Volunteer Web Site Effectiveness: Attracting Volunteers via the Web

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Abstract

Volunteer programs are shifting towards the use of web sites to recruit volunteers. Using previously recommended practices for web site management, the authors analyzed 93 web sites of volunteer-based animal welfare organizations regarding 14 best practices in web design and management. On average, the organizations used nine of the 14 best practices. The most commonly used practices included (1) providing a link to the volunteer program web page and (2) providing an organizational mission statement. The least commonly used practices included (1) providing information for future orientation sessions and (2) providing a volunteer program mission statement. Analyses further indicated that the number of best practices used is related to the number of volunteers at each program even after controlling for the overall size of the organization or the availability of resources (i.e., total revenue). Implications for volunteer resource managers are discussed.

Key Words:
web site, best practice, volunteer resource management, recruitment

Introduction
Volunteers serve as an incredible resource to non-profit organizations (McFarland, 2005). Volunteer-based non-profit organizations are often faced with a paucity of resources in their operations, and volunteers serve to supplement the paid staff in supporting general operations and achieving organizational goals (Safrit & Schmiesing, 2005; Safrit, Schmiesing, Gliem, & Gliem,

2005). The ability of non-profit organizations to recruit and retain volunteers is an area for sustained competitive advantage in accomplishing the aims of the organization. In fact, some non-profit organizations (e.g., animal welfare organizations, social welfare organizations, religious institutions, etc.) operate completely on a volunteer basis with no paid staff to maintain operations (McFarland, 2005). Because of this general need to attract and retain volunteers, volunteer programs in non-profit organizations are shifting towards the use of web sites to recruit volunteers (Goh, Allen, Rogelberg, & Currie, 2009; Waters, 2007). By connecting with potential volunteers via the web, non-profit organizations can attract and sign-up the essential volunteer talent they need.

Non-profit organizations and volunteer programs may turn to trade and academic literature for best practices to bolster the effectiveness of their web sites in this crucial function. For example, McKee and McKee (2007) discussed practices for dealing with a new generation of volunteers, how to utilize virtual volunteers, and ways to avoid scaring away potential volunteers. However, as more practices are proposed in both trade and academic literatures, non-profit organizations may become inundated with unproven sets of practices. The purpose of this study was to empirically test one such set of best practices for managing volunteer program web sites (Goh, Allen, Rogelberg, & Currie, 2009). The practices analyzed here were designed to help improve such web sites, with an emphasis on attracting volunteers. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that volunteer programs may be able to attract more volunteers by effectively utilizing websites, which is an inexpensive and easily accessible resource for volunteer resource managers.

Suggested Web Site Best Practices and Number of Volunteers

Prior work by Goh, Allen, Rogelberg and Currie uncovered a set of 14 best practices proposed in the academic and trade literatures (Table 1). These practices focus on both ease of access and the importance of adequate information provided by the web site. According to Agarwal and Venkatesh (2007), the accessibility of a web site helps improve the extent to which the web site can be used effectively, efficiently, and to the user's satisfaction. Furthermore, Sargeant, West, and Jay (2007) found that accessibility of nonprofit web sites was related to online donations and number of new donors. In addition, research concerning for-profit organizations' use of web sites attests to the importance of information to web site visitors. For example, Allen, Mahto, and Otondo (2007) suggested that job and organization information lead to intentions to pursue employment. These same factors are likely to impact whether or not an individual will pursue volunteer activities with the organization.

Organization Size and Total Revenue

Even though the volunteer program web site may be an important tool for recruiting volunteers, other resources will likely impact the organization's ability to attract more volunteers. For example, previous research suggests that larger organizations tend to have more resources that allow them to attract more applicants for positions, volunteer or paid (Mabey & Ramirez, 2005). Larger organizations have more employees to handle everyday operations and typically have more money to purchase equipment, supplies, and other perks for employees and volunteers. Thus, larger organizations that have more monetary resources are likely to attract more volunteers.

However, web sites are a relatively low-cost resource that volunteer resource managers may use. Being a large organization or having additional monetary resources does not necessarily equate to effective web site use nor does having less resources mean that an organization cannot launch a web site. With all the many free or inexpensive online services (e.g., blogs, wikis, and inexpensive website domains), even volunteer managers in small organizations working with minimal budgets can still incorporate the proposed practices. Thus, we believe that use of these practices will relate to number of volunteers above and beyond traditional resources (i.e., organization size and total revenue).

