



Volunteers Can Be Found in Cyberspace

Get your message out via the Internet and other on-line services

I recently went "on line" for the first time and the world as I knew it changed forever. You may already be deep into cyberspace, or a "newbie" like me. Or you may so completely fed up with hearing about an "information superhighway" that you have no interest in or access to join.

It doesn't matter. The fundamental power of this new communication tool cannot be stopped. It will prove to be as radical a social shift as the introduction of the telephone. This is not going to be a column waxing poetic about the Internet or other cybernetic interaction. Instead I want to share my amazement at the implications of this new technology on volunteers, volunteer leaders, and community change.

First, let's recognize what everyone on-line knows but is rarely pointed out: if it were not for volunteers, there would be no cyberspace interaction. The Internet, most news groups, and electronic "boards" are run by volunteers.

Local, community boards are managed by "sysops" — system operators who most often do this work out of addiction to electronic communication and devotion to the subject matter of the board. They frequently use home computer systems and carve the hours necessary out of evening and weekend personal time.

While the growing number of professional and academic bulletin boards, news groups, and other exchanges are attracting people who work at their electronic tasks out of their daytime offices, most such "hosts" do not receive payment from anyone who uses the service. The commercial services provide the forum within which members create the attraction.

Even more important is that all electronic boards exist only if subscribers conduct exchanges. So someone poses a question on the board and someone else has to post an answer.

This becomes a form of volunteer technical assistance to any reader, even if there are many more "lurkers" than participants in most on-line discussions.

The extent of mutual exchange and service caught me unprepared. America On Line, for example, has a free area called "Members-Helping-Members" on which literally hundreds of messages go back and forth between subscribers who need assistance in elementary and advanced use of the system.

In my first week on line I posted a question about downloading to disk. Within 12 hours I had received five different — and helpful — responses from other AOL members across the country. All included cheery notes of encouragement.

So far, I suspect that very few of my clients and colleagues are on line — at least professionally.

Why should someone in the volunteer field go on line? Here is just the tip of the iceberg of the potential of this new form of communication. Each is already being tried somewhere, but only in a very experimental way.

New Ways to Recruit Volunteers

Electronic outreach is a new mechanism for identifying likely volunteer prospects. This is already being tried by Volunteer Centers in areas with community computer bulletin boards. Such "free net" projects give local residents access to a wide range of community information through public computer terminals as well as from home computers. A section on volunteer opportunities operates just as the old-fashioned newspaper feature does.

Even more exciting, however, is targeted recruiting possibilities. As more special-interest electronic forums open up, it becomes possible to send a message directly to people with needed skills or mutual interests. So a youth center might find a volunteer to run its after-school book club by posting a message on a board created to exchange book reviews.

On-line Technical Assistance

I have already come across messages posted by people offering to volunteer their

computer expertise to organizations via electronic mail (e-mail).

This idea holds great potential and at least one new organization is planning to improve on it. Impact Online out of Palo Alto, Calif. has coined the phrase "virtual volunteers" to refer to people with specific technical or professional skills who are willing to answer questions for nonprofits by e-mail.

To work well, the project needs to recruit a wide range of experts, advertise the availability of the service, and monitor the activities, but what a terrific way to access all sorts of knowledge. And what a great new form of volunteering:

New Outreach Services to Clients

In December, the *Wall Street Journal* ran a piece on how teenagers and seniors have found new uses for electronic communication. It set off fireworks in my mind. Consider the potential for just a few cyberspace ideas—all organized with volunteer help (much of which can be done from home): a homework help-line to support teens on the edge of dropping out; an all-night weekend suicide prevention group discussion; homebound friendly electronic visiting; self-help discussion groups among people with similar illnesses or other concerns. Today there may still be too few seniors or teens with access to on-line communication—but not tomorrow.

Linking Like-minded People

From a community-organizing perspective, the ability to locate and "talk" with anyone sharing your opinion is quite a remarkable capability of this medium. Whether on a local board or national network, the mavericks of this world can now inform, motivate, and exhort others to take action on something.

While this may be dismissed by some as mere ranting, if only a small percentage of electronic readers become involved, the impact can be felt. And all of this bypasses the formal institutions who may ordinarily

have few mechanisms for citizens to voice concerns or criticism.

My introduction to cyberspace also makes me aware of some pretty serious problems, too.

Apart from whether access will ever be affordable by most people, I am struck by the incredible degree of basic literacy required on line. The words just keep scrolling on. There is also the issue of whether the system will fall in under its own weight.

Right now the "superhighway" metaphor is laughable. More appropriate is to imagine the universe—filled with tantalizing, bright stars but separated by a cold, dark vacuum. How to get from here to there? It is still extremely difficult to navigate the net without wasting a great deal of time and patience.

This arena is a terrific way to utilize volunteers now. Find a student with a flair for computers and ask him or her to teach agency staff about electronic communications. Ask a volunteer who already subscribes to AOL or who has access to the Internet to add some pertinent news groups to his or her list and monitor the messages for your organization. Put someone on the task of learning about local "free nets" and connecting you to them. See you in cyberspace!

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