Not just any volunteers: segmenting the market to attract the high contributors

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Growing competition in the third sector has resulted in nonprofit organizations making more sophisticated use of marketing techniques to attract volunteers. Not only are organizations attempting to attract more volunteers but increasingly the focus is shifting to attracting the right type of volunteers, or those who will contribute the most hours. This study segments the volunteering market by number of hours contributed in the past 12 months, and identifies significant differences between the characteristics of high-contribution and low-contribution volunteers. High-contribution volunteers are found to (a) exhibit distinctive sociodemographic characteristics; (b) have a greater number, and broader range, of motivations for volunteering; and (c) initially get involved in volunteering in different ways to low-contribution volunteers. Findings are important because they provide practitioners with a description of those individuals most likely to contribute more hours, which can be used to increasingly attract these types of people and subsequently reduce the amount spent continually attracting new volunteers.

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Not Just Any Volunteers: Segmenting the Market to Attract the High Contributors

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Abstract

Growing competition in the third sector has resulted in nonprofit organizations making more sophisticated use of marketing techniques to attract volunteers. Not only are organizations attempting to attract more volunteers but increasingly the focus is shifting to attracting the right type of volunteers, or those who will contribute the most hours. This study segments the volunteering market by number of hours contributed in the past 12 months, and identifies significant differences between the characteristics of high-contribution and low-contribution volunteers. High-contribution volunteers are found to (a) exhibit distinctive sociodemographic characteristics; (b) have a greater number, and broader range, of motivations for volunteering; and (c) initially get involved in volunteering in different ways to low-contribution volunteers. Findings are important because they provide practitioners with a description of those individuals most likely to contribute more hours, which can be used to increasingly attract these types of people and subsequently reduce the amount spent continually attracting new volunteers.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In recent decades, many countries around the world have experienced a dramatic expansion of the third sector. The increase in nonprofit organizations has been attributed to a number of factors, including the shift of responsibility for services previously provided by government to the third sector (Kingfisher, 2002). The growing number of social issues requiring support has also contributed, for example the growth in mortgage debt and resultant financial pressures on families, as well as environmental-related problems such climate change, which have not yet emerged as high priorities on the agendas of many government bodies.

However, the increase in the number of third sector organizations has not been accompanied by an equal growth in the availability of human and financial resources. Therefore, in an

effort to continue achieving their goals, nonprofit organizations are taking a more pragmatic approach to their operation and are using techniques and processes which have, until now, been more commonly seen in the for-profit sector.

This has also been the case in academia, with marketing researchers applying marketing techniques to gain greater insight into volunteers and volunteering organizations, with the aim of providing practitioners with the information and tools that allow them to compete more effectively. For example, the traditionally "commercial" concepts such of branding, positioning, and targeting have been demonstrated as not only relevant but important to the nonprofit sector (see for example Wray, 1994; Venable, Rose, Bush, & Gilbert, 2005; Chiagouris, 2005; Bennett & Kottasz, 2000; Ewing, Govekar, Govekar, & Rishi, 2002; Yavas & Riecken, 1997).

One marketing technique which has for years been widely adopted and commonly used in the commercial sector, but still less so in the nonprofit sector, is market segmentation. Market segmentation is the process of grouping customers within an heterogeneous market into different segments, within which individuals have similar requirements which can be fulfilled by a specific marketing mix (McDonald & Dunbar, 1998). Although not yet commonly used by volunteering organizations, there is growing acknowledgement of the heterogeneous nature of the market and the value of segmentation as a way of more effectively targeting individuals likely to volunteer. As a result, there have been some notable applications of segmentation techniques to the volunteering sector which warrant mention.

Wymer has conducted a number of a priori studies which segment the market (Mazanec, 2000) using a number of criteria, including sociodemographic characteristics and volunteering behavior (Wymer, 1997, 2003; Wymer & Starnes, 1999; Wymer, 1999). In each case, results show that the segments displayed distinctive profiles indicating that customized marketing mixes could be designed to more effectively attract them.

