Strategic Marketing of Volunteer Programs for Social Causes

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The Reagan Administration's reductions in social program funding generated much discussion about the need for more voluntarism. Some estimate the loss to non-profit organizations to be about $45 billion during the years 1981 to 1984 (Shifrin, 1982). Mark Bletz, the Assistant Director for Policy and Planning at ACTION said, "The task now is to begin to reinforce those activities by which people in a community deal with their own problems, and learn once again not to be dependent on government" (Garment, 1982). The purpose of this paper is to outline a strategic marketing program for volunteer recruitment and maintenance that would deal with some of the cuts in public spending. This strategy was developed after much research in nonprofit organizations and personal implementation of the total program in a local elementary school. The concepts are applicable to both local and international efforts to create social change.

CREATING THE CONTEXT FOR CHANGE

There are two fundamental concepts that must be communicated to the general public before volunteers can be successfully generated for a social program. The first concept is that there is a need for the program.

People are not going to volunteer to participate in a program unless they feel that there is a problem that is important and calls for immediate action. Research into local blood donor campaigns, for example, found that donors were much more likely to turn out for a specific emergency or for specific individuals. The establishment of a designated time and place to give a particular type of a blood was usually quite successful. Generalized campaigns requesting people to "Give Blood" were generally ignored.

Establishing a need is a necessary, but not a sufficient first step. The second part is to convince people that something can be done about the problem with their help. Again, giving blood for a specific group at a specific time is obviously something that people can do successfully. On the other hand, creating world peace is a problem that does not seem solvable by citizen involvement, and so volunteer solicitation is difficult at best.

There are many examples of communities creating a context for volunteering. In the Whispering Oaks subdivision of Austin, Texas, a serious crime wave occurred. Exposure in the media made local citizens aware of the fact that in one month there were over 35 offenses ranging

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from burglary and vandalism to sexual assaults. People were told that the high crime rate was destroying housing values and many people were fearful of personal injury. In short, people recognized the problem. The question then became what to do about it. The answer took the form of a "Neighborhood Watch" program promoted by a local policeman. People were convinced that their participation was needed and that such involvement would solve the problem!

Similar programs have been successfully implemented throughout the United States. Over 32 police departments in Virginia have set up similar crime-prevention programs. In Alexandria, a neighborhood with 235 participating homes cut its burglary rate almost in half. Some communities have marked their cars with highly visible stickers so autos driven by outsiders can easily be spotted.

In the Fenway section of Boston, the problem was arson. Within a two-year period, 29 of 74 buildings on two parallel streets were severely damaged or destroyed by fire. The local police and fire departments seemed to be unable to stop the problem. The need for action was apparent. A citizen's group called the Symphony Tenants Organizing Project (STOP) was formed to generate action. They convinced the community that citizen action could do what the public and fire departments could not. Together, the action group began an investigation that uncovered an arson ring that involved some key public figures.

In Orlando, Florida, the problem was the public schools. As in so many communities, public education was underfunded, resulting in poor academic achievement by students. The problem was clear. Starting with just 100 volunteers, a program called ADDitions was started that now has more than 4,000 volunteers in Orange County Schools. Another 500 volunteers are available for special projects. Again, it was the concept that

citizen involvement could make a difference that was a factor in such enthusiastic support.

On a larger scale, a few citizens of Baltimore, Maryland decided to revamp its downtown area and revitalize the city. This time the need was not as directly apparent, so different citizen groups combined to promote the idea. Government and business leaders joined the campaign. Eventually, enough private money was raised to build Harbor Place, a huge shopping complex on the waterfront. Nearby is the new National Aquarium. These attractions drew in hotels and other private businesses and the area was transformed.

The lessons are clear: volunteerism is growing in the United States and is making great progress in areas such as crime prevention (Neighborhood Watch Programs), arson reduction, school enrichment, and downtown revitalization. But equally clear is the need for strategic marketing programs to recruit and maintain volunteers over time. Often projects are launched, get highly publicized, make some change, and then die out from lack of a continuous program of promotion and support.

