

# Marketing Volunteering

By Norma Selvidge

*"The best advertisement is a satisfied customer!" That's a statement most business people endorse. I think it also has a meaning for volunteer coordinators who are selling an opportunity for service to customers who are buying the opportunity to serve. The very fabric of this country is woven with the yarn of our economic system, so let's look at volunteering as a marketable idea.*

"Don't you dare commercialize volunteering," says the idealist. "Don't you dare reduce human service to economic terms," says the altruist. "Don't you dare fail to use your finest creativity to market ideas," says the pragmatist.

Let's look at volunteering from the practical viewpoint and fit it into a marketing paradigm. Whether you view yourself as a salesperson or not, working with volunteers is selling. The quality of the volunteer program may be directly related to your ability to sell.

The paradigm involves a product, a medium, and an audience. (See chart pg. 13)

The product to be sold in volunteering is the opportunity to help others. That's a dynamic and highly sellable product!

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*Norma Selvidge, Ph.D., Communication Analyst, Austin, Texas.*

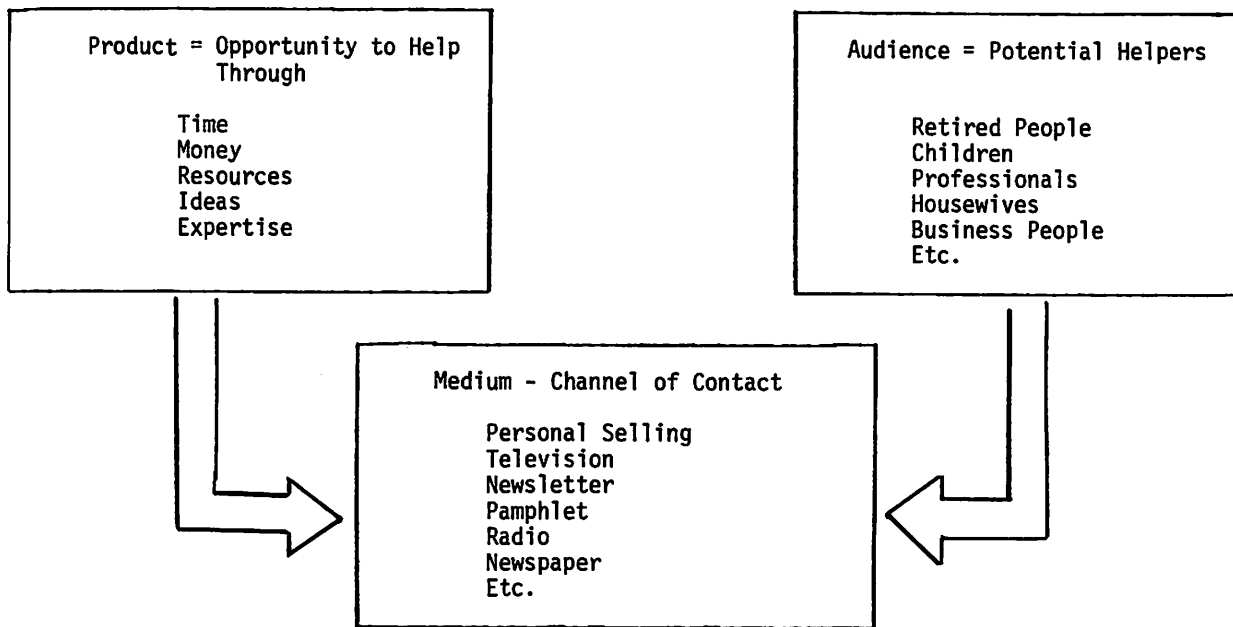
Helping others adds a dimension to the maintenance elements of daily living and has incredibly high pay-offs in self-satisfaction, social approval, and meaningful interactions. The question then becomes one of developing an effective marketing strategy that involves five steps.

- (1) *Know your product*
- (2) *Assess your needs*
- (3) *Target the audience*
- (4) *Choose a medium*
- (5) *Sell*

## Know Your Product

In planning your communication strategy for marketing volunteering you must assess your current product image. To do this you must look for information that identifies the volunteer program image. This image is built through person-to-person discussions, personality styles of volunteers, staff and professionals, attitudes of clients, and any written messages about volunteering. The volunteer image is also affected by the public image of the larger organization which it serves. Anyone associated with volunteerism contributes to the image.

