

Effectively Recruiting and Retaining Service Volunteers in the IndyCar Series Racing

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Abstract

This action research project was undertaken to uncover the demographic and psychographic profiles, as well as satisfaction levels of the volunteers involved in a IndyCar auto race with a view enhancing the volunteer recruitment, deployment, and retention practices. The event requires more than 1800 volunteers on an annual basis. Volunteers were found to be well educated, between the ages of 35 and 45, experienced in other volunteer and professional areas, relatively affluent, and satisfied with their volunteer experience. Volunteers recruited by other volunteers tended to be the most satisfied with their experience compared to those who responded to general print or electronic advertisements. Recommendations are provided to help volunteer resource managers of large-scale sporting events deploy more effective recruitment and deployment practices.

Key Words:

volunteers, recruitment, auto racing, sport

Introduction

Sport is a fertile area for researchers exploring the volunteer sector given its high dependence on volunteers. Volunteers are needed in high quantities wherever large-scale sporting events are produced and/or consumed (Kim & Chelladurai, 2005) and this dependence appears to be growing (e.g., use of volunteers in the Summer Olympic Games has nearly doubled since 1984). MacLean and Hamm's (2007) study of volunteers from a Ladies Professional Golf event and Strigas and Jackson's (2003) research into volunteers lending their time and talents to marathon races both underscored the heightening dependence that large-scale sporting events have on

volunteers. De Knop and Gratton (1999, p. 7) noted a comparable dependence in Europe where volunteers are referred to as the "cornerstone of the development and growth of sport" in Britain, and the "mainstay of sport" in the Netherlands. Researchers must address this sector, and produce research results that better inform volunteer recruitment and deployment practices for sport organizations and events.

Typical Volunteer Profiles

Early researchers focused on the characteristics of volunteers. For example, Babchuk and Booth (1969) and Scott (1957) reported that males volunteered more than females, a trend that has reversed in recent

times (Hennessy & Hennessy, 2005). However, males still volunteer more frequently than females for sporting events (Gratton, Taylor, & Kokolakis, 2003). Early researchers (Gidron, 1978; Scott) also found a positive, linear relationship between age and volunteering up to the age of 50 to 60 years, when a negative, linear relationship emerges. This pattern holds true in recent research into the demographic profiles of volunteers (Yoshioka, Brown, & Ashcraft, 2007). However, Gratton, Taylor, and Kokolakis uncovered a different pattern for the sport sector where the majority of volunteers tended to be younger (i.e., 60% were between the ages of 18 and 34). MacLean and Hamm (2007), Yoshioka, Brown, and Ashcraft (2007), and Strigas and Jackson (2003) all noted that people from higher socioeconomic classes were more likely to volunteer while married people volunteered at rates higher than single or divorced individuals.

Picard (1998) concluded that volunteers are generally employed and well-educated. However, a growing volunteer sector appears to be younger individuals who aspire to heighten skill sets, expand professional networks, and/or advance marketability for employment (Katz, 2007). Many educational systems now require a volunteer experience as a condition of graduation. One would expect this cohort to be a stable pool of volunteers that could be effectively recruited and deployed. Societal changes may be altering the demographic and psychographic profiles of today's volunteer. Katz underscored this point and questioned whether volunteer resource managers are effectively adapting to these sweeping social changes. In particular, Katz pointed to the baby boomer generation as a growing, relatively untapped source for volunteers. Younger women may be drawn to volunteer experiences in greater numbers as they acquire skills sets and experiences

for a highly competitive but more assessable workforce.

Volunteer Recruitment and Retention Research

Researchers have long dismissed the notion that volunteers contribute their time for purely altruistic reasons (Houle, Sagarin & Kaplan, 2005). Clary, Snyder and, Stukas (1996) highlighted the importance of volunteer resource managers taking the time to better understand the motives of volunteers, and then deploy them in activities that help address the motive. The motivating forces are often cited as a desire to help others, feel useful and needed, self-develop, improve the community, meet people, gain work-related experience, join friends who are volunteers, and enjoy companionship. Finklestein's (2007) insightful study of volunteers with hospice organizations uncovered significant relationships between volunteer satisfaction levels and their levels of commitment and contribution. Katz (2007) further highlighted the importance of effective leadership to maximizing volunteer satisfaction and commitment, especially volunteer resource managers who lead older volunteers.

Volunteers' experiences, motivations, and satisfaction are all important factors in effective recruitment, deployment, and retention of service volunteers for sport (Bang & Ross, 2005). Doherty and Carron (2003) highlighted the importance of volunteer satisfaction to both performance and retention of volunteers for sporting events. They also stressed the importance of establishing strong lines of communications so volunteers felt connected to the event. Green and Chalip (1998, p. 20) suggested that effective communication is critical, and that the sport organizations "need to continually market the benefits of volunteering, update and repackage those benefits, and monitor to

discern changes in volunteers' motives and satisfaction". Experienced, competent and committed volunteers are crucial for sports organizations that rely on service volunteers. Otherwise, considerable time, energy, and money are continually expended on recruiting and training new volunteers.

