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## Media Blitz vs. Media Noise: What Are We Trying to Accomplish?

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

November  
2009

As I write this Hot Topic, we've just ended the Entertainment Industry Foundation's (EIF) attempt to mention volunteering in all types of media. Despite the announced list of over 50 television shows planning to incorporate either a public service ad or a story line about service during the week of October 19-25, the media blitz was more of a bust. The messages were all over the map in type, length, and meaning. It took conscious effort to find the teeny, tiny mentions of service and, if it was hard to catch our eyes, why think the general public was aware of anything?

For all the brilliant media minds involved, there was no defined message or target audience. Worse, several new Web sites were opened, each with a "brand" name and logo; EIF launched "[iParticipate](#)." Despite the Obama Administration's desire to center attention on its portal, [Serve.gov](#), the media messages almost never mentioned that.

In contrast, the media campaign that was the most consistent and appealing was the Disney Corporation's "Give a Day, Get a Disney Day" promotion. Their repeated ads send people to a clear and direct Web site, channeling would-be volunteers to HandsOn Network to find service opportunities. They are definitely generating buzz.

What's important is not which shows carried the volunteering message or even how well. The questions that concern me most are:

- ***What is the goal here? To get people to volunteer for anything at all or to stimulate meaningful service?***

We can say the word "volunteer" a million times, but it only matters when someone applies it personally. So far, the media attention has not generated much action.

Greg Baldwin, president of VolunteerMatch, the nation's largest online registry of volunteer opportunities, reported in [his blog](#) that:

*Over the course of the week this historic TV campaign produced an average of only 775 new visits a day or 2.6% of our weekly total of 208,400 visits. This amounts to perhaps 100 new volunteers.*

*These were not the results we expected, or the results you deserve.*

Further, he noted that:

*...there were serious technical problems with “unresolved system bugs related to the Entertainment Industry Foundation’s implementation of the new All for Good APIs [Web site no longer findable, 2014] left thousands of interested volunteers on [iParticipate.org](#) browsing through an aggregation of incomplete, incorrect, duplicate, out-of-date and out-of-place volunteer opportunities...*

VolunteerMatch notified the various organizations of these problems, but they remain unfixed, again raising the question of whether the goal was to *mention* volunteering or *support* it.

When you consider the cost – talent and effort as well as cash – of getting even these small mentions of volunteering on the air, plus the expense of forming new organizations and Web sites, has there been return-on-investment? What could you have accomplished with even a small part of these resources?

- ***Who believes that simply mentioning volunteering in a haphazard way is enough to “enter the consciousness” of Americans and translate into action?***

It is hard to pinpoint who (if anyone) is acting as advisor to the media on what the needs of agencies are and how to recruit volunteers. I'm positive that the EIF wanted to do the best job, but haven't we had enough of the presumption that all people need is a push to volunteer (preferably from a celebrity) and off they'll go?

Advertisers craft commercial messages to get consumers to buy something *specific*, not simply to “go shopping.”

Also as usual, all the focus is on getting people to give their time (to anything, in any amount) without any real attention to whether organizations want or are ready to welcome them.

- ***What does all this emphasis on getting people to volunteer communicate to the many people already deeply involved in service?***

Missing from the publicity was any sense of the millions of Americans already doing volunteer work. Media messages could do double duty as current volunteer recognition as well as encouraging others to start getting involved.

Similarly, the new crop of media messages ignore well-established volunteer opportunities. A great example is [Make a Difference Day](#) which actually took place *at the same time*, but got very little acknowledgement from any of new Web sites. The push of new players to re-brand volunteering results in competition and dissipated energy.

- ***Do calls for volunteering that offer a tangible reward compete with non-remunerated service or do they stimulate new people to test the water of volunteering?***

The Disney promotion represents a variety of cause-related marketing campaigns that – legitimately and sometimes creatively – capture consumers for the product while also doing some good for a cause. But the monetary value of a ticket for one day at Disneyland® or Disney World® is between \$72-\$94! Even if a “day” of service is as much as eight hours, this amounts to a reward higher than the minimum wage! This is more than a token thank you and completely out of reach for any nonprofit organization to match (and they should not want to anyway).

