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Online Spying Can Improve Your Volunteer Management Skills

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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Ever think that industrial espionage would be recommended as a best practice management tool? Keep reading!

We've made great strides in communicating online, recruiting volunteers through Web-based registries of opportunities, "talking" on listservs and discussion forums, and expanding our skills from a wealth of electronic resources. These are all intentional collegial exchanges, which are great.

So now let's consider what can be learned online through stealth.

Of course I'm not talking about anything illegal, dishonest, or even unethical. I'm recommending using the Internet to be a quiet explorer, observing carefully what other organizations are doing (or, at least, are presenting to the public about what they do). Educate yourself about approaches and models that you might follow, adapt, or even avoid.

Let's look at some specific examples. Remember as you read, please, that one of my most-repeated suggestions is to recruit volunteers to be your "cyber-deputies" – folks who are comfortable online and enjoy the challenge of finding Internet resources. So *you* do not have to add the suggestions here to your unending personal to-do list; assign it to your cyber-deputies who will love the challenge.

Volunteer Roles and Recruitment

Go to VolunteerMatch (www.volunteermatch.org), the United Way's Volunteer Solutions (www.volunteersolutions.org), Idealist (www.idealists.org), or any other online registry of volunteer opportunities – many countries these days have their own (see [which we know about](#)). Pretend you're a prospective volunteer and search for a possible placement. Search by the type of *setting* you are in and see what comes up. Then search by your site's *zip/postal code* and do the same thing. Next, search by the different *skills* needed for the assignments you want to fill. If you can search by other

criteria, see what turns up if you say you want evening hours or something you can do with your children.

All of this will reveal some interesting information if you carefully read each “ad” and see what you think of it. For example:

- What’s your local competition? (Like it or not, in this case that’s what the other organizations are.) Conversely, what organizations do you know want volunteers but are *not* listed here? Is this to your advantage or not?
- What are other organizations like yours asking volunteers to do? Might such tasks be valuable in your agency, too?
- How flexible are the other assignments in terms of schedule, where the work has to be done, etc.?
- How attractive does each position sound? How much detail does each listing provide?

Now study the opportunity descriptions you have posted or are preparing to post. How do they compare? Will you compete successfully?

Don’t stop there. Enter a different zip/postal code – even in another state or country. If you’ve ever been at a loss about what you might ask volunteers to do, you’ll get your creative juices flowing by sampling what other organizations are up to. And it will be easier to get the agreement of both paid staff and other volunteers if you can demonstrate that this idea is already being tried elsewhere.

Of course, once you’ve discovered a volunteer role you’d like to duplicate, you can come out from the shadows and contact that organization’s volunteer office and openly ask for help in replicating the activity. It’s flattering to hear, “I found your great program online and just had to contact you as a colleague.” Wouldn’t you respond positively?

You aren’t done yet with the potential buried treasure. Select the advertised volunteer assignments you like best and click through it each organization’s own Web site (or take time to visit the Web sites of every member of your local DOVIA or other professional network). Here you want to look for:

- How visible is the fact that this organization involves volunteers? Is volunteering mentioned on the home page or deep within the site after many clicks?
- Are current openings for volunteers shown or is the description of what volunteers do general and unchanging?
- How can someone express interest in volunteering? With an online application? Only by telephone during office hours?

Again, how do these Web sites compare with your organization’s and can you do a better job of making volunteering visible to your site visitors?

Make the Most of Existing Opportunities

Smart volunteer resources managers used to read what were called the “social pages” of the newspaper to identify community events and individuals considered leaders, major donors, experts, etc. The need to find these folks and where they gather continues, but today you can scope out happenings online. Most local newspapers, radio stations, and television stations also maintain Web sites where you can search for what’s relevant to you. Look for calendars of events that might lead you to new recruits. Is there a health fair, a flea market, a high school play scheduled? Could you “piggyback” on that gathering with an exhibit booth, literature table, or playbill ad?

Use these sorts of news items and calendars to do targeted outreach. What’s going on that involves young men or Asian-American families? Can you glean what issues matter to the population you most wish to reach? How about ideas for where they spend their free time – and can you get to the same place with your message?

Current volunteers and colleague employees all have special interests, both professional and personal, and you can bet they are active on one or more listservs or discussion boards for those. Simply ask them to be on the lookout for you and let you know about:

- Service projects that might be discussed.
- Events such as the ones just mentioned.
- Ideas on what might be of interest to their circle in terms of volunteer activities.