There have also been limited attempts to segment the volunteer market a posteriori (Mazanec, 2000), using data driven methods (Dolnicar, 2004) to derive the segments. Studies by Dolnicar and Randle have found that that there are groups of volunteering organizations which compete with each other for the same individuals (Dolnicar & Randle, 2005), and that groups of volunteers exist with particular combinations of motivations for involvement (Dolnicar & Randle, 2007). In both cases, the value of segmenting the volunteer market was demonstrated and the potential for further applications of the concept for the nonprofit sector highlighted.

Increased competition has also resulted in many volunteering organizations considering not only the *number* of volunteers they attract but the *type* of volunteers they attract. Recruitment costs can be dramatically reduced if organizations can recruit volunteers who are prepared to contribute more time to the cause and stay involved longer (Wymer & Starnes, 2001a). These individuals are valuable because they become experienced in the particular role they are performing and reduce the advertising and training costs associated with attracting and inducting new volunteers. Wymer and Starnes (2001b) provide a detailed analysis and discussion of the various factors which contribute to volunteer retention and the importance of ensuring a positive volunteer experience. This includes, for instance, making sure volunteers feel needed, gain a sense of job satisfaction and accomplishment, and have the opportunity to meet people and develop a network of friends.

Currently, however, there is little information regarding who these high-contribution volunteers are, and how or if they are different from individuals who volunteer less frequently. The purpose of this study is to identify whether high-contribution volunteers differ significantly from low-contribution volunteers in their personal characteristics and motivations, and whether this information can be used to more effectively target high-contribution volunteers.

PRIOR RESEARCH

Many studies have attempted to identify and describe those individuals most likely to volunteer. Some have taken a sample of people who have performed a particular type of volunteer work, for example volunteering for the Girl Guides (Nichols & King, 1999) or the Red Cross (Frisch & Gerrard, 1981), and simply described their characteristics. Others have compared a sample of volunteers with a sample of nonvolunteers to test for, and describe, significant differences (Dolnicar & Randle, 2006). However a limitation of most studies is that to form the segment of "volunteers" they group together everyone who has performed any volunteer work within a defined timeframe, for example the past 12 months. This means that individuals who have volunteered only once for a few hours during the past year are grouped with those who have regularly contributed multiple hours every week during the past year. These studies fail to consider that there may be very different types of people who engage in low- versus high-frequency volunteering activities, and that understanding these differences may make it easier for organizations to attract people who are likely to contribute more hours. This study addresses this gap by segmenting the volunteering market a priori based on the number of hours contributed by the individual in the past 12 months.

In terms of *who* is most likely to volunteer, the results of previous studies are conflicting. One factor which consistently emerges as a strong predictor of volunteering behavior is education (McPherson & Rotolo, 1996; Reed & Selbee, 2000). However, for other sociodemographic characteristics the profile of volunteers varies significantly from study to study. For example, Curtis, Grabb, and Baer (1992) found volunteers most likely to be employed full-time, whereas Smith (1999) found volunteers more likely to work part-time. A study of Red Cross volunteers found women more likely to volunteer (Frisch & Gerrard, 1981), while studies of political volunteers find men more likely to be involved (Riecken, Babakus, & Yavas, 1994).

One organization that reported on the sociodemographic characteristics of its longer serving members was the Girl Scouts, which found that they were older (at least 40), had attended at least four years of college, and were employed full-time or part-time (Girl Scout U.S.A. Profile of Adult Volunteers,1998, cited in Wymer & Starnes, 2001b). While this information is useful in terms of knowing the volunteers they have already successfully attracted, it is less helpful in identifying potential new markets. The question remains: when an organization is looking to expand its base of high-contribution volunteers, is there a distinctive segment of the market which should be targeted? Considering that most profiling studies of volunteers have found that different segments of the volunteering market do display distinct characteristics, it is expected that when segmented by volunteering contribution the resultant groups will also display distinctive profiles. Therefore, it is hypothesised that:

H1: High-contribution volunteers will be characterized by a distinct sociodemographic profile when compared to low-contribution volunteers.

