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## **Marketing Research for Volunteering: A Research Agenda**

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## Abstract

Contributing an estimated AUD42 billion dollars a year to the Australian economy and US150 billion dollars to the USA, volunteering has become an industry sector of major importance. It has consequently attracted significant attention among researchers of various disciplines, including marketing. Nevertheless, the industry is confronted with ongoing challenges, particularly in the area of recruitment. This article provides a review of prior marketing-related studies and identifies a number of gaps in the research, such as a limitation in the past to a priori approaches to categorising volunteers, which has offered limited insight and conflicting results. The authors recommend a more comprehensive investigation of heterogeneity amongst volunteers through a posteriori segmentation which will allow precise targeting of specific segments. In addition, a more comprehensive investigation of competition and positioning in the industry is recommended which will facilitate an integrated market structure analysis and lead to more efficient and effective marketing strategies for nonprofit organisations. As a specific example, a better understanding of volunteering motivations in multicultural societies is needed to optimise targeted recruitment messages.

## Keywords

volunteering, review, marketing research

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# Marketing Research for Volunteering: A Research Agenda

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Contributing an estimated AUD42 billion dollars a year to the Australian economy and US150 billion dollars to the USA, volunteering has become an industry sector of major importance. It has consequently attracted significant attention among researchers of various disciplines, including marketing. Nevertheless, the industry is confronted with ongoing challenges, particularly in the area of recruitment. This article provides a review of prior marketing-related studies and identifies a number of gaps in the research, such as a limitation in the past to *a priori* approaches to categorising volunteers, which has offered limited insight and conflicting results. The authors recommend a more comprehensive investigation of heterogeneity amongst volunteers through *a posteriori* segmentation which will allow precise targeting of specific segments. In addition, a more comprehensive investigation of competition and positioning in the industry is recommended which will facilitate an integrated market structure analysis and lead to more efficient and effective marketing strategies for nonprofit organisations. As a specific example, a better understanding of volunteering motivations in multicultural societies is needed to optimise targeted recruitment messages.

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## Introduction

Eighty million adults invest five hours a week into volunteering in the USA (Wandersman and Alderman, 1993), amounting to a total of 20 billion hours, or 150 billion USD a year in value for the USA. In Australia, the sector has an estimated value of 42 billion AUD with 4.4 million Australians contributing 704 million hours (Volunteering Australia, 2001). While a large proportion of volunteer activity is dedicated to government organisations (Brudney and Kellough, 2000), many non-government organisations would not exist without volunteers. The American Red Cross workforce, for instance, consists of 97 % volunteers (Reeder, 2001). Due to the enormous value of the sector and the increasing number of nonprofit organisations competing intensely for limited resources (Bendapudi, Singh and Bendapudi, 1996; Courtney, 1994; Riecken, Babakus and Yavas, 1994) voluntary organisations are finding themselves under increasing pressure to use traditionally commercial marketing techniques to attract volunteers. This paper reviews prior research in the area of marketing to volunteers, identifies research gaps, and suggests a future research agenda that will provide voluntary organisations with the tools they require to effectively target appropriate segments of the market.

## Prior Research and Identification of Research Gaps

In the area of marketing related volunteering research, prior studies can be categorised into five main topics: competition; positioning and image; investigations of the volunteer as a customer of the volunteering organisation; the “buying-behaviour” of volunteers; and ways of encouraging them to become loyal customers.

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## Competition

Numerous researchers have recognised the wide variety of **competing volunteer organisations** defining a marketplace which faces increasing competition for limited resources (Courtney, 1994; Riecken, Babakus and Yavas, 1994). This led to a greater variety of volunteers within organisations, largely due to their being forced to widen the pool from which members are recruited (McPherson and Rotolo, 1996). Greater competition amongst agencies relying on volunteers has also made it more difficult to recruit and retain members (Yavas and Riecken, 1997).

Despite the wide acknowledgement that competition is an increasing concern for volunteering organisations, competition analysis have so far not been conducted and consequently competitive strategies have not been applied in the voluntary sector.

