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S. Dolnicar\*  
K. Lazarevski‡

H. Irvine†  
M. Randle\*\*

\*University of Wollongong, sarad@uow.edu.au

†University of Wollongong, hirvine@uow.edu.au

‡University of Wollongong, kl67@uow.edu.au

\*\*University of Wollongong, mjr46@uow.edu.au

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## Mimetic Marketing in Environmental Volunteering Organisations

Sara Dolnicar\*<sup>a</sup>, Helen Irvine\*<sup>b</sup>, Katie Lazarevski\*<sup>ac</sup>, Melanie Randle\*<sup>a</sup>

\* Authors listed in alphabetical order: All are from the University of Wollongong.

<sup>a</sup> Marketing Research Innovation Centre (MRIC) at the School of Management & Marketing;

<sup>b</sup> School of Accounting and Finance; <sup>c</sup> Honours Thesis

### Abstract

The last decade has seen increased competition amongst voluntary organisations. This has resulted in a number of changes to the nonprofit sector, such as increased levels of scrutiny and accountability. Voluntary organisations compete not only for limited numbers of volunteers but also for limited grant funding made available at local, state and federal government levels. Increased competition has placed pressure on organisations to take a more commercial approach to the management of their organisations and to adopt what have been previously considered ‘for profit’ business practices such as marketing. This empirical study uses neo-institutional theory to investigate the marketing of nonprofit organisations, specifically the concept of “mimetic isomorphism”. The ‘Bushcare’ program in NSW is examined to determine the extent to which competitive pressures are forcing nonprofit environmental volunteering organisations to copy each other and grow more homogenous in terms of their marketing strategies. Since the most commonly accepted marketing practices are not necessarily the most efficient, managers of these organisations are faced with the challenge of attracting new volunteers and need to assess their current strategies and motivations for recruitment programs.

*Keywords:* volunteering, non-profit marketing, neo-institutional theory

### Introduction

Bushcare programs are funded and administered by local councils all over Australia. While these organisations operate within the public sector, they possess many characteristics of the nonprofit/third sector. Furthermore, although they are coordinated by individual councils they have an analogous objective: to encourage and support community participation in the conservation and restoration of local natural areas. Locally supported Bushcare projects are typically staffed by a skeleton paid staff and rely on community volunteers to achieve local environmental objectives. The first locally supported Bushcare program was launched in 1989 and has now grown to include over 50 programs in NSW alone. In addition to local council funding, Bushcare programs rely heavily on grant schemes to support their operation and continued growth, thereby taking on characteristics and mannerisms which resemble nonprofit organisations. This was exemplified by 95% of NSW Bushcare programs being successful in gaining additional funding in 1999-2000. This was largely through grant schemes such as the National Heritage Trust Bushcare scheme, which made available \$312.5 million for these types of environmental projects between 1996-2002 (Volunteering Australia, 2001; Natural Heritage Trust: Bushcare, 2004). Recent developments have placed community organisations under extreme pressure as they have come to terms with changing patterns of funding and more rigorous accountability for outcomes (Hernandez, 2002; Georke, 2003) and the application of corporate business practices, for which many of them have had little training. Neo-institutional theory is the lens used to visualise the resulting competitive pressures of the environment in which Bushcare organisations exist. It suggests that pressure within a field arising from institutional rules, myths and beliefs (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Oliver, 1991) results in the tendency of organisations within that

field to take on similar structural characteristics – a process termed ‘isomorphism’. Isomorphism is a result of organisations’ desire to appear legitimate and professional, and according to DiMaggio and Powell (1983), occurs in three ways: through regulative, normative and mimetic processes. Mimetic isomorphism is examined in detail in this article, and relates to the way organisations copy more successful organisations.

### **Prior Research**

Previous research in the field of non-profit marketing pioneered by Kotler and Levy (1969) posited that marketing does indeed have a valuable role to play in the non-profit sector. Essentially, Kotler argues that marketing offers great potential to third sector organisations “to survive, grow, and strengthen their contributions to the general welfare” (1979, p. 44). Gallagher and Weinberg (1991) highlight the reality that in today’s competitive economic climate, non-profit organisations are challenged by more complicated decisions about marketing than conventional commercial marketing due to the complexity of multiple goals within their organisations. Some complicating characteristics such as non-financial objectives and multiple stakeholders make it difficult to measure success and lead to their disregard of marketing. Other researchers acknowledge that the increasing pressures in the voluntary sector have made organisational survival dependent on the effective application of marketing tools (Bendapudi et al, 1996), originally a technique of the for-profit sector. A study by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) investigating how people become recruited into voluntary programs within Australia highlights a startling figure: only 4% of those who first became involved in voluntary work in the last 10 years were recruited via a media report or advertisement (ABS, 2001). Over half of those who became involved did so through knowing someone involved in volunteering or being asked to volunteer. This emphasises Bendapudi et al’s (1996) recommendations. In terms of neo-institutional theory, increasing pressure within any given field results in the tendency of organisations to take on similar characteristics, in order to demonstrate their ability to maintain success in the achievement of their objectives, particularly within the context of competition for scarce resources (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Scott, 1995; Oliver, 1988; Tilt and Symes, 1999; Irvine, 1999). However, the adoption of acceptable and legitimate practices within the field may mean that ineffective or unnecessary practices are adopted in order to appear legitimate and professional and to be eligible for funding (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983).