Volunteer recruitment may take many forms. General appeal techniques (e.g., letters, telephone campaigns, electronic and print advertisements, etc.) are possible, but "word of mouth" through social networks has proven to be the most effective recruitment strategy, especially when targeting older volunteers (Nagchoudhuri, McBride, Thirupthy, Morrow-Howell, & Tang, 2007). Green and Chalip (1998) concurred, noting that volunteers with close personal ties to an organization, its participants, and/or other volunteers have higher commitment levels and are more likely to be retained. Hodgkinson and Weitzman (1992) reported that 26% of volunteers in sport donated their time because of family or a friend's involvement. Daly (1991) found that 18% of volunteers in sport gave their time and expertise as a consequence of their love of sport, 26% had family members participating, and 36% had previous experience as a volunteer within the sport, research findings that align with the later work of Musick and Wilson (2008).

Volunteer resource managers of large scale sporting events should use this information to strategically recruit new volunteers (e.g., target sport organizations comprised of sport enthusiasts, and/or have current volunteers recruit their friends and family members).

In summary, conditions that lead to volunteer dissatisfaction and defection include a discrepancy between expectations of time or effort, a lack of training and support, poor relationships with other volunteers, and/or unsatisfactory working conditions. Conversely, volunteer

satisfaction and commensurate commitment and contribution levels (Finkelstein, 2007; Starnes, 2007) may be heightened by volunteers holding the perception that they are making a contribution, feeling appreciated, increasing their skill sets, and/or working closely with respected friends and loved ones. As a result, empowering volunteers with a sense of responsibility, creating new learning opportunities, and providing effective training will help organizations satisfy and effectively motivate volunteers. The key principle in retention appears to be for resource managers to demonstrate a genuine sense of appreciation of volunteers and also work to create a positive social experience for the them (Katz, 2007).

Understanding the Subculture for Volunteers in Sport

Some researchers (Donnelly, 1993; Green & Chalip, 1998; MacLean & Hamm, 2007) suggest that a unique subculture exists for the sport sector that requires a different paradigm for volunteer recruitment and deployment. They suggest that people often volunteer with sport organizations because they can gain access to privileged spectator and participation opportunities (Green & Chalip). The idea of being an insider to the event appears to be the key factor. Donnelly believed that a sense of identification and the optimization of benefits, such as the privileged information gained, the unique visibility afforded, the positive social connections made, and/or the heightened status of being a part of the event were key motivators for volunteers from large-scale sporting events. Donnelly's findings were supported by the research of Pauline and Pauline (2009) whose study of volunteers at the US Open Tennis Championships found that male and female volunteers were motivated by the excitement and the privilege of being involved in the event. The

“backstage feel” of volunteering may be a key element to understanding sport volunteers. Green and Chalip (1998) indicated that even if the volunteer’s task is menial, the opportunity to observe what paying patrons can’t see, namely the production and staging of the event, may help attract and retain volunteers. Consequently, volunteer recruitment and retention for large-scale sporting events should be conceptually based on the exchange of personal benefits, social status, and social networking for volunteer commitment and effort. Volunteer resource managers must know how to strategically and efficiently identify and commit prospects. They must also know how to train and deploy them, considering volunteer motives and needs. Green and Chalip proposed the use of a marketing paradigm for the effective recruitment and retention of volunteers. The first step in the volunteer recruitment and deployment processes for the auto racing sector is to develop an understanding of the demographic and psychographic backgrounds of current service volunteers.

Methodology

The researchers used an action research approach to explore and describe volunteers of the IndyCar auto race. Patton (1990) described this as action research, or an investigation that solves problems in a “program, organization or community” (p.161).

The population for the study was a census of all the 1,100 volunteers registered to assist with the staging of the race. The researchers included all volunteers to eliminate the possibility of committing a sampling error (Kerlinger, 1986) and therefore enhanced the internal validity of the research. The study frame was checked for accuracy by the event organizers in advance of the distribution of the survey

packages. This step helped reduce frame error.

The researchers developed a two-page questionnaire, comprised of four sections and 12 questions. The content for the questionnaire was drawn from the volunteer literature base and the instrument was tested for content validity by a three-person panel of experts who conduct research in the sport and volunteer sectors.