The following is a complete outline of a strategic marketing program to recruit and maintain volunteers over time. The program is applicable to all social programs from local crime-watch programs to multinational efforts to foster world peace and end world hunger. Some of the terms used in this program were first presented by Wiebe (1951/1952) in an article designed to show how marketing could be used in social programs. The details of the procedures, however, were developed in conversations with volunteer coordinators, with nonprofit managers of all kinds, and in personal efforts to generate volunteerism.

STRATEGIC MARKETING

There are six elements to a strategic marketing program:

(1) A social catalyst: Some person

or organization must take a leadership position and begin implementing the other five steps.

(2) Market segmentation: Social promotions must be focused on those people and/or organizations most likely to respond.

(3) Direction: Volunteers must be told what to do, when, where, how often, and for how long.

(4) A mechanism: The promoters must establish some structure (place, time, organizational name) around which volunteers can rally.

(5) Adequacy and compatibility: The social program's coordinators must provide feedback to volunteers, showing them the program is working (adequacy), and in a way they would approve of (compatibility).

(6) Minimizing of costs: Every effort should be made to let volunteers do what is most enjoyable for them, where they want, when they want and, to some extent, how. The long run success of a program is based on volunteers who continue to serve for years, something they are more likely to do if it is fun and relatively easy.

Below we shall look at the implementation of each of these elements, give examples, and discuss their importance.

The Social Catalyst

One factor Wiebe did not mention in creating social change is the need for a catalyst. A catalyst is a person or organization that recognizes a social need (e.g., better schools, end of world hunger, ban of nuclear bombs, saving the whales) and mobilizes others to support the cause. In other words, segmentation, direction, and the other concepts do not occur until a catalyst comes along to initiate them. The catalyst can be a government agency, a private firm, a famous person, or any concerned citizen.

President Kennedy was the catalyst who said that we would send a man to the moon. He motivated committed people, established a mechanism, and in a relatively short time men were walking on the moon. The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a catalyst for civil rights and made much progress by giving direction to the cause. Ralph Nader is also a catalyst for many causes.

The United States now needs a catalyst who will mobilize the cause of world peace. It also needs a catalyst to improve technical training (e.g., math, engineering, physics, mechanics, statistics) in our high schools and colleges--and to address a wide variety of other problems. All such causes need a catalyst who will implement the concepts of segmentation, direction, mechanism, and so on. But the most effective catalysts really are individuals who see a need and try to satisfy it. The beauty of social marketing is that it enables individuals to form groups that become movements that create a political force such that change occurs. Marketing is the tool that cuts through resistance and rallies volunteers.

Once a catalyst has emerged, the procedures for recruiting and maintaining volunteers are rather clear. First, a cause needs a core of a few, committed people. These people are easy to find because they are very vocal about the need for change, but have no direction at first.

Market Segmentation

Studies have shown that the normal segmentation strategies aimed at groups based on age, sex, income, social class, and other such variables do not necessarily work (Kassargian, 1971) in recruitment. The variable that does work is degree of interest in the cause or problem. For example, parents of school children are the most likely volunteers at school. But other groups may have a similar interest, including people in nearby nursing homes and students studying to be teachers. Families with cancer victims are most likely to support cancer research, people whose homes have been burglarized may sign up

first for neighborhood watch programs, and so on. The role of the catalyst is to contact these people and get their support. Such support might take the form of block meetings to discuss the issue, phone calls to other concerned people, and attendance at organizational meetings.

The segmentation strategy is this: get highly committed people to contact a few other highly committed people. Usually they either know these people already or can find them easily. Each contacted person is asked to contact several more in a pyramiding scheme that generates dozens of concerned and partially committed volunteers. They may be called together at one or several meeting places and asked to do more work. At that time, a name may be established for the movement and meeting times and places established (mechanism).

