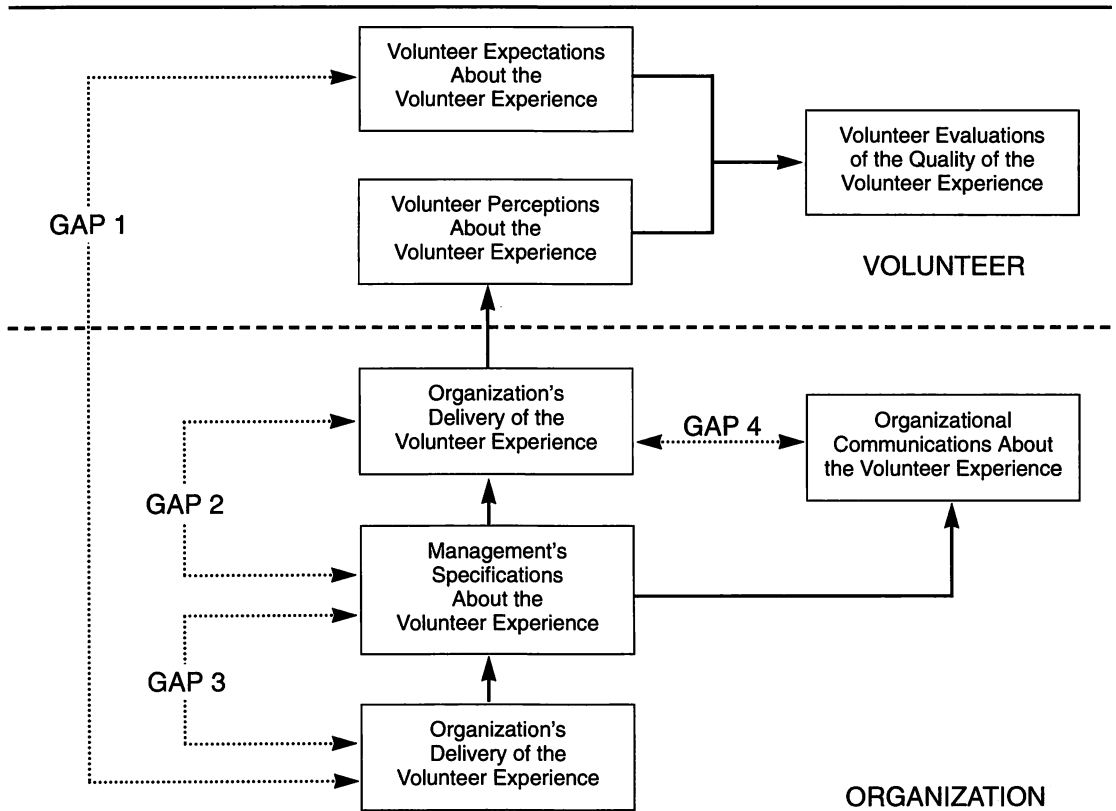
DEFINING AND DELIVERING A QUALITY VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE

The model introduced in this article is adapted from Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry's (1985) conceptual model of service quality. The original model was the product of research conducted among customers and managers of for-profit service companies including credit card companies, repair-and-maintenance companies, retail banking, securities brokerage, and long distance telephone services (see also Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Berry, 1990). That research was designed to determine how customers define service quality and to identify problem areas preventing service firms from delivering high quality services. The model provides a useful conceptual framework to explore issues of defining and delivering high quality volunteer experiences. The model in this article is revised based on a review of conceptual and empirical volunteer literature. In addition, conceptual development and revision was enriched by fifteen exploratory in-depth interviews conducted with both executives and volunteers of nonprofit organizations. Approximately half the interviews were with executives and half were with volunteers; each interview lasted approximately one hour.

The revised model addresses the issue of high quality volunteer experiences from two perspectives. On the volunteer side, the model defines how volunteers evaluate the quality of a volunteer experience. On the volunteer organization side, the model addresses how volunteer organizations might deliver, or be prevented from delivering, quality volunteer experiences. The model is outlined in Figure 1.