In terms of reasons *why* people volunteer, most researchers acknowledge that motivations are multifaceted (Bendapudi, Singh, & Bendapudi, 1996; Omoto & Snyder, 1995). Wymer, Riecken, & Yavas (1996) discuss the generally agreed upon opinion that altruistic motivations (e.g. to help those less fortunate) and egoistic motivations (e.g. enjoyment or to develop skills to help their career) are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and that most individuals who volunteer because of a genuine desire to help others still want to have a rewarding experience. However, what is not known is whether the number of reasons for involvement is different for different segments of the market. It seems likely that individuals who volunteer regularly and consistently over a long period are motivated by a greater number of reasons for involvement. For these people, if one of their reasons for volunteering reduces in importance the other reasons for involvement are enough to keep them actively volunteering. On the other hand, if low-contribution volunteers are motivated by fewer factors and one of these reduces in importance (e.g. if they volunteer for their child's school but the child leaves that school) they would have no other reason to continue and therefore stop volunteering for that cause. Therefore it is hypothesized that:

H2: High-contribution volunteers cite a greater number of motivations for volunteering than low-contribution volunteers.

H3: High-contribution volunteers exhibit a broader range of motivations for volunteering than low-contribution volunteers.

Numerous studies have investigated the attitudes or mindset that characterize volunteers. Findings include that volunteers display prosocial attitudes (Wymer, 1997), a strong sense of civic duty (Florin, Jones, & Wandersman, 1986), and feel a personal responsibility to support the common good (Reed & Selbee, 2000). Accepting that volunteers do have distinctive attitudes which intrinsically motivate them to perform some form of social service, it is hypothesized that this would also influence the way they come to be involved in volunteering activities. That is, the more involved, higher-contribution, volunteers are more likely to have initiated involvement themselves (intrinsic motivation) rather than have been asked or persuaded by others (extrinsic motivation) to become involved. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

H4: High-contribution volunteers are more likely to actively seek out volunteering opportunities, whereas low-contribution volunteers are more likely to become involved because they were encouraged to do so by someone else.

METHODOLOGY

Fieldwork Administration

The data for this study was collected during September and October of 2006 in Australia using an online internet panel, which was set up and maintained such that it was representative of the population. The online panel was recruited not only online but also face-to-face and over the phone to minimize the sample bias which can occur if one recruitment method is used exclusively. An invitation to participate in the survey was sent to a subset of the panel which was also representative of the Australian population.

An online research design was chosen because it allowed a national Australian sample to be collected within the cost and time constraints of the project. Due to the questionnaire being completed online the data was automatically entered into an SPSS file. This eliminated the possibility of errors in data entry which can be a problematic aspect of survey research. In addition, the online survey was programmed such that respondents were not able to proceed to the next question until they had provided a valid answer for the current question. This eliminated any possibility of missing data.

Measures

The data used for this study were collected as part of a larger 30 minute online survey which asked detailed questions relating mostly to giving unpaid help. To allow for hypothesis testing and profiling of segments in this study, individuals answered questions relating to their past volunteering behavior, reasons for volunteering, and personal characteristics.

Level of contribution

To split the sample according to level of volunteering contribution, respondents were asked to indicate the number of hours of unpaid help they had contributed to organizations or groups in the past 12 months. Respondents could select one of seven answer alternatives: 1-9 hours, 10-19 hours, 20-39 hours, 40-79 hours, 80-139 hours, 140-299 hours, or 300 hours or more.

Reasons for volunteering

Following a review of relevant literature and an extensive qualitative phase which contributed to the design of this study, respondents were given a list of 19 possible reasons for volunteering, for example to help those less fortunate or to maintain services they may use one day. Respondents indicated which of the reasons applied to them by either checking or leaving blank the box next to each reason. Participants could select as many reasons as applied to them.