This core of volunteers would be assigned people to call to get more volunteers until the movement has some visibility and attention. From that base, a wider promotional campaign can be launched to involve other citizens, businesses, government leaders, community leaders, and so on. The idea is to start small with a catalyst and a central core of volunteers and to build from there.

Direction

Volunteers must be told what to do, when, where, how often, and how long. Most people are very concerned about environmental problems, but few people do anything about it because they have not been given direction. When people are told to save newspapers or put water savers in the toilet, they usually do so, but people rarely do more than asked.

Sometimes it is best to draw up a list of everything that needs to be done: car pooling, phone calling, advertising, soliciting, stapling, Xeroxing, and so forth. Job descriptions are helpful tools. Then each volunteer is asked which jobs he or she

prefers. The left over jobs are usually assigned to particularly committed volunteers who are willing to do anything to help.

It is best to get long term commitments at the start to prevent the cause from faltering just as it gets moving. In the heat of initial enthusiasm, momentum must be built to launch the cause into the future.

It is important at this stage to recognize the concept of "minimizing cost." That is, volunteers should be asked to do no more than what is comfortable for them or else they will drop out eventually. Those who are willing to "do anything" may not do "anything" if the task becomes too burdensome.

A Mechanism

The sooner the organization can establish a meeting place, a time for meeting, and a name, the better. Notice the visibility that groups obtain once they have a name such as Neighborhood Watch, ADDitions, or STOP. It is best to have one place where volunteers can meet together and give each other moral support, especially at the beginning when the group is small and seemingly ineffective. There are many committed people eager to create social change who do nothing because they do not know where to go to volunteer. Unless they themselves become catalysts, that potential may never be actualized.

It does no good to tell people to save newspapers unless a recycling center is established as a mechanism for processing the papers. It does little good to promote cancer checkups among American Indians (as is now done) without having clinics available for the Indians to get such checkups.

Adequacy

The time when most organizations fail to keep their volunteers is after the initial campaign is over. Volunteers wonder how they did. Were we a success? How much did we ac-

complish? More often than not such answers are not forthcoming. Sometimes no answers are given because the effort failed. But more often the effort was a success and no one publicized the fact. Eventually, volunteers lose interest and the momentum stops. From that point on, it is difficult to regenerate interest and the whole program falters or dies.

Thus the heart of any ongoing social program is an effective communication program that provides feedback to volunteers. "We're doing great, we only have this much more to go," is a rallying cry. "OK, great, we've done this; now we can do that and really improve things," is another.

For example, imagine your goal is to recruit volunteers for a blood drive. You may have a goal of 1,000 pints. You would let volunteers know how close they were to the goal and thank them for helping. If you reached the goal, you might say: "Fantastic, we've reached the initial goal of 1,000 pints. That proves we can do it. Now, the larger goal is 10,000 pints for all the city hospitals. We have the mechanism, we have the momentum, let's keep it going!"

It is amazing at this point how few programs have a system for recognizing volunteers and their contribution. It doesn't take much, perhaps a phone call or a ribbon or a "thank you" brunch. But something is necessary. Volunteers like to feel appreciated. They have given valuable time and money to a program and deserve credit. Without that recognition and feedback, enthusiasm wanes.

Minimizing of Costs

More women than men volunteer for most social programs, but that mix is rapidly changing. Since so many people work at salaried jobs and volunteer, there is even more reason to recognize those who do work as volunteers. Beyond that, volunteering should not be so onerous as to be a burden on volunteers.

There should be much flexibility in hours, tasks, and actions to adjust to busy schedules. People look at the costs (both financial and personal) and benefits associated with volunteering. The benefits should outweigh the costs or the program will founder.

To minimize personal costs and because it makes good management sense, the organizers should let volunteers choose what to do to help as much as possible. Some people love to make posters; others love to make phone calls. Others hate to make posters or do phone calls, but love to open their homes for meetings. If people are asked to do what is fun for them, volunteering not only is easier, but lasts longer. Assigning willing volunteers unpleasant and low-level work time after time will kill a social program eventually.