Methods and Analysis

The current study focused on a specific type of volunteer-based non-profit organization: animal welfare organizations (e.g., shelters). While the authors recognize that this sector may not be representative of all volunteer-based non-profit organizations, it is still a meaningfully large type of non-profit organization that actively utilizes a volunteer workforce to supplement operations (McFarland, 2005). With help from leaders within the Humane Society of the United States, the authors developed a convenience sample of 94 animal shelters for use in this research. For the purposes of this study, the analysis investigated all available web sites for these animal shelters that resulted in a final sample of 93 shelters (i.e., one organization did not have a web site) all located in North America.

The authors analyzed the organizational web sites focusing on the volunteer program aspect of each site. Two research assistants were trained and assigned to analyze each web site for the practices previously listed. The use of each of these practices was scored on a dichotomous scale where 0 indicated "not in use" and 1 indicated "in use". As a check of the ratings, the authors calculated percent agreement statistics to verify adequate levels of rater agreement (Table 1).

Additional information about the shelters was ascertained through the use of CharityNavigator.com, a web site that tracks nonprofit organization demographics and financial data. From this web site, the authors collected values for organization size (i.e., number of employees) and monetary resources (i.e., total revenue). The web site reports on publicly available records for non-profit organizations (i.e., United States official tax records).

To estimate the extent of use of best practices in the sample, the authors utilized simple percentages for ease of interpretation. They then tested the relationship between web site management practices used and number of volunteers using correlational and hierarchical regression analyses. For both analyses (regression and correlation), they computed an additional variable that reflected the number of best practices that each organization used (i.e., total number of best practices used by each organization). In the first step, they entered the resource-based control variables believed to have some effect on the number of volunteers (i.e., organizational size, total revenue, and population of surrounding area). In the second step, they entered the variable reflecting the number of practices used. This allowed the authors to estimate the incremental variance accounted for by number of practices used, beyond the variance accounted for by the control variables.

Table 1
Agreement Indices for Each of the 14 Web Site Best Practices

Best Practice	% Agreement
1. Organization's web site includes the organization's mission statement	80
2. Front page of organization's web site includes a link to volunteer program web page	100
3. Web site provides a description of the volunteer program	100
4. Volunteer program web page includes the volunteer program mission statement	80
5. Requirements for volunteering listed on web site	100
6. Web site indicates minimum number of hours of volunteer service required	80
7. Web site lists different types of volunteer positions available	100
8. Web site provides "job descriptions" for volunteer positions	100
9. Web site outlines the specific steps required to volunteer	100
10. Web site states that volunteer orientation is available	100
11. Visitors to web site are able to apply for volunteer positions online or download volunteer application form to be printed and mailed in	100
12. Visitors to web site are able to register for more information	80
13. Contact information for the volunteer coordinator is provided on the web site	80
14. Web site indicates that volunteers will be trained beyond orientation	100
Mean	91.43

Results and Discussion

Table 2 contains descriptive statistics and intercorrelations of the key variables. The organizations studied had an average of 226 volunteers ($\sigma = 219$). The average organization in the sample had 28 employees ($\sigma = 31$), was located in an area with a population of roughly 700,000 people ($\sigma = 3,051,747$), and had annual revenues of about $1.7 million ($\sigma = \$2,647,074$). The mean number of web practices used was 8.7 (out of a possible 14). While this is more than half the practices, this suggests that a number of shelters still have room for improvement. Indeed, the high standard deviation of practices ($\sigma = 3.8$) suggests that even within the sample, there was much variation. To put this in more concrete terms, 21 (roughly 23%) of the web sites used six or fewer of the recommended practices.

Use of Best Practices

Table 3 provides a full list of recommended practices, as well as the percentages of web sites examined that utilized each practice. Ten of the 14 best practices were used by more than half the web sites in the sample. However, only three of the 14 practices were used by more than 75% of the sample.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations of Key Variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Total Number of Practices Used	8.65	3.82				
2. Total Number of Volunteers	226.47	218.53	.501*			
3. Organizational Size	28.41	31.46	.414*	.632*		
4. Population of Surrounding Area	701,712.25	3,051,746.67	-.142	-.091	.381*	
5. Revenue ($)	1,664,233.10	2,647,074.27	.413*	.597*	.937*	-.036

Note. N = 93. * p<.05.