How became involved in volunteering

Respondents were asked to indicate how it was that they first came to give unpaid help to the organization or group. Six answer alternatives were given and participants were allowed to select only one option as the main reason. The reasons were because they knew someone involved, someone asked them to become involved, previous involvement with the organization, they saw an ad/report in the media, they found out about it themselves, and other. Respondents who selected the "other" alternative were asked to describe how they became involved.

Socio-demographic characteristics

To enable profiling of segments and testing for significant differences, respondents were asked questions relating to sex, age, education, income, employment status, relationship status, and family status.

Sample Characteristics

Because of the highly multicultural nature of Australian society, the sample for this study was deliberately structured to ensure that a wide range of cultural groups were represented, including individuals from Anglo-Celtic, Asian, Middle Eastern, European, and American ancestries.

A total of 848 individuals who completed the survey indicated they had volunteered in the past 12 months. Segments were constructed according to the total number of hours volunteered in the past year. An extreme group design was employed (Alf & Abrahams, 1975), whereby high and low subgroups were isolated and the remaining midlevel group eliminated from analysis. Rather than simply take a median split to derive the groups, experts in the field of volunteering were consulted as to how they would define typical high-contribution volunteers and low-contribution volunteers. Following these interviews it was determined that low-contribution volunteers would be defined as individuals who contributed between 1-19 hours in the past 12 months ($n = 449$) and high-contribution volunteers would be defined as those who contributed 40 or more hours in the past 12 months ($n = 271$). Those in the midrange, who had volunteered for between 20-39 hours ($n = 128$), were excluded. Therefore, the total sample size used for this analysis was 720.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this study was conducted using SPSS statistical software. The variables used to test hypotheses H1 and H4 are categorically or ordinal scaled. Therefore, chi-squared tests were performed to check for significant differences between groups, and the p-values Bonferroni corrected to account for multiple testing on the same data. For hypothesis H2, the average number of motivations was calculated for each group, and ANOVA used to test for significant differences. For hypothesis, H3 frequency counts were performed to identify which motivations were selected by over half of the total sample. Unless otherwise specified, all statistics reported in this paper have significance levels of 95% or higher.

RESULTS

H1: High-contribution volunteers are characterized by a distinct sociodemographic profile when compared to low-contribution volunteers.

No significant differences were found between the groups in relation to sex or income. Surprisingly, and inconsistent with other studies of volunteers, education also failed to discriminate between segments. Despite this, a number of significant differences were found between the groups. High-contribution volunteers had a significantly higher number of part-time employees (27%) and non-working individuals (17%) than the low-contribution group (14% and 12% respectively), while low-contribution volunteers had the highest proportion of full-time employees (60%, compared to 50%), $\chi^2(4) = 23.3, p = .000$. Intuitively this seems logical because nonworking and part-time employees would have more time to regularly devote hours to another cause, while the time restraints placed on full-time employees would be a barrier to frequent involvement. High-contribution volunteers were more likely to be older, with 33% aged 36-45 (compared to 18% for low-contribution volunteers), and 27% aged 46 or above (compared to 13% for the low-contributors). Conversely, low-contribution volunteers had a high proportion of younger individuals aged 18-25 (31% compared to 16%) and 26-35 (37% compared to 25%), $\chi^2(5) = 55.0, p = .000$. High-contribution volunteers were also more likely to have children (51% compared to 38%) while low-contribution

volunteers were likely to be without children (62% compared to 49%), $\chi^2(1) = 6.6$, $p = .049$. That a number of significant sociodemographic differences were found between the high- and low-contribution volunteers means hypothesis H1cannot be rejected.

H2: High-contribution volunteers cite a greater number of motivations for volunteering than low-contribution volunteers.

The average number of reasons ticked by each group was calculated and ANOVA performed to assess the significance of differences. The average number of motivations applying to the low-contribution group was 6.7 and the average for the high-contribution group was 9.0. This was significant at the 99.9% level ($F = 53.6$, $df = 1$), therefore hypothesis H2 cannot be rejected.