How Do Volunteers Evaluate the Quality of Their Volunteer Experiences?

Service quality refers to customers' overall judgments of the excellence or superiority of a service (Parasuraman,



Adapted from: Parasuraman, A., Valarie A. Zeithaml, and Leonard L. Berry. A Conceptual Model of Service Quality and Its Implications for Future Research. *Journal of Marketing*, 1985, 49 (Fall) p. 44.

Figure 1
A Conceptual Model of Service Quality as It Applies to the Volunteer Experience

Zeithaml, and Berry, 1988). Specifically, judgments of service quality are a function of the extent to which customers perceive the level of service performance meeting or exceeding their expectations. If an organization regularly provides service at a level that exceeds customer expectations, the service will be evaluated as high quality. In contrast, if an organization fails to meet customer expectations, the service will be judged as poor quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry, 1985).

Volunteers, like customers of other services, make judgments about the quality of their volunteer experiences by comparing their expectations against their perceived experiences. It is important for nonprofit volunteer organizations to be

aware of both elements of the service quality equation, because each affects a volunteer's evaluation of the quality of the volunteer experience. First, nonprofit organizations must realize that if volunteer expectations are not in some way met, or exceeded, the volunteer experience will be judged as poor quality. Second, the organization must recognize that it is *volunteer* perceptions of the experience—not management or staff perceptions—that determine the quality of the experience.

How Do Organizations Provide a Quality Volunteer Experience?

Nonprofit organizations can improve their abilities to deliver quality volunteer experiences through the careful design,

management, implementation, and communication of the volunteer services they offer. However, a series of "gaps" has been found to occur on the organizational side that prevent organizations from delivering high quality services. Figure 1 illustrated the four gaps, identified as follows:

Gap 1: . . . occurs when there is a difference between customer expectations and management perceptions of customer expectations.

Gap 2: . . . occurs when there is a difference between management perceptions of consumer expectations and service quality specifications.

Gap 3: . . . occurs when there is a difference between service quality specifications and the service actually delivered.

Gap 4: . . . occurs when there is a difference between service delivery and what is communicated about the service to customers (Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman, 1988, p. 35).

The next sections discuss each of these serviced quality delivery issues in the context of volunteerism.

GAP 1: Is There A Difference Between Volunteer Expectations and Management Perceptions of Volunteer Expectations?

Gap 1 refers to differences between volunteers' and managers' expectations about what constitutes a quality volunteer experience. An oversimplified answer is that a quality volunteer experience is one that meets the needs of the volunteer. However, volunteers and managers have quite different views about what motivates an individual to seek a volunteer experience.

Volunteers become involved with nonprofit agencies for a number of reasons. A 1990 Gallup poll (p. 149), for example, reported that 62.2% of volunteers surveyed cited "wanted to do something

useful" as the reason for first becoming involved in volunteer activities. "Thought I would enjoy the work" was cited by 33.6%; "family member or friend would benefit" was cited by 28.9%; and "religious concerns" was cited by 26.4%. Other volunteers "wanted to learn" (7.8%); had "previously benefitted from the activity" (8.9%); or "had a lot of free time" (10.1%); and "wanted to engage in an activity more fulfilling than current job" (8.4%). Still others may have seen volunteerism as a way to enhance their employment prospects by getting free training, as a chance to more fully utilize talents and abilities, or as a leisure pursuit for those with discretionary time. A total greater than 100% reflected the fact that volunteers had multiple reasons for volunteering. As one volunteer noted, "When I volunteer I do something for my children, something for myself, and something for the community. Part of my ethic is to give something back. It's also a chance to play with a number of different roles, be an important part of my community, and meet different people."

