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Is It Anyway?

Branding National Volunteer Week: Whose Week Is It Anyway?

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

May

2014

National Volunteer Week last month was its usual non-event in the United States – despite its 40th anniversary – with precious little media attention. This year, however, that might well have been a good thing. Points of Light (POL) sold the event to Advil[®], making all the rest of us non-consenting participants in a commercial advertising strategy.

In the words of Points of Light:

This year Advil[®], as part of the Advil[®] Relief in Action program, is the lead sponsor of National Volunteer Week. The Advil[®] Relief in Action campaign celebrates and enables active volunteers who don't let pain stop them from helping others in need.

During National Volunteer Week Advil[®] will be celebrating volunteers' dedication to helping others, relieving the aches and pains that come with giving back, and encouraging others to join the movement.

This quote is taken directly from the only Web page about National Volunteer Week [on POL's site](#). Also note that “Advil” is mentioned 9 times on this single page! Download the [National Volunteer Week Resource Guide](#) and read through the suggested press releases repeating the mantra.

And the worst part is that I can find absolutely no public statements from volunteer resources managers (or, for that matter, any HandsOn affiliates or other volunteer centers) criticizing this development, or even questioning it.

A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words

Naturally I was not privy to any of the negotiations behind the scenes, so I first learned about the branding of National Volunteer Week to Advil[®] along with everyone else, early this year. It was announced by Points of Light proudly, along with a new logo:



Note the similarities to:



If you think I'm reading too much into this visual, take a look at last year's logo. In fact, this logo was used every year since 2009 – in the branding colors of Points of Light (we'll get to the "ownership" issue in a moment).



Now look at an ad that Advil® itself ran on Facebook (and perhaps elsewhere) during National Volunteer Week. Pay special attention to the last line implying Points of Light endorsement of their product.



[https://www.facebook.com/Advil/photos/a.657311944289881.1073741828.](https://www.facebook.com/Advil/photos/a.657311944289881.1073741828.639412096079866/855591527795254/?type=1&permPage=1)

[639412096079866/855591527795254/?type=1&permPage=1](https://www.facebook.com/Advil/photos/a.657311944289881.1073741828.639412096079866/855591527795254/?type=1&permPage=1)

A national celebration of volunteers is common [around the world](#). It is usually run by a “peak” body for volunteerism, often with government funding. While there are examples of corporate sponsorship of things like recognition dinners or special awards, to the best of my knowledge no other country has ever attempted to commercialize the entire day or week by designating a corporate partner, integrating its logo and language, and advertising its product throughout all promotion and activities.

The Problem Is *Not* Advil®

I do not blame Advil® (actually Pfizer, the manufacturer) for taking commercial advantage of an opportunity to associate itself with a good cause while selling its product. In fact, the company began its “Relief in Action” campaign last year on its own. All indications were that they wanted to continue to with the program and partnering with POL seemed a natural extension. Their slogan, that the campaign “celebrates and enables active volunteers who don’t let pain stop them from helping others in need,” is logical and funny without being mocking.

POL has traditionally been very late in planning National Volunteer Week activities, and it looks a lot as if the Advil® connection was made after Pfizer had already started planning its second year by choosing “Actor/Active Volunteer” Josh Duhamel as the face of their campaign for 2014. The headline of their official press release on April 14 (after NVW was over), was [Advil® Relief in Action and Josh Duhamel Celebrate National Volunteer Week with Points of Light & Kick Off a Nationwide "Relief" Tour](#). If this seems a bit crammed with references, it is.

However, Pfizer is clearly running a full campaign to encourage volunteering – and, yes, selling their pain reliever – in which National Volunteer Week is only one element.

Conversely, it seems that Points of Light “sold” the Week to Advil®, added the brand name to all of their promotion, and then did very little else. Except, one assumes, to deposit a large “donation” into the bank. Try Googling “National Volunteer Week 2014” and you’ll see how the official POL press release language was printed verbatim in countless newspapers, blogs, and other social media – all giving free publicity to the Advil® name. Wonder what the other corporations with big social responsibility projects thought about Pfizer’s favored positioning?

Whose Week Is It Anyway?

On its [National Volunteer Week page](#), just before the lines quoted above, Points of Light opens with:

National Volunteer Week, a program of Points of Light and sponsored by Advil® as a part of the Advil® Relief in Action campaign, was established in 1974 and has grown exponentially each year, with thousands of volunteer projects and special events scheduled throughout the week.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of National Volunteer Week, demonstrating the enduring importance of recognizing our country’s volunteers for their vital contributions.

Note the opening phrase, “a program of Points of Light.” I beg to differ.

As I so often need to do, let me provide some historical context.