Online Tools

Have your cyber-deputies help you find more, but here are two fantastic, free resources:

- **Google Alerts** (<http://www.google.com/alerts>) – You can enter any number of key words or phrases (a separate form for each) that you want to track and every day Google will send you an e-mail with links for where those words appeared the day before on the Web, with hotlinks so you can read more! This is like the old newspaper “clipping services,” only neater. So monitor where and how the name of your organization is used, track the distribution of a press release, monitor an issue, etc. Keep up the espionage by monitoring your “competition”; get Alerts for the name of the few organizations that seem to vie for filling the same type of volunteer positions.
- **Survey Monkey** (<http://www.surveymonkey.com>) – This wonderful site for conducting electronic surveys (and there are others like it) offers a basic free membership and relatively inexpensive additional options. In terms of uncovering hidden information, create a survey to be taken by people with whom you don’t usually communicate. Some ideas for sleuthing:
 - Ask the people monitoring discussion forums/listservs for you (see above) to submit a post inviting the members of their forum to “help the agency I volunteer with” by completing a very quick online questionnaire. For example, if you want to recruit for your

speakers bureau and a staff colleague or volunteer is active on a public relations professional list, try to get a sampling of PR practitioners to answer questions like: Have you ever been asked to contribute your professional skills as a volunteer? What is the most important factor to you in choosing a volunteer role? What do you hate to see?

- Create a graphic that is linked directly to the survey and says, in an eye-catching way, some variation of: *"Give 5 minutes and your opinion! Click here to answer 8 questions to help X Agency in its important work. Thanks so much!"* Get any volunteer, donor, or vendor to place this graphic/link on any Web site and then gather opinions on whatever you like.

Did I get your creative juices flowing? How?

Are you already spying positively? Do share!

What other online tools in this vein do you recommend?

Related Topics: [Program Assessment](#) | [Recruitment](#) | [Social Media and Internet Technology](#) | [Volunteer Resources Manager, Role of](#) | [Image of Volunteering](#)

Submitted on 5 May 2006 by Debbie Anderson, Coordinator, Volunteer Resources, Ontario Canada

These are great ideas that will improve organizational accountability and create a new virtual volunteer position for any organization up to the challenge. It's also interesting to have a volunteer try applying for a position with your own organization electronically and report back on the accessibility, ease and timeliness so that you can make improvements to your own process.

Volunteers can help us make sure that our organizations come up quickly when a potential volunteer is surfing for opportunities.

In this day of doing more and more with less and less, education budgets are being cut in many organizations. I hear peers complaining that they haven't had education in 2 or 3 years. I encourage them to use the Internet as a significant resource. There are key Voluntary Sector organizations that aim to build capacity for non-profits and the training they offer online is incredible. Sign up to receive ezines, articles, participate in chat groups... and schedule time each week for your own personally directed education. Make a list of things you need to learn this year and then each week take an hour to learn more about it online. No one should be complaining about the lack of available education for professionals in the Voluntary Sector. The world wide web is exploding with information, just use trusted and reliable websites.

Submitted on 5 May 2006 by Jayne Cravens, Coyote Communications, Consultant, Bonn Germany

And don't stop there! You can get tremendous insight into what people think about your organization by such online exploring. Every organization should go to www.google.com or any other online directory system and search for its name, executive director name, web address, or key phrases, such as the word "contact" or "volunteer" or donate and the organization name. These searches can help you see how easy it is for someone looking to volunteer with, donate to or contact an organization with a particular focus to be able to find your organization online. It also will give you an idea of how

many web sites are linked to your organization's site, and what the media, other publications and "blogs" may have said about your organization or its staff. You may find criticism or praise from a volunteer, donor, or client about your organization that you will want to address. Look on social networking tools as well, particularly if you work with young people, such as MySpace, to see what's being said about your organization. All of these are great activities for online volunteers!

Submitted on 1 May 2006 by Hillary Roberts, PLNJ Inc., President

Keyport/NJ USA

When we first started using the Internet to research our own agency-related questions, content was fairly limited. Today the choices have exploded, the required reading requiring virtual volunteers. Google Alert remains a search-specific favorite. Whether we are "lurking" for content on our agency (as much for security as appropriateness) or reading what media outlets are saying on a specific subject, Google Alert saves time! Tickle an idea, a single subject or just a one-time query and you will receive free, daily alerts direct to your email box! Since 2001, we have recruited virtual volunteers to be our Internet eyes & ears. Useful content is forwarded to our HQ for review. The occasional inappropriate or inaccurate content is corrected quickly. Google Alert is a virtual filing cabinet of timely information and new ideas!

Another favorite web tool is Amazon.com based, A9. Search under "volunteer leadership" and receive not only web links, but related online resources via books, blogs, wikipedia and reference material on the same subject. Of course Amazon is more than happy to sell a few books but with A9.com you receive more "bang for your search buck."

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