Since these commercials are running side-by-side with the EIF messages, are we confusing the public? Is volunteering important for our society or a means to win a prize? Again: what are we trying to do here?

**Your turn.** What are *your* thoughts on these questions, or can you pose some others? Also, has your organization received any calls at all from new people seeking to volunteer who refer to something they saw in the media that made them act?

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***Update 18 November 2009 by Susan***

On November 13th, Michelle Nunn, CEO of the Points of Light Institute, wrote a blog posting about what POLI and the others involved in the media outreach campaign have learned from the first month: [post no longer online, 2014]

Also, I wanted to acknowledge that the public service announcements about volunteering have indeed continued over the past weeks, although the overall strategy of disconnected and vague "go volunteer" messages has not. Michelle's comments, however, seem to indicate that lessons are being learned and that this is a "long haul" effort, so there is hope!

***Submitted 11 November 2009, anonymously***

Volunteering that matters isn't about winning a prize, but about consistently giving time, talent, and treasure to a cause in which you believe and which is in need of your help. It's not based on gimmicks or giveaways, it's based on giving with a caring heart. The media noise seems aimed at hustling still more "entitled" volunteers, not with honoring the many who provide a foundation that supports better communities and a better nation.

**Submitted 5 November 2009 by Tony Goodrow, Volunteer Squared, Burlington, ON Canada**

Was this whole campaign a swing and a miss? It certainly appears so. But I want to commend the entertainment industry for getting up to bat in the first place.

Having not had the opportunity to watch television over the past week I cannot comment on the usefulness of the messaging but the implementation of the technology was clearly a contributor to the lack of results. Greg Baldwin (president of [Volunteer Match](#)) was openly and honestly apologetic to the members of Volunteer Match but I think he was shouldering more than his share of the blame. The various lists of volunteer opportunities from which [iparticipate.org](#) draws, such as Volunteer Match, had many more opportunities than were to be found on the iparticipate site.

Let's look toward next year and work toward a strategy in the messaging that is consistent with the needs of the sector and best practices in building a movement along with better testing in advance from the technology partners. The discussions of where things broke down in this year's attempt can help the next time (and I hope there's a next time) the IEF steps up to bat.

**Submitted 5 November 2009 by Wendy Moluf, Citizen Advocacy Program/The Arc of NJ, Coordinator of Volunteer Services, Mount Holly, NJ USA**

Below is the comment I posted to the Volunteer Match blog in response to the letter from the president of Volunteer Match. Not surprisingly it echoes some of Susan's thoughts pretty closely:

*"It was great to see people volunteering on some of the shows I watch, like 30 Rock and Parks and Rec. But this is what happens every single day in the real world – people trying to help each other without expecting anything in return. And those of us who work with volunteers have been helping them to help others for a long time – with lots of assistance from organizations like Volunteer Match. We kind of have it together already in so many ways – why do we always think we have to re-invent the wheel? Was it necessary to establish a new online site to connect people with opportunities when we already have several good ones? And if so, doesn't Hollywood have the resources to make it work – the first time? I really appreciate the efforts of the media to promote volunteerism, but it looks like this was one more example of the fact that they don't have a clue what life is like for the rest of us."*

**Submitted 5 November 2009 by Loretta, Volunteer Coordinator, Phoenix Arizona USA**

The only mention I saw was on an episode of 'Numbers' where one of the main characters mentioned he was a Big Brother when his own brother was talking about the issue of having children and having a busy career. The character invited his own brother along to meet his 'little' to see how he could fit this into his busy life.

This was, to me, a realistic depiction of how volunteers are asked by other volunteers and the viewpoint that non-retirees are fitting volunteerism into a busy life with family and career commitments.

If there were more moments like these between two good-lookin' dudes on a major hit TV show - yes, it may change some attitudes. Will take awhile because it's subtle, but it can be effective. (-:

***Submitted 3 November 2009 by Amber, ME<sup>3</sup>, President, Raleigh/NC U.S.A.***

What a great topic. I actually watched some of the TV shows said to be mentioning volunteerism during this week, and another thing I thought about was the choice of character and message - for example, on one of my favorite shows, The Office, the character mentioning "volunteerism" (for a few seconds in passing, I might add), was Dwight, the show's awkward, social outcast comic relief character. One tip for producers - if you want to make volunteering "cool", have your show's heroes talk about it, not the characters the average person can't relate to!