In contrast, managers of nonprofit organizations believe, usually mistakenly, that volunteers are driven by the same single-minded altruism that drives them. Problem-centered organizations tend to overlook the fact that a volunteer has alternative options—he or she can volunteer somewhere else. One executive director of a volunteer umbrella organization in a major metropolitan area related what she called a "typical anecdote" of volunteer management. The new manager of a member agency was chagrined because the public was not donating "as it should" to "the cause." Despite a lack of any marketing planning, the manager believed the program was so inherently "right" that any and all potential donors would surely see the light. The executive director confessed, "People in volunteer organizations are often so immersed in their cause that they assume others will be. They're not businesslike or even reasonable in their expectations."

Overcoming negative discrepancies between management and customer expectations about the volunteer experience is a crucial first step in the delivery of a quality volunteer experience. If the volunteer's needs are not accurately identified, then a quality experience cannot be delivered. The American Red Cross, for example, notes that nonprofit organizations should have an "awareness of a volunteer's motivations and expectations so as to provide a satisfying volunteer experience" (1990, p. 14). To research volunteer motives, some organizations carefully interview prospective volunteers to assess their needs vis-à-vis the needs of the agency (Yeager, 1986). Time is spent at the outset getting to know the prospective volunteer. Some degree of insight and intuition is required on the part of the interviewer to unearth the needs of the volunteer: volunteers feel that "I want something in return," however accurate, is not a socially sanctioned response. Other nonprofit organizations address the reticence of volunteers to articulate their "real" expectations by asking prospective volunteers to choose what he or she would like to contribute from a menu of tasks (Keyton, Wilson, and Geiger, 1990). Still others ask prospective volunteers to offer suggestions about what kinds of projects or tasks they would like to accept.

What these organizations have in common is what marketers call a "customer orientation." Customer-oriented nonprofit organizations exhibit a willingness—a commitment—to ongoing research about volunteer expectations. Further, successful nonprofit organizations recognize that upward communication (from volunteers to management, and not the other way around) about volunteer needs should not stop after the interview process is complete. Volunteer motivations change with time and experience in the organization. One volunteer noted, "At first, I thought I should, I just need to . . . you get some praise and feel good." He then talked about a turn-

ing point where "you realize that you get more than you give." The volunteer experience had, over time, helped this volunteer to reorganize priorities and reassess personal values.

The Junior League of a major metropolitan area recognizes that a met need no longer motivates. They designed a "career track" approach to volunteerism by offering a hierarchy of volunteer tasks ranked by leadership and responsibility. A volunteer starts with an entry level position, where he/she serves for a specified period of time. The volunteer is at some point *required* to accept a promotion to the next position. This progression serves the needs of the organization for skilled, experienced volunteers at managerial levels while stimulating personal growth and development in its volunteers.

GAP 2: Is There A Difference Between Management's Perceptions of Volunteers' Expectations and Volunteer Experience Specifications?

The second gap to providing a high quality volunteer experience occurs when the nonprofit organization's managers are unwilling or unable to develop volunteer experience specifications—specific tasks, standards, goals, and interactions—that foster a quality experience. In the first case, managers may recognize the differences described in Gap 1 but lack a commitment to providing volunteer experiences that meet *volunteer* needs. One author made the dismal observation that top management commitment to providing a satisfactory volunteer experience "varies from open hostility to vague lip service to avid commitment and is reflected throughout the organization" (Wilson, 1983, p. 185). Managers and staff caught up in fund raising, grant proposal writing, and other survival issues may have neither the time nor the inclination to "stroke" volunteers. Other managers and staff, driven by the intrinsic "rightness" of the cause, may not see the need for further volunteer support—after all,

the volunteer has been given the opportunity (read, "privilege") to contribute to a worthwhile cause.

Gap 2 must be closed before a quality volunteer experience can be delivered. An unwilling management is doomed to fail to structure volunteer experiences that meet volunteer needs. Only when managers believe that volunteers are critical to optimal functioning of their organizations will the needs of volunteers prevail over the needs of management. The experiences of for-profit companies, whose commitment to service quality resulted in gains in revenues, market share, or returns on investment, may provide successful case models to convince reluctant managers. One volunteer suggests, "An organization should appeal to more than just your sense of duty. It should try to appeal to a sense of vision."

