

Jayne Cravens Blog

Commentary, resources & discussion re: nonprofits/ngos, communications, community engagement, volunteerism, effective humanitarian aid & development, ethics, women's empowerment & management ethics.

Microvolunteering is virtual volunteering

Imagine if I announced that a one-day beach clean up, or a one-day walk-a-thon, that brought hundreds or thousands of people together for one-off service in support of a nonprofit organization or cause, wasn't *really* volunteering. Imagine if I said it isn't *volunteering* because most of the participants who are donating their time and service aren't screened, aren't interviewed, aren't background-checked, and aren't trained beyond maybe a 10 minute speech about things to keep in mind during the experience. Imagine if I also said it was because most participants may never volunteer again with that organization or for the cause.

Imagine if I claimed that people who sewed or knitted items from their home, in their spare time, for some nonprofit group helping kids in hospitals or people suffering from a particular disease, weren't *really* volunteers. They also aren't screened the way most other volunteers are, aren't background-checked, and usually have no deadline for their work – they get it done when they get it done, if at all.

I would look ridiculous to make such claims. The volunteer management community would laugh me out of the workshop or conference (or the conference hotel bar, as the case may be). Or off the Intertubes.

Of course all of these activities are *volunteering*. **In fact, they are all MICROvolunteering, without a computer!** (most volunteer managers call such *episodic volunteering*, but the new name is much snazzier)

The folks behind the microvolunteering movement [The Extraordinaries](#) (though their web site is now called [Sparked.com](#)) continue to [try to say microvolunteering isn't virtual volunteering](#). Which is as preposterous as me claiming those other one-off volunteering gigs like one-day beach clean ups aren't really *volunteering*. **Of course microvolunteering is virtual volunteering: it's unpaid, donated service in support of nonprofit organizations, provided via a computer or handheld device.** How much time it may or may not take, and how volunteers are or aren't screened or supported, is immaterial.

I've had an ongoing battle with the people behind the Extraordinaires for a while now. They burst online a few years ago, claiming that there was no need for traditional volunteering, or traditional volunteer management, because everything nonprofits need by online volunteers can be done through what they were calling microvolunteering: people who volunteered for just a few minutes at a time whenever they might get an inclination to help, from wherever they were. Web sites would be built. Topics would be researched. Logos would be designed. Marketing plans would be written. Children would be mentored. All by people waiting for a plane or during time outs at sporting events. No need to *make* time to volunteer — just volunteer whenever you have some spare time, even if that's just for a minute or two.

I challenged them on various blogs and the [ARNOVA discussion group](#), pointing out that, indeed, microvolunteering *can* work for *some* tasks – and I had been saying so since the late 1990s, when I called the practice *byte-sized volunteering* – but most certainly not for mentoring a child (online or face-to-face, mentoring is effective only if its a long-term, ongoing commitment that builds trust – something I learned when working with the [National Mentoring Partnership](#) in launching their standards for online mentoring) and many other activities undertaken by community-serving organizations. I pointed out that microvolunteering most definitely can work for something like logo design — which, in fact, [I wrote about back in 2006](#), per the first [NetSquared](#) conference that highlighted several examples of such. But I also pointed out that **successful volunteer engagement isn't about just getting work done**; it is, in fact, about relationship-building — recruiting people who could turn into donors, for instance, or raising awareness and changing behaviors — and it's also about reserving certain tasks for volunteers *specifically*, because some tasks are actually best done by volunteers.

[This recent blog](#) shows that some of those arguments are starting to seep into their thinking – Hurrah! – but they still need to evolve their concept. They are right to point out that microvolunteering doesn't employ some volunteer management techniques in the same way as other volunteering, but they just can't get their mind around the fact that LOTS of volunteering doesn't, like a one-day beach clean up doesn't. But that doesn't somehow negate microvolunteering as volunteering, or as virtual volunteering.

Volunteer management and support must be adjusted for a wide variety of volunteering scenarios, online and off; while there are certain fundamentals of volunteer management that are *always* the same for *all* volunteering, online or offline, microvolunteering or longer-term, such as capturing volunteer contact info, ensuring volunteers are invited to future opportunities, thanking volunteers for their contributions and showing volunteers how their service has been of value, other aspects of volunteer management have to be tailored to the unique situation, and that does, indeed, mean not recruiting micro-volunteers the same way as long-term volunteers, on or offline.

In addition to their continued refusal to accept that, indeed, microvolunteering is virtual volunteering, they also continue to make some other misguided statements, such as:

With microvolunteering, 'You hire EVERY volunteer.' The end result gets better as more people work on and peer-review your project. You turn no-one away.

You do NOT hire every volunteer in a microvolunteering or crowd-sourcing project. In fact, you reject MOST of them — for a logo design, for instance, *most* people's ideas are rejected – most ideas are not used. For open source software design that allows anyone to contribute to the code, not every submission gets included in the released version. It doesn't mean those volunteering efforts aren't appreciated and that you shouldn't thank them and celebrate such, but the reality is that you are *not* going to use most of the work submitted for such a crowd-sourcing endeavor.

And as for their comment that *The end result gets better as more people work on and peer-review your project*, I could point to dozens of pages on [Wikipedia](#) that have gotten worse as more people have worked on them. The idea that *more* volunteers automatically means *better* is something that only someone who does not work with volunteers regularly — particularly online volunteers — would say.