Section A of the instrument outlined the purpose and importance of the research, reaffirmed respondent anonymity, and reminded respondents of the incentive prizes for replying in a timely fashion. Respondents were also provided with instructions for returning the completed questionnaire. Section B was designed to help the researchers and race officials understand the demographic profiles of the volunteers. Respondents were presented with seven forced-choice questions that uncovered their sex, age, education level attained, personal income level, occupation, and work experience. Three questions in Section C invited respondents to indicate the method that they were recruited, what role they were assumed for race officials, and if they volunteered for other events (i.e., races, other sporting events, other community events). The two questions in Section D uncovered respondent motives for volunteering as well as their level of satisfaction with the experience. Respondents were asked the most important reason for volunteering with the race and they were presented with six options. Respondents could also offer an alternative option that was not listed. Respondents were then invited to elaborate on their most important reason for volunteering with the race. Volunteer satisfaction was measured on a five-point Likert scale (i.e., extremely dissatisfied through extremely satisfied). Respondents were also invited to elaborate on their level of satisfaction, and indicate

what they found most satisfying, and most dissatisfying with the experience. This qualitative information provided researchers with that data needed to formulate a more complete understanding of the determinants of volunteer satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the experience.

The instrument's face validity was assessed by the senior administrator of the race who was responsible for recruiting and deploying the volunteers. This person had extensive experience working with the volunteers. She reviewed the instrument and provided written feedback. She was also interviewed where the researchers went over every question to ensure that respondents would understand what was being asked in each question. She also confirmed that there were no questions that were threatening or inappropriate. Minor editorial changes were made to the instrument following this assessment to heighten question clarity.

A survey package was mailed to the home addresses of all study participants. Each package included: (a) an introductory letter from the researchers outlining the study and the importance of volunteer participation in the research; (b) a letter from the race officials outlining the importance of the study and encouraging the volunteers to participate; (c) the questionnaire; and (d) a return-addressed envelope to facilitate study compliance and data collection. Participants were instructed to return their completed questionnaires within a two-week period and an incentive prize (i.e., draw for an official race jacket) was provided. The use of an incentive has been demonstrated to improve response rates in survey research (Ary, Jacobs & Razavich, 1985). The researchers did not follow-up with non-respondents.

Results and Discussion

Two hundred and seventy-eight of the 1,100 race volunteers responded to the

survey, a 25.3% response rate. Mullin, Hardy and Sutton (1993) indicated that mailed questionnaires often produce response rates of 10% or less. However, due to the low response rate and absence of follow-up with non-respondents, the reader is cautioned regarding inferring the research findings to any group other than the actual study respondents.

Forty-five percent of the respondents were female, which according to a senior race official mirrored the gender breakdown of the entire volunteer frame. Respondents were found to be older (i.e., 34 years +), experienced as a race volunteer (i.e., approximately 33% had volunteered with the race for three to four years), highly educated (i.e., majority were college or university educated), relatively affluent (i.e., household incomes greater than \$60,000) and experienced in the work force (i.e., in excess of 15 years). Female respondents volunteered more frequently than males (1.94 volunteer experiences a year compared to 1.38 volunteer experiences a year) and the females also indicated that they volunteered with other groups/causes (i.e., 41%) more than the male volunteers (i.e., 31%). "Personal enrichment" was cited as the most popular motive offered by female volunteers while "being a racing fan" was the primary motive offered by the males. A higher percentage of male respondents (i.e., 43%) worked in the auto industry as compared to the female respondents (i.e., 19%).

Psychographic Profiles and Volunteer Satisfaction

Considerable research has been cited on the strong links between volunteer satisfaction and their commensurate commitment and contribution levels. The race volunteers were asked to indicate their levels of satisfaction on a five-point Likert scale. Data were subsequently segmented and analyzed to determine if satisfaction

levels varied based on volunteer recruitment or assignment factors.

An overwhelming number of volunteers (i.e., 93% of the females; 91% of the males) were “satisfied” or “extremely satisfied” with their experience, a finding consistent with the research findings of other studies set in sport environments (MacLean & Hamm, 2007; Pauline & Pauline, 2009). However, although the overwhelming majority of respondents indicated that they were satisfied, 24% offered negative comments in the qualitative section of the questionnaire. More than 50% of the negative comments were directed at race officials for not giving the volunteers enough perks while volunteering. De Moragas, Moreno, and Paniaguq (2000) noted that Olympic Games volunteers developed a stronger bond with the event they received tangible items identifying them with the event (e.g., uniforms, badges, etc.). Pauline and Pauline (2009) also found that volunteers for the United States Open Tennis Championship were also positively motivated by receiving official merchandise from the event.

Consistent with the findings of Nacchoudhuri, McBride, Thirupthy, Morrow-Howell, and Tang (2007), the most dissatisfied volunteers were those recruited by general advertisements. Perhaps these volunteers held unrealistic expectations about the experience, something that could be rectified through strategic recruitment activities (i.e., more personal recruitment programs that are based on social networks) and/or early/effective communications and training programs that accurately outline the expected experience.