The second case, where managers feel unable to develop volunteer experience specifications that will satisfy all potential customers, may be even more difficult. Compare volunteer expectations about volunteer experiences with management's specifications for jobs that need to be done: volunteers view volunteer experiences as opportunities for personal growth while *at the same time* providing a useful service—in that order. Volunteers expect that their needs, as well as the needs of the organization, will be considered; they do not want to feel that their time is being wasted; they expect to be treated with respect; and they expect at least some feedback and recognition for the work that they provide. In contrast, managers of nonprofit organizations may simply need free labor—what one manager calls "those nice, free people" (Wilson, 1983, p. 186). Nonprofit service organizations often do enough fulfilling jobs, requiring diverse talents or even skilled people, to satisfy volunteer needs. Envelopes need stuffing, beds need to be made, floors need washing, food must be prepared. Managers want volunteers to be committed, to take their

responsibilities seriously, to follow through, and to communicate their needs to management. Yet, by necessity, managers and volunteers look at volunteer jobs from opposite ends of the spectrum: a manager evaluates a task in terms of the needs of the organization, a volunteer evaluates that same task in terms of meeting his or her personal needs.

Successful nonprofit organizations recognize that, if properly handled, even routine tasks can be designed in such a way as to meet some volunteer needs. For example, the nonprofit organization can develop clear descriptions of jobs that include goals to be met, tasks to be accomplished, and time (or other) commitments required. Even if the task is not intrinsically interesting, a structured, efficient approach will at least meet volunteer expectations that the organization respects the value of their time, does not waste their time, and that the job contributes in an identifiable way to the goals of the organization. Organizations can also develop need profiles to segment volunteers and match them with jobs (Heidrich, 1990): volunteers with a need for achievement may be directed to take leadership roles; volunteers with a need to help others may be trained to provide direct service with constituents; volunteers who need to learn job skills may be trained to assist paid staff in running the business; and volunteers who need an opportunity to apply some special skills or talents may be utilized on an "as needed" basis.

In summary, management commitment to quality volunteer experiences, combined with a commitment to defining goals and tasks in such a way as to meet volunteer needs, are required to close Gap 2 and provide a quality volunteer experience.

GAP 3: Are Quality Volunteer Experience Specifications Delivered as Specified?

Gap 3 suggests that a third barrier preventing organizations from delivering

high quality volunteer experiences is a failure to deliver the experience as specified. That is, management has successfully researched volunteer expectations and designed a portfolio of volunteer experiences to meet various volunteers' needs. However, management finds that the specified volunteer experiences are not implemented. What causes Gap 3?

One reason for a failure to deliver management specifications for quality can be the presence of conflict in the organization (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Berry, 1988). For example, *managers* may recognize that volunteers are critical to the organization, may understand what motivates volunteers and what they expect from a volunteer experience, and may be committed to the idea of delivering a quality volunteer experience. *Paid staff*, with whom volunteers most frequently interact, may not share that vision.

Some conflicts arise because paid staff, like management, are often driven by altruistic motives. As a result, paid staff may expect total commitment from volunteers that mirrors their own. It may be difficult for paid staff to remember that other, perhaps less lofty, motives compel volunteers. Staff may resent the seemingly cavalier attitude of volunteers who give only so much and no more, who come and go as they please. Indeed paid staff have been known to exert a "self-righteous pressure" on volunteers to comply with their philanthropic expectations, thus hastening the volunteers' feelings of dissatisfaction and guilt (Schindler-Rainman and Lippett, 1975).

Alternately, staff may resent the freedom of volunteers, seeing them as "prima donnas" who resist supervision, ignore policy, and even embarrass the agency (Schindler-Rainman and Lippett, 1975). Volunteers who circumvent channels, "do their own thing," and do not become integrated into the organization exacerbate this separation. Paid staff may also see themselves as the "professionals" and the

"experts" and may resent their dependence on "amateurs" to get the job done. This aura of exclusivity and elitism may bolster the egos of the staff, but will alienate volunteers and keep them from participating in meaningful decision making (Wilson, 1983). Further, staff attitudes that volunteers "have nothing better to do" reflect a lack of respect for volunteers that is often only thinly disguised.

