

January 2005

Cultural Perceptions of Volunteering: Attracting Volunteers in an Increasingly Multicultural Society

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Recommended Citation

Dolnicar, Sara and Randle, Melanie J.: Cultural Perceptions of Volunteering: Attracting Volunteers in an Increasingly Multicultural Society 2005.
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Abstract

Contributing 42 billion dollars to the Australian economy annually, volunteering has become an industry of major importance. The increasingly multicultural nature of Australia has presented new challenges for nonprofit marketers in terms of designing recruitment strategies that appeal to the extremely heterogeneous cultural groups that make up our society. While various studies have focused on the application of marketing techniques to the nonprofit sector, there has been a lack of research looking specifically at the nonprofit organisations competing within a particular marketplace, and whether the perceptions and image of these competitors differs between cultural groups. This empirical study seeks to address this issue by using qualitative methodology (structures in-depth interviews, phone interviews, focus groups, and short intercept interviews) to investigate the differences in perceptions of volunteering and volunteering organisations between key cultural minority groups within the Illawarra region of NSW, and to identify the implications of these differences for marketing managers. Clear differences with major managerial implications were revealed in the study: for instance, Macedonians and Greeks are looking to socialise with other people from their own culture, whereas others are looking for opportunities to mix with Australians and practice their English speaking skills. Perceptions vary widely as well, from a service to society over slavery and the appropriateness for men or women to engage in volunteering only.

Keywords

marketing, volunteering, cultural minorities, exploratory research

Disciplines

Business | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Publication Details

This article was originally published as: Dolnicar, S & Randle, M, Cultural Perceptions of Volunteering: Attracting Volunteers in an Increasingly Multicultural Society, ANZMAC 2005 (CD)Conference Proceedings of the Australian and New Zealand Marketing Academy, Fremantle, Western Australia, 5-7 December 2005.

Cultural Perceptions of Volunteering: Attracting Volunteers in an Increasingly Multicultural Society

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Abstract

Contributing 42 billion dollars to the Australian economy annually, volunteering has become an industry of major importance. The increasingly multicultural nature of Australia has presented new challenges for nonprofit marketers in terms of designing recruitment strategies that appeal to the extremely heterogeneous cultural groups that make up our society. While various studies have focused on the application of marketing techniques to the nonprofit sector, there has been a lack of research looking specifically at the nonprofit organisations competing within a particular marketplace, and whether the perceptions and image of these competitors differs between cultural groups. This empirical study seeks to address this issue by using qualitative methodology (structures in-depth interviews, phone interviews, focus groups, and short intercept interviews) to investigate the differences in perceptions of volunteering and volunteering organisations between key cultural minority groups within the Illawarra region of NSW, and to identify the implications of these differences for marketing managers. Clear differences with major managerial implications were revealed in the study: for instance, Macedonians and Greeks are looking to socialise with other people from their own culture, whereas others are looking for opportunities to mix with Australians and practice their English speaking skills. Perceptions vary widely as well, from a service to society over slavery and the appropriateness for men or women to engage in volunteering only.

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Introduction and Prior Research

In Australia, the volunteering sector has an estimated value of A\$42 billion per annum with 4.4 million individuals contributing 704 million hours (Volunteering Australia, 2001). Increasingly, nonprofit organisations are being expected to provide services which have traditionally been the responsibility of government (Bales, 1996) which, combined with reductions in funding, is increasing the demand for unpaid workers (Wymer, 1997). The last half century has also seen significant changes in the cultural make up of the country. Since World War II almost six million people have come to Australia as new settlers and even now over 115,000 migrants and refugees are granted visas each year (Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, 2005). Today, Australia's population is about three quarters Anglo-Celtic, 20 percent other European and five percent Asian. These significant changes have presented unique challenges for volunteering organisations. Heterogeneity amongst volunteers has increased, largely due to organisations being forced to widen the pool from which volunteers are recruited (McPherson and Rotolo, 1996). And while this has meant greater numbers of ethnic groups being involved, there is still an under representation of minorities within volunteering groups (Fisher and Cole, 1993; Martin, 1999).

The immense contribution of the volunteering sector to many societies has led to substantial research investigating different aspects of the volunteering phenomenon. For the purpose of this study the review of prior research is focused on three key aspects of volunteering – **marketing** related studies of the nonprofit sector, investigations into **motivations** for volunteering, and studies of **cultural minorities** and their views on volunteering.