National Volunteer Week is *run by POL on behalf* of the nation. As acknowledged by everyone, it was started in 1974 and administered at that time by the National Center for Voluntary Action (NCVA). It begins each and every year with a **presidential proclamation**. Read the proclamation delivered this year [by President Obama](#) and you will find no reference whatsoever to Points of Light. (Unfortunately, you also won’t find any references to anything by name except the Corporation for National and Community Service, but that’s an issue for [another Hot Topic](#).)

NCVA eventually merged with another organization, and then morphed a few more times, and then merged into the “Points of Light Foundation.” In each incarnation, the responsibility for running National Volunteer Week was transferred to the new entity. So when HandsOn Network merged in, they, too, inherited the celebration. And assumed it was *theirs*.

I do not assign any ulterior or sinister motive to this assumption. It simply was an indicator of how unconnected the organization was with anything outside of the national level. After the merger, the POL webmasters basically removed all information about National Volunteer Week from the site – including advance dates. Full disclosure: It took me 8 months to convince POL leadership that people in the field *needed* those dates. Finally I received the dates in a private e-mail and posted them to the Energize site – almost 3 months before they appeared on the POL site. Since then they seem to care

a bit more, but rarely with much advance planning and, these days, without connecting the Week to anything outside of HandsOn affiliates.

Meanwhile, over at United Way of America, a different story plays out. As U.S. readers are aware, there has long been competition between United Way and POL over volunteer centers, a large percentage of which are funded by or units of local United Ways. Volunteer centers, no matter what they are called or how they are funded, traditionally are seen as the focal point of National Volunteer Week in their communities – promoting the celebration, running recognition events, giving out awards. From the United Way perspective, National Volunteer Week is a national event connected more to the White House than anything else. Don't believe me? See the [NVW posting on the official United Way blog](#). Not a word about Points of Light or Advil®.

It all gives me a headache.

Does anyone out there care? Or do you see clothes on the Emperor?

Related Topics: [Recognition](#)

Submitted on 24 May 2014 by Gerald (Jerry) Pannozzo, CVA, independent contractor, workshop facilitator, etc., MSBI, New York, NY, USA

Susan, thanks for this Hot Topic. My mentee brought it to my attention ☺. I appreciate the history review and responses from colleagues. I recently read on a colleague's FaceBook page about a group (of 35) who called on Thursday afternoon to volunteer this coming Monday (Memorial Day) and the caller's surprise that this was his fourth call to a nonprofit and all had said "no".

My comment on my friend's FaceBook page reflected my disappointment with our "national associations" and their lack of "educating the public" about what it takes to engage volunteers and clarify what we do before a volunteer can effectively serve a client, population, cause, etc. The recent actions by POL reflects this disconnect with the troops in the trenches (VRM) – especially at smaller and less funded organizations (one's that don't produce "big numbers", that don't make for "BIG PUBLICITY". Who made this decision at POL? Was it the board, member representatives, a task force, development department, executive director, etc.?

I'm fortunate to work in NYC with strong professional associations - NYAVA, GNYADVS, etc. - where my support comes from, not POL, etc. Some of our local advocates and visionaries are gone (a generation of trail blazers). I now look at an entirely new group of volunteer resources managers and hope they will become advocates. Regarding the lack off responses, I think colleagues feel pressured not to respond if it isn't in alignment with "company speak" (job security/difficult economy).

Submitted on 12 May 2014 by Elise Hyder, Director of Volunteers, Ronald McDonald House Charities of Greater Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH

I was appalled when I read the tagline for this year's National Volunteer Week! It reeks of commercialism and I think it exploits volunteerism. Shame on POL. Thanks so much for bringing this up, Susan!

Comment from Susan, 12 May 2014

Thanks to all who have posted so far to this discussion, especially to the colleagues who voiced some disagreement with me or offered an additional perspective. That's the whole point!

It's mid-month so there's time to hear from more of you. What about from some HandsOn affiliates?

I see two issues here. One is whether it is possible for an organization to seek funding without agreeing to any and all branding requests. The other is what does it take to get volunteerism folks to speak out?

Submitted on 06 May 2014 by Jeri Bush, VolunteerLEON, Florida, USA

I wonder if this "marketing" piece was designed by POL and signed off by Advil, or vice versa. I cringed when I saw this and wondered if I was the only one taking crazy pills. Volunteering and pain relief don't quite go together like soup and sandwich- maybe they can reach out to Campbell's Soup next year and try again...

Submitted on 06 May 2014 by Rob Jackson, Director, Rob Jackson Consulting Ltd, Grantham, UK

Reading this makes me want a Tylenol

Submitted on 03 May 2014 by Tiffani Hill, Volunteer Program Director, ASAP, Santa Barbara, CA, USA

I had not yet heard about this and admit that I am very disappointed by this decision. It definitely takes away from the meaning and impact of the week. I will still use the week as an opportunity to celebrate our volunteers but definitely will not use any POL-related materials or association. Poorly done, Points of Light.

