

**Measuring the Volunteer - Nonprofit Organization Relationship:  
An Application of Public Relations Theory**

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**Abstract**

*Because nonprofit managers often face challenges in deciding how to best incorporate volunteers in working toward the organization's mission, it is important to understand how volunteers view their involvement with organizations. This study provides nonprofit managers with a short survey instrument they can use to help understand the nonprofit-volunteer relationship with volunteers by focusing on four dimensions: trust, satisfaction, commitment, and power balance. These four relationship outcomes are derived from public relations scholarship on the organization-public relationship. This study found that although volunteers all evaluated the relationships with organizations positively, there were significant differences when looking at the amount of time volunteers gave to organizations. This study also offers suggestions on how relationships can be improved with volunteers based on their evaluation of the relationship.*

**Keywords:**

volunteer management, relationship, evaluation, public relations

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2005), more than 65 million Americans volunteer their time at nonprofit organizations annually. According to Allen (2006), organizations have an endless supply of volunteers when they are able to identify and motivate them to give their time and energy for worthwhile causes. Once recruited, the organization must focus on

managing volunteers in a manner that meets the needs of both groups—the volunteers and the organization. Volunteer coordinators have to do a significant amount of work to retain volunteers.

Researchers studying the nonprofit sector have made significant progress in identifying strategies that organizations can implement to increase volunteer retention.

Hager and Brudney (2004) found the three strategies most often used by organizations were regular supervision and communication, screening procedures such as an interview, and annual recognition activities. Having written policies and job descriptions for volunteers and offering volunteers professional development opportunities can also improve volunteer retention efforts (Brudney, 2005).

Although these studies have been helpful in providing useful information to organizations on how they could improve their volunteer management programs, the strategies rarely involved seeking information from volunteers to help shape their experience. The purpose of this study is to apply relationship management theory to the nonprofit-volunteer relationship. This research focuses on the measurement of this relationship and provides a reliable and valid instrument that can be used to help organizations improve their volunteer management programs.

### **Literature Review**

Defined as the management of relationships between an organization and its stakeholders, public relations provides an ideal setting to study the dynamics of volunteering. Within the last 10 years, significant advances have been made in the measurement of organization-public relationships (OPR). Drawing from interpersonal communication literature, Hon and Grunig (1999) developed an instrument to measure the OPR that focuses on four dimensions of relationship quality: trust, commitment, satisfaction, and control mutuality.

#### *Trust*

Quite simply, trust refers to one party's confidence that it can be open and honest with another. Ledingham and Bruning (1998) operationalized trust as "doing what

an organization says it will do" (p. 98). The trust scale measures three dimensions of trust, including integrity, which centers on the belief that both parties involved in the relationship are fair and just; dependability, which is primarily concerned with whether the parties involved in the relationship follow through with what they say they will do; and competence, which focuses on whether the parties have the abilities to do what they say they will do.

For volunteers, feeling that an organization is trustworthy is critical when deciding to continue to help advance the organization's mission. Nonprofit organizations that actively listen to volunteers' suggestions and demonstrate social accountability have a greater likelihood of seeing volunteers stay with an organization for an extended period of time because they not only understand the nonprofit but also feel it is capable of accomplishing its mission.

#### *Commitment*

Bruning and Galloway (2003) report that commitment—the level of dedication to an organization—is a key component of OPR because it is fundamental to the public's attitude of the organization. Hon and Grunig (1999) defined commitment as "the extent to which one party believes and feels that the relationship is worth spending energy to maintain and promote" (p. 20). This scale contains measures of both attitude and behavioral intention, and unlike the other relationship outcome measures, it is the only one that hints toward future behavior.

Though nonprofits understand that volunteers have very diverse motivations for giving time to nonprofits, many become involved with organizations because of their own personal interests in seeing a problem addressed or resolved. These active publics have a deep commitment to mission of the

organization, and nonprofit organizations can benefit by tapping into this personal dimension.