In relation to **marketing**, a number of authors have postulated the potential benefits of applying what have traditionally been considered commercial marketing techniques to the nonprofit sector, for example promotions and communications (Bendapudi, Singh and Bendapudi, 1996), segmentation (Dolnicar and Randle, 2004; Wymer, 2003), positioning (Roberts-Wray, 1994), and branding (Hankinson, 2001; Saxton, 1995). While it is recognised that the image of a nonprofit organisation can be a key factor in peoples decision making process (Supphellen and Nelson, 2001), there is a lack of studies which investigate the competitive positioning and image of the nonprofit organisations operating within a particular market. Such studies would be valuable as they would provide recommendations to managers about the most effective marketing strategy to employ.

The question that has perhaps most perplexed nonprofit researchers in recent decades is ‘why do people volunteer?’ Investigations into this question of **motivations** has produced conflicting findings which have ranged from the suggestion that volunteers are motivated by purely altruistic reasons (Bussell and Forbes, 2002) to the proposition that individuals are motivated by the personal benefits they gain by being involved (Hibbert, Piacentini and Dajani, 2003). A number of researchers have proposed structured frameworks for measuring motivations, for example Clary, Snyder and Ridge’s Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) (1992) which groups motivations into six categories. More recent approaches have used generic models of behaviour, such as the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1988), to explain the relationship between attitudes, social norms and perceived behavioral control, and the way these combine to influence volunteering behavior (Warburton, *et al*, 2001).

There has been general recognition that **cultural minorities** are under-represented in voluntary organisations (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001) and a number of researchers have attempted to investigate the reasons for this. Latting (1990) suggests two reasons for this under-representation: firstly, minority groups may use volunteering to compensate for the lack of opportunities afforded to them within the wider community; and secondly, minorities strongly identify with their ethnic group and use volunteering as a way of instigating changes which benefit their community. Joseph (1995) also notes that minorities have in the past relied on volunteering as a means of support when there was little support from government s. In Australia, Martin (1999) and Kerr (2001) note a particularly mainstream, Anglo-Celtic approach to volunteering, the foundations of which have tended to exclude many cultural groups who do not share the same family and social values and roles. While some insight has been provided, this is an area that still requires further investigation to clarify some of the issues. As Musick, Wilson and Bynum (2000) point out: ‘research on racial differences in volunteering is inconclusive because of differences in definitions of volunteering, methods of analysis, and subject populations’ (p.1562). Pires, Stanton and Cheek (2003) also note: “attention to the problems of identifying and reaching a single, often relatively small, ethnic group, as opposed to some aggregate of groups, has been minimal” (p. 224).

The gap in prior research, however, lies in the integration of these three areas to understand how the perceptions of volunteering and volunteering organisations influence motivations and participation rates of cultural minorities in volunteering activities. The aim of this exploratory study is to answer the following questions: (i) are there differences (as is suggested) between ethnic minorities in their motivations for volunteering and what are these differences; (ii) do different groups have different perceptions of volunteering and the image of volunteering

organisations; and (iii) what are the implications of these findings in terms of marketing volunteering within extremely culturally heterogeneous communities for nonprofit managers.

Empirical Study

An exploratory approach was taken utilising a number of qualitative research tools. Fieldwork was conducted between November 2004 and February 2005. The sample for the study was drawn from the Illawarra region of NSW and included three main groups. The first group, representatives from key cultural minorities, were selected based on ABS statistics for the region and included representatives from the Macedonian, Italian, Greek, Dutch, German, Middle Eastern, Indochinese, Serbian, British, Scottish, Irish, Australian and Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islander (ATSI) communities. In-depth interviews and focus groups were held at the locations most convenient for participants. The second group included representatives from Volunteering Australia, Volunteering Illawarra, Wollongong City Council, the Illawarra Ethnic Communities Council, the Illawarra Migrant Resource Centre, current volunteers and ex-volunteers. Face to face interviews were conducted with each 'expert', with one interview being conducted over the telephone. The third group consisted of a random selection of 40 residents who were approached within local shopping centres and asked to participate in a short interview. In its entirety the study comprised 27 face-to-face interviews, 1 phone interview, 8 focus groups, and 40 short interviews (a total of 116 participants). The sample was sufficiently large to enable frequency counts of statements or coded statements for a number of variables including motivations, image attributes and social norms. Separate frequency counts for different cultural subgroups are consequently used to complement the qualitative insight derived from the interviews and focus groups.

