

**Focusing on the Health Benefits of Volunteering  
as a Recruitment Strategy**

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**Abstract**

*There has been an upward trend in volunteering since 1998, with the most significant increase after the tragedies of September 11, 2001. Identifying and understanding the potential volunteer market and the motivational strategies needed to attract those volunteers will be key issues for the future of volunteerism. Fortunately, there is more evidence today than ever before that helping others has real health benefits. This paper will share the findings of a number of studies as well as insight into the generation most likely to be interested and influenced by this information.*

**Key Words:**

volunteerism, seniors, health benefits, recruitment, motivation, baby boomers

The days of the long-term volunteer are gone. Today's volunteers are more reluctant to commit to a scheduled, weekly block of time. They are looking for flexibility, special projects of limited duration, and short-term commitments. Administrators of volunteer programs will be challenged to look at current recruitment methods and think outside the box. Organizations may need to offer options for flexible shifts, possibilities for both short- and long-term time commitments, and opportunities for family and couple volunteering. According to Merrill (2006), "Understanding and recognizing the wide variations of available time require structuring work to maximize opportunities for broad participation without placing undue burdens or expectations on individuals." This strategy, however, may be only one of the keys for successful recruitment.

Another key to successful recruitment is to attract the baby boomer generation. According to a research initiative

commissioned by *AARP* (2004), baby boomers, those born between 1946 and 1964, comprise 77.5 million people—the largest generation in United States history. Europe's boomer population consists of nearly 160 million people ("The strongest market in Europe is growing," para. 1).

As the baby boomer generation begins to retire, it will make up a large resource base that could provide ample volunteers for many years to come. In order to effectively recruit the baby boomers, volunteer administrators must adapt to our changing culture and find creative ways to communicate the benefits of volunteerism. The results of a United States survey just released by *SecureHorizon* show that seniors' most important concerns include maintaining their health and mobility (62%) and maintaining an active lifestyle (55%) ("US: Health and well-being tops seniors' biggest concerns over finances," 2006). From a recruitment perspective, using data from studies that validate the health benefits

of volunteering may be the single most important key to recruitment success.

In researching the correlation between volunteering and good health, it was surprising to find a number of studies and research projects on this topic over the past decade, not only in the United States but in a number of countries around the world.

According to Michael Callow, Assistant Professor of Marketing at Morgan State University, Maryland, "when developing a recruitment campaign, nonprofits can highlight the various appeal of volunteering by examining both the motives for, and the benefits of, volunteering" (Callow, 2004, p.263). Callow explains that an individual may choose to volunteer for altruistic reasons, but find further satisfaction in the experience because it meets social needs as well. From a recruitment perspective, using data from studies that validate the health benefits of volunteering may indeed spark interest in this soon-retiring group of adults.

In Canada, an Ontario study of volunteering linked to health benefits found that volunteering not only improves self-esteem, but helps to reduce social isolation, lower blood pressure, and enhance the immune system. Furthermore, a study on volunteerism and mortality revealed that older adults who volunteer actually experience a lower mortality rate (Jenkins, 2005).

A study performed at the University of Michigan Research Center supports this finding. The study tracked volunteers who had histories of heart conditions and found they experienced a reduction in chest pain and lower cholesterol levels. Furthermore, men who volunteered at least once a week lived longer than men who did not volunteer. The study concluded that volunteering is a positive way of connecting with others, regardless of race or income. Results demonstrated that those participants

with many social contacts tend to live longer than those who are isolated. In essence, people need people. ("Volunteering is good for your health," para. 1).

According to Yaffee (2005), Canadians who volunteer are reaping health benefits such as reduced anxiety and depression. Yaffee goes on to comment that other potential benefits for seniors include: enhanced images of older adults in society, improved personal self-regard, increased mental functioning, and reduced self-concern. Yaffee observes that "society benefits and the person volunteering may personally benefit. What a perfect prescription for health promotion and maintenance" (p.1).

The Nottingham Council for Voluntary Services newsletter shared that medical and scientific research in the UK supports the health benefits of volunteering: a sense of well-being, a decrease in insomnia, a stronger immune system, and a speedier recovery from surgery ("Improve your well-being," 2005, para. 1).

In the *Healing Power of Doing Good*, Luks and Payne (1992) share a number of benefits that volunteers experienced as a result of volunteering: a more optimistic outlook, increased energy, better perceived health, less depression, less pain, more ease in relaxing and sleeping, an improved immune system, better weight control, a healthier cardiovascular system, and a speedier recovery time from surgery.