## Positioning and Image

Since marketing concepts were first applied to the nonprofit sector, the importance of public perceptions and attitudes towards the organisation have been repeatedly emphasised (Fox and Kotler, 1980; Kotler, 1975). This has been magnified in recent decades by increased funding pressures, and growing competition which has made organisational survival reliant on careful application of consumer behaviour concepts and marketing management tools (Riecken, Babakus and Yavas, 1994; Yavas and Riecken, 1997). While they also acknowledge the value of personal networks and recommendations, Wilson and Pimm (1996) discuss the value of applying traditional commercial marketing strategies such as **positioning** to the voluntary sector. Recognition of the **brand name** of the organisation (Supphellen and Nelson, 2001) and a positive public **image** (Bendapudi, Singh and Bendapudi, 1996; Davis Smith, 1999) are also important because many people do not make contribution decisions based on extensive and rational information. Among active volunteers, many cite recognition of the organisation name as enough to call them to action.

Although it seems to be generally acknowledged that the match between personal needs and organisational goals (Dailey, 1986) is a major determinant for successful recruitment and retention (Fox and Kotler, 1980; Kotler, 1975), no comparative image studies have so far been conducted for the volunteering sector. Webb, Green and Brashear (2000) did develop scales to measure attitudes for nonprofits to more accurately assess appropriate target markets. These scales, however, have not yet been used for competitive image studies in the voluntary sector. As Supphellen and Nelson (2001, p. 593) point out: "Little is known about the determinants of attitudes toward charitable organisations" indicating that the volunteering image space is yet to be defined.

## Volunteers as Customers

Different organisations take different approaches to the recruitment of volunteers. Those that take a marketing approach view volunteers as **customers** (Wymer, 1998). This approach is identified by the Canadian Heart and Stroke Foundation as a key factor in effectively managing volunteer programs (Ross, 1992). It is commonly acknowledged that volunteers are an extremely heterogeneous group, coming from very different backgrounds with very different qualities and skills (Bussell and Forbes, 2002; Wilson and Pimm, 1996).

There have been many studies which have sought to categorise volunteers according to certain descriptive variables. The majority of these descriptive studies have focussed on *demographics*. Education has been found to be the strongest and most consistent factor influencing volunteering activity (Curtis, Grabb and Baer, 1992; Edwards and White, 1980;