### *Satisfaction*

Originally proposed by Ferguson (1984), the dimension of satisfaction serves to measure whether the parties involved have positive feelings about one another. Hon and Grunig (1999) note that “a satisfying relationship is one in which the benefits outweigh the costs” (p. 3). Previous research from relationship marketing suggests that when parties are satisfied with the nature of the relationship, they are more likely to be committed to maintaining it (Dwyer & Oh, 1987). Therefore, organizations that invest into developing satisfying relationships with targeted stakeholders are likely to produce beneficial results for the organization in the long term, such as the continued volunteer efforts over time.

Ledingham and Bruning (2000) argue that satisfaction is a dimension of the organization-public relationship that can be increased if the organization invests the time and resources. By dedicating resources to the job descriptions, interviews, and personalized reviews, volunteer coordinators can generate a sense of satisfaction within the organization’s volunteers that they are involved with a professionally-managed organization and with a rewarding experience.

### *Power Balance*

The final dimension of relationship quality involves the balance of power. Termed “control mutuality” by Hon and Grunig, this component seeks to evaluate which party has more power over the other. Power exists in any relationship, and its distribution has a tremendous impact on the perceptions and actualities of the organization-public relationship.

Power is often misunderstood in the nonprofit organization-volunteer relationship. Many assume that because volunteers are willing to work for organizations without pay that they retain the power because they can walk away from the relationship. However, organizations also have a significant amount of power. Many volunteers want to assist in resolving community issues that interest them, and they need the organizations to help fulfill that desire. Additionally, organizations often offer professional development training and opportunities for volunteers to enhance their resumes. For a healthy relationship with its volunteers, an organization needs to balance the levels of power with them. The organization may need to be assertive and fire a volunteer, but it may also need to be willing to compromise with its volunteer base to see a project succeed.

Given this study’s aim to determine how well these dimensions measure the nonprofit-volunteer relationship, the following research question was created:

*RQ1: To what extent do volunteers give nonprofit organizations favorable evaluations of the four relationship dimensions?*

Several studies have found that women are more likely to evaluate themselves as being more altruistic than men in terms of volunteering for the community (Wilson & Musick, 1997; Mills, Pederson, & Grusec, 1989; Greeno & Maccoby, 1993; Mesch, Rooney, Chin, & Steinberg, 2002). Some have found that men volunteer more than women (Hayghe, 1991; Gallagher, 1994) while others maintain that there is no difference between a person’s gender and their connection to volunteering (Smith, 1994; Sundeen, 1990). Though men and women both report that they enjoy

volunteering and find it personally rewarding, the lack of a consensus on gender's connection to volunteering leads to the second research question:

*RQ2: Does gender influence how men and women evaluate their involvement in the nonprofit organization-volunteer relationship?*

Finally, because public relations literature suggests that individuals will evaluate their relationships differently based on levels of involvement with that organization, a third research question was created to determine if the dimensions of the OPR could be used to predict which volunteers are more involved with the organization:

*RQ3: Can an individual's work with a nonprofit organization (as determined by the number of hours volunteered) be predicted by his or her evaluation of the relationship using the four dimensions?*

### **Methodology**

This project used intercept surveys that were administered to participants in volunteer fairs at two large Florida cities by students enrolled in a nonprofit management course. Students were given extra credit for recruiting adults to complete the survey. Of the 300 adults asked to complete the surveys, 144 completed usable surveys, resulting in a survey completion rate of 48%.

The survey designed for this study was based on Hon and Grunig's (1999) four outcome scales. These questions were used to evaluate the relationship volunteers had with an organization where they had volunteered with in the previous calendar year. Participants also provided information about their demographics, including gender, age, race, and number of

volunteer hours worked at the organization per month. The volunteer hours were then classified into two groups (high and low involvement) based on calculating the cutoff points from the hours reported by the participants.

The relationship with the volunteer organization was tested using the above-mentioned scales, which were measured using a modified 9-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (9). The survey had four questions for power balance, five for commitment and satisfaction and six for trust, which are presented in Appendix A. These indices were found to be reliable with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from .80 to .86.