Results

In investigating **motivations** for volunteering, some common themes emerged across all cultural groups. One such common theme was generic altruism which included a desire to help others less fortunate than themselves or to support a cause that is worthwhile. It was also revealed consistently that people acknowledge some personal benefits from being involved such as enjoying the work, having the opportunity to socialise and meet new people, feeling good about themselves and having something to do with their spare time. These findings support Chinman and Wandersman's (1999) suggestion that motivations are, in fact, multifaceted.

Many of the reasons listed are consistent with those given by Australians and were particularly strong among the more western cultures such as British, Scottish, and Irish. However while at a general level these motivations appear similar, if we look more closely they actually have different meanings for different cultures. For Macedonians, for example, socialising is a key benefit of volunteering. However the real issue is that many within the community are approaching retirement age and, having worked all their lives, now have difficulty finding things to occupy their time. This is particularly the case for men who do not have the home and family responsibilities that many women do within the Macedonian community. Generally their preference is to spend time with other Macedonian men so any opportunity to do this (be that volunteering or otherwise) is welcomed.

For other groups newer to the area, such as East Africans, the appeal of socialisation lies not in mingling with others from their own country, but in the opportunity to mix with native English speakers and to practice their English speaking skills.

One theme that was consistent amongst the Non-English Speaking Background (NESB) cultures was their preference to volunteer for culturally specific activities. The larger and more established groups in the Illawarra such as the Greek, Italian and Macedonian communities focused on preserving specific elements of their culture such as dancing, churches, and the language because they thought it important to pass on to future generations. Those cultures that were less established or smaller, for example the Serbian and Middle Eastern communities, placed more emphasis on supporting those within their community such as the elderly and the disadvantaged because appropriate services were not seen to be adequately provided by government. Some of the particularly family oriented cultures, such as Italians, Greeks, and Macedonians also expressed their desire to be involved and look after other members of their community because they do not have their own parents or elders here in Australia so they feel this is a way they can compensate for the lack of immediate family. When asked why there is relatively low involvement of minorities in the more mainstream volunteering activities most cultures said they were simply less comfortable doing so because they thought there would be no other people like them.

Those who had migrated to Australia fleeing civil unrest or persecution in their own country (for example from the former Yugoslavia or the Middle East), and especially those who still had family or loved ones back home, found themselves too preoccupied with the issues in their home country to become involved in the more mainstream volunteering organisations that are designed to assist every day Australians. It is more of a priority for these people to focus their fundraising and volunteering efforts on causes that will assist the families they have left behind. From a marketer's perspective these people are extremely hard to attract because their family priorities place a very pointed scope on the causes they are prepared to contribute to. Others, such as Italians and Indochinese, gave more practical reasons such as the language barrier being an obstacle, as well as lack of transport with many members not holding licences.

In terms of **general perceptions of volunteering**, there was agreement that the types of services provided by volunteering organisations were very valuable for society.

Australians have a very positive view of volunteering, which is very similar to those expressed by participants from UK, Scotland and Ireland, which is not surprising given the similarly Anglo-Celtic backgrounds of these countries.

However while some cultures seem quite comfortable with the concept, others are either not familiar or are simply uncomfortable with volunteering. Middle Eastern cultures associate volunteering with slavery, that is, it takes advantage of people by getting them to work for no pay. When discussing their interest in being involved in Clean Up Australia Day one Middle Eastern participant noted: "why should I do it, the government should pay someone to do it". This was reinforced by the Serbian view that asking people to work for no pay is unacceptable. Other cultures such as Macedonian feel that their attention should be centred on their own families and are uncomfortable focusing their helping efforts outside their immediate family. This is particularly true of cultures with more of a family orientation and less westernisation such as Macedonian and Indochinese. German participants also expressed their discomfort with strangers being in their house or offering them help for no return. Generally people were fully focused on taking care of their families and their time was taken up by performing many of the functions that Australians view as volunteering, however they were directed within the family group rather than towards broader society. For example, Italians, Greeks, and Macedonians all indicated that they would provide care for the older members of their family or help children with reading – however these were not services they would consider providing for broader society.

ATSI people acknowledge that helping each other is firmly entrenched in their community but they do not label it as 'volunteering'. They associate this term with more mainstream

Australian volunteering organisations than with the type of helping they are involved with in their own communities. It could almost be argued that this helping behaviour within ATSI communities is at the extreme end of obligation, as failure to assist other community members is actually viewed very negatively so the social pressure to help out is very strong.

Some, such as Macedonians indicated that there are simply no systems for volunteering in their culture so they are quite sceptical about institutions which promote this, and others such as ATSI people are wary of volunteering because in the past their people have been taken advantage of in doing work for very little or no pay. Some European cultures including German, Italian and Greek also felt that they have worked hard all their life and it was now their turn to relax. They felt that they should now be the recipients of services provided by the younger generation, just as they provided them when they were younger and working.

