EMPLOYING MARKETING TO ATTRACT POTENTIAL VOLUNTEERS TO NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

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Exploring the marketing of nonprofit organizations presents marketing scholars with three attractive opportunities. One is to test the relevance of their central concept of exchange as it applies to an area of human behaviour which they have barely examined. Another is to marry their buyer behaviour concepts with a significant body of empirical work done largely by researchers from other fields. The third is to market their insights to "unsold" practitioners in ways more forthcoming than is customary today.

EXPANDING MARKETING'S PURVIEW

Since the early 1970's marketing academics on both sides of the Atlantic have been at work "broadening the concept of marketing". Within that broad movement there have been two thrusts. The first has been to extend marketing applications beyond the corporation to the full pantheon of organizations, including churches, political parties, unions, museums, military establishments, hospitals, co-operatives, governments, universities, and social service agencies. Accordingly, our "buyers" have come to include believers, voters, members, recruits, patients, students, and patrons. Appropriately, the proceedings of both MEG and AMS have reflected their members' work on this expanding frontier.

A companion academic thrust is that which attempts to extend marketing's usefulness not across organizations, but within them. More particularly, it aims to fit marketing approaches to the needs of functional areas such as finance, personnel, and purchasing. Here the rationale is superficially different but fundamentally similiar. It is that the manager charged with attracting capital, people or raw materials has the marketing-like task of facilitating exchange with providers of needed inputs, and can therefore profit from marketing insights. As marketing academics explore this companion frontier, potential buyers have also come to include investors, suppliers, and workers.

This paper combines both initiatives. It focusses on organizations beyond corporations and it addresses buyers who are workers. Specifically, it explores the application of marketing concepts to the problems of managers charged with recruiting volunteers in nonprofit enterprises. First, it identifies trends which are encouraging this kind of academic bridge building; second, it shows how some of the non-marketing research on voluntary workers might be connected to some of our marketing concepts on conventional consumers; third, it identifies some of the larger problems which must be addressed if this work is to be fully useful to nonprofit managers.

TRENDS ENCOURAGING RESEARCH ON MARKETING TO POTENTIAL VOLUNTEERS

A Growing Problem in the Marketplace

One trend encouraging this work is that the problems of volunteer administrators appear to be substantial and growing. In Europe and North America the proportion of all adults who serve as volunteers has been estimated at between one-quarter and two-thirds. Figures for individual countries are reported as: Mexico 25%, Italy 29%, France 41%, Germany 44%, Great Britain 47%, United States 57%, and Canada 64% (Moyer 1981).

However, these participation rates seem threatened. Lacking corroborating data, but scanning their changing environment, volunteer recruiters are apprehensive that their markets are shrinking. On the one hand, they expect that constrained economies, the general shift to conservative political philosophies, and cutbacks in funding will cause nonprofits to search for volunteers as alternative inputs to money. On the other hand, they wonder whether the women's movement, the trend to working wives, and union hostility will make their search for unpaid workers increasingly difficult. Certainly most third sector managers will testify that the market for volunteers, like the market for funds, is becoming more competitive.

This leads to a growing belief, or at least hope, that, as marketing has helped fund-raising, it may facilitate volunteer-raising. Accordingly, volunteer administrators are increasingly prepared to regard their volunteer assignments as products, other pursuits as competitors, themselves as marketers, and volunteers as customers. In the community, then, emerging trends are encouraging research on the marketing of nonprofit organizations to volunteers.

A Maturing Debate in Academia

Such research is encouraged by parallel developments in academia. In particular, it is facilitated by the maturing of the debate over volunteer motivations. Non-marketing scholars once thought it sufficient to regard volunteers as acting out of motives which were

dominantly altruistic (Schindler-Rainman and Lippett 1977; Anderson and Moore 1978). That seemed to suggest that it was inappropriate for marketing academics to analyse volunteers as buyers engaging in an act of exchange. However, it is now customary to see the volunteer as acting out of a mixture of motives. This position received powerful support when the founder of the Association of Voluntary Action Scholars, after a broad review of the literature, concluded that "Research on why people participate in volunteerism shows that most volunteer activity is the result of multiple causation, with ultruism being a very minor factor in most organized volunteerism".[1]