If they want to claim that microvolunteering is the *coolest* form of virtual volunteering, or even the coolest form of volunteering, I wouldn't be quite so passionate in my arguments – what's coolest is, ofcourse, entirely subjective. Of course, I'd still argue that it wasn't — I'd be speaking as a person who has been both a long-term online

volunteer and a micro-volunteer, and has recruited and managed both kinds of online volunteers. To me, microvolunteering is like a one-night stand: interesting/fun in the moment, but then quickly forgotten. Um, not that I know what a one-night stand is... Such might lead to something more substantial, but usually, it won't – and that means it's not for everyone.

But this fact Ben and Jacob *will* have to eventually accept: microvolunteering, online, is virtual volunteering. And it's been going on long before the Extraordinaires showed up. Proposing that it isn't creates only confusion, segregates them from terrific conversations and resources and networks, and holds them back from the full success they could have with their efforts; accepting that they are part of virtual volunteering would open many more opportunities for their endeavor and ensure their long-term success.

Also see:

[Micro-Volunteering and Crowd-Sourcing: Not-So-New Trends in Virtual Volunteering/Online Volunteering](#)

[But virtual volunteering means it takes no time, right?](#)

[What online community service is – and is not](#)

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This entry was posted in Community / Volunteer Engagement and tagged byte size, community service, controversy, cyber, debate, digital, ework, help, micro, microtask, online, reality check, sparked, volunteering, volunteers on 24 February 2011 [<http://coyotecomunications.com/coyoteblog/2011/02/microvolunteering-is-virtual-volunteering/>].

7 thoughts on “Microvolunteering is virtual volunteering”

Andy Fryar

24 February 2011 at 21:36

Hi Jayne, After reading the Sparked blog my head just wanted to explode. I've been around this sector long enough to be well over the debate about what is and what is not volunteering ... but I think that what Ben has described in his blog is simply an interesting new take on 'virtual' volunteering. He makes a lot of assumptions about a lot of things, and I think one complete error is the belief that microvolunteering is unique because it recruits an outcome and not a person. While traditional volunteering may indeed recruit people first, we only ever do so to achieve an outcome as the end result. I don't quite see the connection he is trying to make. The other issue I have is that while the microvolunteering model may achieve a great result (for one volunteer in the case of his example), how many others does it leave with a bad taste in their mouths because their contribution was rejected at the end of the day. Ben argues

they enter into the activity knowing they may not be successful, BUT I'd argue there is potential to actually have many people feel disappointed with the process and not contribute again in the future – and if this is the case, I am not sure this is such a good practice at all. Thanks for continuing to be a rational voice Jayne! Andy

robjackson74

25 February 2011 at 08:31

Jayne, There is lots I could say about this but I won't because you have said it much better than I could. I wholeheartedly support your position on this. What is interesting is the concept that for an idea to be credible it has to be disassociated from volunteering. I see this in the UK on occasion as well. As Andy says, the debate about what is and isn't volunteering has raged for years. We've also had years of debate about whether we should find a new word for volunteering or change people's associations about the stereotypes of volunteering. Perhaps this is the latest evolution of that, just don't call it volunteering at all but something flash and all new-media like and instant credibility here we come. That latter point for me is the note of caution around micro-volunteering. Just because the technology makes something possible doesn't mean we should do it or that it is a good thing. What we need is more constructively critical analysis of micro-volunteering so it develops into an exciting, trendy and (most importantly) impactful form of volunteering that really makes a difference. So, keep up the good work. So much for me not writing much!

Kevin Baughen

25 February 2011 at 10:50

Thanks for the thought-provoking comments Jayne. Like you I've been talking for a while about the need to stop arguing over definitions and ownership of concepts around volunteering. The sector just needs to recognise that 21st century volunteering is pretty much whatever those volunteering their time or expertise want it to be! Charities and NFP bodies have various needs which have to be met by volunteers of all kinds and, fortunately, there are now all kinds of volunteers to help. How about we expend our efforts on matching the two together and GET IT DONE? Here's a few articles to show you what I mean... <http://bottomlineideas.wordpress.com/2011/02/21/im-a-serial-slacktivist-and-proud/> Thanks again for the thoughts. Kevin

Isidro Maya Jariego

25 February 2011 at 14:19

We had a similar debate on micro-blogging and community participation on E-Voluntas, although it is in Spanish: <http://evoluntas.wordpress.com/2011/02/22/to-tweet-or-not-to-tweet-nuevos-dilemas-en-la-participacion/> To follow the debate I think it is interesting to compare the article by Malcom Gladwell, "why the revolution will not be tweeted" <http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/04/101004fa_fact_gladwell> and the answer by one of the

Twitter's founders, Biz Stone: <<http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2010/10/exclusive-biz-stone-on-twitter-and-activism/64772/>>. Thank you. Isidro Maya Jariego

Anonymous

25 February 2011 at 20:31

Thanks to everyone who has replied! Isidro, I haven't heard from you in so long – I'm off to read the evolutas blog (pero, mi espa??ol es muy, muy malo ahora). What I should have also noted was all of the arguments I used to hear from people saying that an onsite volunteer who also provided service from home or from work or otherwise remotely, online, he or she wasn't really engaged in virtual volunteering, since the organization saw the volunteer onsite sometimes. I'm pretty sure that way of thinking has, at last, gone away...

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