The researchers also asked the volunteers to share their reasons for volunteering with the race. The results supported the work of Donnelly (1993) and Bang and Ross (2005) for the male respondents. “Being a racing fan” was the

reason offered by the majority of male volunteers. Being close to the action and having privileged access to the race, to the drivers, and to the peripheral elements surrounding the event made for a more satisfying experience for the male volunteers. Female volunteers claimed to be more satisfied if they experienced personal enrichment, learned new skills, and established new networks. Race officials must consider this information when establishing and implementing volunteer recruitment and retention programs. As Starnes (2007) noted in her insightful article, volunteer resource managers can maximize volunteer satisfaction levels (and commensurate levels of volunteer commitment and contribution) by implementing job rotation and job enrichment/enlargement programs when menial volunteer assignments are required.

Conclusions and Implications

This study adds to the literature bases in sport management and in the management of volunteers for large-scale sporting events. Volunteers are critical to the staging of sporting events, yet the area is not a prime research area. Volunteer resource managers of large-scale sporting events can be more efficient and effective if they knew how to effectively and efficiently find prospective volunteers, better understand their motives, and more effectively deploy volunteers to maximize satisfaction and ultimately, their retention levels. This is especially true for the auto racing sector given the high number of volunteers needed to deliver the race. As noted earlier, the IndyCar race requires the services of 1,800 volunteers annually. Due to the high levels of volunteer defection experienced, considerable time and effort is invested annually in volunteer recruiting and training activities. The researchers believe that this situation could be minimized with

more strategic volunteer recruitment and deployment practices.

The results of this action-research substantiated the claims of other researchers (e.g., Donnelly, 1993; Finkelstein, 2007; Houle, et al., 2005; Katz, 2007) who all called for a more strategic approach to volunteer recruitment and retention. Volunteer resource managers need to understand the motives of their current and prospective volunteers so they can more strategically attract and deploy them. If done strategically, volunteers will be more satisfied, committed, and more likely to return in subsequent years. Large scale sporting events rely on volunteers, and frequently need to recruit and train high numbers of volunteers on an annual basis. For example, the results of this study allowed the researchers to conclude that “word of mouth” was the most effective method of recruiting new volunteers. Volunteer resource managers would be well served in enlisting the services of current volunteers to recruit new volunteers. Current volunteers should be encouraged, and rewarded, for recruiting their friends and family members, perhaps in response to the organization implementing an incentive program (i.e., every volunteer who brings a volunteer is entered into a prize draw). Experienced volunteers can help clarify the roles, expectations, and excitement to prospective volunteers who will know what to expect in advance of the experience. They can respond to questions at the time of recruitment, and serve as a source of support to new volunteers once they are involved in the event.

Volunteer resource managers can be more efficient and strategic in their recruitment activities. Inviting people who work in the auto industry (e.g., car dealerships, automotive plants, automotive supplier businesses) would appear to be the best place to look for new volunteers for the

race. Furthermore, since volunteers of this race were found to volunteer with other sporting events, it would be prudent to target people volunteers of other sporting events. These are committed volunteers who have demonstrated that they want to get involved in sporting events. Volunteer resource managers who be well served in building relationships with their counterparts from the local sport sector with a view to sharing lists of potential volunteers. Consistent with the findings of this research, it would be strategic to have current volunteers call these individuals and invite them to participate in the race experience. Finally, females were underrepresented in the volunteer pool, so targeting more female volunteers, (especially those employed in the auto industry and/or who volunteer with another sporting event) would appear to be a prudent strategy. It is clear that the general recruitment appeals that large scale sporting events often use are ineffective and often result in disenchanting volunteers who will likely defect.

Volunteer resource managers from the sport sector would also be well-served in implementing the findings of this study relative to the ways that they deploy their volunteers. As noted above, these managers need to know their volunteers, understand their motives, and deploy them in ways that their motives will be satisfied. For example, the researchers in this study found that male volunteers generally wanted to get close to the action. Female volunteers tended to seek personal enrichment and challenge from the experience. Volunteer resource managers should ask volunteers to indicate their role preferences and try to meet these requests. Resource managers could employ a rotation system if necessary to ensure that critical operational areas that don't offer the desired benefits are covered and the volunteers remain satisfied. For example, ticket takers and information booth attendants were

found the most dissatisfied volunteers in this study, likely due to the fact that they were removed from the action and from social interaction with other volunteers. These important, front-line positions may need to go on a rotation system or be converted to paid positions.

Finally, volunteers appreciate a volunteer recognition program to show tangible appreciation for continuing volunteers and heighten their pride, identity, and affiliation with the event (e.g., apparel with logo, social event to bring volunteers together and thank them). Volunteers in sport value the recognition, and as uncovered in this research, are critical of, and dissatisfied with, organizations that do not provide volunteer recognition apparel, activities and/or programs.

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