***Submitted 3 November 2009 by Christine Nardecchia, City of Dublin, Volunteer Services Administrator, Dublin, OH USA***

Interesting reading here. Ours was one of the 17 cities invited by Mayor Bloomberg to accept this challenge-and we did. Our Volunteer Resources leadership and City Council siezed this as an opportunity to develop a comprehensive, community-wide volunteer engagement plan...what are our critical needs? How can volunteerism respond to them? What is our role in administering volunteerism? The result has been a marvelous community-wide experience, gathering all agencies who use volunteers in our community, hosting citizen focus groups, generating a lot of thought about doing the right things in the right ways for the right reasons. My plan is literally with our graphic designers, but it will be presented to Council in late November. We have taken this on as an opportunity to open up dialogue among our local governments, school communities, NPOs and faith communities. We are educating about the drain of one-day-only service days and the concept of creating sustainable service!

We are going to train project leaders and BUILD CAPACITY to manage volunteers here and ask our residential base to think about volunteerism on a more regional and global scale. Frankly-we are thrilled in Dublin, Ohio to be a part of this and have taken the reigns to lead us as a true "City of Service." Look for our complete plan to be posted in December, pending Council discussion and approval!

***Submitted 3 November 2009 by Emily J. Schnipper, Goodwill, Volunteer Coordinator, San Francisco USA***

I agree that simply mentioning volunteering isn't enough. In one instance, I was watching "Flash Forward" and a character, out of the blue, asked a clergy member if she could volunteer at the church...and he said no! If anything, this scenario would discourage people from volunteering.

***Submitted on Facebook and reposted with permission, 2 November 2009. Bruce Cline, CNCS, Washington, DC responded to Susan's posting there about the episode of Desperate Housewives that included a town watch organizing meeting as its mention of service.***

Did you *really* think incorporating volunteering into t.v. shows was a viable means of promoting service? I imagine most of us had low expectations...I did and they most certainly were met. I'm not

disappointed because entertainment is, well, entertainment. Significant social impact via popular media is, at best, an unintended consequence. What disappoints me is to learn that you watch *Desperate Housewives* unless, of course, you were watching only to determine whether its incorporation of volunteering in the plot might truly turn fans into rabid volunteers. What America *needs* is a series centered around the wild, wacky, and sexually permissive lives of volunteers, volunteer resource managers, and Volunteer Centers!

**Submitted 2 November 2009 by H. Roberts, PLNJ, Inc. - Blankie Depot, President  
Keyport/NJ USA**

This month's hot topic writes itself! I too rec'd the same email communication from the President of VolunteerMatch.org apologizing for the media blitz (lack of) outcome. And while I appreciate the willingness to admit failure, VM was in the ideal position to campaign for the validity and voices of thousands of volunteer organizations it supports through its recruitment and education portal as true spokespeople for volunteerism instead of being dazzled by Hollywood.

Susan, each of the interesting points you raised in summary underscores the biggest issues facing the non profit industry globally-our voices, both big and small, seem to be of less interest than the newcomers rebranding and renaming the field. Many of whom do not work in non profit businesses. All that glitz and glitter appears more fashionable and marketable while the resources spent on real organizations, real field workers and REAL CLIENTS is just too difficult to look at.

Earlier in the year, you asked your readers to highlight what they would like to see in volunteerism during 2009. My wish list included television. A charity channel offered regularly, national wide. Good news for the people, by the people. I still believe television is the wide-reaching vehicle for our large message. I still believe t.v. can educate. But, like any new idea, the right people, appropriate industry-speak and effective tools need to be utilized. We know these guideposts exist! While Hollywood might know how to attract viewers it could learn a thing or two about script writing and maximizing, expensive, precious air time from a down in the trenches, budget frugal VRM. It is my sincere hope that this short term failure to deliver won't end with the "pilot episode."

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