At one time, people raised money for many causes by having bake sales, book sales, vacation auctions, and the like. Such efforts took much time for baking, setting up tables, and more. Today's active people have little time for such activities. They often would prefer donating $5 or $10 and not getting involved with fund raisers. Every program should be flexible and work to make volunteers happy as well as to reach the goal.

Every program coordinator should take time for pleasurable events to reward volunteers, create a spirit of comaraderie, and renew commitments. That bolsters the "benefit" side of the cost/benefit equation. Volunteers are not soldiers to be sacrificed to the cause; they are precious assets who need to be protected, nourished, and fed with compliments.

APPLYING THE STRATEGY

In the middle of my research for this paper, my wife and I became involved in the local elementary school that my son, age 7, was attending. Previously, the principal had been reluctant to use parent volunteers and the school was relatively well funded. All of that changed

rather rapidly! Funds were cut, programs were eliminated, and a new principal arrived. Parents began talking at parties and over fences about the declining programs and the potential for losing the excellent academic achievements of the past. For over a year, nothing happened but talk. Everyone agreed something needed to be done, but the feeling was "let the schoolboard do it" or "call someone on the P.T.A." Well, the P.T.A. and the schoolboard did nothing and parental concern grew. Still, nothing was done but complain.

At this point, my wife decided to be a catalyst. She called the mothers she knew were most concerned and asked them to talk to others in their area. Soon there were over twenty greatly concerned mothers in a phone network. One day they were asked to come to a meeting at school. When they arrived, my wife had a whole list of tasks available that needed to be accomplished to bring the school back to excellence. Those tasks included working in the library, the reading lab, the math lab, and the health room; providing typing, folding, and distribution assistance to the secretaries; driving students on field trips; helping at fund raisers; playing music for plays and other events; and generally being available for emergency help.

The women decided to call themselves "Fallsmead Parent Volunteers" and volunteer name tags were designed. Some women drew flowers on the name tags (a separate design for each) and others wrote the volunteers' names using calligraphy. These name tags were worn proudly and word spread that a volunteer program (mechanism) called "Fallsmead Parent Volunteers" was now in operation. We now had a catalyst (my wife) and a mechanism (the Fallsmead Parent Volunteers). Meeting times and places were arranged and volunteers agreed to solicit more volunteers on a block-by-block basis. Fathers and mothers were solicited equally since both worked full-time jobs in many instances.

To minimize the personal cost of volunteering, each person was asked what they would like to do. It was amazing how many ex-school teachers, ex-nurses, ex-piano teachers, and so forth were in the community. Almost all of them were willing to donate some time to the school. Some were more than willing; they were eager to get back to working with children.

Now it was time for direction. Volunteers were given specific instructions regarding what to do, when, where, how often, and for how long. The parent volunteer coordinator obtained lists from the teachers saying what they needed (e.g., people who could lecture on foreign countries, interesting hobbies or unusual jobs). Men and women volunteered to come into the classroom and give talks or act as classroom aides. The program was a big success. Parents were proud of the school and volunteers were pleased to help.

Each year now, there is a school party where all the volunteers are recognized for their help and the year's accomplishments are reviewed (adequacy). A copy of those evaluation results is distributed to all parents. The outcome is an ongoing program where parents, teacher, and principal work together to maintain excellence in all phases of the school: basic subjects, art, music, physical education, recreation, field trips, and more.

Volunteerism is not new to schools; only the pressing need for more help is new. Some public schools are way behind academically. Recently, more parents have become involved but parents cannot do it alone. Some want to solicit volunteers from business to help teach in the public schools. What is needed, on the national level, is a catalyst, some segmentation, and direction. With a volunteer force in motion, there is no end to the potential for change in our educational system.