Submitted on 02 May 2014 by Gloria Deucher, Director, Volunteer Resources, WNET, New York, NY, USA

I wonder if my silence spoke to the fact that these days in our society we are almost resigned to the idea that anything can be for sale and there is little we can do about it. I was shocked to see this sponsorship when I logged into the POLF website during National Volunteer Week when I was looking for a nice logo or statement I could use in my organization's newsletter. What I found instead was an ad for an analgesic. I found the sponsorship cynical and the website totally useless. THANK YOU Susan for expressing the outrage.

Submitted on 02 May 2014 by Carla Lehn, California State Library, Sacramento CA, USA

Thanks for this comprehensive and thought-provoking piece, Susan. I too admit to not even knowing this - at the very least uncomfortable - activity was taking place . . . I guess it must have less and less relevance to me, since I don't follow what they're doing very closely. . . The historical context you provided seems to make clear how they may have lost their way through merger after merger. Seems like they should be looking at a new strategic vision for the organization so that our local and national volunteer goals can be enhanced, and celebrated more effectively.

Submitted on 02 May 2014 by H Smith, Executive Director, Colorado, USA

Susan - You have some salient points. The reality is.. Points of Light has to keep their doors open, too. I want them to achieve their mission. They are contributing a significant amount of money & knowledge to nonprofits. It might be difficult to be sympathetic to a large organization but it is also true that no organization is without fault. I hope I can contribute to help POL make better decisions.

Submitted on 02 May 2014 by anonymous, Vol. Prog. Coordinator, Harrisburg PA, USA

I decided to stop being disappointed by Points of Light years ago. Any organization so centered on itself as POL is, is not worth considering when there are so many other organizations actually making a difference.

Submitted on 02 May 2014 by Zoe Peltekis, Volunteer Coordinator, Monash Health Dandenong Hospital, Victoria, Australia

Clever marketing in a commercial world, but not in the spirit of giving and caring that is volunteering.

Manipulating and aligning the sincerity of volunteering with commercialism hurts ones ethical conscious. Lets hope our large Government supported volunteer peak bodies (in Australa), don't lean too far on the corporate sector for support.

Submitted on 01 May 2014 by Sheri E Barnes, Volunteer Coordinator, American Red Cross, Wichita, KS, USA

Wow! I have been so busy that I hadn't even been aware that this branding had occurred. It strikes me as tacky and unhelpful to both our profession and to volunteerism, in general. It sends a wrong message about the people who volunteer and "don't let pain stop them," and it commercializes something that is defined by its unpaid status. Thanks for bringing this to my attention. Clearly, I need to notice things like this more readily.

Submitted on 01 May 2014 by Deirdre Araujo, Manager Volunteer Services, Exploratorium, San Francisco, USA

National Volunteer Week and POL's campaign just earned itself a place on the 'meh' list in New York Magazine, at least for me.

Submitted on 01 May 2014 by Andy Fryar, Director, OzVPM, Adelaide, Australia

Thanks yet again for raising such an important issue Susan. There is a fine line between sponsorship and selling your proverbial 'soul' for the sake of a few dollars. I think that there are a variety of lessons we can (and should) all learn from this situation.

Submitted on 01 May 2014 by Sue Hine, Wellington, New Zealand

Whew! Yet another example of 'marketisation' of volunteering and volunteer organisations. There has to be a better way to living alongside the corporate and government worlds without being swallowed up and/or abused, and losing our identity.

Submitted on 01 May 2014 by Marty O'Dell, CVA, Volunteer Program Manager, Goodwill Easter Seals Miami Valley, Dayton, OH, USA

Oh my, I read your article right before heading into a department meeting, where I shared the gist of the article. The first thing one staff member said was, "well that's great, let's give everyone the impression that volunteering hurts!"

I will continue to treat my wonderful volunteers to lunch, discount cards and whatever else I can afford without selling my soul; including a great big "thank you" as often as possible.

Thank you, Susan for being the voice.