The web site for The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2006) recently published a study on the importance of physical activity, stating that volunteer programs play an important role in promoting physical activity and that those benefits can help to control weight and high blood pressure ("Physical activity resources," para. 1).

Musick and Wilson (1999) utilized data from three waves (1986, 1989 & 1994) from the Americans' Changing Lives data set and revealed that volunteering did lower depression levels for those over age 65. Like other studies noted above, their findings revealed that individuals who volunteer have a lower mortality rate than nonvolunteers. Musick and Wilson (2003, abstract section, para. 1) noted, "There are a number of reasons why volunteering might yield mental health benefits, especially to older people. Volunteer work improves access to social and psychological resources, which is known to counter negative moods such as depression and anxiety."

Van Willigen (2000) conducted a study assessing the long-term impact of volunteering on the life satisfaction and perceived health of persons aged 60 and older. He found that older volunteers experienced greater increases in life satisfaction over time as a result of volunteer hours than did younger adult volunteers. The study also concluded that older volunteers experienced greater positive change in their perceived health than did the younger volunteers.

OASIS, a nonprofit agency in the United States dedicated to promoting volunteerism among the elderly, commissioned Nancy Morrow-Howell (1999) to discover what kinds of benefits volunteers receive from their volunteer activities. She found that 80% of those she spoke to reported an increase in well being attributed to volunteering, a larger circle of friends as a result of volunteer activities, and a perception that their lives were more productive.

In Scotland, a two-year project is currently under way to improve mental health and well being. The study has identified these benefits to volunteerism: escaping from dependency, enhancing strong links within the community, getting people involved, and helping individuals to

understand the importance of healthy lifestyles. ("Volunteering in health is good for volunteers," n.d.).

Haddon (2001) shares a study published in the British Medical Journal in which doctors followed 2,761 people over the age of 65 for 13 years. The study compared individuals that were active in volunteer work to those who did not volunteer but who exercised regularly. The researchers stated the results were impressive, and noted that participants who had forged active lifestyles through volunteerism were just as physically healthy as the participants who exercised faithfully.

At the Canadian Forum on Volunteering in Montreal, Chappell (1999) presented information concerning 37 independent studies, 34 of which were conducted in the United States and three in Canada. Chappell stated, "These studies demonstrate that 70 percent of older volunteers claim to enjoy greater quality of life than the average nonvolunteer; those involved in direct helping seem to derive greater rewards from volunteering than elders engaged in more indirect or less formal helping roles" (p.12).

In summation of the thirteen studies mentioned, seven studies identified an overall reduction in anxiety and depression, six studies noted improved self-esteem, five studies identified lower mortality rates, three studies identified improved immune systems, and two studies recognized better weight control, reduced blood pressure, and a speedier recovery time from surgery. Only one study identified increased mental functions as a health benefit of volunteering.

Although research has been conducted over the last 15 years on the health benefits of volunteering, there is no information to indicate that any focus has been placed on using this information in recruitment efforts. With the baby boomer generation on the cusp of retirement, this is the time to seize the

moment and put the results of these studies to work for the future of volunteerism. The engagement of the boomer will bring a level of unprecedented skills, energy, and experience to volunteerism that we have not seen in the past.

In order to effectively use this strategy, a marketing campaign to attract volunteers interested in health benefits would be developed. A starting point would be to redesign your volunteer web page. Ask an intriguing question on the page; *Do you have high blood pressure?* Find out how volunteering can help. Promise a benefit; *feeling blue, not quite yourself?* Click here to find out how volunteering can help change your outlook on life. Develop branding; *Volunteering is good for your health* and use it on all of your printed materials; brochures, advertising, stationary, and business cards. Develop brochures specifically for recruitment focusing on the health benefits and provide to physician

offices, senior service agencies, and retirement communities. On your voice mail, end your message with a statistic about health benefits of volunteering. Offer to be a guest on your local radio or television station to share information on the health benefits associated with volunteering. Put your name on the speakers bureau to speak on this topic and take a volunteer with you that could conclude your talk with a few comments about how volunteering has personally enhanced their health. Contact your local newspapers and offer to write an article on volunteering and health benefits. If they are not interested, offer to write an article on baby boomers and add the health benefits as part of the baby boomer approach. Finally, engage your volunteers in activities in the healthcare community, be visible. And always have an ample supply of handouts that provide information on studies that validate the health benefits of volunteering.

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**About the Author**

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