### **Results**

The participants in the study represented a wide variety of backgrounds. The respondent group was 57% female and 43% male. Most (70%) of respondents were Caucasian; 15% were African-American, 14% were Latino, and 1% were Asian. The mean age of the participants was 23 years old, ranging from a low of 18 years to a high of 85. Finally, the participants volunteered an average of 17.4 hours per month at nonprofit organizations (15.01 standard deviation).

The first research question asked how volunteers perceived their relationship with the organizations for which they volunteered. As shown in Table 1, the data indicate that the volunteer tend to perceive the relationship positively on all four relationship dimensions.

The second research question asked whether men and women would evaluate the volunteer-nonprofit organization differently since previous studies have provided contradictory results in terms of the effect gender has on an individual's motivation to volunteer and the evaluation of volunteering.

Table 1. *Volunteers' Evaluation of their Relationship with Nonprofits based on Gender.*

	Overall			Males		Females	
	Mean	SD	Cronbach's $\alpha$	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Trust	7.16	1.20	.80	7.19	1.09	7.14	1.29
Commitment	7.03	1.46	.83	7.07	1.21	7.00	1.62
Satisfaction	7.35	1.25	.86	7.40	0.91	7.30	1.46
Power Balance	7.06	1.38	.84	7.49	0.93	6.75	1.57

Table 2. *One-Way ANOVA on Evaluation of the Volunteers' Relationship with the Nonprofit Organization.*

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F-score	p-value
Trust	.09	1,142	.09	.07	.79
Commitment	.16	1,142	.16	.07	.78
Satisfaction	.37	1,142	.37	.23	.63
Power Balance	19.51	1,142	19.51	11.03	.001

Analysis reveals that there was no significant difference in how the genders evaluated the relationship for three of the four relationship outcome variables. However, as shown in Table 2, there was a difference in how the genders perceived the balance of power with the organizations. Men were more likely than women to feel that power was balanced between the volunteers and the organizations.

The third research question explored whether a volunteer's evaluation of the nonprofit-volunteer relationship could be used to predict a volunteer's level of involvement with the organization as determined by the number of hours volunteered per month. To examine the predictive nature of the dimensions, discriminant analysis was used to compare the four OPR index scores (trust, commitment, satisfaction, and power balance) with the classification level of volunteer hours (high or low). Table 3

presents the results of the discriminant analysis.

As Table 3 shows, the most important variables that led to group prediction when considered individually were trust and commitment even though all were statistically significant. These two variables have the lowest Wilks'  $\lambda$  values, meaning that 61% and 66% of the variance in these variables is not explained by the group differences, respectively. The group differences explained even less variance for the remaining variables. Because the function was statistically significant, the model can be tested to see if it can properly predict group membership.

Table 4 shows that a volunteers' evaluation of the trust and commitment dimensions can accurately predict an individual's inclination to volunteer. Of the 69 individuals giving the most time to nonprofit organizations, 59 of the cases were successfully predicted to have worked more

Table 3. *Discriminant Analysis of Overall Relationship with Nonprofit Organization.*

	b	B	Wilks' $\lambda$	F (1, 142)	Group 1 (n = 74)		Group 2 (n = 70)	
					Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.
Constant	-7.11							
Trust	.89	-.08	.61	90.94*	6.43	1.06	7.93	0.79
Satisfaction	-.26	.36	.77	42.97*	6.76	1.33	7.96	0.78
Commitment	.44	.81	.66	73.38*	6.21	1.42	7.90	0.88
Power Balance	-.07	-.02	.79	36.69*	6.46	1.44	7.70	0.96

R = .65, Wilks'  $\lambda$  of function = .58,  $\chi^2 = 76.08$ , df = 4, p < .001, centroids = (-.82, .87)

\*p < .001

Table 4. *Classification Matrix of Discriminant Analysis Function.*

Original	Predicted	
	Group 1 (High Volunteer Hours)	Group 2 (Low Volunteer Hours)
Group 1 (High Volunteer Hours)	59	15
Group 2 (Low Volunteer Hours)	10	60