We hypothesise that the neo-institutional notion of inefficiency is applicable to community groups as they compete for relatively scarce resources, both in terms of funding and volunteers. The gap in research lies in the integration of all of these areas, that is, the investigation of the marketing of nonprofit organisations in the context of neo-institutional theory. This study aims to fill this gap and to provide insight into challenges of the nonprofit sector by using the principles of neo-institutional theory to explain recent trends in the marketing of these organisations. More specifically, this study will (1) investigate the structural marketing characteristics of volunteering organisations; and (2) test hypotheses relating to the marketing of volunteering organisations in the context of neo-institutional theory.

### **Data Analysis and Methodology**

The research was conducted in two phases. The first (exploratory) qualitative phase included indepth interviews and focus groups with environmental volunteering and nonprofit marketing experts. Insight was gained into the structure, funding systems, grant application

processes, recruitment practices, challenges and environmental regeneration practices which form the basis of the organisations' mission. The second (quantitative) phase used the findings from phase one to develop a questionnaire. All local councils within NSW were contacted to determine the number of Bushcare units operating in the state (a total of 54), and each Bushcare coordinator was mailed a copy of the survey. The questionnaire included questions regarding the size of the organisation, nature of its relationship with local council, marketing activities undertaken, accountability structures, reporting and hierarchical structures, reporting requirements, budget size, funding schemes and the nature of the bidding process. Of the 54 questionnaires distributed, 43 were returned and used for analysis – a response rate of 80 percent.

## Results

Within NSW, Bushcare programs involve an average of 201 individual volunteers distributed amongst 28 groups. They have typically applied for an average of 21 grants since the inception of the program which has resulted in an average of over \$168,000 in funding in the past 12 months alone. Among the 48% who have a budget for recruitment activities, around 9% of their budget is allocated.

### The Marketing of Environmental Volunteering Organisations

Respondents were asked about their marketing efforts in two ways: first, at the beginning of the survey, when they were asked specifically about whether “*marketing activities*” are undertaken, the tools used and the aim of their initiatives. At a later stage, respondents were questioned about the “*recruitment activities*” they used to enlist volunteers. By posing these two questions separately, understanding was gained about Bushcare coordinators' comprehension of fundamental marketing concepts and the deliberate application of them to the management of the program.

Interestingly, ‘marketing’ and ‘recruitment’ efforts were viewed as two distinct constructs, indicating lack of understanding of the true scope of marketing and its potential within their organisation. Where 98% of coordinators indicated that they conduct *recruitment activities* in some form or another, only 62% of respondents answered positively to conducting any *marketing*. Three broad categories of marketing aims eventuated: (i) to increase the number of new volunteers recruited (88%); (ii) to increase awareness of the Bushcare program (46%); and (iii) to educate people about bush regeneration (31%).

The two most popular *marketing tools*, utilised by almost 75% of programs, were newspaper advertising and special events like open days. Similarly, the most popular *recruitment activities* are events and educational programs (71%), and newspaper advertisements (40%). Brochures, pamphlets and flyers, newsletters and magazines were identified as common marketing tools utilised. Others were identified more often as recruitment tools but not marketing tools, for example posters and signs, websites, and workshops. Mail-outs and letterbox drops were equally popular as tools for marketing and recruitment. Surprisingly, over one quarter of respondents indicated word-of-mouth as a useful form of recruitment, with one coordinator stating this as their *only* recruitment tool. Table 1 illustrates the results of another categorical question, where respondents indicated recruitment activities employed. The most commonly used recruitment activities for Bushcare units are word-of-mouth, letter-box drops, site signage, and website recruitment with over three quarters of programs adopting each of these tools.

In terms of accountability for these activities, almost one in ten respondents indicated that they do not monitor the success of recruitment activities at all. The most common method used to assess recruitment success, however, is to simply count the number of new volunteers

who have joined the organisation. Only a small proportion of coordinators asked new volunteers how they heard about Bushcare and why they decided to join. For one program, an annual satisfaction survey is used; however it includes all volunteers, not just new recruits.