You become a visible part of the image of volunteering. Let us suppose that you work with volunteers and someone comes to your office. The visitor may be talking to you at a time when you are tired, the phone is ringing, a report is due in fifteen minutes, and you have a headache. You are



over-extended and pressured. The visitor is talking to you about volunteerism and you do not have your best face on, but you represent volunteering nevertheless. Volunteering is you at that point in time and that is the image the visitor gets. If you are selling an idea that you are tired, overworked, and surrounded by negative happenings, then that is the image of volunteering that gets sold to the visitor. Do you think you have a marketable product with that image?

Awareness of image building through personal communication can help you mobilize a dynamic sales force. Your "satisfied customer" - a happy volunteer - is one of the most potent sales mediums. Personal satisfaction and commitment to volunteering can combine as a dynamic duo of salesmanship. You can remember when you sold an idea that you believed was important, though the idea was pretty much unsellable at first. Real commitment and satisfaction which you communicated probably made the difference. Package a sellable idea in a positive, enthusiastic, realistic form and you will find a buyer.

#### Assess Your Needs

The volunteer coordinator is continuously receiving data about needs of the volunteer program. The needs can range from recruitment of volunteers, to raising money, to seeking specific supplies or equipment. One of the difficulties involves the frequently shifting need patterns that result in the coordinator spending much time meeting unexpected needs with little time left for planning. Frequent crisis underscores the importance of a functional systematic

approach to marketing the volunteer package.

*Needs assessment involves weekly evaluation of current status of the program. Systematically matching the needs of the volunteer program with the needs of the potential audience is an essential link in the marketing strategy. Through clear and specific statement of needs, your success at meeting goals can be measured and evaluated. Evaluation of critical needs to meet (1) goals for the week, (2) goals for the month, (3) goals for the year, and (4) multi-year goals can provide a work sheet for matching potential audiences with potential needs.*

#### Target Your Audience

Planning a marketing campaign includes targeting the audience who (1) can afford your product, and (2) can meet personal goals by purchasing your product. The strategy does not include the favor system, but is based upon exchange of ways to meet individual goals. Very often in the helping area, we ask for money or services in terms of asking for a favor. That is not a very viable selling position, for doing a favor upsets the equality that facilitates communication. Favors can trigger guilt mechanisms and enable a salesperson to make a sale. That's a one-time sale and does not foster a supportive long-term market. Few people enjoy owing a favor.

*The helping force does not have to ask anybody for a favor; instead, it's healthy to ask for an exchange rather than a favor. Know your product and design an exchange strategy. Matching the needs of the volunteer program with the needs of the buyer provides an effective vehicle for the sales exchange.*

Let's suppose that you needed money from a banker. That's a tough sales situation. Ask yourself what the banker's goals might be. What does he need? Many banks try to counteract the stereotypic image of "No," and "Too money conscious." Perhaps your need for money can be traded for the banker's need for an improved public image. Match your needs with the buyer. Even this approach won't work, however, if you go in armed only with your enthusiasm. As you offer to exchange positive public relations for the money you need, the banker quite legitimately should ask you how you plan to accomplish the exchange. A nebulous reply such as "Well, we're going to tell everybody that you sponsored this project," will not give the buyer a measurable way of estimating his return on this investment. Instead have a specific plan. You could respond to him with specifics such as "We are planning to take this program to 5 meetings at which we are estimating the attendance of 2000 people. Printed on the bottom of the program, we will show your sponsorship and we are additionally willing to make an announcement that you have contributed to our program in this way. We are also willing to return to you a report of the actual attendance and feedback from our program." Let's not ask for favors. Let's give our customers their money's worth. If we do not, then we should pay for their service.

Volunteer programs are often viewed as involving "do-gooders, bleeding heart sorts of folks, who don't understand bank statements and can't be expected to give people equal value for their investment." We must change that image and show the kind of pragmatic business thinking that can improve the dynamic and positive nature of volunteering. You have to operate in the business community, so perhaps you had better speak business language. Speak the language of your buyer as you target the potential buying public.