H3: High-contribution volunteers exhibit a broader range of motivations for volunteering than low-contribution volunteers.

To test hypothesis H3 not only were the average number of reasons for volunteering considered but the types of reasons were investigated. Those reasons which applied to the majority of each segment (that is, the reasons which were selected by over 50% of the segment) were analyzed. In the low-contribution group, only four motivations applied to the majority. These were, "it gives me the chance to help others"; "I can give something back to society"; "it will improve my community"; and "I can support an important cause." These four reasons also applied to the majority of the high-contribution group, but an additional five reasons also applied to the majority of the high-contributors. These were, "I can meet different types of people"; "it sets a good example for others"; "I can socialize with people who are like me"; "it keeps me active"; and "I feel like I am doing a good job." Interestingly, while the four reasons applying to the low-contribution group are all altruistic in nature, the high-contribution group nominated not only altruistic motivations for involvement, but a number of egoistic reasons that essentially provide benefits not only to others but also to themselves, such as being able to meet different types of people and keep active. This balance of helping others plus benefiting oneself is likely to be a key factor in the high-contribution group being willing to keep donating more hours for a longer period, because they feel as though they also have benefited personally in some way from their involvement. This is the fundamental concept of relationship marketing, that the relationship must be mutually beneficially for it to be healthy and lasting in the long term (Arnett, German, & Hunt, 2003). That the majority of the high-contribution group indicated a wider range of altruistic and egoistic reasons for involvement means that hypothesis H3 cannot be rejected.

H4: High-contribution volunteers are more likely to actively seek out volunteering opportunities, whereas low-contribution volunteers are more likely to become involved because they were encouraged to do so by someone else.

Participants were asked to indicate how it was that they first became involved in volunteering by selecting one of five answer options. As expected, high-contribution volunteers had the highest proportion indicating they became involved after finding out about volunteering opportunities themselves (21%), while low-contribution volunteers were more likely to indicate they became involved because someone asked them to be involved (27%), $X^2(5) = 19.8$, $p = .001$. Therefore, hypothesis H4 cannot be rejected.

DISCUSSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The significant differences that have been found between high- and low-contribution volunteers allow managers of volunteering organizations to design marketing strategies which more effectively target these particular types of individuals. The distinctive socio-demographic characteristics of high-contribution volunteers provide insight as to who the people are that contribute the most hours to volunteering. They are likely to be married or living with a partner, not working or in part-time employment, have children, and be over 35 years old.

That high-contributors are motivated by a range of altruistic and egoistic motivations means that a package of benefits not only to others and the community, but also to themselves, is the message that will be most meaningful and motivating for them. The fact that they are the group most likely to seek out information on volunteering opportunities themselves means that organizations need to make sure that information on their particular cause is readily available, clear, and concise.

The present study has provided evidence to suggest that high-contribution volunteers are significantly different from low-contribution volunteers in terms of their socio-demographic characteristics, motivations for involvement and how they initially became involved in volunteering. Results are important for managers of volunteering organizations because they enable them not only to identify those individuals who are likely to become involved in volunteering, but those who are likely to contribute the highest number of hours. By doing this they can minimize the costs of advertising, recruitment, and training which are associated with new volunteers. In the current environment of reduced funding and increased competition, it is fundamental that organizations make the most efficient use of their limited resources. Only by doing this can they continue to meet their organizational goals and provide important public services which would otherwise not be provided by government.

This study provides a platform from which further research could be launched, for example investigations of additional characteristics of the high-contribution group. Questions that remain include: are there particular roles that high-contribution volunteers are more likely to perform or certain organizations or types of causes that they are attracted to? Do the profiles of high-contribution volunteers differ depending on the cause? For example is the profile of a high contributor to environmental causes different from high contributors for humanitarian causes?

Further insight into the mindset of this group and the ways in which they differ from other groups of volunteers, or indeed non-volunteers, would only add to the tools available to volunteering managers in trying to target the types of people who are most likely to be interested in their volunteering offering and contribute the most hours doing that specific type of work.

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Notes