$\chi^2 = 61.73$ , df = 1, p < .001

volunteer hours. The model also was able to predict most of those who did not volunteer a large number of hours to the organizations. Of the 75 cases predicted to have low volunteer hours, only 15 were predicted

### Discussion

This study found that volunteers evaluate their relationships with nonprofit organizations positively. That alone is not surprising given the numerous studies that have highlighted the public's willingness to become involved in causes or nonprofit organizations that address issues that are important to them (Lysakowski, 2003). However, exploring the results further provides insight into the nonprofit-volunteer relationship.

All of the relationship outcomes were statistically important in predicting which

incorrectly. Overall, the success rate of this model at predicting the group membership was 83% (119 of 144 cases correctly predicted).

volunteers were more likely to donate their time to help organizations carry out their programs and services. It is not surprisingly that people would be committed to an organization that they willingly expend their time and energy to help see community issues they care about resolved. Volunteer managers can work to build an individual's commitment to a program or cause by getting them excited about the vision and goals of an organization. By describing the value of a program and showing how they can make a difference, managers can build feelings of commitment within an

organization's volunteer base. However, commitment alone is not enough to keep volunteers returning to an organization.

Trust is an important component of the nonprofit-volunteer relationship for both parties. It is vital that organizations screen volunteers to ensure they are qualified and dedicated to carrying out the mission of the organization. However, as this study found, trust is one of the most significant variables in predicting which volunteers are likely to give more volunteer hours to an organization. To build trust, nonprofit management literature has shown that organizations need to recognize the uniqueness of their volunteers by allowing them to work on projects that use their particular skillsets.

As the Baby Boom generation retires, many are seeking volunteer opportunities to stay connected to their communities and social networks. Many of these individuals have years of work experience that could be used to help advance nonprofit organizations if they are utilized properly. By asking qualified volunteers to audit an organization's finance or develop a marketing plan, organizations can help build a relationship with those individuals that will produce significant returns in future investments of volunteer time.

Clary and Snyder (1999) found that young professionals often seek volunteer opportunities to broaden their professional portfolio while helping the community address important issues. One organization, the Taproot Foundation, is focusing on this aspect to help connect worthwhile nonprofits with experienced and qualified marketing, Internet technology, and human resources professionals who work on specific capacity-building projects that use their knowledge and skills.

To foster healthy relationship growth with its volunteers, organizations' leaders need to remember that volunteers do many

things in their daily lives, and their skills can be used to help organizations in ways that may not be recognized immediately. Staff time needs to be devoted to engage volunteers in conversations and actively listen to their comments. By responding to the volunteers' needs and identifying their key interests, managers can build trust in the nonprofit organization-volunteers relationship.

The volunteers in this study indicated that satisfaction also was important. By providing applications and interviewing potential volunteers, organizations can better understand an individual's motivation to work for an organization. Management can place that individual in volunteer situations where they are likely to have their motivations met. For example, college students and young professionals often use the volunteer experience to develop social networks upon moving to new cities (Grube & Piliavin, 2000). Organizations can increase levels of satisfaction by asking these volunteers to aid in planning and carrying out a special event will be far more meaningful to a volunteer wanting to build a social network than performing routine office work.

Finally, the balance of power was also found to be significant in predicting the amount of time a volunteer gives to an organization. However, unlike the other three relationship outcomes, men and women volunteers did not evaluate this construct similarly. Instead, males felt the balance of power between themselves and the organization was more evenly distributed than women. Although women did not view that the balance of power was completely one-sided, they did indicate that they did not feel as powerful in the relationship as men did based on the survey data.

This revelation poses an intriguing challenge for managers who work with a wide variety of volunteers. Volunteer

coordinators must work to make sure that volunteers do not feel that they are simply being used by the organization. By actively listening to volunteers' suggestions, demonstrating appreciation and showing recognition for the volunteers' efforts, and involving volunteers in meetings and the decision-making process can help lead to feelings of balanced power.