#### Choose the Medium

*Marshall McLuhan's famous assertion that the "medium is the message" has special significance in selling the image of volunteering. The volunteer is often the medium. The message is associated with the person delivering the message and the volunteers are an important public relations link with the community. Helping volunteers become aware of the important image they are selling is an essential aspect of their training.*

Matching the selling style to the buyer by selecting an appropriate medium to reach a targeted audience is the next step in the marketing strategy. Mediums

that can be used include: television, telephone, radio, newspapers, newsletters, letters, posters, pamphlets, speakers, personal contact, etc. Many of these mediums are affordable even on a limited budget.

Personal contact is a vital selling medium. Marketing research indicates that television is excellent for getting name identification or information to the buying public, but is inept at getting people to commit to a service or commit time. That more often occurs through personal contact. Even in selling products, some research indicates that it is still the "opinion setter" who personally reinforces what was seen on television and causes action. The "people link" is still crucial. It is possible for television to disseminate information and have dramatic results, but in general you still cannot replace a "turned on" human being who stirs others' imagination and consequently commitment.

In selecting the medium for the message, the volunteer coordinator should phrase the message according to the buyer's needs and language. When selecting a medium such as a newspaper, people usually go to the paper to promote their own concept and ask the paper to do them a favor by printing the story. What is the newspaper's goal? Financial solvency through advertisement and provocative news to enlarge circulation is one of the goals. Therefore a news story written in interesting fashion can meet one of the newspaper's goals. One volunteer coordinator has received exceptional coverage in the local newspaper. She finds interesting stories about volunteers, writes a sellable story, and just incidentally includes information about the volunteer activities. The story meets both the newspaper's and coordinator's goals. The image of volunteering is enhanced as the story reveals the kind of active, exciting people who are attracted to volunteering. Over time the coordinator has created a trusting relationship so that an article from her gets the paper's attention. She has earned a reputation of exchanging worthwhile products.

Other mediums for getting your message distributed can be uncovered through an assessment of your community. For the distribution of pamphlets you might consider including your message in these delivery sources: bank statements, teacher's boxes at school, welcome wagons, scouts, public libraries, newspapers, and department stores. Use creative thinking and brainstorming to develop sources of selling the image of volunteering.

## Close the Sale

After following the marketing strategy, you still need to close the sale. A quick review of psychological factors that have been identified as motivators of behavior stimulate thinking about the close of the sale. Subtle use of motives can enhance your chances for sale. These include basically three kinds of motives - social, ego, and biological:

### Social Motives

*Group norms*  
*Status*  
*Recognition*  
*Social approval*  
*Belongingness*

### Ego Motives

*Self respect*  
*To gain power*  
*To excel*  
*To control*  
*To create*

### Biological Motives

*Food/Shelter*  
*Sex*  
*Avoidance of danger*  
*Freedom*  
*Seek pleasant sensations and*  
*avoid unpleasant ones*

Careful use of these motives can provide an action move toward closing the sale.

When you go to a potential buyer to sell a specific part of your volunteer program, take with you a map in your head of your needs. It is possible that the buyer's own requirements will not allow him to buy the particular product you are selling. Be flexible. If you have a positive buyer who just cannot afford the product you are selling, then switch to another product. If you were visiting a lawyer whom you wanted to serve on your board, watch carefully for signals of his positive attitude toward the project. Because of time constraints, he is telling you that he cannot serve but he supports the idea. Quickly take a mental check of your other needs. You may remember that you need to send a personal letter to 300 people. And you also realize that he has a mag card typewriter. You might then negotiate with him for the use of that typewriter during a time when his staff is not ordinarily using it. Though you do not make the sale you had intended, it is possible you can offer him a different product - one that he can afford. His desire to help and your meeting a program need result in exchange.

## Summary

*Your marketing strategy includes: (1) know your product, (2) assess your needs, (3) target the audience, (4) choose the appropriate medium, and (5) close the sale. Volunteering is a worthwhile idea that deserves the most effective marketing strategy you can devise. The idea of helping each other has been a central element in our survival since life first began on this planet. Some very impressive salespeople have been promoting sharing and caring for over 2000 years. When you add a sound marketing strategy to selling a positive image of volunteering, then you will achieve your goal. You will find buyers. You will have satisfied customers!*

## References:

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