In terms of the **image of specific organisations**, there seemed to be four natural groupings of organisations.

Firstly, the *'heroes'*, which typically included the outdoor, high profile emergency and environmental type activities which often wear a uniform and included SES, Rural Fire Service, Bushcare, and Surf Life Savers.

The *'do-gooders'*, were those organisations which provide more humanitarian services for the poor and less fortunate and include agencies such as St. Vincent de Paul, the Smith Family, the Salvation Army and the Red Cross.

'Community groups' are those organisations which work to improve local communities and include Rotary, the Lions Club and APEX.

'Other groups' were seen to be more cause specific and particularly relevant to the individual who is volunteering, for example churches, Parents and Citizens (P&C) Associations, sporting organisations, and cultural organisations. Some cultures had more definite views on the type of work as being more appropriate for particular gender roles, for example Macedonians specifically noted the *'hero'* type organisations as being appropriate for men and suggested women would not be interested in doing that type of outdoor work. Women would however be prepared to do more of the human services work typical of the *'do-gooder'* organisations. None of the individual organisations tested could claim to have a clear and distinct image. It was more the groups that were considered similar. For example people had difficulty in distinguishing between Rotary, the Lions Club and APEX – they were essentially seen as the same. And while Bushcare was associated as being outdoors and for the environment, this was much the same image as people had about the Rural Fire Service. There was also a perception that all of the mainstream volunteering organisations were really designed to benefit mainstream Australians and not specific cultural minorities and therefore had little relevance for them. They thought there would be no other people like them, and that the benefits would be going to people who were not like them.

Conclusions and Limitations

The results of this study confirm the findings of a number of studies cited above, that different cultural groups have different motivations for being involved in volunteering activities. They are looking for different experiences and benefits from being involved. For example some groups such as Macedonians and Greeks are looking to socialise with other people from their own culture and to preserve their traditions and language, whereas others, such as the smaller groups, are looking for opportunities to mix with Australians and practice their English speaking skills. It goes further to confirm that different groups have different perceptions of volunteering in general, and of specific volunteering organisations. For example if we consider the *'Bushcare'* organisation, ATSI groups have a positive view of this program

because they have such a strong affiliation with the land. Middle Eastern people see it as appropriate work for men only, with women being more suited to indoor, humanitarian type causes. This is compared to Australians who see it as not only worthwhile but a fun way to meet new people and socialise. These findings are important for nonprofit marketers because they illustrate the importance of understanding not only the motivations of different cultural groups but also the image these groups have of their particular organisation. They can then assess the groups that are most likely to respond to different marketing messages. Again using 'Bushcare' as an example, we know that the ATSI community has relatively positive image of the organisation due to its links with the land. To this group the environmental aspect of the organisation and the benefits to the land are the messages that should be promoted heavily, as well as the opportunity to form a Bushcare group exclusively for ATSI people and having them be involved in selecting a site of significance to them. In marketing to Macedonians however, it would be effective to target retired men and promote the opportunity to socialise with other Macedonian men while working outdoors (in what are considered male activities). To the authors' knowledge this study represents the first investigation of motivational and perceptual differences with regard to volunteering among different cultural groups in Australia. The findings are of high managerial value for volunteering organisations as they make it possible to approach groups of different cultural backgrounds in the most appropriate and culturally sensitive way when recruiting volunteers.

One limitation of this study is the non-representative sample used which, due to timing and budgetary restraints, was restricted to the Illawarra region of NSW. This limits our ability to generalise results to the Australian population. A larger scale quantitative study would enable the estimation of percentages of the Australian population who share similar views and enable results to be used by nonprofit managers throughout the country. Furthermore, information on the level of assimilation or perceived assimilation were not collected. No conclusions can consequently be drawn about whether or not the assimilation levels are associated with any of the identified differences.

While this study provided insights of qualitative nature, a quantitative follow-up study representative for Australian residents will be conducted based on the findings of this qualitative stage. The quantitative study will enable us to investigate systematic patterns of motivational differences in a way that will enable the development of campaigns targeting segments of potential volunteers.

Acknowledgements

This research is funded by the ARC through the Linkage Grant Scheme (LP0453682) and our industry partner, Bushcare Wollongong, a division of Wollongong City Council. We would particularly like to thank Paul Formosa, Natural Areas Coordinator for Wollongong City Council, for his support and assistance with this project.

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