Florin, Jones and Wandersman, 1986; McPherson and Rotolo, 1996; Reed and Selbee, 2000; Yavas and Riecken, 1985). Following a similar socioeconomic theme, employed people have also been found to be more likely volunteers than the unemployed (Curtis, Grabb and Baer, 1992). Other demographic variables however have resulted in conflicting findings, such as sex (Curtis, Grabb and Baer, 1992; Davis Smith, 1999; Riecken, Babakus and Yavas, 1994; Rohs, 1986), age (Curtis, Grabb and Baer, 1992; Menchik and Weisbrod, 1987; Smith, 1994), marital status (Jenner, 1982; Luloff, *et al.*, 1984; Palisi and Korn, 1989; Smith, Reddy and Baldwin, 1972; Williams and Ortega, 1986), duration of residence (Florin, Jones and Wandersman, 1986; Reed and Selbee, 2000; Smith, 1994), and race (Auslander and Litwin, 1988; Florin, Jones and Wandersman, 1986; Musick, Wilson and Bynum, 2000; Smith, 1994). Other studies investigated *attitudinal factors*. Most have found particular attitudes and values to discriminate between volunteers, and while there are certain common empathetic and altruistic themes, there is no agreement on specific attitudes. For example, volunteers have been described as holding a distinctive worldview (Reed and Selbee, 2000), being characterised by morality, efficacy and emotional stability (Allen and Rushton, 1983), having a higher sense of political efficacy and patriotism (Florin, Jones and Wandersman, 1986; Hougland and Christenson, 1982), and displaying altruistic attitudes such as sense of civic duty (Harris, 1990; Musick, Wilson and Bynum, 2000; Reed and Selbee, 2000). Reed and Selbee (2000) not only recognise the distinctive values of volunteers but also the roots of these values - such as childhood experiences, religious background, education and occupation. In relation to religion researchers are unable to agree on the extent of its influence over volunteering behaviour (Independent Sector, 2001; Menchik and Weisbrod, 1987; Musick, Wilson and Bynum, 2000). Family background is generally acknowledged to be an important factor, particularly if an individual's parents volunteered (Harris, 1990; Wymer, 1998), if they have children involved in the organisation (Menchik and Weisbrod, 1987; Smith, 1994), or if they were involved in civic activities as a child (Reed and Selbee, 2000; Rohs, 1986). Reed and Selbee (2000) go further to suggest that volunteering can in fact be learned or taught. Finally, *motivations* for volunteering have been studied. A wide spectrum of groupings have been proposed however most researchers broadly group motivations into two categories: altruistic and egotistic (Bendapudi, Singh and Bendapudi, 1996; Latting, 1990; Phillips, 1982; Smith, 1981). Some suggest that volunteering motivations must be altruistic (Bussell and Forbes, 2002), that is, they must be selfless and the individual must gain no apparent social or materialistic reward (Bryan and Test, 1967). There is evidence to suggest that altruism is indeed present in many types of volunteer activity (Nichols and King, 1999; Unger, 1991; Wilson and Pimm, 1996). However many researchers have disputed such purely altruistic motivations and argue that individuals are also driven by egotistical motives. Olson (1965) proposed that volunteers gain economic benefits, for example they may want to maintain a service that they use which would not otherwise be available (Smith, 1994). This 'reciprocity motive' has been found in various contexts, such as donating time to the Red Cross (Riecken, Babakus and Yavas, 1994). Families also use volunteering activities as a way of strengthening the family unit and developing solid values (Johnson-Coffey, 1997). Some, particularly older people volunteer to attain a sense of belonging, affiliation, prestige (Bussell and Forbes, 2002), to feel valuable and useful (Okun, 1994), or to alleviate loneliness (Wilson and Pimm, 1996). For others the central motivating factor is the importance of particular values (Omoto and Snyder, 1995) and the opportunity to express these beliefs and values (Bussell and Forbes, 2002; Wymer, 1998). However, while benefit segmentation has been undertaken specifically for donating and fundraising (Harvey, 1990), such research has not been conducted for volunteering organisations. Volunteering activities have also been credited with developing skills useful in furthering an individual's career (Bussell and Forbes, 2002; Caudron, 1994; Johnson-Coffey, 1997), and giving the volunteer a broader perspective which

enables a more balanced work-family equilibrium (Loeb, 1996; Schweitzer, 1998). In a more recent focus on older volunteers, health and fitness have also been found to be key factors motivating volunteers to action (Musick, Herzog and House, 1999; Van Willigen, 2000; Wilson and Pimm, 1996). Finally, Heidreich (1990) segmented volunteers *a priori* based on the roles they perform in the organisations, demonstrating significant lifestyle and socio-demographic profiles.

To the authors' knowledge, prior descriptions of volunteers have been limited to averages of total market or simple grouping criteria like gender and age, rather than *a posteriori* segmentation based on motivations or benefits. This research gap has been explicitly mentioned by numerous researchers.. For instance, Reed and Selbee (2000, p. 588-589) asked "Are there particular social settings [...] where the unique combination of (a) prevalent norms, values, social networks, and civic structures and (b) the blend of both opportunity and need for helping [...] are especially favourable to volunteering and that elicit such behaviour selectively from individuals who are heterogeneous in most other respects? And what is the importance of personality factors relative to subcultural elements?". Effective segmentation of the volunteer market would be useful for nonprofit organisations to develop very targeted campaigns which cut through to key target audiences in a cost effective manner. Motivation or benefit segmentation provides a much stronger basis for segmentation than relying solely on descriptive techniques (Harvey, 1990).