### **Conclusions**

This study sought to offer practitioners in volunteer coordination some insight into how they can improve relationships with those they manage. By providing nonprofit organizations with the Hon and Grunig (1999) scales for measuring the relationship they have with their volunteers, this study offers a measurement instrument that can measure the volunteers' evaluation of their involvement with an organization. This survey can be incorporated into the volunteer management program in an efficient and cost-effective manner. The results can then be used by each nonprofit to tailor their volunteer program to one that is most appropriate for the organization.

Nonprofit organizations need to know how volunteers view their relationship with the organization. In many cases, organizations cannot meet their programmatic goals without the contributions from volunteers. Having individuals evaluate their nonprofit-volunteer relationship provides management with valuable insight into how to best prepare for the organization's future. Positive evaluations not only help identify individuals that are more likely to donate more time to an organization, but the survey also helps identify areas where managers can improve their interactions with volunteers. For example, managers may need to be more inclusive when it comes to program goals and decision making for

volunteers who score the relationship lower on the trust items.

Although this study found that volunteers had a positive views of the nonprofit-volunteer relationship, managers who receive negative evaluations from this survey also gain insight into how they can improve their organizations. Negative evaluations may indicate that the organization needs to conduct a strategic planning process that includes volunteer representatives so they feel they are involved in helping improve the existing services and programs. Management can also encourage volunteers to share their concerns and make suggestions on how the organization can improve its efficiency and program delivery.

The relationship evaluation items provided by this study allow nonprofit managers insights into how they can evaluate their relationship with volunteers. The participants in this study represented a cross-section of two different communities, and they volunteered at a variety of nonprofit organizations. The data demonstrated that the four relationship dimensions—trust, commitment, satisfaction, and power balance—can be used to predict which volunteers are more likely to donate more time to work for an organization. By reviewing volunteers' evaluation of the relationship, the items also help indicate how managers can improve their relationships with volunteers. Although this study found support for the measurement of the nonprofit-volunteer relationship by focusing on residents of different communities, it did not specifically look at one particular organization. An in-depth analysis of one organization would provide additional insight into how organizations can develop relationships with their volunteers. Then, scholars would be in a position to offer volunteer management programs not only the tool for measuring



their relationship with volunteers but also strategies for improving that relationship.

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**Appendix A**

Dimensions	Question Items
Trust	<p>The organization respects its volunteers.</p> <p>The organization can be relied on to keep its promises.</p> <p>When the organization makes important decisions, it is concerned about its volunteers.</p> <p>I believe the organization takes the opinions of volunteers into account when making decisions.</p> <p>I feel very confident about the organization's ability to accomplish its mission.</p> <p>The organization does not have the ability to meet its goals and objectives. (Reverse coded)</p>
Satisfaction	<p>Volunteers are happy with the organization.</p> <p>Both the organization and its volunteers benefit from the relationship.</p> <p>Most volunteers are happy with their interactions with the organization.</p> <p>Generally speaking, I am pleased with the relationship the organization has established with me.</p> <p>The organization fails to satisfy the needs of its volunteers. (Reverse coded)</p> <p>Most volunteers enjoy dealing with this organization.</p>
Commitment	<p>I feel that the organization is trying to maintain a long-term commitment with its volunteers.</p> <p>I cannot see that the organization wants to maintain a relationship with its volunteers. (Reverse coded)</p> <p>There is a long-lasting bond between the organization and its volunteers.</p> <p>Compared to other nonprofit organizations, I value my relationship with this organization more.</p> <p>I would rather have a relationship with this organization than not.</p>
Power Balance	<p>The organization and volunteers are attentive to each other's needs.</p> <p>The organization does not believe the opinions and concerns of its volunteers are important. (Reverse coded)</p> <p>I believe volunteers have influence on the decision-makers of the organization.</p> <p>The organization really listens to what its volunteers have to say.</p> <p>When volunteers interact with this organization, they have a sense of control over the situation.</p> <p>This organization really listens to what its volunteers have to say.</p>