**Table 1: Type of recruitment activities conducted**

Recruitment Activities conducted	Yes	No
Letter-box drops	83.7%	16.3%
Direct mail from a database	39.5%	60.5%
Radio Advertising	20.9%	79.1%
Bushcare Newsletter	67.4%	32.6%
Television Advertising	2.3%	97.7%
Newspaper Advertising	62.8%	37.2%
Website	76.7%	23.3%
Agency Referral	20.9%	79.1%
Workshops	48.8%	51.2%
Word-of-mouth	95.3%	4.7%
Site signage	83.7%	16.3%
Brochures	72.1%	27.9%

### The Institutionalisation of Marketing Activities

Over half of all respondents (64%) indicated that they have previously adopted or copied recruitment activities from other Bushcare groups that they perceived as successful. Therefore, the ‘mimetic’ isomorphic concept is relevant for investigating the marketing practices of these volunteering organisations. For example, 90% indicated that they thought obtaining grants would improve their image to make them appear more successful and legitimate and almost half (49%) had copied the successful grant application strategies of other programs. Further analysis was conducted to specifically investigate the mimetic processes present amongst Bushcare organisations. Based on prior research in the area of neo-institutional theory and isomorphism, three hypotheses were developed. The first hypothesis relates to the relationship between copying marketing activities and recruitment efforts. It has been chosen because of the neo-institutional assertion that an established field is likely to produce mimetic behaviour by organisations as they copy the practices of organisations they perceive to be successful within that field.

*H<sub>1</sub>: Those organisations that currently employ marketing activities are also more likely to have copied the successful recruitment strategies of other Bushcare organisations.*

A cross-tabulation was performed to assess whether organisations that report implementing marketing activities are more likely to have copied other organisations’ recruitment efforts, the results of which are illustrated in Table 2. The cross-tabulation renders a significant chi-square result (p-value <0.02): H<sub>1</sub> cannot be rejected. Almost three quarters of Bushcare organisations that do conduct marketing have also copied the recruitment initiatives of others.

**Table 2: Cross-tabulation of marketing and adoption of recruitment activities**

	Do Not Copy Recruitment Activities	Copy Recruitment Activities
Do not conduct marketing	64%	26%
Conduct marketing	36%	74%

*H<sub>2</sub>: The copying of recruitment activities from other successful organisations is positively associated with the number of volunteers within the organisation.*

This hypothesis was developed according to the neo-institutional ideology that proposes that the more established the organisational field, the stronger the need of organisations within that field for legitimacy. Legitimacy is achieved by copying the practices of other organisations

within the field. The two variables used to investigate this matter were the number of volunteers within the organisation and whether or not the organisation had adopted or copied any recruitment activities. The mean number of volunteers is significantly different between those volunteers who adopt recruitment activities and those who do not (p-value <0.01) (as illustrated in Table 3). Consequently, H<sub>2</sub> cannot be rejected. The significance of organisation size is associated with the tendency to adopt or copy successful recruitment activities.

**Table 3: Number of volunteers and the adoption of recruitment techniques**

	Mean Number of Volunteers
Adopted/copied activities	348
Have not adopted/copied activities	86

*H<sub>3</sub>: Hearing of successful grant applications at Volunteer Coordinator Network (VCN) meetings is positively associated with success in grant applications.*

This hypothesis allows determination as to whether an organisational field has developed, by evaluating two of the four criteria of organisational field formation. These are increased interactions and mutual awareness through a social network (the VCN) (DiMaggio et al., 1983). An ANOVA was conducted with the two variables of whether the organisations had heard about successful grant applications at VCN meetings and the amount of funding obtained in the last year. This resulted in a significant difference (p-value less than 0.02), however, the direction of association is counter-intuitive, with those who attend the VCN meetings and hear about successful applications having a mean value funding of funding lower than those who do not attend the meetings at all. This surprising result may be accounted to the skewed nature of the mean funding sum due to a large grant obtained; therefore this analysis was revised with the exclusion of the one extreme outlier. The association was insignificant; H<sub>3</sub> consequently has to be rejected.

**Table 4: Total yearly funding and information about grant success at VCN meetings.**

	Mean funding over years (\$)
Hear about applications	193,988
Do not hear about successful grant applications	716,666

## Conclusion

The hypotheses suggest an organisational field has been established: Bushcare organisations display mimetic behaviours through the adoption and copying of recruitment techniques and practices. The tendency will therefore be for those organisations to become isomorphic, i.e. more similar, in their practices and, ultimately, *more susceptible to inefficient marketing practices*. This research has added to knowledge of institutional theory by examining a new area, particularly interesting due to the fact that it is only an emerging field.

It is apparent that traditional advertising activities are deemed as an effective marketing and recruitment strategy in these organisations. While being aware that they do conduct some form of marketing for recruitment, these organisations are in the initial stages of marketing, relying on ad hoc methods to recruit volunteers. From a marketing perspective, the logical solution would be to actively communicate with target markets. Therefore, the key managerial challenge would be to assess the current strategies and motivations for recruitment programs. This research may be used as a platform for the development of more sophisticated and effective instruments from the marketing toolbox, in conjunction with targeting groups within the community, in order to overcome the challenge of new volunteer recruitment. In light of increasing competition within the field, fighting mimetic temptations which result in counter-productive practices will enable them to find a niche approach to attract volunteers.

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