Spokesmen for leading organizations which promote volunteerism now echo that view. As one has said, "We have put aside our belief that to be 'right', volunteering must be 'pure' -- to that is, undertaken out of strict altruism. We now recognize that volunteering is a mutually beneficial act, helping the helper as well as the consumer. From that recognition is growing new ways of recruiting, training and rewarding volunteers which are expanding the available pool of volunteers by removing artifical barriers to participation".[2]

This new position creates a common conceptual ground with members of MEG and AMS who might be interested in applying their insights to the promotion of volunteer action. It also encourages scholars outside of business schools to explore the concept of volunteering as exchange. Indeed, that is now happening: "Volunteer work ... is perceived as an exchange, between the volunteer and his/her work situation ... whereby time and effort are exchanged for satisfactions and psychic rewards to the individual".[3] That in turn invites marketing reseachers to consider to what extent volunteer behaviour can be understood as buyer behaviour.

MARRYING BUYER BEHAVIOUR CONCEPTS WITH VOLUNTARY ACTION RESEARCH: SOME EXAMPLES

In an earlier paper the author identified a number of buyer behaviour constructs which might be appropriate for analysing and recruiting volunteers (Moyer 1983). This section takes the next step of connecting available empirical research to some of those constructs.

Individual Physological Characteristics

Marketers are often interested in understanding and appealing to individuals clustered by common psychological characteristics. Can potential volunteers be identified and targeted in this way?

Logically, one would first enquire whether certain kinds of people are especially susceptible to general appeals to volunteer, without regard to the particular form of helping, much as one might ask whether certain types of people are predisposed to use charge

cards, patronize casinos, or buy paperbacks. Non-marketing academics have now conducted enough experimental laboratory studies to suggest that, compared with non-volunteers, community volunteers do share certain psychological characteristics. More specifically, it appears that they are more empathetic, have higher "moral" standards, possess more positive attitudes toward themselves and others, are more emotionally stable, and have greater feelings of self-efficacy (Allen and Rushton). These kinds of findings could be useful to the many volunteer action centers whose mission is to attract a broad range of volunteers and match them with the body of voluntary agencies in the VAC's community.

However, most nonprofit organizations also solicit volunteers directly and on their own behalf. This shifts attention closer to the level of the product class and brand. Again some existing scholarship seems relevant; there are a number of published reports which detail the psychological makeup of volunteers in specific situations. For example, undergraduate volunteer mental health workers have been found to score higher than nonvolunteers on social responsibility, volunteer telephone crisis workers report a greater capacity for spontaneity and intimacy than others (Tapp and Spanier 1973) and senior citizens who are most likely to offer their services through a skillsbank are found to be those who view retirement as a time of potential fulfillment (Stone and Velmons 1980).

When considering possible marketing implications, one must recognize that the influences found in these studies can run in both directions. Marketing researchers know that just as shoppers' attitudes will influence buying behaviour, consuming experience can revise shoppers' attitudes. (This is part of the rationale for a sampling campaign for an improved product). Similarly, academic researchers know that a volunteer's experiences with clients will increase his or her empathy for them and will increase the likelihood of "repurchase" in the form of continued service to them (Hobfall 1980). This interaction of cause and effect tends to blur the impact of phsychological variables on volunteering behaviour. Nevertheless, there is substantial evidence that personality and attitudes are important determinants of both affiliation with, and participation in, formal voluntary organizations (Mulford and Klonglun). Therefore, "... Relating personality traits ... to types of voluntary action ... holds great promise for fruitful and significant research".[4]

Much research remains to be done to explore the connection: "Personality traits and capacities have frequently had low interest priorities for sociologists and other social scientists whose focus has often been mainly on the voluntary group or voluntary action, and only secondarily on attitudes. On the other hand, psychologists have tended to show greater interest in personality and attitudes, but only a secondary interest in relating these to participation in voluntary groups".[5] Therefore, this area of

inquiry should occupy marketing researchers interested in effective recruiting as much as scholarly researchers interested in a strong voluntary sector.