Table 3
Prevalence of Web Site Best Practices for 94 Animals Shelters Volunteer Programs

Best Practice	% of Web Sites Using Practice
1. Organization's web site includes the organization's mission statement	77
2. Front page of organization's web site includes a link to volunteer program web page	83
3. Web site provides a description of the volunteer program	65
4. Volunteer program web page includes the volunteer program mission statement	31
5. Requirements for volunteering listed on web site	66
6. Web site indicates minimum number of hours of volunteer service required	48
7. Web site lists different types of volunteer positions available	76
8. Web site provides "job descriptions" for volunteer positions	49
9. Web site outlines the specific steps required to volunteer	66
10. Web site states that volunteer orientation is available	66
a. If volunteer orientation is available, web site provides information for future volunteer orientation sessions (N =62)	30
11. Visitors to web site are able to apply for volunteer positions online or download volunteer application form to be printed and mailed in	53
12. Visitors to web site are able to register for more information	44
13. Contact information for the volunteer coordinator is provided on the web site	68
14. Web site indicates that volunteers will be trained beyond orientation	53

Note. N = 93 unless otherwise noted.

Web Site Access and Links

While 77% of the organizations' web sites included an *organizational* mission statement, a much smaller percentage (31%) provided a *volunteer program* mission statement. The fact that most of the volunteer program web pages did not have a mission statement posted may deter potential volunteers and/or donors, since mission statements can give visitors a good first impression of both the volunteer program and, more broadly, the organization. Mission statements convey information about an organization or a volunteer program that can help potential volunteers determine their potential individual-organization fit. The mission statement may actually attract volunteers and donors to the organization by providing a desirable vision for the future that these important stakeholders find intriguing and rewarding (Herman & Renz, 1998).

In terms of access, 83% of the web sites' front pages had a direct link to the volunteer program web pages, and 65% of the web sites provided at least a cursory description of the volunteer program itself. Visitors to an organizations web site may perceive a lack of importance of the volunteer program to the organization in the absence of an easily accessible volunteer program web page. Volunteer resource managers need to gauge the importance of the volunteer program for the organization's continued viability. If the organization cannot function without volunteers, then the managers need to reduce the number of client-oriented links and increase the accessibility of the website for potential volunteers.

Information on Volunteering

Slightly less than half the web sites provided the minimum required volunteer hours and volunteer "job descriptions" (48% and 49%, respectively). On the other hand, two thirds or more of the web sites provided lists of the volunteer positions available, the specific steps necessary to becoming a volunteer, and information on whether volunteer orientation was provided (76%, 66%, and 66%, respectively). These proportions are slightly disturbing. For most of the organizations' web sites in the sample, information is provided for visitors up to the point of acceptance into the volunteer program, but few provide information that allows visitors to make an informed decision on whether or not the position they are applying for is right for their particular situation. Volunteers come from all walks of life and types of backgrounds, and many different levels of availability. Some may treat volunteering as a full-time job while others view it as a nice distraction from other endeavors. Volunteer resource managers need to communicate the variability in the opportunities provided so that all individuals who could potentially volunteer have that option.

Surprisingly, just over half the web sites (53%) provided means for visitors to apply for volunteer positions while only 30% provided information on the next volunteer orientation session. Some organizations have pre-orientation (and pre-applying) volunteer screening, making this finding less problematic in terms of general volunteer recruitment strategies. A little more than half of the web sites (53%) mentioned that volunteers would undergo training after orientation. Again, the usefulness of these options stems from the importance of providing volunteers with a realistic view of what volunteer work is like in the organization. Volunteer resource managers will spend less time informing individuals of the opportunities and more time training volunteers when volunteers come to the organization aware of the available positions.

Additional Information

In general, the volunteer program web sites did not provide options for potential volunteers to receive additional information on volunteering. Only 44% of web sites provided a method for visitors to register for additional information about volunteering. In some cases, visitors were able to e-mail volunteer resource managers for more information (68% of web sites listed volunteer resource manager contact information). Volunteer resource managers need to provide easy ways to contact the organization and the volunteer resource manager so that questions do not go unanswered. Individuals may have specific questions about volunteering or may want to donate to the organization in other ways. Every person who visits the web site is a potential donor or volunteer; answering their questions may actually provide direct benefit to the organization's continued viability and success.

Volunteer Web Sites and Total Number of Volunteers

To begin to test the relationship between volunteer web site management practices and total number of volunteers, the authors correlated each individual practice with the number of volunteers at the specific organization. The initial correlational analyses of individual web site practices and number of volunteers yielded non-significant results ($p > .05$) after controlling for organization size and revenue. This suggests that individual practices do not matter alone in this particular convenience sample, or may simply be a statistical artifact of the small sample size. Therefore, to more fully test the possibility of the hypothesized relationship, the authors tested the cumulative effect of incorporating web site practices and a different pattern of results emerged.

To further test the importance of incorporating these web site practices, the authors correlated the number of practices with the number of volunteers and subsequently illustrated that this relationship was not simply a proxy for other organizational resources using regression analysis. Number of practices was significantly positively related to number of volunteers ($r = .501$; $p < .05$). However, organization size and total revenue were also significantly positively related to number of volunteers ($r = .41, .41$; $p < .05$, respectively). These correlations suggest that animal welfare organizations that use more best practices also have more volunteers. However, they also suggest that larger and wealthier organizations tend to have more volunteers as well, suggesting that larger organizations may invest more time and resources in their web sites.