To close Gap 4, necessary to successfully deliver high quality volunteer experiences, conflict must be reduced and a sense of teamwork fostered. To reduce conflict, volunteer coordinators must clearly structure volunteer activities that do not encroach on the responsibilities of staff. If conflict between volunteers and staff is reduced, staff may be more comfortable involving volunteers in the operations of the organization. In addition, promoting a spirit of teamwork should reduce conflict and further the goal of a quality volunteer experience. For example, volunteers want to be respected and welcomed as part of the team, invited to participate in decision-making, and share in the success of the organization. They should be treated as professionals rather than as free labor and second class citizens. Including volunteers in brainstorming sessions about projects can tap their creativity and allow volunteers to personalize their contributions (Keyton, Wilson, and Geiger, 1990).

A second reason that management specifications for quality volunteer experiences are not delivered occurs because, while paid staff are professionals in the field, they are usually not trained as managers. Even specially designated volunteer coordinators may not possess the unique skills required to recruit, train, motivate, and supervise non-paid individuals. A series of excellent suggestions, which need not be repeated here, have been provided by Barkman (1990). Briefly, Barkman advocates the use of "job aids" (checklists, worksheets, flow charts) to improve volunteer perfor-

mance. Such job aids could be a very useful tool for helping paid staff to deliver quality volunteer experiences as articulated by management.

GAP 4: Does Communication of the Volunteer Experience Reflect Reality?

The fourth gap refers to differences between what the nonprofit organization communicates about the volunteer experience and what it delivers. For example, honesty about the time required to do the volunteer job is a critical issue here. As the American Red Cross (1990, p. 12) warns, "Volunteers must never be exploited. If volunteers are pressured to work longer hours than they anticipated, they may feel exploited. If they are led to expect resume-building opportunities but never get them, they may feel exploited. Because of their enthusiasm and deep sense of commitment, volunteers make easy prey. It is essential not to take advantage of them."

A second problem for nonprofit organizations, and a direct route to volunteer burnout, is over-reliance on "good" volunteers. Ex-volunteers will attest that demands increase proportionately with a volunteer's willingness to comply. Indeed, the number one reason that volunteers cite for quitting volunteer involvement is that they are "too busy" (Gallup, 1990).

A third mistake that organizations make is undervaluing the experience. The 1990 Winner of a Governor's Volunteer Award warned, "If someone tells you that you're the ninth person he's called and no one wants this job, you're not going to take it either. I recruit by saying, 'You have valuable skills that I need in this position and you're my first choice for this job.' Nine out of ten times I get them." Organizations also discourage volunteerism by a not-so-subtle elitism. An underlying message saying "We are the experts and you are the amateurs" may be read between the lines.

"Rubber stamping" is a fourth way that nonprofit organizations lose volunteers. Many government agencies, for

example, are guilty of asking for input but never completing the feedback loop. Volunteers quickly tire of attending meetings where they listen instead of being heard (Yeager, 1986). As the American Cancer Society warns, "There is nothing more deadly than a recruitment process that sets up false expectations." Whatever the cause, Gap 4 must be closed before volunteers will evaluate their experiences as being of high quality.

SUMMARY

This article has explored the issue of attracting and retaining volunteer employees by considering the volunteer as a customer of a not-for-profit service organization. From that perspective, the article highlighted possible service quality gaps between volunteer expectations and the service firm's expectations, as well as gaps between the firm's intentions and reality, that might stand in the way of delivering a high quality volunteer experience. Not-for-profit service organizations are dependent upon volunteer employees to provide much of the labor to implement programs. Since volunteer employees are "paid" in the currency of quality volunteer experiences, lessons learned by services firms in the business of providing high quality services are most useful for not-for-profit firms attempting to provide quality volunteer experiences to the "customers."

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