Submitted on 01 May 2014 by Karla Roth, Director Volunteer Services, Concord Hospital, Concord, NH, USA

Yes, Susan I agree with you and appreciate you explaining what has happened to NVW. I was not aware of the national campaign this year. I did not see any ads. For the past 10 years, I have done my own thing to celebrate NVW for our volunteers by developing my own campaign materials that are relevant for our volunteers. I am saddened that NVW has been saddled with a corporate sponsor who devised a lame and negative message about volunteerism....to wit, "relieving the aches and pains that come with giving back". How is that a positive or accurate message regarding volunteering? What was POL thinking? It seems that they or whoever have lost their way. In my 30 year experience as a hospital volunteer administrator, this message does not accurately reflect my volunteers' experience within my volunteer program and would not be a message that would recruit volunteer to my program. Volunteerism deserves better. It seems that emphasis on corporate and political needs is doing a disservice to the culture of volunteerism in this country and the sincere intention of celebrating and thanking the volunteers who contribute so much to our communities. Perhaps, professional volunteer managers need to do a better job educating those corporations and

organizations who want to inappropriately brand volunteerism instead of celebrate it. Isn't it time to take back National Volunteer Week ?

Submitted on 01 May 2014 by Judy Kingsbury, Volunteer Program Coordinator, UW-Madison Arboretum, Madison, WI, USA

Thanks for this Hot Topic. I most often turn to my local DOVIA and United Way Volunteer Center for resources, not Points of Light. Branding National Volunteer Week with a corporate sponsor is repugnant. National Volunteer Week belongs to all of us; each organization celebrates it in a way that makes sense for that organization and the people who volunteer there.

Submitted on 01 May 2014 by anonymous, Volunteer Coordinator, Virginia, USA

I totally agree with your assessment. POL has stepped beyond their boundaries of what volunteer organizations and opportunities try to promote. Their conference is becoming more commercial from what I have heard and the cost is ridiculous for individuals who volunteer. Why is a non-profit organization looking to lean on "for profit" companies to promote their work and the work of volunteers worldwide?

Submitted on 01 May 2014 by Cissy Hansen, Principle, BC Consultants, Tucson, AZ, USA

Thank you Susan for saying aloud what we've all been saying in our communities for many, many years. POL has become an embarrassment to the volunteer management professionals in the US. Not only have they lost contact with the profession but now they have sold us for a 'thirty pieces of silver' to the highest bidder. If not for you, we would have no VOICE at all. POL went from a voice for our profession to a hollow-auctioneer who now fills their pockets. I agree the Volunteer Conference was not educational but political. Ask any local Volunteer Center across our nation what tools or support they have received in the last few years from the POL. Ask any DOVIA if they have received any advice, support or educational tools from the POL. I remember when POL began we had educational opportunities. POL shared tools we could access, even a phone call they would answer. Those days are gone. And again, if not for Susan we would never get the National Volunteer Week dates each year. They have become a drain on our industry. I suggest they either become our support by changing their MO or maybe it is time they disband and distribute the government (and now corporate) support of the POL bureaucracy and send it to State and local VC's to support local volunteer organizations. In over 25 years as

Submitted on 01 May 2014 by Donna Lockhart, Consultant, The RETHINK Group, Ennismore, Canada

Thanks for being so brave and honest in your review. I think it is unfortunate that the voluntary sector is so underfunded that they have to resort to corporate takeovers such as this one in the US. However, in Canada the wording is a little different as you will see below from the Volunteer Canada page on Volunteer Week. Is 'partnership' really any different? Corporations want to be seen doing

good works and they have products to sell; and, the voluntary sector has encouraged this. The struggle between the for profit and non profit worlds continue to collide, unless we can find a balanced compromise. Can we use corporate-employees as 'volunteers' without promoting their company and good works at the same time?

" National Volunteer Week is a time to recognize, celebrate and thank Canada's 13.3 million volunteers. 2014 marked the 11th consecutive year we've delivered the NVW campaign in partnership with Investors Group, Canada's corporate leader in volunteer recognition."

Submitted on 01 May 2014 by anonymous, Supervising Ranger, CA, USA

Everytime that I think we should get our volunteer operations more involved with the national scene something like this comes along to discourage me and helps in my decision to keep our volunteer program within our organization only. Is everything for sale? Even something that isn't owned by anyone?

Submitted on 01 May 2014 by anonymous, Office of Public Private Partnerships, Virginia, USA

Thank you, Susan, for shedding light on this marketing mindset that I think lots of organizations believe they have to buy into. I saw nothing, outstanding or otherwise, in promotion of National Volunteer Week (NVW), during or after NVW. As far as I can tell, POL has not offered volunteer program managers ways or tools to promote NVW within their geographic areas or organizations/agencies. To my way of thinking, in my 35+ years in volunteer administration, POL is now as far removed from what we really do and need as the moon.

Submitted on 01 May 2014 by anonymous, Manager, Public Safety Outreach, Colorado

Yes, I agree with your assesmennt and am very disappointed with POL. Additionally, I am not attending the POL Volunteer Conference this year as last year's conference in Washington, D.C. was very politicized and missed the educational mark, in my opinion.

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