The results of the hierarchical regression analysis are presented in Table 4. While no control variable was significant at the .05 level, the variance accounted for in the first step was substantial ($R^2 = .379$). This suggests that 38% of the variation in number of volunteers was already captured by the control variables entered together. In the final step of the regression analysis, the authors entered the number of practices used by organizations. As is apparent in Table 4, this variable is a significant predictor ($\beta = 22.93$, p<.05) and accounted for an additional 10% of the variance in number of volunteers. This suggests that even after controlling for organizational size, revenue, and population of the surrounding area, the number of practices used still has a significant relationship to the number of volunteers in the organizations studied.

Table 4
Hierarchical Regression Analysis on Number of Volunteers

Model	B	S.E.	β	R^2	ΔR^2
Step 1				.379*	.379*
(Intercept)	130.116	56.311			
Organizational Size	.000	.000	.103		
Population	.000	.000	-.176		
Revenue	4.814	3.645	.743*		
Step 2				.473*	.097*
(Intercept)	-42.805	92.436			
Organizational Size	.000	.000	.155		
Population	.000	.000	-.098		
Revenue	3.136	3.493	.484*		
Total Practices Used	22.923*	10.063	.353*		

Note. N = 93. B = unstandardized coefficients; S.E. = standard error; β = standardized coefficients; R^2 = variance accounted for; ΔR^2 = change in variance accounted for. * $p<.05$.

In terms of implications for volunteer resource managers, several key issues are raised. This particular set of best practices seems to be related to the number of volunteers, even after controlling for other relevant organizational resource characteristics. The low average number of best practices used suggests that there are still many volunteer programs who can take advantage of these practices. In addition, most of the practices tested here have little additional cost tied to them, assuming the volunteer program is currently managing its own web site. Since web site construction and maintenance are relatively inexpensive, any non-profit organization that is struggling to attract volunteers may benefit from engaging in more of these practices.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Overall, the authors found substantial variability between recommended web site best practices in terms of their rates of use. Despite the low base rates of usage, the authors are encouraged by the fact that each of the best practices was used by at least 30% of the organizations studied. Through the course of this research, the authors noted that while there were some volunteer program web sites that did not use any of these best practices, the majority (roughly 53%) of the shelters used nine or more of the best practices. Thus, web site improvement could not only benefit the volunteer program in terms of sheer numbers of volunteers, but research also indicates that nonprofit organizations that provided mission statements, organizational goals, and reports on a web site are able to raise more donations than those that used a sales approach (Waters, 2007).

As with any scientific endeavor, this study was not without its limitations. These findings may only be inferred to those organizations studied as part of the convenience sample used. Due to the nascent field, the authors were unable to find a solid foundation of work on web-based recruitment within the volunteer resource management literature. Although research in for-profit organizations helped inform our theoretical understanding, there are distinct differences between non-profit and for-profit

management. In addition, the design for our study was descriptive-correlational, which constrains the authors from making causal claims. Future research can look to expand the variety of organizational outcomes that are affected by web-based recruitment (e.g., organizational financial data, volunteer retention, etc.). With the multiple opportunities for future research, this study provides the necessary first step in understanding how volunteer programs manage their web presence and gives early indications of areas for improvement.

The authors recommend further investigation into the use of all the best practices investigated in this study, with customization specific to volunteer programs. Understandably, organizations may feel that the time and expense of setting up and maintaining a web site are not cost effective. The diversity of literature reviewed here as well as the important finding of the relationship between the use of such practices and overall number of volunteers provides preliminary evidence that these best practices may be helpful to non-profit organizations. The next step in the scientific cycle is for independent replication of these results in a different sample. As we have mentioned previously, our sample was a rather small purposeful convenience sample. A larger random sample would provide a more rigorous test of these best practices and provide an indication as to whether individual practices have more predictive power than others on the variables tested and other important volunteer program outcome variables.

Additionally, future researchers could attempt to understand how to better design volunteer program web sites by linking the practices listed here in a quasi-experimental study of volunteer recruitment patterns. For example, using archival data of recruitment in non-profit organizations before and after implementing these practices could begin to explore possible causal relationships between these web site practices and overall success in recruiting and retaining volunteers. Also, future research could look at information about the number of visitors to the web site and the number of volunteers who learned about the program through the web site. This simple analysis could show a more direct link between web site design and attracting individuals to the volunteer program.

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