The Family

Scholars in business schools have found that, in consumer markets for big-ticket products, the relevant unit of analysis is often that cluster of initiators influences, deciders, buyers and users which is the family. Accordingly, one might ask whether, when a nonprofit enterprise sets out to sell "big-ticket" volunteer assignments, it should not do the same. For example it seems likely that when a volunteer organization signs up a volunteer rape crisis counsellor, museum tour guide or palliative care worker, it has sold not one person, but a family of them, on the undertaking.

Moreover, for third-sector marketers, families can have a role beyond that of influencing individual members; families may be the unit of volunteering itself. This marketing opportunity has been neglected: "Families rarely have been viewed as potential volunteers by those in leadership roles in human service agencies, arts groups, and community organizations ... that actively seek to involve volunteers ... The involvement of families together is more accidental than intentional".[6]

Family recruiting may be impeded by the apparent fact that family participation is itself a substitute for formal group membership. Moreover, once they are recruited as units, families may bring special logistical and interpersonal problems to the job. Indeed, families may volunteer in search of filial experiences or group therapy for themselves. Nevertheless, there is a growing body of examples in which nonprofit organizations have successfully marketed themselves to families of volunteers. Thus this seems a clear case in which a common buyer behaviour concept can be borrowed to good effect by volunteer administrators.

Lifestyle

Another example of a consumer behaviour construct which might serve volunteer recruiters is that of lifestyle.

Marketing research has shown that people make commitments to products, services and organizations within the context of a life setting. (Bearden, Teel and Durand 1978; Teel, Bearden and Durant 1979). If lifestyle analysis can help explain how people choose the stores in which they shop, as it does then it may throw light on how they choose the voluntary organizations in which they work. Consumer research indicates that this should be epecially so where the "product" is expensive, symbolic, highly involving, hard to evaluate objectively, and heavy in psychological gratification. That suggests that lifestyle concepts would be most fitting when managers of volunteer programs are asking citizens to make

substantial investments in the enterprise -- as board members, major fundraisers, and key service providers, for example.

Pursuing that line of reasoning, volunteer administrators would be led to the VALS system developed at the Stanford Research Institute. Using its lifestyles as surrogates for alternative targets in the market for volunteers, one writer has suggested what kinds of nonprofit organizations might best focus on each lifestyle segment. For example, "name" charities and fraternal groups might logically seek to attract emulators, who are, among other things, young, ostentatious, ambitious and trendy, while political parties and social service agencies might seek workers among the "societally conscious" because they tend to be concerned, assured, and politically aware, and arts groups and third-world assistance organizations might target "experientials" whose lifestyle includes the seeking of direct, vivid experiences, liberal leanings, and co-habitation (Lang 1985).

SOME TASKS AHEAD

Preceding sections have illustrated how the emperical findings of non-marketing scholars might be fitted into the conceptual frameworks employed by marketing academics. Hopefully, it has been shown that this kind of synthesis can be suggestive for managers seeking to market their nonprofit organizations to volunteers.

However, as this work proceeds, other tasks will need to be taken up. In particular, business school scholars will have to demonstrate to administrators that sophisticated marketing to volunteers is more than a regrettable necessity. Neglect of that added academic marketing task could lead to scholarship which is useful but unused.

"Making the sale" will require success in addressing three impediments to the adoption of marketing by managers, staffs and board members in volunteer organizations. The first is the perception that true volunteerism is, essentially, simply the spontaneous acting out of the decent instincts of ordinary citizens. This view is widely cherished in the third sector. Its strength is seen in the fact that, invariably, the accepted definitions of volunteerism include specify that it is uncoerced.

Against that set of perceptions, the management of demand, so central to marketing, can seem unacceptably aggressive and exploitive. Faced with this mindset, fundraising consultants, even demonstrably successful ones, know that they must somehow deal with substantial ambivalence in their clients. So, then, might those who subscribe to the notion of volunteer as buyer.

In the nonprofit field, the acceptance of the idea of marketing to volunteers is further discouraged by our literature's emphasis on adversarial relationships, its invocation of military analogies,

and its use of combative language. People in the third sector, especially in the field of social and health services, like to describe themselves as part of "the helping professions" who work through "human service organizations". Moreover they see the needs they serve as huge, escalating, and beyond their capacity to meet. In those circumstances, managers in social service agencies see their task as one of rationing their organizations' efforts intelligently and compassionately rather than opening up its markets innovately and aggressively. Consequently, they perceive the relationships between themselves and similar organizations to be naturally collaborative rather than competitive.