## **Buying Behaviour**

If volunteers are customers, how do these customers make their **decision whether or not to buy**? Bendapudi, Singh and Bendapudi (1996) present a process map to explain the decision process of helpers which proposes four steps: perception, motivation, behaviour and consequences. Highlighted in their model is the importance of image and reputation of the organisation which in turn influences public perception and individual motivation. Supphellen and Nelson (2001) focus specifically on the way in which people process information when making philanthropic decisions, which can range from lengthy evaluation based on detailed information, to requiring no information other than the name of the organisation. Others however have found it more useful to ask the question 'why don't people volunteer?'. A number of common themes have emerged. Firstly, many researchers profess the resource model of volunteering which argues that people have limited resources to offer, including time, and that this can be a significant barrier to volunteering (Geroy, Wright and Jacoby, 2000; McPherson and Rotolo, 1996; Musick, Wilson and Bynum, 2000). This is supported by those investigating the changing nature of both family structures and the labour market which has resulted in more dual income families with increasingly hectic lifestyles (Tiehen, 2000; Yavas and Riecken, 1997). Secondly, a number of authors point to the 'me generation' of the 1980's and the pursuit of self-indulgent leisure activities as a contributor to the decline in volunteering rates (Johnson-Coffey, 1997; Riecken, Babakus and Yavas, 1994; Yavas and Riecken, 1997). Thirdly, the 'free rider' problem has been identified as a potential deterrent (Olson, 1965; Riecken, Babakus and Yavas, 1994; Unger, 1991). This occurs when the benefit produced is freely available to the public, not just those who contribute to the creation of it, so individuals feel no incentive to participate. Other reasons identified as potential deterrents include the organisation being unwelcoming to newcomers (Nichols and King, 1999), and a negative image of the volunteering organisation (Davis Smith, 1999; Nichols and King, 1999).

This area has been covered well from a marketing research perspective and does not demonstrate any major gaps.

## Retention

Once individuals have made the decision to volunteer, the next challenge is to **transform these customers into loyal customers**. Chinman and Wandersman (1999) discuss retention in terms of costs and benefits and suggest that by repeatedly assessing the benefits that will keep members participating and assigning tasks that are consistent with those benefits, rates of retention can be increased. They also suggest linking to other groups to supplement the available benefits. Others have suggested that certain aspects of the working environment contribute significantly to levels of volunteer retention, for example the relationship between volunteers and paid staff (Mitchell and Taylor, 1997), the level of personal satisfaction the volunteer gains from their involvement (Omoto and Snyder, 1995; Watts and Edwards, 1983) and training, autonomy and feedback (Dailey, 1986). Significantly, the original motivations of the volunteer can impact rates of retention but are also often out of the control of the organisation, for example, parents will often resign when their children are no longer involved with the organisation (Wilson and Pimm, 1996; Wymer, 1998), and those with egotistic motivations typically volunteer for shorter periods of time (Rubin and Thorelli, 1984). While the abovementioned retention studies are of high value to the volunteering sector, it seems that there is a lack of integration of retention studies to the investigation of volunteering segments and competition faced in the marketplace which represents a significant weakness, as it ignores major factors potentially leading to loyalty or the loss of volunteers.

## Research Gaps and Future Directions

Despite the voluminous research into volunteering, some critical problems remain and require further insight:

1. While recruitment of volunteers is an ongoing problem in the industry in general, volunteering organisations operating in many countries, including Australia, the USA, and the UK, face a specific recruiting problem: the multicultural structure of society. These societies are highly heterogeneous with respect to values and beliefs, and consequently need to be understood better to optimise appeals for volunteer participation.
2. Improved analysis of heterogeneity among volunteers and potential volunteers. To date, volunteers have only been grouped in an *a priori* manner. That means it was assumed that the variable discriminating between groups is known in advance (for instance, gender, age, education or role of the volunteer in the organisation). Data-driven (*a posteriori*, *post-hoc*) segmentation approaches could provide valuable new insight into the segmentation structure of volunteers.
3. Positioning and competition research: While some attempts have been made to learn about volunteers' perceptions of volunteering and volunteer organisations, a perceptual map approach has so far not been conducted. This would provide valuable insights for managers of volunteering organisations in terms of how their organisation is viewed in the competitive volunteering marketplace and what positioning strategy would be optimal in providing a "unique volunteering proposition", and ultimately, a competitive advantage.
4. Integrated strategic marketing research: While the above gaps have been filled in other sectors of industry, integration of the core strategic components (segmentation, positioning and competition), represent a general research gap in marketing. In the volunteering sector, such an approach would help management make strategic decisions based on comprehensive market knowledge, which would avoid the common mistake of making segmentation, position and competitive strategy decisions independently of each other.

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