GENERATING VOLUNTEERS TO SOLVE WORLD PROBLEMS

The success of strategic marketing in recruiting and maintaining volunteers for community programs such as those described above raises the question of whether strategic marketing might work to recruit volunteers for world problems such as war and hunger. Recently, a program was started to end world hunger by the year 1997. Below we shall explore this program using the strategic marketing outline.

We have learned that the first steps in any social program are to: (1) create the concept that there is a need for change; and (2) convince people that something can be done about the problem. One problem with world hunger is that the problem has lasted so long (thousands of years) that people feel there is no solution. Yet today we have the resources and the technology to provide enough food for everyone. In fact, the United States actually has a surplus of some foods.

The context that must be created for ending world hunger is that feeding the hungry is an idea whose time has come. One catalyst for creating that context has been Werner Erhard, the creator of est. The segmentation strategy is to take a small core of committed individuals (e.g., est graduates) and create a pyramiding scheme to recruit more and more volunteers until a critical mass is reached. The core group consisted of 25,000 people who attended a rally in 1976. By early 1983, millions had volunteered to commit themselves to ending world hunger by 1997. The mechanism is called The Hunger Project. At the outset, direction consisted of pledging oneself to a personal commitment to assisting and recruiting more volunteers. Adequacy is maintained by sending a newsletter that documents how many volunteers have joined and what the results are. People such as Chip Carter, the former President's son; Roy Scheider, the actor; Harold Solo-

man, the tennis player (who donates a percentage of his earnings); and hundreds of other highly visible people have joined the cause. Actual implementation of food programs is left to the dozens of agencies already set up for that; the Hunger Project is strictly an organization for generating volunteers to work in those programs and get more volunteers. The personal cost/benefit ratio is high because each volunteer does only what he or she is willing to do.

Millions of volunteers have been recruited for The Hunger Project. Whether or not world hunger will be conquered as a result is yet to be decided.

The purpose of this paper was to outline a strategic marketing program for recruiting and maintaining volunteers. There is no guarantee that volunteers can solve problems such as cancer, heart disease, world hunger, and international tensions. Certainly, however, little progress can be made without volunteers.

The six-step volunteer program outlined here has proven successful at the local and national level. The cause of world peace would surely receive a giant boost if another catalyst such as Gandhi or Martin Luther King would create a mechanism that would unite peace-seeking organizations throughout the world and give them direction for creating the social and political atmosphere that would make peace "an idea whose time has come." The catalyst could be a religious organization, the Pope, a political leader, or some charismatic individual willing to devote his or her life to the cause. Certainly the threat of world destruction by nuclear weapons has made world peace through citizen involvement an unprecedented challenge for volunteerism.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

A worldwide recession has put tremendous pressure on nonprofit organizations to provide services once provided by government agencies. Volunteers are part of that effort.

Volunteer recruitment, to be successful, must be based on two fundamental concepts: that a need exists and that volunteer efforts can work to make a difference. A context must be established that solving that problem is an idea whose time has come. To create that context, a cause needs a <u>catalyst</u>, some person or organization that has the vision to begin social change. That catalyst must gather a few, committed supporters to create a <u>mechanism</u> for change. <u>Market segmentation</u> demands focusing on those already committed first, and giving them <u>direction</u> such that a pyramiding of volunteers occurs. At all phases of the movement, feedback must be given volunteers to maintain morale and esprit de corps. This is called <u>adequacy</u> because it assures volunteers that the organization is working adequately to accomplish the task. Volunteers must be given recognition for their contribution and <u>the costs</u> of volunteering should be minimized.

Given such a strategy, social problems ranging from cleaning up local neighborhoods to promoting world peace can be effectively promoted and implemented. The success of such programs in the past indicates that future programs have a great potential for success. Each success should prompt some individual or groups to become the catalyst for further change. The media are eager to cover stories of successful programs such as Neighborhood Watch efforts. Therefore, all successful programs should contact the media to create the context that citizen involvement in social change is an idea whose time has come.

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