This perceived reality, compared to marketing's, causes differences in how practitioners interact with one another. For example, an observer attending the annual meeting of the Association for Volunteer Administration or the Association of Voluntary Action Scholars, but accustomed to the agenda of the Marketing Educators Group or the Academy of Marketing Science, would be struck by the inattention to competing successfully and the obsession with "networking" effectively.

By contrast, our literature speaks of such acts as exploiting market opportunities, charging skimming prices and attacking competing brands. For example a recent award-winning article was entitled "Marketing Warfare in the 1980's", (Kotler and Singh 1981) while a leading publisher introduced a new series of videotapes for educators under the banner that it "proudly announces the great marketing wars." Given their self-image as nurturers rather than warriors, voluntary sector managers are bound to wonder whether the marketer's constructs are relevant and transferrable.

A third deterrent is the conviction that voluntary action is, almost without regard for its objectives, a vital process in a healthy society. This belief is held with special fervour by those involved in smaller "non-establishment" nonprofit enterprises. This credo is given authority and respectability by a number of scholars. They report that voluntary bodies contribute to the life of a society in a host of ways, including by reducing alienation, moderating extremist behaviour, helping to distribute power at the grassroots level, encouraging cultural pluralism, promoting social reform, increasing social cohesion, reinforcing important values, providing opportunities for self expression, and educating participants about how social, political and economic processes work in their society.

This justification of voluntary enterprises as much by their processes as by their goals is also at odds with the premises of marketing management. Administrative theory assumes that human enterprises are driven by organizational goals, and that the instrumentalities through which those goals may be accomplished are secondary, optional and several. For example, the interest of our managers in Japanese quality circles is not primarily because they

seem to cause happier, more involved factory hands, but because they appear to produce cheaper, better-made, cars. In the conventional wisdom of management, then, to focus unduly on the quality of the members' interactions, rather than the accomplishment of the organization's purposes, would be regarded as dangerously existential.

This tension between output and activity is summarized in the statement of editorial policy of the newly-founded Journal of Community Action: "The Journal is an advocate of community action. Editorial policy is premised by the conviction that community organizations not only carry out vital functions but also contribute to humanizing our society. The essential qualities of community groups -- their small scale, the personal relationships amoung members, the democratic character of their governance -- contrast markedly with the impersonality, indifference, the rigidity of the massive bureaucratized structures through which so much of our public business is currently conducted".[7]

These competing management philosophies find their sharpest disagreement when the workers to be managed are not mercenaries, but volunteers. As one third-sector leader has said: Managing volunteers? A confused chorus of protest arises at the very word. For results. Whose results? If managing is required, doesn't that imply volunteers are being manipulated, eased into serving others' ends?".[8] For most participants in this conference, that kind of question was laid to rest some decades ago when Drucker argued that the purpose of business is to create a customer.

However, for managers in nonprofit organizations, that statement would be regarded as simplistic. As a "voluntary action scholar" has recently written, "A healthy skepticism should be brought to bear on knowledge deemed usable in the management of voluntary sector organizations if that knowledge has been derived from the study of other organizational forms. For example, the emphasis in most schools of management [is] on understanding the behaviour of profit-making, economic organizations ... .. It is arguable regarding the extent that [nonprofit enterprises] have benefitted from the development of new management techniques since these techniques are most frequently based on assumptions which do not apply to voluntary organizations as a distinct organizational form".[9]

To the extent that these impediments do operate, then as members of MEG and AMS continue to explore the marketing of nonprofit organizations to volunteers, they will encounter some added tasks. They will have to demonstrate that the process can be healthy rather than exploitive, that marketing can use idioms more generic than combative, and that marketing scholars understand the special features of voluntary organizations.

CONCLUSION

Exploring the marketing of nonprofit organizations presents marketing scholars with three attractive opportunities. One is to test the relevance of their central concept of exchange as it applies to an area of human behaviour which they have barely examined. Another is to marry their buyer behaviour concepts with a significant body of empirical work done largely by researchers from other fields. The third is to market their insights to "unsold" practitioners in ways more forthcoming than is customary today. That should occupy interested academics "into the 1990's and beyond".

FOOTNOTES

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