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The Volunteer Matrix: Positioning and Volunteering

Introduction
In the fierce competition that volunteer-involved organisations face nowadays over many resources, but particularly over people’s willingness to donate their time for a specific organisation, marketing strategies should be used to recruit more suitable volunteers. If the organisation works to improve its ability to recruit volunteers, it needs to correctly identify its target groups, but also understand what the positioning of the organisation is and what type of volunteering roles are being offered. This can be done by using positioning and perceptual mapping, two marketing tools which can be implemented in the volunteering context.

Positioning is the ‘relative competitive comparison’ a product occupies in a given market as perceived by the target market audience. In order to make positioning more visual, a perceptual mapping can be used as a graphics technique that attempts to visually display the perceptions of customers or potential customers, usually on a two dimensional matrix. A very common perceptual mapping matrix in commercial marketing will be based on quality of the product versus its price. Thus, we can have four types of brands or products: high quality-high price (“prestigious product”); high quality-low price (“a bargain”); low quality-low price (“common products”) and low quality-high price (“rip-off”).

The volunteer matrix
We present here the volunteer matrix – a perceptual mapping which can help volunteer organisations deal with the growing competition with other similar organisations in accessing the common-pool resource of volunteering. The volunteer matrix is also based on price and quality. The price axis moves between high and low costs attached to the volunteering experience (such as time, tangible costs, emotional difficulties, social costs and anxiety, and opportunity costs); while the quality axis (total quality of the volunteering experience) moves from poor to good and includes all the various benefits attached to volunteering (social, warm glow, career, tangible, as well as physical, mental and social well-being).

Figure 1: The Volunteer Matrix
Thus, we identify four types of volunteers:

1. **Type A** volunteers experience a good quality of volunteering service for a low price. One example for type A volunteering is “watching board”. Persons who volunteer for a board of a prestigious organisation may gain many benefits: they become affiliated with the positive image of the organisation, acquire a strong network, warm glow and feeling of achievement. All these benefits can be gained for a relatively low price in terms of time (with only a few annual meetings), emotional difficulty (which may hardly exist) and investment of reputation. Since this is a “bargain” way of volunteering, many would like to undertake such a role, and organisations usually approach people to be part of the board and have selection processes.

2. **Type B** volunteers may gain a good quality of volunteer service, but for a higher price. A good example is international volunteering. One of the recent trends in volunteering is giving time to provide services, usually weeks or months, in a needed place oversees, mostly in the developing world. International volunteers may gain an unforgettable experience, feelings of a meaningful achievement and impact on people’s lives, social networking, acquaintance with another culture, and even job experience and career enhancement. However, the costs involved can be relatively high too. First, there are the travel costs including air fare and accommodation, and payment for program participation. Second, volunteering in some of these areas can be emotionally difficult and draining, particularly when undertaken by very young people. Such volunteers may experience culture shock, both upon arrival to the new place and upon returning home.

3. **Type C** is volunteering for poor quality experience at low costs, for example - episodic volunteering. Recently individuals are switching from regular and long-term to shorter term episodic volunteering, engaging in short-term experiences that will fulfil their immediate and timely needs, and then move on to other fulfilling experiences. Episodic volunteering does not provide the individual volunteer with all the potential benefits, mainly due to its short term nature. As such, episodical volunteers usually have fewer social benefits and networks; their feelings of impact and fulfilment are much less; and their level of affiliation to the group and the organisation is relatively low. However, considering the fact that they only give very little time and that usually they are involved in tasks that are not emotionally challenging, they get a good value of experience for their costs.

4. **Type D** is a poor quality volunteering experience at a high cost. Just as no commercial organisation would brand itself or its products in this niche (the “rip off” niche), no volunteer organisation would. This is volunteering that is highly difficult and draining, but with very few benefits. However, some volunteers find themselves in a position or an organisation where they give much but gain little. Hotline volunteering can in some cases be described as type D volunteering; it has high costs, particularly emotional ones (the one-time basis of the relationship with the service recipients, the anonymity of the person of the other side of the line, frustration due to lack of visible outcomes, as well as abuse from some callers). As a result of the above difficulties, benefits are also low, as many volunteers do not know if and whom they helped and what the outcomes of their work are, and therefore have low job satisfaction. In some cases hotline volunteers work from home or alone and do not have the social affiliation and network. However, it should be noted that in every organisation, effective and supportive as it may be, there will always be some volunteers who are not satisfied enough with their experience. This may lead volunteer managers to try to address such dissatisfaction individually or rather assure a higher person-organisation fit during the selection phase.
Implications

There are practical implementations to this typology as organisations come to understand which niche they are in and therefore which potential volunteers to target. Type A volunteering (e.g. watching board) can be suitable for people with a strong socio-demographic background, those in business and people with many social and financial resources who would like to volunteer with low costs but gain a lot out of this experience. Type B volunteering (e.g. international volunteering) is more suitable for young and enthusiastic people, with time on their hands and eagerness to learn and contribute. That is why such volunteering is particularly popular among Generation Y. However, since the related costs, especially the emotional ones, can be rather high, the organisation should help these volunteers by providing on-going support. Type C volunteering (e.g. episodical) can attract people with little time but with ability and willingness to volunteer, especially those who are unable or unwilling to undertake a long-term commitment, such as university students or employees. Type D volunteering requires an organisational change rather than a marketing strategy.

Working according to the perceptual map suggested here could lead to the enhancement and improvement of ongoing volunteer management: from the early stages of recruitment and selection, through training and socialisation, to maintaining and motivating volunteers. By targeting the right volunteers, time, effort, money and frustration can be avoided, both by the volunteers and by the organisation. This will help the organisation achieve its mission.

Note:
The full article was written by Debbie Haski-Leventhal and Lucas Meijs and was published in the early view of the International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing in December 2010. It can be retrieved here:
